

Guest editorial: Journal of Children's Services Special Edition: the intersection of education and formal and community-based children's services

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Introduction

Most children spend a significant amount of their time in educational settings, and the role of these settings in keeping children safe and promoting their wellbeing is increasingly recognised. Equally, children's services – in the broad sense that includes informal and universal services as well as targeted and statutory services – have a key role to play in promoting access to education and opportunities for learning. Until recently, relatively little research explored the intersection between education and this range of children's services, including those delivered by local authority social care services, health professionals, non-formal education, youth services and independent agencies.

Understandably, the focus of most of the research that has taken place in this area has been on educational progress and outcomes for looked-after children. We know that children with experience of formal children's services tend to have poorer educational attendance and attainment and are less likely to go on to further and higher education (Children's Commissioner, 2023; Department for Education, 2024; Luke and O'Higgins, 2018; Stein, 2012). But even here the amount and quality of research has been generally limited, especially in relation to interventions (Department for Education, 2024) designed to address these issues (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, we know less about outcomes for children who are involved with services and who have a lower level of need (Berridge *et al.*, 2020), including those who access informal children's services, or about interventions that might improve these outcomes. There is some evidence that focussing on this group is at least as important as focussing on children in care, due to the similarly poor outcomes they experience and the absence of the benefits that alternative care can bring (Sinclair *et al.*, 2019).

There is also reason to believe that less targeted services could play an important role in helping disadvantaged children thrive. Here in the UK, new findings from a longitudinal analysis of Sure Start were published this year, showing the long-term impact of the high profile and widespread service that was scaled across England in the first decade of the 2000s. Established in 1999 as a flagship early years policy of the New Labour government, Sure Start children's centres and local programmes operated across England, Scotland and Wales[1]. The network brought together a range of support under one roof, and worked with children under five years of age and their families in a way that signalled a shift in focus from the more targeted provision that was available previously. The initiative bore similarities to others in Australia, the USA and Canada, and by the start of the 2010s, there were around

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3,500 Sure Start centres in England. Although early evaluation findings were mixed, medium-term effects began to materialise in the published data. The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) found children growing up in areas where local programmes were running were less likely to be overweight and more likely to be healthy than those in other areas, as well as identifying a range of other parent and family benefits (NESS, 2010). More recently, an analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) suggested that hospitalisations of young children reduced in areas with Sure Start children's centres. The researchers found that by age 5 "an additional centre per thousand children prevented around 2,900 hospitalisations a year" and the effects endured through to adolescence (Cattan *et al.*, 2021).

The new analysis, again by the IFS, points to clear benefits of the programme, especially for children resident in disadvantaged families (Carneiro *et al.*, 2024). Access to a Sure Start centre between the ages of 0–5 significantly improved educational attainment up to Key Stage 4 (the assessment stage for 16 year olds in England) (*ibid*). The poorest children, those who were eligible for free school meals due to their family's low socioeconomic status, experienced benefits that were six times higher (*ibid*).

This underlines the significant contribution of services designed to help socially and economically disadvantaged families in the community. Sadly, in the last 14 years, successive Conservative and Conservative-led governments have dismantled this provision and systematically reduced the extent and quality of services designed to help children in need of support. At the time of writing, the new UK government have signalled – albeit vaguely – a desire to revive community-based early years support and develop teachers' skills in supporting children with additional needs (Labour Party, 2023). Achieving this in the current fiscal climate will require sophisticated inter-agency collaboration as well as a great deal of creative thinking.

Aims of special issue

This special issue aims to speak to that objective of collaborative and creative thinking and doing. Papers presented are from practitioners and researchers who explore challenges and benefits of interagency and co-operative work to support diverse groups of children, particularly with regard to wider and informal services that support children's education and wellbeing. As we had hoped when issuing the call for papers, we attracted an eclectic range of submissions that tackle different aspects of this topic from a range of perspectives. There are, however, threads which run through all the contributions. The most prominent is that they all showcase the value of taking a holistic approach to improving children's wellbeing and education, and moving across and between disciplinary or organisational boundaries where appropriate.

