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Written evidence submitted by The Manchester Metropolitan University (IEDO0002)

1. Title

Improving educational outcomes for young people vulnerable to becoming Not in Employment Education or Training (NEET).

2. Authors

Professor Lisa Russell (Professor of Education and Employment) and Dr Katherine Davey (Research Fellow) from the Institute for Children's Futures based at The Manchester Metropolitan University; Dr Ron Thompson (Principal Research Fellow) and Dr Jo Bishop (Senior Lecturer) at The University of Huddersfield.

3. Evidence summary

Evidence is provided to inform **whether the Department for Education is improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children vulnerable to becoming NEET**. Data is derived from The Leverhulme Trust funded project aimed at mapping interventions for young people at risk of becoming NEET in England (RPG-2021-144); it includes survey, interview and observation data from: sixty Local Authority representatives working in NEET prevention, 41 other professionals, 81 Key Stage Four young people across 20 secondary schools and alternative education provision sites in England, and 10 family members.

Research is ongoing with two phases completed:

Phase 1 (November 2021-November 2022) Mapping early intervention strategies in England

- Sixty Local Authority (LA) representative survey responses completed with the aim of establishing NEET prediction/early intervention strategies.
- Twenty-five interviews conducted with LA representatives working in NEET prevention.

Phase 2 (September 2022-August 2024) Key Stage 4 (KS4) school level data on young people identified as 'at risk' of becoming NEET

- 159 interviews with 81 young people aged 14-16.
 - 49% come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (based on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) of the occupation of the highest classified parent or stepparent with whom the young person was living).
 - 6 are care experienced. A further 4 are living in kinship care.
- 41 professional interviews with people working with young people 'at risk' of school dropout.
- 10 family member interviews.
- 68 participant observations across nineteen education sites including: 6 mainstream secondary schools, 4 pupil referral units, 5 FE colleges (14-16 provision), 2 adult community education centres, 1 social emotional mental health school, 2 alternative providers.
- 416 hours spent in the field over a two-year period.

Findings are organised around areas which young people, their families and the professionals working with them felt were important and related to the effectiveness of NEET prevention strategies to improve educational outcomes for this group of disadvantaged young people.

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3.1 Broken educational trajectories

The educational journeys of many young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET are not straightforward. Some experience multiple school moves which are often damaging to their educational outcomes.

The consequences of these broken trajectories include:

- Some young people have missed considerable periods of their education whilst they are between schools (e.g. following exclusion or a 'managed move') or not attending due to truancy. Some are aware of the negative impact this may have on their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades, future post-16 destinations and educational outcomes.

'[...] once you get kicked out you're now officially behind, because you're not getting the support you would get in school. And then, now when it comes to me doing my GCSEs I don't get the grades that I want.' (Rhiannon, Year 11 interview, September 2023).

- The curriculum (subject options, exam board, schemes of work) is different in each educational setting that young people attend. This means that young people have to drop subjects and/or take up new ones in addition to catching-up on learning they may have missed. Josh describes how he is working on a reduced curriculum due to joining his secondary school midway through Year 11:

Josh: 'So I do English language, science, and obviously maths, and then I do sports studies and then history and RE (...) because obviously there's five lessons a day – I only do four, so I've got that one free period where I go into the hub, it's just round the corner, I go in there and do revision for the subjects that I need to catch up on ... So they gave me the free time to help myself really.'

Researcher: And is anybody helping you or is it just free time?

Josh: No, I get teachers coming in. Like today my maths teacher was in there with me going through all the maths and stuff.'

Researcher: Okay and why don't you do English literature then?

Josh: Because I've never done it, so they said rather than trying to teach it me in a year and get a GCSE out of it they'll just leave it out and mark me mainly on my English language.'

(Josh, Year 11 interview, October 2023).

- The curriculum in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) or Alternative Education settings is often narrower than the curriculum in mainstream school. In one PRU, for example, young people were studying three GCSEs: English, maths, and a science. Often the young people appreciate no longer having to take certain options; however, how this impacts their longer-term futures is important to consider. A limited curriculum offer is not narrowing the attainment gap for this group of young people. Sky was told they had to choose geography in mainstream school, but when they started at a PRU were informed,

"'You don't have to do that here, plus we don't have a geography teacher'". And I was like

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“okay, great”.

(Sky, Year 10, interview, July 2023).

