Improving Outcomes for Looked After Children

Jacqui Horsburgh

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BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Preface

While undertaking research for this book I spoke to a range of practitioners beyond those described in the case studies. My aim in talking to these professionals who worked closely with looked after children was to ensure that I had a clear understanding of the issues to be addressed. One of the people who was of particular influence was Shona, who had worked in multiple education settings for over 22 years. One of her firmly held beliefs was that the most significant rights children and young people can claim is their right to an education. She believed that it was her responsibility to use her skills and knowledge to support them to claim that right.

Beginning her work as a community worker Shona was totally committed to implementing article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). This article emphasises children's right to express their views in all matters that affect them and to have their views considered and taken seriously. She provided training for practitioners in various organisations; produced resource packs on children's rights and participation; founded some of the first fully funded youth representation structures in Scotland; and worked with and on behalf of some of the least supported and underrepresented groups in Scotland, including young women, LGBT groups, families in poverty, refugees, asylum seekers and young gypsy travellers.

Recognising the crucial role that formal education plays in supporting individuals to achieve positive outcomes, Shona re-trained as a teacher. As a Head Teacher Shona was committed to building an ethos where children, staff and families worked together. She built communities where everyone was valued and played a significant role in improving the work of the school. In doing this she recognised that everyone had a crucial role to play and that individual family circumstances should not be a barrier to engagement and achievement.

Shona became very aware that the outcomes for care experienced young people were significantly behind that of their peers. Her outrage and disappointment and immense sense of frustration led her to taking on a Quality Improvement Role where she became determined to ensure that the outcomes for care experienced children and young people were improved.

In her role as a Quality Improvement Education Officer, Shona analysed the policies and procedures of the local authority to identify ways in which care experienced people were being advantaged or disadvantaged. By engaging staff in high-quality professional learning, outlining their roles and responsibility as corporate parents and when necessary, holding people to account, she promoted a

message that children who are care experienced belong to everyone and by working together they will be loved, safe and respected.

The work that Shona has done is clearly inspirational and has had significant impact for children, staff and families. What makes Shona's story even more remarkable is that she is care experienced.

When you speak to Shona and ask her who supported her to achieve, she responds without hesitating and can quickly name off a number of people who influenced, inspired and encouraged her. From a Moden Studies teacher who taught her the skills of debating, a music teacher who ensured she had access to an instrument, a social worker who demonstrated a depth of care and compassion, a neighbour who every year made her a birthday cake, a volunteer tutor she still remembers fondly, trusted friends who knew of and accepted her situation, a granny who despite needing a high level of support herself always called her 'the apple of her eye', to mentors who throughout her professional career recognised her skills and talents and engaged with her to ensure she was in a place to recognise and acknowledge them herself.

Unfortunately, Shona is an exception as many people who have spent a substantial part of their childhood in care do less well that their contemporaries. It was inspiring examples of those such as Shona who have succeeded against the odds, rather than the depressing data highlighting decades of underachievement, that motivated me to undertake research to try to identify ways of providing more effective support for looked after children.

Chapter 1

What's the Problem?

International data illustrate that many people who have spent a substantial part of their childhood in care do less well than their contemporaries. However, there are a number of notable exceptions, and it was inspiring examples of those who have succeeded against the odds, rather than the depressing data highlighting decades of underachievement, that motivated me to undertake research to identify ways of providing more effective support for looked after children.

In this chapter, I answer a number of questions in order to explain the rationale behind this book. I look at what the data tell us and discuss its implications for individual looked after children and society in general. I then share my personal and professional motivation for writing this book. In order to explain why I feel that we need to give focused consideration to the education of looked after children, I discuss the potential impact that being in care can have on an individual and how this may inhibit engagement in learning in the classroom. A brief overview of the methodology used to gather and analyse the data that form the basis of the case studies presented in the book is then provided. The case studies in each chapter illustrate some of the challenges that teachers face in supporting looked after children and provide a starting point for practitioners to reflect on their own practice. In the second part of this chapter, I explain how practitioners can use the reflective questions and audit tools to examine and improve the support they provide for looked after children and their families.

What Does the Data Tell Us?

