

Looked after children – good practice in schools

This is a short report based on a small-scale survey of good practice in schools in relation to looked after children. It does not cover all aspects of looked after children or claim to be a full review of related reports and studies of these children. However, it does illustrate good practice for others to consider.

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Introduction

In the summer term 2007, Ofsted undertook a survey of 20 schools to identify good practice for looked after children. The schools were in local authorities that had received an 'excellent' judgement for their children's services in their most recent annual performance assessment undertaken by Ofsted. The local authorities selected the schools to be involved in the survey, and the sample included special, primary and secondary schools.

The examples of good practice highlighted in this report are grouped under the questions that inspectors asked of schools during the survey. They illustrate some of the methods that schools use to improve the educational experiences and achievements of looked after children.

What we know

1. Although there has been a slight improvement in outcomes for looked after children over the past three years, they remain significantly lower than those for all children, and the gap is not narrowing. In 2006, only 12% of these children achieved five GCSE A* – C passes, compared with 59% of all children; 37% of them did not achieve any passes compared, with 2% of all children.¹ The 20 schools surveyed by Ofsted had secured outcomes that were better than the average for looked after children, in some cases markedly so.
2. The key elements of their practice which were increasing the progress made by looked after children were:
 - a focus on looked after children within a framework of high expectations and good teaching and learning for all pupils; for example recognising that looked after children may be gifted and talented
 - looked after children engaged in and taking responsibility for their learning
 - close monitoring of academic, social and personal progress
 - the involvement of looked after children in learning outside the classroom and after-school activities
 - unified but low profile support in school for each looked after child so that they are not made to feel different from other children.
 - swift and early intervention if a problem emerges, such as with behaviour or attendance
 - the successful engagement of carers and parents wherever possible.

¹ *Care matters: best practice in schools working group report* (00532-2007DOM-EN), DfES, 2007.

What teaching and learning strategies work best to raise standards?

3. High expectations of what looked after pupils can attain and achieve, linked to excellent whole-school approaches to teaching and learning, were the common characteristics of the schools in the survey and deemed crucial in raising standards for this group of young people. Children in settings that provided nurture groups for under-fours to develop understanding and the language to express their feelings, met the early learning goals for the Foundation Stage more frequently than children in settings that had no similar provision.
4. The schools recognised that individual pupils had different learning needs. Through assessment and by securing information about prior learning from the settings that looked after children had come from, schools were able to identify each pupil's learning needs and then develop individual learning plans and learning tasks to closely match them.
5. Lessons were finely tuned to meet pupils' identified needs. This process worked best where teachers were sensitive to the learning needs of all pupils in the class and had developed a high level of expertise in devising different learning tasks to ensure pupils made effective progress. For example, teachers' planning in one school indicated clearly how the distribution of learning tasks and activities in classes was matched closely to the different learning demonstrated by individual pupils. Teachers provided additional notes on each lesson to indicate how individual learning might be developed further in future lessons and how this would impact on lesson planning.
6. Rigorous target-setting and monitoring of progress made by looked after children, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4, focused on academic progress as well as behaviour and attendance. Schools were adamant that the academic progress of looked after children should be determined and monitored in the same manner as for other students in the school. Students valued such an approach since they did not wish to be treated differently. They welcomed challenge in lessons and worked hard to achieve targets that they reviewed regularly with teachers to measure their progress.
7. Personal and social targets were also monitored regularly. Realistically high targets were set for looked after children in lessons. The children welcomed any intervention and support provided by the school where this was seen by them to have direct impact on improving their work or personal and social development.
8. Looked after children were represented in focus groups of pupils, which helped schools to review and improve the quality of teaching. The young people indicated that this support by the school helped them to cement a positive, trusting relationship with other group members and to work more confidently in

lessons. This was especially the case where young people felt able to discuss with teachers what worked best for them in their learning.