- Our evidence suggests that it is harder to move in and out of alternative provisions as a young person reaches Year 11, as curriculum content can vary from one setting to the next. The limited time available for the young person to catch up on curriculum content they may have missed previously before key exams may act to widen the attainment gap.
- Among young people with experience of permanent exclusion, there is a sense of frustration regarding their broken trajectories. They often recognise the significance of the GCSE exams they are due to take at the end of Year 11 and their ‘currency’ for their future education, training, and employment outcomes. Often, they express having low expectations of their final school years.

Kira – Giving up on School

Kira had moved between 9 different settings during her secondary education by the start of Year 11. She is currently registered at a PRU and says she attends ‘maybe once every two weeks’. Describing her views on school, she says:

I just don’t like school at all. I’ve actually, my school, my whole high school experience has just been like a blur [...] I literally, yeah so many things have happened. It’s just like, I just give up with school. It’s one of them.

(Kira, Year 11 interview, November 2023).

Kira hopes to work in real estate or as an air hostess in the future. She buys into the necessity of getting qualifications to facilitate this and studies in libraries and at home on the days she does not attend the PRU. However, her broken trajectory means she has little faith left in the education system itself.

3.2 The hauntings of negative reputations

Some young people and their families expressed the challenges they had experienced moving on from experiences such as exclusion, attending a provision to help them ‘get back on track’ or having been in a PRU. Young people described feeling tainted by these experiences and the negative connotations peers and teachers held towards their past interventions.

Josh – Trying to move on

Josh below gives the following response when asked how he was settling into his new mainstream school after having been in the PRU. Josh was temporarily placed in the PRU for his own protection following a grooming incident whereby he was the victim.

Josh: I mean obviously I’ve avoided fights and stuff, but like they’ve just, like just silly little things. But obviously because I’m like, I’m not new, but because I’m like the newest to the school and I’ve come from a PRU as well, obviously it’s going to have that reputation. But like they rang my mum the other day saying that I’m on thin ice.

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(Josh, Year 11 interview, February 2024).

Such evidence further indicates how the prospects for some disadvantaged young people may be damaged by the interventions designed to support them. Reducing the disadvantage gap necessitates addressing the external factors that influence the young person's educational trajectory in and out of mainstream schooling.

3.3 Fragmented careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) provision

The Education Act 2011 transferred responsibility for careers guidance from LAs to schools and colleges. Our data suggest that the CIAG provision given to young people in KS4 is thus highly variable, with some schools and education settings 'buying in' LA provision and others opting out. Due to their disrupted educational pathways, some disadvantaged young people missed key events and lacked any formal careers guidance and support at all. The careers lead at one mainstream school describes how young people with poor attendance tend also to miss vital CIAG support, which may act to exacerbate the disadvantages these young people experience in education and employment outcomes.

Careers Lead: "So we are seeing now that some of our non-attenders, especially lower down the school, with intervention they are now coming in. So, I think a lot of them is because they're not in school we can't get the information to them, and then they're not seeing the importance of then carrying on their studies post-sixteen".

(Careers Lead interview, March 2023).

The great majority of our cohort had some kind of intended destination post-16, although their ideas about what options were available and how they might best achieve them were sometimes vague or partly formed. College was the destination of choice for most of these young people, overwhelmingly to do vocational courses, but many young people were also considering apprenticeships. Only 8 young people in Year 10 were considering taking Advanced levels.

Holt-White, Montacute and Tibbs (2022) highlight the fact that not all young people receive the same level of support. Young people in families with highly educated parents and better networks are more likely to receive better CIAG support, thus enabling them to make more informed choices. Many of our disadvantaged young people actively sought their own forms of information from internet and family and friend sources rather than accessing credible formalised CIAG.

Furthermore, CIAG staff within schools felt that they were not well enough resourced to execute the CIAG provision effectively and fairly across the board.

Careers Lead: I mean what the ideal would be is that we could have a careers advisor in every single day, but obviously finances won't necessarily allow that ... And it's one of those, it's a tricky thing, because yes we're very lucky to get two days and they get the careers tutorial program. So, they're getting lots of intervention. It's then just having the time, because we've

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got two hundred and sixty kids in a year group, it's then having those one-to-one conversations, it takes a lot of time.

Researcher: Yeah. And you feel that that's needed, that one-to-one conversation?

Careers Lead: Yeah definitely. Even if the kids know what they want to do, it's just 'right, okay well have you thought about where you're going?' 'Oh no I haven't thought about that yet'. It's like 'right, we need to look at these different colleges or these different sixth forms' and do that route.

(Careers Lead interview, March 2023).

