APSW Association of Professors of Social Work

research in practice

Knowledge and Evidence Briefing 2

Equality, diversity and inclusion in children's social care and social work

August 2021

This event focused on equality, diversity and inclusion within social work and social care with children and families. It was facilitated by Professor Gillian Ruch and Dr Tam Cane at the University of Sussex. Key points from each presentation and the chat contributions are outlined below. Recordings, slides and references are available at https://apsw.org.uk/kee-recordings.

About the KEEs

In May and June 2021, the UK's Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) delivered four on-line Knowledge and Evidence Events (KEEs) to highlight key research messages about children's social care and social work. The KEEs were intended to spark debate and, in doing so, positively inform the work of the 'once-in-a-generation' review of children's social care commissioned by the Department for Education.

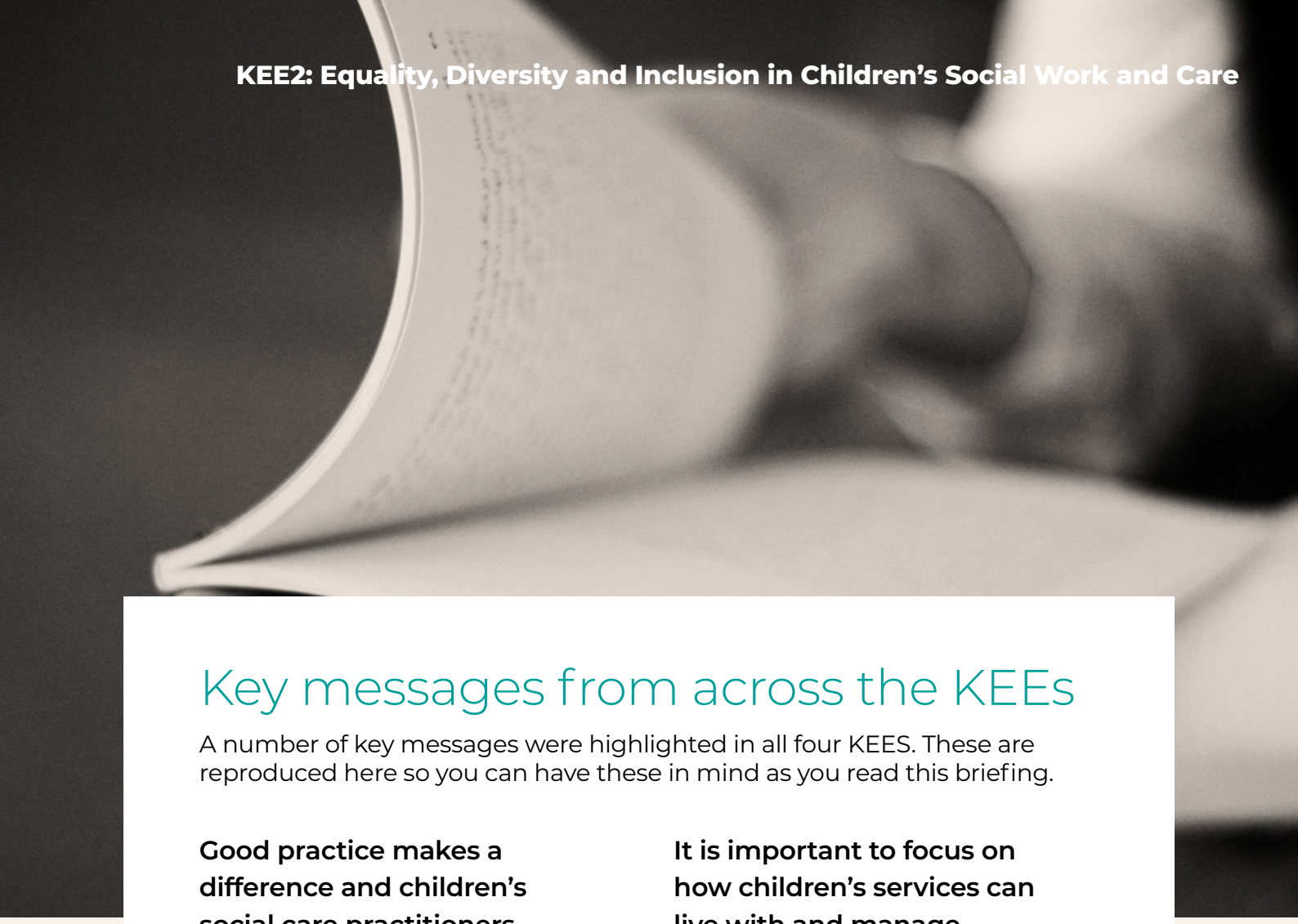
Each of the four KEEs featured presentations by professors of social work and social policy. All had experience as frontline practitioners within children's social care and social work, and as researchers, educators, managers and leaders within children's social services in the UK and internationally.

