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Improving Educational Outcomes for Children Looked After at Home: The Perspectives of Designated Managers for Looked After Children

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Improving Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children: The Perspectives of Designated Managers for Looked After Children

The educational attainment of looked after children in Scotland remains low compared with children who are not looked after, especially for children who are looked after at home. This briefing describes an action research programme led by CELCIS, exploring how the barriers to looked after children's learning can be overcome.

Designated Managers for looked after children (DMs), pastoral staff and education officers in four local authorities were asked to describe the learning journey of the looked after children within their schools. Staff from early-years' centres, primary schools and secondary schools were consulted. The consultation was intended to inform current work by CELCIS using improvement methodology to test practice aimed at achieving positive educational outcomes for looked after children.

Key messages:

- Low attendance of children looked after at home was seen as a priority for action by schools and management.
- Schools often experience difficulties in engaging parents of children looked after at home in their child's learning.
- Training focused on the needs of traumatised and disadvantaged children was rare.
- Looked after children did not usually receive automatic assessment for additional support needs. Assessment of additional support needs was said to cause delays in enrolment during transition between local authorities.
- Many different planning documents were in use in schools. Although staff were familiar with GIRFEC, the multi-agency child's plan was not used everywhere.
- Designated managers differed in their views about whether education or social work should take the main responsibility for addressing concerns.
- Multi-agency working was said to be variable. Services provided by voluntary agencies were seen as particularly important by many participants.

Background

This briefing paper describes the first stage in an action research programme investigating the educational outcomes of looked after children in Scotland. It is known that looked after children have poorer educational outcomes than their peers, with children looked after at home experiencing some of the poorest outcomes (Scottish Government, 2013). This is likely to be due to a complex range of issues, including problems associated with trauma, attachment issues, abuse or neglect, and placement instability.

The overall approach of this project was to combine research interviews with practice in an action research model. The interviews with managers were carried out to understand the issues and barriers to learning faced by looked after children, with a particular focus on children looked after at home. The research findings were also intended to inform subsequent stages of an improving educational outcomes programme in collaboration with local authorities using improvement methodology (Langley, 2009). This approach, recently adopted by the Scottish Government's Early Years Collaborative programme, provides a model by which organisations can improve structures, procedures and practice. Small changes are planned, implemented, studied and refined until a measurable improvement is obtained, using plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles. The changes can then be tested more widely or rolled out to the whole organisation, if appropriate.

Methodology

Interviews were carried out in four local authorities between October and December 2012. These local authorities were selected to represent the national characteristics of Scotland, and included one large urban local authority, one small urban local authority, one local authority with high unemployment and one local authority with more rural areas. Primary schools containing relatively large numbers of looked after children were identified, and interviews were carried out with Designated Managers for looked after children in these primary schools, and in an early years centre and secondary school in the same area (usually the same cluster). In addition to DMs, pastoral support workers and an education officer were interviewed in each local authority.

Traditional discursive interviews and mind mapping techniques were used to carry out semi-structured qualitative interviews lasting between one and two hours. Data were analysed using a combination of mind mapping and thematic coding of transcribed interviews using N-Vivo qualitative analysis software.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study.

Research findings

Participants were asked to concentrate on children who are looked after at home, i.e. children who are placed on a supervision order by the children's hearings system and who live in the family home with one or both parents. It was suggested that the original reasons for the supervision order often persist, and children are left in the situation that triggered concern.

Parental Contact

Participants indicated that a lack of engagement with parents of children who are looked after at home is the main barrier to their progress in learning. To understand how schools try to engage families, participants were asked how contact was maintained with the parents of the child. Early years' centres were in a position to engage with the parents on a daily basis, as parents come into the building to drop off and pick up their child. Parenting clubs and groups were often in place, which have the potential to engage parents, and participants were enthusiastic and proud about the tools they could offer parents. Early years' centres appeared to be as involved with the parents as they were with the children themselves, but staff expressed concern that this family- focused environment was not replicated after transition to primary school. Comparing reports given by early years' DMs and primary school DMs, interactions appeared to be lower with parents of the older children, but attempts were still made by schools to maintain contact.

