

Improving the education of looked after children: An Aberdeen perspective

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Synopsis: This article outlines how Aberdeen City Council has taken forward work in relation to improving the educational outcomes for looked after children particularly relating to the role of the designated manager (both in schools and residential units), the critical role of residential child care workers in supporting and promoting education and joint and separate training needs for the key departments involved.

Keywords: Looked after children, care, designated manager, interdisciplinary working, professional development

Introduction

“...as a group, looked after children and young people perform less well at school; when compared to the general school population their attendance rates are lower, their exclusion rates are higher and their academic attainment is lower”.

Scottish Executive (2007)

Children and young people who are ‘looked after’ can face many barriers which limit their chances of educational success (SWIA 2006). Reasons for the lack of educational success can be wide ranging from:

- their pre-care experiences;
- a lack of full time education because they are excluded, or have a reduced timetable and
- the looked after system can add to the disadvantages they experience through placement instability and insufficient support at key transitions.

National statistics show that in some parts of Scotland up to 75% of looked after children leave school with no qualifications and overall less than 1% go onto further/ higher education (compared with 50% of the non looked after population). Looked after children are also 8.5 times more likely to be excluded than non looked after children (Scottish Government undated).

Given the difficulties that some looked after children have faced, it is perhaps understandable that both they and the people who care for them do not prioritise educational success (Frances et al. 1995). However research shows that success in education, more than anything else, determines whether a young people who has been looked after will go onto have a fulfilling adult life.

Much work has taken place across Scotland in order to reduce the gap between looked after children and their peers. The Scottish Executive signified its commitment to working in partnership with all relevant parties to raise the educational attainment of looked after children through the publication of *Looked after children and young people: We can and must do better* (Scottish Executive 2007). This report set out 19 specific and targeted actions to be taken forward in order to improve the life outcomes and in particular, educational outcomes of looked after children. It acted as a catalyst in driving forward change and since its publication, several other resources/ materials have been produced by the Scottish Government designed to support local authorities to improve educational outcomes (in the widest sense) for looked after children (Scottish Government 2008a, 2008b, 2009a; Learning and Teaching Scotland 2009).

One of the key messages of the publication (Scottish Executive 2007) highlighted, '*The need to raise awareness of the educational needs of looked after children and young people and improve training for allresidential workers...*' and training materials using a dvd-rom were developed (Scottish Government 2009b).

Training dvd

The training dvd-rom produced by the Scottish Government (in conjunction with British Adoption And Fostering, Scottish Institute of Residential Child

Care and the University of Strathclyde) which underpins the *We can and must do better* (Scottish Executive 2007) materials consists of 20 different units including: an introduction to being looked after, corporate parenting, making it better for looked after children in the education system, making it better together, attachment and loss and trauma. It is designed to support both self study and tutored training courses. Training can be delivered both on a multi-disciplinary and single disciplinary mode depending on the unit and last from an introductory one hour session to three days for the full course.

Aberdeen City Council has five employees trained by the Scottish Government as trainers, a research and policy officer, an educational psychologist, a head teacher, a social work trainer and the looked after children's teacher. A number of events based on the *We can and must do better* training materials have been run and it forms part of the introductory training for residential child care workers.

This article outlines how Aberdeen City Council has taken forward work in relation to improving the educational outcomes for looked after children particularly relating to the role of the designated manager (both in schools and residential units), the critical role of residential child care workers in supporting and promoting education and joint and separate training needs for the key departments involved. As of March 2008 Aberdeen City had 698 looked after children, approximately 66% were of school age.

Designated managers for looked after children in schools

Stage 1 Introductory training

The role of the designated manager is critical to improving educational outcomes for looked after children. However, until the publication of the *Core tasks for designated managers* (Scottish Government 2008b), from here on in referred to as the core tasks, there was no clear and consistent guidance available for designated managers on what this role entailed. The core tasks are an invaluable tool for designated managers and as such, one of the first priorities for the Aberdeen City Council was to promote these materials to all schools and residential units and look at supports designated managers required in order to meet their responsibilities.

Designated managers in every school in Aberdeen were invited to attend an introductory session in October 2008 after they had all been sent the core tasks publication (Scottish Government 2008b). The purpose of the session was to give the background to *We can and must do better*, an introduction to the policy documents supporting this publication and, most importantly, define what it meant to be looked after and why it was critical to prioritise improving educational outcomes for looked after children. The given activity focussed on auditing what a school was already doing in relation to the core tasks and then on what it would need to do (next steps). These next steps could then be integrated into the schools development plan. Twenty-six schools participated in the training, sending designated managers, guidance staff and class teachers.

As a precursor to this training all secondary school designated managers, bar one, had been visited by the authors of this paper.

Local and national information is posted on Aberdeen City Council's *Grid for Learning* website. The list of the city's designated managers for all schools is available on *The Zone* (Aberdeen City Council's intranet).

Evaluation

Participants were asked to evaluate the course from a level of one to six: one being unsatisfactory and six being excellent. 29 evaluations were received and all participants rated the course at four or above. Virtually all the participants stated that there was a requirement for more of the same training to support schools to take forward their responsibilities. Some of the comments included:

This type of training should be made available to all staff.

