



Centre for excellence
for looked after children in Scotland

Research Summary

Assessing the Needs of Looked After Children in the Primary School

A Teacher's Perspective

Stacey Mckillop
June 2015

In this research summary Stacey Mckillop provides a summary of her award-winning B.Ed. dissertation: *How Can Primary School Teachers Effectively Address the Needs of Looked After Children?* Based on an investigation into the challenges presented by looked after children at school, and how teachers might best support children in their learning, this summary is intended to stimulate discussion about support for looked after children in primary school.

Introduction

Since 2001, the Scottish Government has produced an abundance of documents outlining its long-term commitment to improving the educational outcomes of looked after children. While there is evidence to suggest improvement in attendance and attainment, statistics in other areas continue to show that looked after children remain at a disadvantage. This suggests that there is a breakdown between the vision of the Scottish Government and the day to day practice of educators. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore teachers' views on supporting looked after children in the primary school.

Methodology

To gather this information, four semi-structured interviews were carried out in two primary schools in two different local authorities in Scotland. These authorities were chosen due to the variations in their local context. In these interviews, four primary school teachers were asked to reflect on their own experiences of supporting looked after children and were asked to consider the strategies they have used in order to support them. They were also asked to discuss any barriers that they had identified whilst working with looked after children and, finally, to consider how confident they are in identifying and supporting the needs of looked after children. Approval to conduct this study was granted by the University of the West of Scotland Ethics Committee.

Research findings

Theme One: Strategies in place for supporting looked after children

The participants identified a variety of strategies used to support looked after children in their education. The use of a personal timetable was suggested, allowing children to add their name to book a one-to-one time slot with the teacher. This was believed to be an effective strategy as it allowed the looked after child to share any issues with the teacher, and also gave the teacher the opportunity to provide additional support for this child out with class time. Likewise, 'Check In' was another strategy that was used as this also offered the opportunity to share worries or problems.

'Circle Time' was also considered an effective strategy as it is said to offer children the chance to share their thoughts and feelings in a supportive environment and it allows them to listen to suggestions given by their peers in order to help them with their issues. Further suggestions included: the use of an individual learning plan for a looked after child; involving them in decisions about their learning; setting personal and social targets as well as educational goals; and offering more one-to-one support for these children. Finally, all participants stressed that collaboration with other professionals was essential in supporting these children. This point is reinforced by the report *These Are Our Bairns: A Guide for Community Planning Partnerships on Being a Good Corporate Parent* (Scottish Government, 2008) which suggests that there is a need to establish effective partnerships with the families and carers of these children and other local authority agencies involved in supporting looked after children.

Theme Two: Potential educational barriers for looked after children

Participants were also asked to share any potential barriers that they believe impede the success of looked after children in education.

Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties

The first trend which emerged was the agreement that looked after children were more likely to experience social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). All four participants believed this to be a major barrier for these children and also accepted this had an impact on the other children in their class.

All four teachers discussed the connection between the emotional needs and social needs of looked after children, and suggested that these children experience difficulty in trusting and forming relationships with their peers. Two participants made reference to attachment and felt that the challenge of building and maintaining positive and healthy relationships was a result of being uncomfortable and unfamiliar when forming attachments.

The social, emotional and behavioural needs of looked after children were also seen to cause great difficulty in terms of planning and implementing activities. Participants said that often these children do not have the social skills to be able to work effectively with their peers and this can often result in challenging behaviour. All participants in this study highlighted that, in their experience, looked after children often display challenging behaviour which impacts on the learning and teaching taking place in the classroom.

From the responses gathered, it can be seen that all participants felt that the behavioural needs of looked after children can impact on the other children in the class as it can be frustrating and distracting for them.

Curriculum areas: mathematics and literacy

Another finding identified from this research was that looked after children experience difficulty with mathematics and literacy. For mathematics, it was suggested that these difficulties could arise due to the reliance of parental involvement in education. Participants proposed that there is often the expectation for parents to reinforce learning at home, especially in mathematics, and in the case of looked after children this is less likely to happen. For literacy, however, there were no explanations offered as to why this is a subject of potential challenge for looked after children.

Changes in care settings

It was agreed that a change in care setting could be yet another potential barrier for looked after children. Participants said that these children are often expected to establish relationships with new carers, educators, specialists and friends on a regular basis, making it difficult for them to concentrate on their learning.

Participant D, a teacher from South Lanarkshire, explained that ‘there should be a professional who takes responsibility for their learning and development in education, someone who will consistently be there for them no matter what school or local authority they are placed in’.