9. The pupils had a strong say in decisions about targets and learning in their personal and educational learning plans. Pupils said that this focus on personal development helped them to build self-confidence in lessons so that they could ask teachers questions when faced with difficult tasks and contribute to group and class discussions without feeling limited by a lack of basic skills.
10. Support from learning mentors concentrated on tackling pupils' underachievement and on their particular learning difficulties. Mentors undertook training provided by the school to enable them to recognise where individual young people had weaknesses and how these might be addressed. Usually this meant that mentors worked closely with young people to improve their literacy and numeracy skills but often they were required to improve specific subject skills, and subject teachers provided training for this.
11. Looked after children had access to new technologies, such as laptops, which were used both within and beyond the classroom to enable them to access the school's website and subject work sites and thus to complete work as fully and effectively as other students in the school. In this way, young people were helped to take more responsibility for their own learning.
12. Gifted young people were challenged appropriately by teachers who were fully aware of their particular skills and attributes and who provided extra resources and more difficult tasks to fire their enthusiasm and secure better performances. This process worked best where teachers had a good grasp of what excellence looked like in the specific areas of high performance demonstrated by young people. Schools indicated that teachers often requested, and secured, further professional training to meet these demands.

How do schools promote the personal development and well-being of looked after children?

13. The schools visited during the survey placed great emphasis on supporting the personal development and well-being of looked after children. This was usually because the school's pastoral support system was very strong in general and, in the case of looked after pupils, focused on their personal education plan.
14. Nationally, children in care are eight times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers. The schools in the survey sought to minimise exclusion for this group of young people. The most effective means involved close work with the local authority to develop programmes for managing behaviour. These focused on early intervention and on providing appropriately challenging alternative provision; for example, work with local authority behaviour management teams and involvement in initiatives such as behaviour

for learning and anger management courses. Also, some pupils were put on to specific 'flexible curriculum' or alternative curriculum pathways which involved time spent at the local college or with a work placement provider. Looked after children were encouraged to stay after school to be involved with other children in additional enrichment activities (especially where it was an extended school), and staff were at pains to secure a safe and supportive learning environment.

15. In most schools a designated teacher or manager took a strong lead in coordinating all the staff involved with children in care. Schools tried to ensure that the staffing for looked after children was consistent, using school staff to 'cover' for absent colleagues in key classes rather than agency staff. There was also liaison with the local authority's team for looked after children (Integrated Service for Looked After Children), educational welfare officers and carers, so that any emerging concerns were identified and tackled promptly and appropriately.
16. Schools paid attention to improving attitudes to learning, not just behaviour, since poor behaviour and attendance affect learning. In some instances, where attendance was a problem, temporary support was provided for one to one tutorials at the young person's home, paid for by social services, until the child could be re-integrated. The focus was always on re-integrating children as soon as possible.

'As soon as the behaviour was tackled, more learning took place.' – Carer

17. Generally, there was a focus on pupils taking more responsibility for themselves and their own learning. The schools in the survey provided 'reflection time' for young people to think through their problems and their progress with designated staff on a one to one basis.

What do schools need to do to understand the needs of looked after children?

18. The schools visited were developing unified support for looked after children but rooted securely in good practice for all children. They embraced the idea of identifying a single person who could communicate information and coordinate interventions related to individual cases. Often, liaison between tutor/learning mentors/key worker/social worker and, where relevant, the housing agency and the personal advisers in the Connexions service, was most effectively coordinated by a designated teacher, whose role extended to keeping the looked after child informed. This was seen as a key factor in providing consistent support for looked after young people.

'The staff are good at going that bit further to make you feel safe and secure.' – Year 8 pupil

19. Young people were regularly asked how best the school could provide better individual and collective support. The schools surveyed made sure that all looked after children knew they had access to independent visitors and advocates when they needed them. They also ensured that looked after children were listened to appropriately and that their views were acted upon.
20. The emotional and behavioural development of looked after children were screened closely and schools regularly involved carers/parents and extended family in this process. Designated teachers and others involved with looked after children kept up-to-date notes of developments in the lives of young people and changes in behaviour patterns at school. Frequent telephone calls were made to keep everyone updated and aware of any actions taken by the school. It was particularly important for schools to let carers/parents and extended family know of any major future changes to school arrangements so that they did not come as a surprise to young people.