The four KEEs focussed on:

Within each KEE there was the opportunity for those attending to contribute comments via the chat function. There was keen interest in the KEEs with hundreds of people attending from a wide range of roles in children's social care.

You can watch the full recording of each event by clicking on 'View event blog' on the APSW website.

APSW and Research in Practice have developed four short briefings linked with each KEE session. Each briefing highlights key messages from speaker's presentations, the chat contributions and identifies overarching themes. Reflective questions (suggested by the presentations) which focus on improving practice with children and families and links to additional resources you may find useful are also provided. The briefings are relevant to anyone working in children's social care.



Key messages from across the KEEs

A number of key messages were highlighted in all four KEES. These are reproduced here so you can have these in mind as you read this briefing.

Good practice makes a difference and children's social care practitioners make a difference.

Practice must be morally and socially just.

Compassionate and curious relationships are crucial in children's social care.

Continuity and stability in services and child/family-professional relationships are essential.

We need to embrace courageous creativity over compliance.

It is important to focus on how children's services can live with and manage uncertainty and risk.

The importance of adopting systemic perspectives that avoid blaming individual practitioners.

The impact of poverty and social/economic inequality on the everyday lives of children and families.

Fragmentation of services should be avoided.

Socio-economic inequalities: Reforming an unjust child welfare system

Rick Hood
Professor of Social Work, Kingston University and St George's, University of London

Professor Rick Hood and others have undertaken analysis, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, of the annual Department for Education children in need data sets and correlated the data with population and deprivation indices. This has shown how deprivation has a major impact on children and families and in shaping the social work and social care response.

Key points

- Children's services, arguably partly due to resource constraints, have become overly focused on child protection and taking children into care and this is unsustainable.
- The impact of cuts to early help and community-based prevention is significant –estimated to be approximately 60% over the past decade.
- Intervention is disproportionately focused on children from more deprived families/neighbourhoods with higher social gradients based on deprivation at each decision-making stage in the child protection process.
- Socio-economic inequalities intersect with ethnic inequalities.
- The needs of children and families considered in social work assessments are 'entirely' about individual risk factors, the language used is often stigmatising.
- Innovation often leaves fundamental service design unchanged.
- We need to make sure we target problems not people.
- It is important to create a framework of cross-departmental policies to address social problems impacting on children's wellbeing and healthy development.
- Children's social care should be re-balanced towards supporting children, families and communities and sustaining relationships rather than focusing on identifying risk.
- Restrict child protection interventions to the relatively small number of cases where damage to children is evident and serious.
- Co-produce services with families and communities.

Kingston University London

St George's University of London

Equality, Inclusion and Diversity in Children's Social Work

Claudia Bernard
Professor of Social Work,
Goldsmiths, University of London

Professor Claudia Bernard's research has been influential in showing how discrimination has disadvantaged Black, and minoritised children and families, including within children's social work and social care.

Key points

- Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare results in Black, Asian and minoritised children being over-represented in the child welfare system.
- Exposure to racial discrimination and racial micro-aggressions negatively impacts the mental and physical health of Black, Asian and minoritised children and families.
- Black children (particularly boys) are more likely to be excluded from school, which potentially puts them at risk of experiencing criminal exploitation and violence within their communities or peer groups.
- Children living in gang-affected neighbourhoods can face increased exposure to multiple stressors: for example; county lines drug involvement, going missing from home and care and the risk of sexual exploitation.
- There are additional barriers and challenges for Black, Asian and minoritised children who are disabled (and their families), who experience multiple forms of inequalities.
- In some communities, disabilities may be blamed on 'spirit possession and witchcraft- branding' and disabled children may be particularly vulnerable to maltreatment resulting from these accusations.
- Anxieties about engaging with the intersecting effects of racism and cultural issues present barriers to appropriate interventions for Black, Asian and minoritised children.
- There is often a lack of professional curiosity in understanding the salience of race and ethnicity in children's lives.
- The powerful influence of race on Black, Asian and minoritised children's interaction with the child protection system is rarely explored sufficiently, meaning that the learning and improvement in addressing cultural, racial and religious experiences is not harnessed.
- Black, Asian and minoritised children are over-represented amongst those with Special Education Needs and are more likely to be identified as having social, emotional and mental health needs.
- Children and families with uncertain migration status are at increased risk of welfare exclusion because they may not have recourse to public funds.
- Unaccompanied minors who are separated from their parents are at increased risk of being trafficked for domestic slavery and multiple forms of maltreatment.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Protecting children: A social model

Brid Featherstone
Professor of Social Work, Huddersfield University

Anna Gupta
Professor of Social Work,
Royal Holloway, University of London

The writings by Professors Featherstone and Gupta (alongside Professors Sue White and Kate Morris) have highlighted the skew which has been created within children's social work and social care, emphasising the monitoring and surveillance of children and families rather than providing help and assistance. They have provided an alternative 'social model' which reclaims the role of social work in providing help as a means of protecting children and young people and promoting their welfare.