Participant A, a teacher from Inverclyde, did not make direct reference to a change in care setting however she referred to the role of a ‘corporate parenting teacher’. This job involves working one-to-one with looked after children to reduce exclusion rates and ensure that they are able to access the curriculum. This role is available within the local authority of Inverclyde but not within South Lanarkshire, therefore, this finding is an example of one variable between the two local authorities in which this study was conducted.

Based on the observation by Participant D, it could be concluded that the services of a corporate parenting teacher would be beneficial in more local authorities.

Main challenges for teachers

Other barriers highlighted in the interviews included those faced by teachers when supporting looked after children. All four participants admitted that time and resources were a major barrier for them as these children required more one-on-one support which was not always available. Three of the participants concurred that they had experienced difficulty in establishing a positive relationship with a looked after child. They also stated that the lack of communication with families, carers and other agencies proved to be challenging for them.

The amount of specific training that teachers receive relating to supporting looked after children was also perceived as a barrier and for some of the participants this was seen to influence their level of confidence in identifying and supporting these children’s needs.

Theme Three: Teacher confidence in supporting looked after children

Three teachers were confident about identifying the needs of looked after children but were less confident about supporting their needs. The fourth teacher explained that, prior to having a looked after child in her class, she was not very confident, however, since working with a looked after child she is more confident in identifying and supporting their needs.

In the report *Looked After Children & Young People: We Can and Must Do Better*, The Scottish Executive (2007) outlined a commitment to provide training opportunities for teachers, carers and other professionals supporting looked after children. All participants were therefore asked to reflect on any training that they had received and whether they thought their confidence would change as a result of receiving basic training or further training specific to supporting looked after children.

Three of four participants had received no training specific to supporting looked after children at any point. These teachers assumed that they had not received training due to local authority budgets or because looked after children are a minority group in comparison with other children with additional support needs. One teacher confirmed that she had received training whilst at university, however, confessed that it 'was very much theory and statistics based, it wasn't practical and didn't offer any advice when working with looked after children'.

All participants felt that they would become more confident as a result of receiving basic or further training. Similarly, all participants believed that this would reassure them of their own practice and it would provide the opportunity for them to learn new and effective strategies for supporting these children.

Theme 4: Recommendations for improvement

The final theme arising from this research was participants' recommendations in order to improve the overall experience of education for looked after children. Participants promoted regular communication between teachers, carers and other agencies and emphasised the importance of sharing a child's needs and achievements with other practitioners when they are required to move school. Both teachers from Inverclyde discussed the benefits of a corporate parenting teacher and believed this to be a real asset to their local authority. Finally, all participants stressed the need for further training for all staff working with looked after children and believed that this would make a difference to the support that they could provide.

Conclusion

This research found that the social, emotional and behavioural needs of looked after children act as a significant barrier in their education. These needs are thought to

influence the child's relationships with their peers and it was suggested that looked after children are more likely to display challenging behaviour in order to receive attention from others. This behaviour is thought to be distracting and frustrating for other children in the class, thus impacting on their learning also.

It was also highlighted that these children often experience difficulty with mathematics and literacy. In order to access the curriculum, they often require one-on-one support, but due to a lack of time and resources, teachers are not always able to provide this. Legislation such as the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 and 2009 and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 stipulate that in order to maximise the participation of all children in education, educators must remove potential barriers and must respond to and support every child's diverse needs. This raises the question as to whether teachers, under the current circumstances, can actually provide adequate support as expected under additional support needs legislation.

This study also noted there to be varying levels of confidence amongst teachers in identifying and supporting the needs of looked after children. Whilst all practitioners could identify a range of strategies used to support these children, they agreed that basic or further training should be offered to teachers in order to reassure them of their own practice and to provide them with the opportunity to learn new and effective strategies in order to increase their confidence in supporting looked after children. This suggests that, despite the aim to improve training for teachers outlined by the Scottish Government, such training opportunities are yet to be implemented.

It should be noted that the findings from this research are not conclusive due to the small scale nature of the study. In order to compare and contrast the findings from this study, further research could be conducted with a higher number of participants working in a variety of local authorities across Scotland.

About the author



Stacey Mckillop is a teacher at Holytown Primary School in North Lanarkshire. She graduated from the University of the West of Scotland in July 2014 after gaining a Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree, and has since followed the Teacher Induction Scheme to gain full registration from the General Teaching Council for Scotland. During her time at university, Stacey completed her undergraduate dissertation on the education of looked after children. For this project, she was awarded the George D Gray Award by the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Stacey has since been committed to using the knowledge gained through her dissertation project to support the children in her own class. She is keen to raise awareness of the barriers looked after children face throughout their education and hopes that some of the information and practical suggestions in her thesis may help other teachers.

About CELCIS

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.

For more information

Visit: www.celcis.org
Email: celcis@strath.ac.uk