'At this school the teachers take more time to listen and to explain.' – Year 10 pupil

21. Teachers knew how to meet pupils' basic learning needs as well as what was required to deal with more complex needs. For instance, teachers made sure that looked after children always had the materials they needed to take part in lessons, such as pencils, paper and textbooks. In addition, teachers were able to recognise when pupils needed to talk through problems before lessons began and made sure that appropriate people were available to undertake this sensitively and in a timely way. Designated staff with day to day contact with looked after children were able to provide sex and relationship education.
22. Schools recognised the importance of providing stability for looked after pupils in Years 10 and 11. Pupils indicated that they did not like too many changes to their lives while studying for their GCSEs. This was especially the case where staff changes or disruptions to the timetable or normal school day were necessary. This was also the case in relation to circumstances that required students to take a break from schooling or move to another school.

'Far too often there is lots of talk in relation to their age, with compassion and concern but with a fundamental mismatch between where they are emotionally and mentally and how they can communicate with adults.' – Carer

How do schools support looked after children to become independent learners?

23. Schools employed some highly effective strategies to encourage and support looked after children to become independent learners. Examples included:

- ensuring that work with the young people on emotional, social and behavioural skills was integrated into the work of subjects and the school in general
- allowing the parent/carer, social worker and pupil to contribute to the personal education plan, in addition to the school
- reviewing and updating a young person's personal education plan every three months to reflect on successes and to meet changing needs
- devising work, tailored to the individual, that focused on learning needs and attitudes to learning and which celebrated small steps to success

'At this place they explain how I can change, I didn't know how before.' – Year 9 pupil

- giving looked after children opportunities to complete homework at school
- respecting pupils' confidentiality and being sensitive to their circumstances

'In my previous school some teachers talked to others about my home situation without telling me. They sometimes talked loudly to me about home in front of other pupils. I hated this.' – Year 11 pupil

- having well considered and well managed arrangements in place to ensure that looked after children transferred to other schools taking with them a positive attitude to learning and a record of their achievements.

24. Schools ensured that parents and carers had sufficient guidance about how they could support their children's learning, using interpreters and translators where necessary. Parents and carers of looked after children received regular communication from the school about their child's progress. In some cases, schools produced information sheets that explained what progress the pupil had made in a particular area and identified the most common difficulties the young person encountered in their learning. Some schools held special meetings to enable parents and carers to talk through these issues. In those schools with the best practice websites were kept up to date and contained information about how parents and carers could contact the school whenever there were urgent issues to discuss.

How should schools use increased flexibility in the curriculum to support looked after children?

25. The schools visited had adapted the curriculum well to better match individuals with appropriate courses, and were already planning to develop new courses arising from changes nationally to the curriculum and qualifications. They ensured that curricular arrangements were tailored to meet individual needs, with a specific focus on routes to appropriate qualifications and settings. This included providing appropriate work experience and work-based learning routes. In providing such arrangements the individual schools collaborated with other local learning providers, particularly where learning pathways required study outside the school and where the location of the pupil's family might not have been convenient for travel to a neighbouring school.
26. The schools were willing to adjust curricular arrangements as pupils' circumstances changed. Schools also helped young people to adapt if they had to change schools during the year. This support was particularly important for refugees and asylum seekers.
27. Sensitive social and emotional support was provided through personal, social and health education lessons. Teachers worked hard to minimise the influence of peers in young people's decision-making about option choices for GCSE and post-16.

'I got good advice from teachers when my friends wanted me to do what they were doing. I am glad I listened to the teachers now.' – Year 10 pupil

How should schools seek to engage parents and carers?

