

Care experienced groups: 'Sounding out'

The following case study was published in June 2022. Any identifying features of the children and young people referred to in this case study have been changed to protect their identities.

Context

A significant amount of the research literature on the education of care experienced learners is concerned with raising academic attainment.ⁱⁱⁱ School-based research on social and emotional aspects of learning and wellbeing is less available, although there has been a recent renewed focus on attachment and trauma awareness in education.ⁱⁱⁱ We know that learners are more able to settle to learn when they have emotional stability. The ability to achieve, attain and access the curriculum is inextricably linked to social and emotional wellbeing. An understanding of how early experiences affect learners and the importance of relationships, underpins much of the Scottish policy landscape.^{iv}

Aberdeenshire Council is a predominantly rural council area in the northeast of Scotland. The central council services of Aberdeenshire Council are in Aberdeen City making it the only council in Scotland whose headquarters are located outside its jurisdiction. It has almost 800 care experienced learners and 17 secondary schools spread over a large, almost two thousand square miles, geographical area. This case study outlines how Emma Allen, the VSHT in Aberdeenshire, supported and grew 'care experienced groups' within schools in the local authority area.

What were the circumstances?

Emma was acutely aware that many of her care experienced learners were dealing with issues of separation, trauma and loss 'live' and in the moment. The experience of state supported care is not something that had happened to them in the past, it is something that they live with and continue to process on a day-to-day basis. Multiple factors including how they came to need the support of the care system, where they lived, and their relationships all intersected, making their pastoral needs at school more complex.

What did the VSHT do?

This is a journey that developed in three phases over two years.

Phase One

"I'm thinking of running a group for care experienced learners. Would you like to join?"

The Principal Teacher of Mackie Academy posed this question to each of her care experienced learners, and it came to be the start of this work. The school had historically run groups for Young Carers and learners who identify as LGBTQ+. Emma met the newly formed 'care experienced group' soon after coming into post. She described her remit as a VSHT and invited the group to submit a bid for funding that she had available as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Their very strong application with compelling justifications for a residential trip with the Outward Bound Trust was successful and the group went on their trip just before the first lockdown at the start of the pandemic. The group's feedback from the trip proved to be a catalyst for further support. The young people demonstrated a strong group identity, resilience, leadership and a commitment to supporting each other. While the pandemic inevitably delayed ambitions to work with more schools, the Mackie Academy group continued to meet online throughout the lockdown.

Phase Two

At the end of the 2021 academic year, Emma, determined to grow this work, facilitated meetings between Mackie Academy and another school -The Gordon Schools - so that they could share the thinking and process of the work. The Gordon Schools posed a similar question to a number of learners which included care experienced children and young people who subsequently wanted to form their own group. The school's Principal Teacher of Guidance and a Pupil Support Worker worked with the young people to plan a year's worth of activities to support what they wanted to do. The group met weekly from September 2021 and participated in a range of voluntary and social activities both in school and in the local community. During the spring term they collaborated with the Youth Music Initiative to collect footage and sounds to produce a video installation. They went on to screen this as a film 'Sounding Out' as a projection on Huntly Castle in the grounds of their school which was well attended by staff and families.

Phase Three

Emma is currently supporting and encouraging more schools to pose this important question and consider the value of creating identity and 'common experience' based groups. She is liaising with another academy and a primary school and supporting them to grow groups based on the needs of their communities. She is using social media to communicate with young people and has built an online platform where schools and learners share their experiences. The digital platform 'Your Place, Your Space' is a forum

for all local care experienced young people which links them to organisations and showcases work across the whole local authority area.

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What difference did this make?

'Care experienced' groups have met consistently and regularly, as part of the school timetable, in two schools in Aberdeenshire. These have both provided safe spaces for children and young people who share common experiences to meet together whilst learning and participating in a range of cultural, social and voluntary activities both in and out of school. Learners can talk about their experiences in a therapeutic context, as little or as much as they want. Teachers have formed close relationships with learners, they know them well and are able to offer further bespoke, individualised support. Teaching staff have developed a sophisticated understanding of this group of learners in their schools, and their needs, and have access to information which is helping to further reduce barriers to learning.

There have been multiple benefits for individual learners within both of the groups. One learner's school attendance improved significantly as a result of being part of a group with their peers; and when another learner, suffered a personal loss, both the group and school community were able to offer practical, emotional support and stability. Learners have been supported to access additional tuition, helped with transport to work experience opportunities, and have attended career-related training and courses. Many of the young people have had opportunities to participate in skills-based activities and voluntary work. Teachers have created self-sustaining school communities and are able to quickly offer bespoke support as and when needs arise.

The Aberdeenshire case study points towards a model that creates safe spaces for learners and a mechanism for schools to get to know care experienced learners in a deep and nuanced way.

Implications for practice

'Caring schools' is a model of practice drawing from care theory in the USA^v and is proposed as an approach that may be suited for those with care experience.^{vi} Practitioners draw attention to the importance of relationships and make the point that teachers typically only gain a narrow snapshot of a child's story. The child's family narrative and their lived experience is rarely heard and understood holistically by the school.^{vii} This case study points towards a model that creates sustainable safe spaces for learners and a mechanism for schools to get to know care experienced learners in a deep and nuanced way. This is not proposed as a solution for all schools to adopt, a combination of factors must be in place for the model to work. First, learners are asked whether they want to be a part of a group. Secondly, the support of the senior management team in providing time within the curriculum and space for groups to evolve and grow. Finally, a key role is played by specialist staff who are available, emotionally attuned and work in a trauma informed way.

ⁱ O'Higgins, A. A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *What is the relationship of being in care on the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review*. The Rees Centre.

ⁱⁱ Männistö, I. I., & Pirttimaa, R. A. (2018). A review of interventions to support the educational attainments of children and adolescents in foster care. *Adoption & Fostering*, 42(3), 266-281.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme
<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/>

^{iv} Scottish Attachment in Action (2022). [*MAPPING ATTACHMENT-INFORMED, TRAUMA-SENSITIVE PRACTICE IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION*](#).

^v Noddings, N. (2015). *The challenge to care in schools, 2nd Edition*. Teachers College Press.

^{vi} Jackson, S., Cameron, C., & Connelly, G. (2015). *Educating children and young people in care: Learning placements and caring schools*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

^{vii} Wetz, J. (2009). *Urban village schools: Putting relationships at the heart of secondary school organisation and design*.