Designated Managers

DMs have a responsibility to meet the needs of looked after children, and their duties are detailed in *Core Tasks for Designated Managers* (Scottish Government, 2008).

Few of the DMs were aware of the Core Tasks, and, with the exception of one, they were not able to comment on them. The role of the DM differed with school stage. Early years' DMs were very involved both with children looked after at home and their parents. Primary DMs and secondary DMs had a more co-ordinating role. In secondary schools, day-to-day contact often fell to pastoral support staff. DMs were in touch with education officers, mainly in a consultative capacity, but were not accountable to anyone out-with the local authority in this area of their work. DMs were not usually aware of the numbers of looked after children attending their school.

Feelings of Responsibility

Participants were asked what they would do if they were concerned about the attendance, progress or welfare of a child who is looked after at home. All participants talked about liaison with social work to resolve issues, but opinions differed regarding who would have the main responsibility for addressing concerns. It was suggested that

use of the lead professional in a multi-agency GIRFEC context may help to avoid misunderstandings.

Attendance

Children who are looked after at home have, on average, low attendance (79%) compared with the average for all looked after children (89%), which is in turn lower than for all children (93%) (Scottish Government, 2013). Interviewees said they considered good attendance at school to be closely related to attainment and achievement. An understanding of what affects the attendance of children looked after at home could help to provide a solution to address low attainment. Participants representing all school stages stated that the home environment and parental attitudes to learning had the greatest influence on children's attendance. When discussing older children, other reasons emerged, including distractions, embarrassment over their appearance, and the necessity to be a young carer. It was suggested by more than one participant that there may be value in engaging parents more fully and highlighting the importance of their child's learning.

Exclusions

Recent guidance states that looked after children should be excluded only as a last resort (Scottish Government, 2011). Designated Managers should consider the emotional impact on a child who may already have difficulties in relation to attachment, and who may have experienced lack of stability. Participants had different views about excluding children who are looked after at home. Several secondary staff said that exclusion is sometimes necessary to give a message to the young person and other children that bad behaviour is not acceptable. On the other hand, a local authority manager said that excluding children for 'predictable' behaviour was not helpful. This officer stated that the behaviour of these children is often a direct result of their earlier experiences and that to exclude, especially for long periods of time, is counterproductive for children who may have formed a useful and meaningful attachment to a member of school staff. All of the primary schools and secondary schools consulted said they would consider excluding looked after children; however, it was acknowledged that it could be particularly damaging to exclude a child who is looked after at home if there is a chaotic home environment. Internal exclusion bases were present in some schools. It was reported that these exclusion bases act as a deterrent to the young person, remove them from the situation, and give schools the opportunity to risk-assess and plan.

Training

Local authority education officers discussed training for DMs and use of packages such as the *We Can and Must Do Better* training materials (CELCIS, 2013), but many participants struggled to remember when and whether they had participated in training. It was

suggested that schools are ‘staffed to teach’, so it could be difficult to attend training. Curriculum for Excellence was said to be the current training priority in schools.

Recognition of Strengths

Recognition of a child’s strengths can help to build resilience by increasing self-esteem, as the child finds out that they are good at something and develops their skills further. Children who are looked after at home may not have a nurturing background, so it is often up to the school to identify and develop the skills of children. Schools had a variety of ways of recognising skills, including discussion with children and parents, using planning documents and certificates, nurture groups, achievement assemblies and merit systems. Aspirations and ambitions were recognised through discussion, planning documents, and the use of careers coaches.

Expectations of Staff

In *Core Tasks for Designated Managers*, DMs are given the responsibility to guard against their staff having low expectations of looked after children, but there is an increasing awareness that children who are looked after at home have, on average, lower educational outcomes. This can create a misconception that each individual looked after child is likely to fail. Low aspirations and expectations from parents can also be an issue, with many of the parents reported as having had a poor school experience themselves. Some participants made the point that many looked after children will go on to achieve in later life.

