

## **The Exclusion of Looked After Children from English Secondary Schools: A Longitudinal Mixed Methods Examination Final Report to the John Fell Fund, July 2019**

**Dr Eran Melkman**

### **Background**

This John Fell Fund award focused on an important and understudied issue: the school exclusion of looked-after children. This study was a longitudinal mixed methods research project in collaboration with four London boroughs and one local authority in the Southwest of England. The research explored the key individual, care, and educational predictors and outcomes of looked-after children's exclusion from secondary school and the way key stakeholders experience and perceive school exclusion and multi-agency service provision in response to exclusion.

### **Methodology**

The National Pupil Database (NPD) and Children Looked After Database (CLAD) were linked in order to track the care and educational histories, 5 to 16 years, of a complete cohort of 3150 children in England who were looked-after and in school year 9 in 2012/13. This analysis focused on identifying possible precursors of fixed-term exclusion of looked-after children and key outcomes of exclusion by age 16. These analyses were complemented by 34 interviews with excluded looked-after children (9), their carers (9), social workers (8), designated teachers (3) and virtual school heads (5).

Noteworthy are the unexpected challenges and delays in gaining access to national data and interviewees experienced in the data collection phase. Access to the NPD and CLAD was provided by the Department for Education 12 months later than expected based on standard guidance (in January 2019), at a point when official funding for the project had already ended (September 2018).

Recruiting interviewees from the hard-to-reach population of looked-after young people who had been excluded from secondary school proved to be an immense challenge for the research team and participating local authorities. Teachers were also extremely difficult to reach and their particularly low response rates may reflect their inaccessibility and weak links with social services; an issue also indicated in the interview material. This resulted in the qualitative data collection only being completed in February 2019. A no-cost extension of the award until May 2019 has allowed for completion of most, but not all, elements of the analyses, and it was felt that additional extensions of the project would not be appropriate.

Therefore, some analyses and writing up is still in progress and main outputs are expected to be delivered by the end of November 2019.

### **Main Findings**

Findings that have emerged from the data at this stage:

- The general school experience of the young people interviewed was of a hostile environment, insensitive to their needs where they were not, in the main, respected or listened to.

- Support in mainstream schools for looked-after children's needs, particularly their emotional-behavioural needs, was insufficient. This was often a major factor that contributed to their exclusion.
- Almost all professionals interviewed, including all virtual school heads, were of the view that in many instances school staff lacked a fundamental understanding of mental health issues and of the ways to deal with them appropriately, particularly in relation to looked-after children.
- In many cases, fixed-term exclusions and other disciplinary actions were the only consistent strategy used to cope with children's difficulties, whereas other support strategies (e.g., mentoring, teaching assistant support) were of a transient nature or of limited scope.
- Findings from both the analyses of national data and the interviews, clearly indicate that fixed-term exclusions are associated with many negative consequences.
- Analyses of the national data indicated that after controlling for relevant factors (e.g., KS2 attainment, previous exclusions or SEN) exclusions in year 9 were associated with higher rates of subsequent fixed-term or permanent exclusions by year 11 and with lower KS4 attainment scores.
- The interviews with young people and professionals support these findings and further suggest that fixed-term exclusions and other disciplinary actions led to disengagement from school, mental health problems and care placement instability.
- In addition to fixed-term exclusions, young people reported experiencing disciplinary actions such as detentions and placement in isolation rooms on a daily basis and for extended periods of time. In many cases, such experiences had a greater negative impact on young people than the fixed-term exclusions.
- Of particular concern is the placement in isolation rooms that aroused very intense reactions among young people due to their degrading conditions and the fact that they were not offering real opportunities for learning.
- Whereas collaboration between foster carers, social workers and virtual schools was reported to be very good, schools were often perceived to be unresponsive, working in silos, and exercising what others considered to be excessive powers in decision-making around looked-after children's education.

## **Outputs**

As outputs from the JFF research project to date, the research team has:

- Held two final workshops at Camden and Devon County Councils to approximately 50 practitioners
- Presented JFF findings at the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) Conference to approximately 30 practitioners (21 March 2019)
- Presented JFF findings at the Southwest Virtual School Heads meeting to approximately 20 regional Virtual School Heads (29 May 2019)
- Contributed to the Timpson Review of School Exclusion
- Submitted a successful large-scale bid to The Nuffield Foundation on employability of looked-after children that includes links to exclusion, thus following-up on the work

Upcoming outputs to be delivered in the next months include:

- Presentation of JFF findings at the Royal Borough of Greenwich Inclusion Conference (27 June 2019).
- Presentation of JFF findings at Devon Designated teachers Conference (date tbc).
- Publication of two journal articles in high-impact journals on the analyses of national data and interviews.

### **Outcomes**

Outcomes from the research project include:

- The findings were and will be shared in-person with hundreds of practitioners and some practitioners have expressed that they are likely to adapt or change educational provision and support based on these findings.
- This project has also helped to develop new and strengthen existing research collaborations.
- This main JFF award has led to pump-priming for follow on research projects including a successful Nuffield Foundation award (£142,483), with a specific focus on care leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET) and the contribution of exclusions to their employment status.
- The research officer who has worked on this project has also stated that this project has improved his research skills, content knowledge, dissemination skills, networks and research profile as an early career researcher.