3.4 A rising Elective Home Educated (EHE) population

The number of EHE young people in England has been substantially increasing since Covid-19 brought disruptions to children's education and mental health and propelled school deregistration rates (Paulauskaite et al, 2022). Around 92,000 children were EHE in 2023, an increase of almost 14% in the previous autumn term (Gov.UK, Feb 2024). Yet little is known about why so many young people are now being EHE; how EHE is being experienced; what formal and informal systems of support are being used and how being EHE may be contributing to the attainment gap and affecting the future life chances for disadvantaged young people. Concerns are arising amongst LAs that increases in EHE populations may mask young people who would otherwise be permanently excluded from formal education or vulnerable to become NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). EHE is thus hiding some young people who have been de-registered from mainstream education due to other 'risk factors' such as school avoidance, experiencing poor mental health/anxiety, their special educational need status or being bullied. This is exacerbated by the under-resourcing of schools to address these issues effectively for individual young people.

So I think [preventing families de-registering from school] starts with giving the schools the tools to look after their children. They're so under-funded, and this is a consequence of it. We have quite a lot of children come to EHE who have been bullied or have behavioural issues or SEN, and the school just seemingly don't have the time to invest into them children, which is wrong and immoral.

(EHE worker in LA Interview, May 2023).

Some EHE parents want support and are 'crying out for help', some too feel disillusioned with mainstream school and feel that taking their child out of mainstream was not really an active choice but was rather a forced decision. These families do not 'elect' to become home educated.

So for some children EHE is a fantastic educational pathway. But sadly, for the vast majority, we're seeing they're forced into it and it's not a choice.

(EHE Worker in LA Interview, May 2023).

Decisions to EHE are sometimes made when families reach a crisis point. Consequently, some families go into EHE feeling unprepared and ill-informed about what EHE entails and how it may shape post-16 transition outcomes. For some parents, supporting their child's poor mental health when they become EHE trumps the delivery of any education within the home. The overriding concern is that children from families who have been 'pushed' into EHE and are from a lower socio-economic background may be further disadvantaged in terms of educational outcomes since they

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lack the financial resources and social networks to access formalised support and information guidance structures.

LA representatives feel that there are not enough professionals working specifically for/with the EHE cohort and that legislation acts as a barrier for them to help support the EHE population. Some EHE parents feel that the LA do not understand the EHE community. There is thus a disjuncture within the LA and EHE relationship culminating in the LA struggling to gain visits with some EHE families. This means that in some instances EHE families are further removed from gaining much needed support and advice about how to execute EHE effectively. This disjuncture acts to further exclude an already vulnerable group of young people acting to perpetuate the education attainment gap.

4. Summary and solutions

4.1 Broken education trajectories

The more fragmented a young person's education experiences the more likely a young person is to not achieve their full academic potential. GCSE grades act as a gateway to post-16 destinations and outcomes and as such policy intervention must recognise that young people who have churned in and out of different education spaces have unequal learning experiences. More flexible curriculum offers are required to ensure subject and qualification continuity prevails to narrow the attainment gap between those who have had a consistent and stable education trajectory compared to those who have had a more fractured trajectory.

4.2 The hauntings of negative reputations

Some of the interventions targeted to narrow the attainment gap and better support young people vulnerable to becoming NEET can have unintended consequences. Issues include the consistency of the curriculum offer, the requirement to 'fit in' to the new education setting and subject content, and removing oneself from negative stereotypes associated with being in certain provisions. Schools should do more to actively remove the hauntings of negative reputations and experiences enabling young people to move on and focus on their learning rather than concerning themselves with past educational experiences deemed by others as negative.

4.3 Fragmented careers information, advice and guidance provision

The CIAG provision across England is highly variable, with different children getting different types of provision. CIAG support is deemed highly important for disadvantaged young people who may require further formal and official support regarding their future education and career pathways compared to those from more affluent family backgrounds. CIAG provision should be of a high quality and better inform disadvantaged young people regarding their post-16 options, entry requirements and the relationship this may have on their future.

4.4 A rising Elective Home Educated population

Many families execute EHE successfully and make an informed philosophical and/or religious choice to actively engage with EHE. Since Covid-19 however LAs are reporting an increase in the numbers of EHE families but also on their composition, pointing to a concern that some of this population masks vulnerable to becoming NEET young people. Government data needs to better distinguish between EHE as an active choice and EHE as a destination forced upon families due to failings within other education settings. EHE young people and their families need to be better informed about what EHE entails, including qualification entry requirements, costs, and post-16 destination options. Schools

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and LAs too need more resources to actively acknowledge and target this issue. Currently EHE is a legitimate education outcome that protects all EHE young people and their families from state intervention and support – which means that those that need it sometimes miss out.

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