Planning Documents

Many planning documents were being used in schools. While all of the authorities were aware of GIRFEC and used the SHANARRI framework and the ‘My World Triangle’ for the assessment of the whole child, concepts such as the multi-agency child’s plan were in the early stages of development in most establishments. Following analysis of the data across the four local authorities, it was clear that the GIRFEC model represented the only common language in planning across learning. An advantage of GIRFEC is that this common language is extended throughout all of the different agencies involved in the care of the child.

Perception of Support

Several interviewees commented on the large caseloads of social workers. Interviewees were evenly divided on whether social work agencies distinguished between children looked after at home or away from home in terms of the support provided in the school setting. Some said that there was no apparent difference in the support offered, while others suggested that social work contact can be lower for children looked after at home because social workers are forced to prioritise high tariff cases and emergencies over

more routine contact. Frequent changes of social worker and other personnel and lack of continuity due to part-time working were said to cause frustration for school staff.

Multi-agency working

For children looked after away from home, fostering agencies were said to be proactive in linking social work with school, while for children looked after at home, contact with social work was prompted by formal meetings. There was a strong emphasis on the value of voluntary organisations, as it was suggested that families may view these as less intimidating than statutory agencies.

Moves between local authorities

Transitions between local authorities, where children are placed away from home in another local authority area, were said to be problematic. Each local authority in Scotland has a different way of dealing with this transition, and this was said to cause confusion. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 states that children who are looked after are deemed to have additional support needs unless it can be proven otherwise. Automatic assessments to determine additional support needs were not routinely happening in the four local authorities; however, an interpretation of this amendment has led to unacceptable delays in the enrolment and support of young people during transition as assessments are carried out.

Conclusion

In conclusion, differences across the school stages and between the four local authorities were observed; however, there was agreement among the school and local authority managers interviewed on the nature of barriers to the educational attainment of children looked after at home. Many of these barriers were related to the home environment.

It should be noted that only education staff were interviewed for this research. Parents and staff from other professions may have a different perspective, but their views are not represented here.

An important barrier to the educational attainment of looked after children was said to be the difficulty in engaging parents in schools. Parental engagement was said to be high in nursery, but diminished as the child moved through primary and secondary school stages. This was thought to be due to the lack of direct contact with parents. Another important finding of the research was that good attendance was thought to be critical for learning. Attendance rates may also be linked to parental engagement, as well as parental opinions of education.

Exclusion of looked after children was also linked to low attainment. Long exclusions, often in response to 'predictable behaviour', can result in loss of attachments to school staff for children who have already experienced instability. Opinions were divided on the necessity for exclusions. Exclusion bases, provided in some schools may give children the opportunity to work at the same rate as their peers in some subject areas; however, they do not necessarily address attachment problems, as children are isolated from their peers and teachers, and potentially stigmatised, and this may interfere with the capacity to develop relationships. Accessing training opportunities may help teaching staff to understand the problems faced by looked after children, and help them to understand the reasons behind disruptive behaviour.

Interviewees were asked what they thought of the long-term prospects of children looked after at home, and many referred to evidence from government statistics highlighting poor outcomes. Using such evidence is potentially a problem, as this may result in low expectations, which could easily turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Parents and the children themselves were often reported to have low expectations and aspirations, so it is particularly important that the school and other agencies have high aspirations.

Interagency communication was felt to be important, in accordance with GIRFEC principles. Effective communication from school to social work during term time and from social work to school after weekends and holidays would ensure that these agencies were kept abreast of all academic and family developments.

The children discussed in this research had been placed on supervision orders because their parents were unable to meet their basic needs, often due to neglect. When a child is looked after, the team around the child, which can consist of several different agencies, has responsibility for the child's welfare. It was apparent that there were ambiguities over roles. An associated problem is that no single agency feels a true sense of accountability for failing to address the needs of looked after children.

Delays in enrolling children in school, which can happen while assessment of additional support needs is carried out when a child is placed in another local authority area, were identified as a significant issue. Such delays could damage a child's relationship with new carers, and further disrupt their education.

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CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all looked after children in Scotland. We do so by providing a focal point for the sharing of knowledge and the development of best practice, by providing a wide range of services to improve the skills of those working with looked after children, and by placing the interests of children at the heart of our work.

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