28. Parents and carers of looked after children were best engaged through continuous and regular communications and opportunities for self-evaluation and sharing of ideas. In the schools visited, parents and carers valued:
 - being involved in the young person's personal education plan
 - written communications sent home regularly (such as 'chat books'), especially those which gave guidance on how to support pupils' learning
 - information about homework and how they could support the child at home.
29. They felt that the school had developed respect for them, trusted them and had created a welcoming ethos. Parents and carers said that they felt they could support young people better where schools were clearly pleased to see them and took pains to discuss issues as and when they arose. This process was strengthened when schools showed how well they knew the young people and

how willing they were to provide resources and time to enable parents and carers to understand better how to be involved more in the learning process.

'Build relationships with carers; we have to trust the school.' – Carer

What were the roles of others beyond the school in supporting the progress of children who were looked after?

30. Others beyond the school also played important roles in supporting children who were looked after. Although the key person at school was the designated teacher, other important roles were:

- a 'transition officer', appointed to ease transition between phases and stages

'Sometimes the way grown-ups talk is hard to understand.' – Key Stage 2 pupil

- trusted parents, who provided support and acted as parental link 'officers' for other parents and carers
- advocates who spoke on behalf of pupils, visited them regularly in school and made themselves available for discussions between visits if required²
- foster carers, especially trained in therapeutic techniques, and involved with other professionals in reviews
- staff from pupil referral units, who were able to support pupils who were looked after in mainstream schools
- social workers, who were well briefed and trained, and worked closely with schools in their contact with looked after pupils
- schools which monitored the progress of pupils who left at 16 and liaised with colleges and further training providers as necessary
- other agencies, which liaised effectively with those such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and the Educational Psychology Service to screen the changing emotional needs of looked after children.

31. The schools also ensured that looked after children who were gifted and talented had access to support which enabled them to participate fully in appropriate programmes developed by higher education institutions and other organisations. They did this best where there was a strong focus in the school on provision for gifted and talented young people, usually through the good

² See also *Children's views on advocacy: a report by the Children's Rights Director for England*, Ofsted, 2008; this can be found at www.rights4me.org.

work of designated school-based gifted and talented coordinators, or those provided by the local authority. In these cases there were good links with local and national initiatives and often an undertaking to adopt school and classroom improvement and evaluation models that had gifted and talented education as a focus.

Further information

The White Paper, *Care matters: time for change*, June 2007, can be downloaded from;

www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/timeforchange/

The report from the Best Practice in Schools Working Group, led by Professor Dame Pat Collarbone, can also be downloaded from this website.

Research and statistics relating to looked after children can be found at;

www.ttrb.ac.uk/ELibrarianQuestionDetails.aspx?QuestionId=262

The Department for Children, Schools and Families 'Find Out More' website for articles and research can be found at;

http://findoutmore.dfes.gov.uk/2006/10/lookedafter_chi.html

and

www.children.gov.uk/cgi-bin/rsgateway/textsearch.pl?charset=utf-8&col=rsgate&la=en&qt=september&st=91&type=next10

All Office of the Children's Director for England reports of the views of looked after children can be found on the children's website;

www.rights4me.org

For publications and guidance see;

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4005321

Review of international research;

www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0056.asp

Looked After Children Professional Network;

www.youngminds.org.uk/professionals/partnerships/looked-after-children-1

The role of parents is explored in *Parents, carers and schools* (070018), Ofsted, 2007;

www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070018

The role of governors is explored in *Supporting looked after learners: a practical guide for school governors* (DfES-1929-2005), DfES, 2005;

<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-1929-2005&>

The views of looked after children are explored further in two reports published by the Commission for Social Care Inspection in March 2007:

About education;

www.rights4me.org/reportview.cfm?id=111 by children;

<http://www.rights4me.org/reportview.cfm?id=112>