Key points

- It is crucial that the root causes underpinning many families' social care needs- particularly poverty and inequality- are understood and addressed.
- In order to do so, it is important to develop a social model of child protection in which the relationship between the state, families and communities is actively considered.
- Moving towards a social model of child protection requires a focus on co-producing services with children and families.
- Relationship-based practice must be embedded as a core value in service delivery and practice with children and families.
- It is important to embed ethics and human rights in every day talk and practices so that practitioners can routinely reflect on the impact of poverty and inequality when working with children and families.

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Themes and threads in the chat contributions

The focus on 'innovations' and 'pilots' leaves basic services lacking in resources.

There is now more a society of surveillance and policing and engaging less with children and families.

Families already impacted by social inequality are being further stigmatised.

New practice models are leaving the overall system unchanged.

The 1989 Act was clear that families' needs and the context in which they live are inextricable from effective child protection.

Need to disaggregate Black, Asian and other minoritised groups and to think also about individual complexity.

The impact of greater levels of child poverty and of austerity.

Reintroduce welfare rights training.

Children are becoming commodities within privatised services.

Return to a community-based social work and engaging with children and families within their communities.

Lack of social worker curiosity linked to short shelf-life of social workers.

The system is driving social work practice and not allowing social workers to hear children and families lived experience.

Reflections and the big messages from KEE2

The monitoring and surveillance of poor families, rather than addressing the deprivation they are experiencing and the help they may need, is unjust. There should be a re-setting of the ethical base for social work and social care with children and families.

Care, concern and curiosity are crucial when working with children and families in children's social care.

The community context for children and families, and for children's social care, is important and should be reflected in how services are organised and delivered.

Understanding data is important but children, young people and their families are not just data.

Services should be co-produced with children and families.

Reflective questions inspired by KEE2

What might poverty-informed practice look like when enacted in your organisation? What would you need to stop, start and continue doing to provide services for children and families that are poverty-informed and non-stigmatising?

How can children's social care organisations counter the tendency to focus on individual risk factors when working with children and families? Could the focus be more balanced if some procedures were adapted, or if training were offered?

What role can individual and/or group supervision play in embedding ethics and human rights in every day practice? How else might your organisation promote this understanding?

How can you learn more about the experience of Black, Asian and minoritised children and families using your service? Does your organisation gather sufficient data and feedback in order to practice in an ethical and evidence-informed way with Black, Asian and minoritised children and families? What can your organisation learn from Black, Asian and other minoritised professionals amongst the workforce that could inform practice?

Additional open access resources which may be helpful

Child welfare inequality research

More detailed information and research publications (by Professor Rick Hood and others) about the impact of welfare inequalities in children's social care can be found here: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/system-conditions-and-welfare-inequalities-in-childrens-services.

The impact of racism and discrimination on the lives of children and families

This knowledge briefing by Professor Claudia Bernard highlights key messages from research findings about the lived experiences of Black and minoritised children and families who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system: https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/KB-Understanding-the-lived-experiences-of-black-Asian-and-minority-ethnic-children-and-families.pdf.

A social model of child protection

This think piece by Professors Featherstone, Gupta and Morris considers the relevance of the social model of child protection in the context of the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted issues of social and economic inequality: https://sw2020covid19.group.shef.ac.uk/2020/04/24/on-unravelling-and-re-imagining-child-protection-in-a-pandemic/.

This open access tool provides suggestions about how practice supervisors can promote a social model of child protection in supervision discussions – https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Using-a-social-model-of-child-protection-in-supervision.pdf.

Working collaboratively with families to co-design services

Camden worked collaboratively with families in order to inform a family led child protection enquiry in order to work towards creating more effective and inclusive services: https://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/1006758/Camden+Conversations+-+full+report.pdf/675d7d6c-827b-a4ba-08a9-1fbaa9378d10.

They have also recently worked with families to co-create a design vision for good help for families after COVID-19: https://www.angelatam.me/camden-families.