The more exposure we have to this type of training, the better.

Very thought provoking.

Astonishingly interesting statistics.

Need to know more about corporate parenting.

Good opportunity to talk with people in the know.

Need to have more examples of good practice within other schools.

Residential Child Care Workers

Stage 1 Introductory training

The main purpose of the briefing was to provide residential workers with the background and context (local and national) to We can and must do better. Four sessions were held in February and 66 out of a possible 70 workers attended. Thirty-one evaluations were received out of 46 distributed. The course was well received with 29 participants rating the course at four or above. The participants also received information about the behaviour management techniques used with children who experience challenges in coping in educational and home settings by the head teacher of the Hospital and Home Tuition Service.

Evaluation

All participants were asked to provide comments on the course.

Comments included:

Interesting and thought provoking presentation

Very relevant to the work we do in residential.

Gave me a lot to think about.

and to suggest how they would like the course to be followed up:

Further information & training on strategies and resources.

Joined up training with schools.

Guidance packs for residential workers so that they can start using interventions now.

More multi-disciplinary training with identified teachers promoting this.

Would like to learn more of the strategies/ ongoing mechanisms that are used in the Lowit Unit in relation to young people in distress or with stress related behaviour.

More mental health training.

The feedback helped to inform the development of two further sessions for residential workers held in March 2009.

Joint Training (education and social work) – & March 2009

Stage 2

Two sessions were held (three hours each) and attendance was made up of residential workers, unit managers, designated managers, guidance teachers, educational psychologists and education policy development officers. Fifty four staff attended and 39 evaluations were completed. This training was also well received with 24 participants rating at as a five or above.

Training/ information was provided on the following:

- draft exclusions policy and individual education plans policy;
- information on the staged intervention process used by the Educational Psychology service and schools;
- a practical example of how one secondary school (Harlaw Academy) in Aberdeen City is taking forward the *Core tasks for designated managers* along with their audit document;
- group work on how to resolve some common problems faced by residential workers and school staff in relation to the education of looked after children (including non-attendance, truancy, exclusions, and part-time timetables);
- demonstration of the new *We can and must do better* training materials.

Evaluation

All participants were asked to provide comments on the course and to suggest how they would like the course to be followed up. Comments on the course included:

What did you find most useful?

Meeting with educational professionals

Information on the exclusions policy

Networking

All of it

Hearing opinions from other professionals

The case study discussion

What have you learned from this session that you will take back to your workplace and how will it change your practice?

Have learned more about what schools are doing for LAC

More educational psychologists than I realised. Possibility of our young people linking in with these professionals

We need to work more together

To work harder with my education colleagues

I will ask schools more about I.E.P's and use the designated LAC Teacher at the school

More confident with my role and educations' role

Be more proactive with individual education plans

Do you have any recommendations for future training on this subject?

More multi-disciplinary training

Discussion on second starts

More guidance teachers present

More discussions and examples of good practice

Look at models – International – Sweden/ USA.

Group activities feedback

Invaluable

Bringing professionals together to work jointly on solving problems is the best way.

Follow-up interviews

In-depth interviews were carried out with seven residential child care workers two weeks after their sessions to see if the training they had received using the *We can and must do better* materials had had an impact on their practice in relation to raising the educational outcomes of the children and young people they work with.

Early analysis shows that the training increased the residential child care workers level of knowledge about education, its importance to the life chances of the children they support and how they have a critical role in promoting education. One worker commented: *As soon as I was back on shift I emailed*

the guidance teacher to see if I could get an individual education plan for my key child'.

Almost all respondents were surprised to know that class teachers do not generally know which pupils they teach are looked after. They thought they should be told.

Future training

The Children's Services Workforce Training Group is considering the city wide roll out of the *We can and must do better* training - how it could possibly be integrated with *Getting it right for every child* and child protection training, or offered as stand alone. One possibility would be an Improvement Conference attended by all education officers, LAC designated managers, children's services managers and relevant social work personnel.

Participants highlighted that it would be useful for some of the training to be made available online through Aberdeen City Council's online interactive learning resource (OIL). This is one of the areas that officers are currently progressing.

Meanwhile the trainers will offer their services to schools and social work teams on an individual basis and will provide a suite of topics as part of the continuing professional development programme for teachers in 2009/10. Aberdeen City's probationary teachers will have a session tailored to their needs. Additional work in promoting the key role of residential child care workers in enhancing education opportunities will be carried out by the authors on further analysis of the in depth interviews. There may be scope for work on behaviour management.

Conclusion

The training described so far is the start of an ongoing process. Whilst ideally it should be run on a multi disciplinary manner this is not always possible. The feedback so far has demonstrated that the limited amount of training which has taken place has had an impact on participants and their roles in raising educational attainment for looked after children in Aberdeen. It has facilitated more efficient joint working between social work and education.

Definitions

The majority of children and young people who are considered to be 'looked after' will come into one of the following two categories by the Children (Scotland) Act 1995: through the Children's Hearing System

'Looked after at home' (through the Children's Hearing system) with no condition of residence.

'Looked after away from home' whereby there is a supervision requirement with a condition of residence.

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