More broadly, the special issue relates to targets set by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, the targets regarding the impact on education of tackling poverty and socio-economic inequality, improving quality in education including early years, valuing youth and non-formal education, enhancing mental health and wellbeing services for young people and supporting gender equality are all relevant. Moreover, SDG goal 17 promotes the type of partnership working exemplified throughout the issue for achieving positive progress. Support for children and families, whether formal or informal, often originates with parents, community groups, children's services and schools coming together to identify strategies and take action. In addition, collaborative work between statutory services including social work, mental health and education services is needed to respond to the complex challenges facing children and families.

Contributions to the special issue

The special issue comprises five papers which offer practical, theoretical and ethical insights on working at the intersection of education and formal and community-based children's services.

Two papers bring our attention to the complex issue of care-experienced young people and their experiences in education. Whitelaw provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of this group of young people in relation to their complex journeys through education. The study yields practical recommendations for schools and further education colleges to support lifelong learning trajectories and educational outcomes for this group. Focussing more narrowly on higher education, O’Kane and Bird’s research explores the affordances of care-experienced young people at university. Their work took place in Canada, but has much wider relevance and touches on issues that many countries grapple with. They consider educational stability in a broad sense, in recognition of the role of the placement or setting in support for continuing education, the importance of care relationships while at university, appropriate housing and provision including during holidays and legal status and responsibilities by higher education providers.

Spencer and colleagues approach the topic from a different angle, through the lens of mental health. Against the backdrop of concerning increases in mental health difficulties being experienced by children, their paper highlights the role children’s mental health plays in a wide range of settings – including how young people with mental health difficulties fare in educational and learning environments. Their paper details the advent of public health approaches being taken by local authorities in the UK and explores barriers and opportunities to intervening.

Finally, two contributions reflect on young people’s voices and on their responses to interventions that support them. Using interview data from a large randomised controlled trial, Bennett and colleagues explore the attitudes and experiences of secondary school students who had a dedicated school social worker assigned to their school. The paper explores the perspectives of a sample of children who were interviewed by the researchers as part of a large randomised controlled trial. Although the wider study found no effects on the outcome measures studied, the interviews revealed several positive messages from students – who reported valuing their school-based social worker and drawing on their support during school hours.

In a paper that explores the role of a different institutional setting in children’s lives, Brookes and Daly work through creative methods using photographs and creative writing to enable young people who have a parent in prison to express their identities beyond the label of “prisoner’s child”. Situated in a peer-support group, the value of this community-based informal education project was highlighted by young people and families as a space that supports the education and aspirations of those young people in a way that school-based provision cannot. Through contrasting methods, both these papers highlight the importance of young people’s perspectives on the institutions in their lives, and the need to include young people’s voices in research.

Concluding remarks

The research presented in this issue seeks to bridge the gap between research and positive real-world change. We hope the collection of studies makes clear the benefits and challenges of education settings engaging widely with children’s non-formal and formal services. This special edition of the *Journal of Children’s Services* is an opportunity to expand our understanding of this complex area. Its focus is on the way a wide range of services marry up to promote the welfare and education of children, with a particular focus on how practice can be improved at *the intersection of education and formal and community-based children’s services*. In keeping with this interdisciplinary scope, the volume includes papers that explore services delivered by health, education, social care, police, youth justice and voluntary or independent agencies. We hope this special issue offers insights that resonate with readers internationally who are also working at this intersection with a view to exploring further research in this area.

Nonetheless, the intersection of education and formal and community-based children's services is complex, and the papers in this issue also highlight the gaps that remain in our understanding of how services support children in their education and how educational provision can promote safety and wellbeing. Some of the challenges are also becoming more acute, such as the increase in children and young people at risk of disassociation with education that has happened since the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF UK, 2022; Daly *et al.*, 2021).

While there is a history of school-community-services collaboration, this is usually subject to alignments with funding for such work, and research is often restricted to programme evaluations. There is scope to further explore the challenges and benefits of the intersection between education and wider children's services delivered by health, non-formal education, social care, youth and voluntary or independent services. The current economic and social challenges facing many countries makes this both more urgent and more challenging.

The special issue highlights the contribution that practitioners and researchers working in the field can make. The papers shed light on innovative and holistic ways of supporting children's education, improving educational outcomes, enhancing safeguarding and child development. They illustrate the need for holistic, multi-agency and collaborative action to enable children and young people to thrive. We look forward to further research and practice-based papers on this intersectional space becoming available to improve both research agendas and practice in supporting children and families.

Note

1. The terminology varied – they were called Flying Start in Wales, and Best Start in Scotland, but they were broadly similar in their aims and methods.

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