Where countries strive to meet goals of equity and equality, the social and economic impact of poor educational outcomes, particularly for looked after children and young people, is of concern. The literature (O'Higgins et al., 2015) suggests that educational underachievement of looked after children and young people is an issue that is faced by countries around the world regardless of their political system or the governance process that is in place. Of particular concern is the report by Education Policy Institute (2020) whose data for 2019 indicated that what they term 'disadvantage gap' had stopped closing over the previous five years. They specifically noted that: 'Looked after children were 29 months behind other children' (Education Policy Institute, 2020, p.8).

Despite increasing investment into resources to support children and young people in out of home care, statistics (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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(AIHW), 2015; Department for Education, 2020; Okpych & Courtney, 2020; O'Neil, 2016; Scottish Government, 2020) continue to show that for a significant number of looked after children across the world educational experiences appear to be less than positive. Whilst outcomes, as measured by academic qualifications, are improving for looked after young people they continue to be much lower than national averages. Further, it is contended that looked after children remain less likely than their peers to move into education or training or obtain employment when they leave school (Barnardo's, 2015; Duncan, 2013; Happer et al., 2006). This in turn has implications for the health, social and emotional well-being, and economic prosperity of these young people (O'Higgins et al., 2015). For example, during the academic session 2018/2019 of the looked after young people leaving school in Scotland only 35 % achieved one or more qualifications at Scottish Credit Qualification Framework level five.

In England in 2019 (Department for Education, 2019) the average Attainment 8 scores for looked after children (19.1) were considerably lower than those of non-looked after children (44.6). Part of this difference was attributed to the fact that 53% of the looked after children had been identified as having an identified Special Educational Need (SEN) compared to 14% of the non-looked after population. In reporting these statistics, the authors (Department for Education, 2020; Scottish Government, 2020) identified links between outcomes and aspects of care placement that a looked after child had experienced but do not make links to aspects of education. Across the world many countries and or legislatures within countries would claim to provide a board and balanced curricula yet focus predominantly on academic assessments when evaluating a child or young person's progress in learning. For example, the purpose of Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004) is to enable young people to develop as: 'successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens and effective contributors'. However, as yet, progress in the last three attributes is not formally recorded in a consistent way.

The discrepancy in attainment between looked after young people and their peers is of concern because of the considerable numbers involved. Where official statistics are held, they show that over the last quarter of a century the numbers of looked after children have increased considerably. For example, in England (Department for Education, 2019) the numbers have risen from below 50,000 in 1994 to 78,150 in 2019. Similar increases can be seen in other countries such as Australia (Bromfield & Holzer, 2008) and the United States (Child Trends Databank, 2020) and in Singapore (Singapore Government, 2020) the numbers have increased by 8.6% in the last ten years.

It is interesting to examine the way in which data regarding the attainment of looked after children are presented. On the one hand, if performance is compared to the general population, then looked after young people may be considered to be underperforming to a greater degree and there may be more of a political imperative to provide support. However, if the underperformance is compared to a similar socio-economic cohort of young people, this may present a more positive picture. It could be suggested that, if academic performance is deemed the most appropriate measure of success, there is a need to use both forms of comparison in order to acknowledge achievements whilst maintaining high expectations. This is

of importance because of the impact that such messages may have on professional's expectations of looked after children. Alternatively, it may be appropriate to question the use of such a narrow measure of success at all. Whilst these statistics serve a useful purpose in highlighting the issues care is required in the ways in which they are used in order to avoid unintended consequences. The narrative that such statistics promotes is one of vulnerability and failure and has the potential for promoting a fatalistic view amongst practitioners. They may then fail to invest time and attention in supporting looked after children who they presume, because of what the statistics demonstrate, are destined to fail regardless. Attainment data are only one indicator of an effective education; however, similar differentials to those described above are likely to be found in the social and emotional development of those who have been in care. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to support practitioners to consider these statistics from a different perspective, that of the individual child, and consider their role in ensuring more positive outcomes for the children that they support.

What Was My Professional and Personal Motivation for Examining This Topic?

