

The Learning With Care Training Materials

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Introduction

The education of looked after children in Scotland has been the focus of serious concern for some time. In January 2002, the Scottish Executive commissioned a consortium of agencies (BAAF Adoption & Fostering, Save the Children, Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, University of Strathclyde Department of Educational Support and Guidance, Professional Development Unit and Quality in Education Centre, and Who Cares? Scotland) to create a package of materials that together may help to develop relevant knowledge and skills among teachers, social workers and carers and provide them with specific tools to enhance their practice. These included training materials (Hudson et al., 2003), an information booklet (Connelly et al., 2003), a report presenting the educational experiences of looked after and accommodated children and young people (Ritchie, 2003; and see Alison Ritchie, Elizabeth Morrison and Steven Paterson in this issue), a set of quality indicators [see Graham Connelly in this issue] and a specific education report that will be incorporated into the *Looking after Children in Scotland* materials.

The impetus for the commissioning of these materials was the report on the findings of a joint inspection between HMIE (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education) and SWSI (Social Work Services Inspectorate) of the education of looked after children in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2001). The *Learning with Care* report commented that almost none of the professionals directly concerned with looked after children's education had received specific training on the issue. There was a frequent lack of understanding about the school system and the educational curriculum among social workers and carers. This was paralleled among many teachers by an ignorance of the care system and the particular difficulties experienced by looked after children. In addition, there was little consistent attempt to support the provision of an 'educationally rich environment' for the young people where they lived, although the inspectors found examples of good practice in individual units and foster families. In planning for the children, there was insufficient focus on their educational needs and very little monitoring of outcomes either on an individual or authority wide basis.

Developing the materials

Although the Executive provided a framework within which the work was to be completed, the materials were developed as a result of widespread consultation with professionals, carers and young people. Three conferences were held at different locations throughout Scotland to discuss the issues involved in the education of looked after children. These were followed by a series of focus groups in which participants were asked what should be involved in a multi-disciplinary training course designed to improve professional practice in the education of looked after children. A three day course was developed drawing on these suggestions and this was piloted with representatives from the education and social work services in three local authorities. The material was also circulated to the focus groups. Feedback from these processes was incorporated in the final review of the materials.

Structure of the training pack

The pack contains the materials required for a 2½ or 3 day course. In addition to trainers' notes, handouts and overheads, the pack contains a video, the information booklet (Connelly et al., 2003), the *Care to Learn?* report of young people's educational experience (Ritchie, 2003) and a draft copy of the quality indicators.

The course consists of six modules. Ideally these should be delivered to multi-disciplinary groups as a coherent short course over three days. The practical difficulties in releasing staff and supporting carers to set aside a block of time were important, however, in the decision to make the course modular so that it could be delivered in a number of different ways and be adapted to the needs of particular participants.

Content of the training pack

In devising the content of the pack, we tried to address a number of different issues simultaneously. The materials directly address the knowledge gaps of the different professional groups. The training is also, however, organised in such a way that participants are encouraged to develop a genuine understanding of the roles, values and dilemmas of the other people who are involved in the education of looked after children. This is not so that participants try to 'do each other's jobs', but to sensitise them to what is possible within their own remit. This is underpinned throughout by an emphasis on the rights, needs and qualities of children and young people looked after by local authorities. The video and the *Care to Learn?* report provide vivid examples of the voices and views of young people.

The first module sets out the background and context of the training. It creates a common framework and understanding for participants about the educational experiences and outcomes for looked after children. It also outlines the legislative and regulatory base that frames the care and education of children looked after away from home. The exercises and the video also begin the process of encouraging participants to develop an empathetic understanding of the experiences that impinge on the lives of looked after young people.

The second module focuses on key themes in child development. It reviews the main concepts in attachment theory, highlights the immediate and long-term impact of trauma on children and encourages participants to develop a resilience-based model of practice with young people. This emphasis on child development and the mental health of children and young people reflects the importance that we placed on a developmental understanding of barriers to learning. It also fits with an emerging consensus that the school environment can profoundly affect the mental health and well-being of all children, whether positively or negatively. For looked after children, a benign and supportive school environment can make a huge difference to their current emotional well-being and their future mental health well into adulthood. Conversely, an adverse school experience can make problems even worse.

