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Book review

Improving Outcomes for Looked After Children

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Improving Outcomes for Looked After Children offers an evidence-based and practical account of ways in which practitioners can help improve educational outcomes for care experienced children. The author sets out clearly the rationale behind this, in that many children who are care experienced have historically underperformed academically compared to their peers. The author outlines reasons throughout the book as to why this may be the case and highlights the importance of teacher and peer relationships as a supportive strategy for improvement. Examples contained within the book discuss and reflect on the importance of learning with and from peers, alongside socio-cultural learning to support improvements in educational outcomes. Early on the author makes clear the value of each person's role in Corporate Parenting and that care experienced children belong to everyone, thereby highlighting the need for Corporate Parents to continue to work together to ensure children feel loved, safe and respected. The benefits of establishing a sense of belonging for care experienced children and them knowing that someone believes in them is clearly outlined.

The book contains seven well developed case studies from primary aged children, which highlight the impact on learning across different care settings, including living in kinship care or a children's house. Interviews with the children, their carers, and key education staff highlight features of the social context the young people live and learn in. Throughout the case studies the author highlights the need to ensure high expectations, a strengths-based approach, resilience, and confidence building opportunities, along with internal motivators for learning. This is strengthened by the significant value placed on giving care experienced children opportunities to support other children and young people in their education setting.

A particular theme throughout the book, which the author returns to often, is the benefit of care experienced children taking part in collaborative work with peers. This is to allow learners to work together and be peer-led rather than teacher-led. There are also examples given of effective strategies to engage and support care experienced children, such as checking in with them and attuning to their feelings, in order to build a positive and meaningful relationships to help meet their individual needs. Focus is placed upon transitions and the importance of positive, consistent, and objective information being passed on to both school

and carers, especially for care experienced children moving between local authorities.

The book emphasises the benefits of whole school nurturing approaches so that teaching staff are supported to fully understand the impact of being care experienced, to include developmental trauma, attachment needs, and barriers care experienced children may face when engaging in learning. Further focus is given to the importance of building secure and stable relationships, both in school and within the wider community, to instil a sense of belonging, alluding to the fact that this can take time. Agency alongside pupil voice is another key strategy and approach described to improve outcomes. This involves young people specifically in the decision-making process and allowing extra time for learning to occur in a safe and supported environment guided by the learner. A helpful aspect of the strategies outlined in the book is the relevance to good learning and teaching that could benefit all learners in a nurturing school environment.

Each case study concludes with a very helpful guide for practitioners and school leaders, including points for reflection and an audit tool. This can be used in a practical and reflective way by school leaders to help plan, improve and evaluate the intended outcomes, to support care experienced children further. Final focus is given to exploring assumptions and shaping practitioners' views, such they are encouraged to hold a non-biased, positive, equitable and inclusive view of a care experienced child. Building capacity within schools beyond the designated manager is highlighted so that the wider teaching staff have autonomy to support and champion care experienced children's learning needs. A designated manager is the person in educational establishments who has overall responsible for care experienced learners. They are usually a member of the senior leadership team.

This book is clearly written and engaging to read. The author draws upon her own extensive experience within education in Scotland, as an education inspector and as an international education consultant. She uses inclusive language and throughout the book suggests strengths-based practical approaches to improve outcomes. The book can feel compact at times due to the

chapter descriptions, however, the last few chapters pull the main themes together in a clear and cohesive manner.

The final chapter highlights that practitioners working with care experienced children are the greatest resource to support improvements in learning to include social and emotional learning alongside health and wellbeing.

This book reaches out to any professional working with care experienced children and young people and is hugely relevant to education staff and school leaders as agents of change. Whilst written in the Scottish education system context there is a helpful chapter at the start looking at the international perspective.

Recommendations and reflections throughout the book will be of general use to any practitioner working with care experienced children and young people nationally or internationally. The research referenced within the book also stretches across many different sectors and settings and offers evidence-based support to the recommendations contained within the book.

About the author

Seonaid Graham is the Lead for Care Experienced Learners in Glasgow Virtual School. Prior to this Seonaid was seconded as a Senior Educational Psychologist into the Care Experienced Team. Seonaid has worked as an Educational Psychologist and before this as a Primary School Teacher. Alongside her Residential Children's House colleagues Seonaid successfully led on the implementation of 'How Nurturing is Our Children's House' programme in Glasgow.

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