As a class teacher and later as a head teacher I often experienced frustration during reviews and planning meetings, considering the needs of looked after children, as the focus was often on the logistics of the child's placement. Discussions would consider issues such as the care provided at home, attendance and general behavioural issues. When considering the teaching of looked after children within the context of the class the focus tended to be on their academic progress in relation to standardised assessments. Limited attention was paid to the development of relationships and socio-cultural aspects of learning within the classroom. Later in my career when as a school inspector I visited schools across Scotland, despite legislation emphasising protocols at management level, I was struck by the lack of focused support and guidance for those working with care experienced children in the classroom. There was clearly a need to examine in more detail the ways in which looked after children could be supported to engage in learning, particularly in collaborative learning with others. I considered that to do this there was a need to move the focus from those with bureaucratic roles to considering the expectations placed on those working most closely with looked after children in schools. Thus, while working as the Lead Inspector for Primary Education in Scotland I undertook research in order to learn more about how best to support the diverse needs of looked after children. Looked after children are not the only ones who require support with learning but experiences that lead them to being in care often have a significant impact on their ability to engage in learning. It is helpful to explore the ways in which these experiences might result in barriers to engagement in learning.

In undertaking this work I aimed to highlight why looked after children may find it difficult to engage in the type of learning that is valued by educational authorities, for example in collaborative learning with others. To date, much of

the literature on the education of looked after children has considered their education from a developmental perspective. Such studies and reports have focused on school education as preparation for further education, learning and training where outcomes are measured by success in examinations. In this book I approach the issue from a different perspective by focusing on socio-cultural aspects of support for a small group of seven looked after children. The decision to adopt this perspective was based on observations of practice where the development of social relationships with looked after children often presented considerable challenges. In adopting this perspective, I attempt to build on the assumption that individual development is inextricably linked with the social, cultural and historical context within which it takes place.

There has previously been limited research with primary school–aged looked after children, possibly because of ethical constraints. In terms of ethical approval, research with children is categorised as high risk and often requires that specific measures be put in place. These may include, for example a requirement to have someone else present during interviews with children. Researchers may be cautious about asking children for accounts of their experiences for fear of causing emotional harm. In section one of Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989), there is a requirement to ensure that children's views are given 'due weight in accordance with their age and capacity'. Here again the issue of perception arises as it is adults who decide the competency of the child. It could be argued that by being deemed to have additional support needs looked after children are being disadvantaged as this may influence an adult's view of their competency. However, it may be that, like some adults, children may not always want to share their views, and this should be respected.

Why Do We Need to Give Special Consideration to Looked after Children?

Before considering how to engage looked after children in learning activities there is a need for a clear understanding of why they might find such engagement difficult. Each year a significant number of children are admitted into care because they have been abused or neglected or because their families are dysfunctional. In many cases this means that they become looked after away from their birth families.

In seeking an understanding of why looked after children may experience relationship difficulties, a number of authors (Barth et al., 2005; Scott, 2011) have turned to attachment theory. Attachment theory can be seen to have originated in the late 1950s from the work of Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1981) into the effects of separation and loss on children. He explored the impact of a child's relationship with their primary care-giver on the child's social and cognitive development. Bowlby considered that if the bond between the child and the primary care-giver was broken this would have a detrimental effect on the child's psychological development. Ainsworth (1991, p.38), who worked with Bowlby, described this as an 'affectional bond' where the care-giver or attachment figure is unique and

could not be replaced by someone else. Scott (2011) posits that even if attachment experiences of looked after children are often less than positive, separation from the primary caregiver may still have a damaging impact on the child. It is important to note here that the idea of one unique care giver was controversial and was criticised for: 'constructing mothers as solely responsible for infants and then for policing this caregiving' (Duschinsky et al., 2015, p.174).

Bergin and Bergin (2009) consider that insecure emotional attachment can manifest itself in different forms of behaviour such as, avoidant, resistant or disorganised, all of which are associated with difficulty in engaging in learning in school. Cairns (2013) describes how neglect and separation from a significant caregiver can be traumatic and this trauma may have long lasting impact. As Goleman (2004, p.vii) explains neuroscience demonstrates the direct link between emotions and learning and illustrates how the emotional areas of the brain are inextricably connected to the neocortical areas that are involved in cognitive learning. Thus, when a child is experiencing distressing emotions, they are not able to devote their attention to listening to the teacher and find it difficult to understand or remember what they have been asked to do.