Module three encapsulates the two next modules (four and five). This is to allow the different professional groups (educational staff and social work staff and carers) to start module three together, to separate to do the relevant module for them, and to come back together to finish module three. Modules four and five address particular issues and knowledge gaps for the different professional groups and would normally be delivered simultaneously.

The first part of module three focuses directly on the barriers to learning that looked after children and young people might experience. Experiential exercises and a task focusing on supportive and inhibiting environments are designed to sensitise all the professionals to the difficulties these children face. When the participants divide into their professional groupings, the work focuses initially on understanding the environment and culture of the other group and the meaning of this for children and young people who have to live and learn in these environments. There is also direct teaching and exercises for each group to address particular knowledge gaps. For the social work group, this focuses on the educational curriculum and current educational frameworks and perspectives. For the education group, it consists of an introduction to the planning process for looked after children, particularly focusing on the *Looking After Children* materials and an examination of the current systems for caring for children away from home. Before returning to the whole group, participants also focus on the quality of experience they offer looked after children in relation to their education and learning and how this might be enhanced.

The decision to split the group at this point was made both for practical reasons and also to promote a better learning experience for participants. It became clear during the piloting of the first draft of the course that, for many participants, the knowledge gaps of their colleagues from other disciplines were exactly the areas about which they knew most. We did consider using the expertise of the participants to educate each other but decided eventually that there needed to be a clear and direct input as it was essential that this knowledge was properly in place by the end of the course. There is still space within the course for participants to learn directly from their colleagues by clarifying issues or asking questions when they return to the large group, but the onus is on the trainers to ensure participants understand the main issues. The final reason for splitting the group also emerged as a result of the pilot course. All participants will have attended schools as children. For some, their individual experiences may have left them with some 'negative' legacies. Similarly, some teachers may have had difficult experiences working with social workers or carers. It became clear that participants felt more able to examine their own practice honestly if they did not have to 'defend' themselves to other disciplines.

The final part of the third module brings the two groups together to reflect on the experience they have just had and to comment on, or ask questions about, the working environment of their colleagues from other disciplines, or the impact of these for looked after children and young people. The last exercise allows participants to experience in a graphic way what it means to be looked after by a 'corporate parent' and the complexity it introduces into even the simplest decision-making or communication. This last exercise leads directly into the final module which addresses issues of working together.

Module six focuses on some of the dilemmas and difficulties that can arise for professionals, carers and families working together for and with looked after children and young people. It also explores the experience of case reviews and considers the role of different participants and the views of young people about how these important planning events should be conducted. The session should finish with trainers providing examples of positive local initiatives where people have successfully collaborated in some way that has improved the educational experience of looked after children and young people.

Supplementary materials

Included within the pack is a number of materials that can be used as part of the training course or on their own.

Video

The video was jointly funded by East Dunbartonshire Council and the Scottish

Executive. The scenarios and statements in the video are based on the actual experiences of looked after young people, though young actors were involved in the scenarios themselves. The video is a powerful and challenging channel for the views and voice of young people. It can be uncomfortable viewing for participants but it does emphasise how much young people are concerned about their education and how dependent they are upon the support of adults who care for them or teach them in this vital area of their lives.

The Information Booklet

This booklet (Connelly et al., 2003) expands on the material in the overheads and exercises by reviewing research, giving detail about legislative and regulatory frameworks, outlining the curriculum and providing suggestions about ways to support young people. Ideally, every participant should have a copy of the booklet to take away as a permanent resource.

Care to Learn? Report

This report (Ritchie, 2003) is an invaluable resource for trainers to provide direct examples of young people's views and experiences, as the young people who took part touched on all the issues covered in the course.

Conclusion

The materials have been sent to every local authority and residential child care provider in Scotland. Many authorities have already begun to develop plans for delivering the training. Negotiations are currently taking place with the Scottish Executive to fund a series of workshops to help trainers to work with the materials effectively. We hope that these training materials will help all staff and carers in their commitment to raise educational attainment and outcomes for looked after children and young people

References

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