In considering early life experiences of looked after children a number of authors, for example (Gerhardt, 2003; O'Higgins et al., 2015) suggest that the impact of pre-care experiences such as maltreatment and neglect is likely to persist and have a long-term impact on educational outcomes. Some authors, for example Pollak et al. (2001) hypothesise that maltreatment appears to affect children's interpretation and understanding of emotional displays. In particular, those who have been subject to an extremely limited emotional environment experience greater difficulty in discriminating emotional expressions than do children who have not been maltreated. This may in turn influence the level of support required for them to engage in learning activities which rely on social interaction. When we feel threatened or have excessive demands made on us, we begin to generate stress hormones which enable us to respond to rapidly the challenging environment. As Goleman (1996) notes, moderate amounts of stress can improve our physical or psychological performance. However, stress caused by abuse has a very different impact and impedes the brain's ability to function. Without appropriate support this trauma can result in post-traumatic stress where according to Cairns (2013, p.151) children become 'locked in a state of terror' and exhibit a range of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. An individual experiencing unresolved trauma may exhibit one or more of a range of symptoms including impairment of language or memory functions. The area of the brain associated with language functions can be significantly impacted by traumatic stress and as the ability to process language is central to the development of intelligence this can result in associated learning difficulties. Difficulties in communicating because of impaired language function may lead to frustration. Changes in the brain caused by trauma may in some cases lead to memory loss or distortion which will impact not only on a child's ability to remember facts and therefore to be able to consolidate learning but also on their ability to follow instructions in a consistent way. This may make them appear to be lazy or disobedient.

Traumatic stress my result in physiological conditions which can impact on an individual's ability to engage in learning. These include altered perceptions where the peripheral vision sharpens and as the individual focuses on scanning the environment, they are not able to concentrate effectively on visual tasks such as reading. The same may apply to auditory scanning where the child may appear not to be listening to the teacher or those close to them. Children who have experienced trauma may continually scan the environment for threat, even when they are in a safe and caring place. They may also be startled easily so that they jump at the slightest sound. Such hyperarousal may lead to physical problems such as clumsiness or a lack of coordination. Social and emotional functions are also impacted by traumatic stress, and this may result in emotional numbing or extreme reactiveness. Children may be withdrawn and refuse to engage with others or because of what appears to be overreaction to insignificant events their behaviour may be difficult to engage with. In some instances, there may be explosive responses to what appear to others as trivial stimuli. In a classroom situation these types of behaviour can be difficult to accommodate and therefore it is important that practitioners are supported effectively in order that they feel equipped to deal with these behaviours.

While not all those who have been in care will demonstrate symptoms of traumatic stress, it is important that practitioners are aware of the potential impact of early adverse experiences on children's ability to engage in learning. To explore such issues in the context of the classroom, the materials in this book are presented as case studies which illustrate these behaviours and other issues that were observed in the everyday experiences of seven looked after children.

How Were the Case Studies Compiled?

The case studies in Chapters 4–10 illustrate aspects of the social context within which looked after children were supported. Examples of each looked after child's experience of learning were drawn from discussions with staff and children and carers. This was merged with evidence from observation to compile each profile. These case studies are intended to provide the reader with a vicarious account of the looked after children's experience of school and the different ways in which they were supported to engage in learning.

Underpinning Theory

The concept of socio-cultural learning was used in the original study to gain insights into the practices and approaches used to support looked after children to engage in learning. A number of theorists argue that learning is socially constructed (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Rogoff, 1990, 1994, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). School is a social environment where students interact with each other and construct their learning not alone but through interaction with others and with reference to the overall context of the society that

they live in. Thus, for those who have encountered adverse experience during the early stages of life and find social interaction challenging the classroom may be a daunting place. Therefore, I felt it appropriate to examine socio-cultural aspects of learning when considering how practitioners attempted to ensure looked after children were included in learning activities in the classroom. Socio-cultural theories of learning have been developed from the work of Vygotsky (1978) who postulated that cognitive development arises from social interaction and considers that for this development to happen there has to be guided learning within what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The supposition is that learning, motivations and emotions are interconnected, and that social and emotional aspects of learning are embedded in the social and cultural practices of the classroom. Therefore, for children and young people who have experienced trauma as discussed earlier in this chapter there will be a need for practitioners to consider how the social and cultural practices in their classes and schools are structured in order to provide an environment in which all children can engage in learning.

When considering socio-cultural perspectives of learning cooperative and collaborative learning are often terms that are used to describe how activities can be organised to enable students to work together and learn with and from each other. Although these are often used interchangeably their original purposes were quite different. Cooperative learning strategies were developed to support the development of cognitive skills. In cooperative learning tasks are carefully structured to support interaction and discussion between learners as they work towards specific outcomes. Jacobs and Renandya (2019) consider that there are eight elements of cooperative learning: positive interdependence; individual accountability; equal opportunity to participate; maximum per interactions; group autonomy; heterogeneous grouping; teaching of cooperative skills; and cooperation as a value. The practitioner's role is to take account of these elements when planning cooperative activities and teach the relevant skills through careful structuring of the group and assigning appropriate roles. The importance of understanding the purpose of the different elements in cooperative learning is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

In collaborative learning the notion is that knowledge is a social concept where learning happens through discussion with others who have different ideas and experiences. This is a more open-ended approach than cooperative learning where students are given increasing responsibility for how they structure their group work. Successful collaborative working is dependent on three aspects: the learning intentions and outcomes (cognitive dimensions); how the members of the group relate to each other (socio-relational dimensions); and what they feel about the experience (the affective dimension).

As I wanted to explore the ways in which looked after children can be supported to engage in the wider cultural community of the classroom, the work of Rogoff (2003) particularly in relation to social referencing is of relevance. Social referencing occurs when individuals attempt to gain an understanding of social

situations from the expressions of others. Within the classroom these 'others' may be peers as well as practitioners. Hedges and Cullen (2012, pp.929–930) consider that: 'Peers are important contributors to children's learning that are often overlooked'. Thus, in line with Hedges & Cullen (2012) and Vygotsky (1978) when taking account of all social resources available I explore the type of support that looked after children consider their peers may be able to provide.

Data Collection and Analysis

In undertaking the research my aim was to produce a holistic and contextual understanding of practices and approaches that may be used to support looked after children to engage in learning. A qualitative approach, using case study methodology, was adopted in order to enable me to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues related to the social, emotional and educational support for looked after children. To develop an understanding of factors that contribute to looked after children experiencing less positive educational outcomes than their peers, I felt it would be appropriate to investigate the individual experiences of a small group of looked after children. In order to identify an appropriate group of children I approached senior officials in a large education authority in central Scotland. The schools in the study (Alpha and Beta Primary Schools) were identified as establishments where staff were supporting a number of looked after children from a range of care settings. These schools were located in an urban area where significant numbers of children were in receipt of free school meals. In Alpha Primary School 50.6% of children were eligible for free school meals and in Beta Primary school the figure was 49%. There was a children's home located near the schools and children from this home attended both schools. Thus, I was able to include children who were looked after away from home in a children's home as well as those who were in kinship and foster care. In analysing the data, I aimed to undertake an interpretive approach to illuminate processes related to supporting seven looked after primary school children to participate in learning. I chose to adopt an interpretive approach because rather than considering outcomes such as examination results, I wanted to look at factors that occurred early in a looked after child's school experience that may influence longer term outcomes. In deciding to adopt this approach I wanted to go beyond developing my own understanding by charting patterns of subjective understanding in order to achieve 'Verstehen'. Hennink et al. (2011, p.17) consider that Verstehen involves:

> …understanding the life of the people whom you study from their own perspective, in their own context and describing this using their own words and concepts.

I was particularly interested in exploring relationships between the looked after children and those, including teachers, support staff, peers and family, who supported them in their learning in school. I chose to focus on relationships because previous research (Garvin et al., 2012; Ubha & Cahill, 2014) has