

Catch up literacy for children in care

Wayne Holmes, Head of Communications at Catch Up, details the results of two pilot studies for a literacy intervention designed to support children in care who struggle to learn to read.

The gap in academic achievement between children in care and their peers is well-documented.¹ Of the 44,000 children who are in care in England, it is likely that fewer than 50% will achieve the expected level in English at age 11 (compared with more than 80% of all 11-year-olds), fewer than 15% will gain 5 or more good GCSEs (compared with 40% of all children), and fewer than one in ten will go on to Higher Education (compared with almost 40% of all children). The gap has significant consequences well beyond education, with, for example, care leavers being hugely over-represented among young prisoners and homeless young people.

The causes are predictably complex. Almost two-thirds of looked-after children are in care due to neglect or abuse and, once in care, they all too often experience repeated disruptions to their education because of moves from one social care placement to another, or from school to

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school. In addition, government research² has suggested that there is inadequate training available for teachers, carers and other professionals working with looked-after children, to enable them to provide effective support. All of this contributes to children in care suffering disproportionately from emotional, social and behavioural problems, which inevitably has a significant, negative impact on their learning and achievement at school.

It is in this context that two pilot

studies have recently been undertaken, in the Midlands and the East of England, to see whether Catch Up Literacy, an intervention demonstrated to be effective in schools, could be used by carers to support children in care who were struggling to learn to read. Both studies highlighted how the experiences of children in care can affect their attitudes to, and achievements in, literacy but both also showed that effective literacy support can be provided by carers who have themselves been given appropriate training.

Catch Up Literacy

Catch Up Literacy was developed in 1997, at Oxford Brookes University,³ in response to research that showed that more than 18% of eight-year-olds had reading difficulties which restricted their access to the curriculum.⁴ It is now available within a comprehensive training and support package provided by Catch Up, a not-for-profit charity, and is delivered by teachers and teaching assistants who have received the training.

The Catch Up Literacy intervention begins with diagnostic/formative assessments enabling the adult to set literacy targets and to identify a focus for effective teaching, centred on a book of an appropriate level of difficulty. The intervention then comprises two 15-minute 1:1 teaching sessions per week, in which the learner reads from the chosen book and completes some linked writing that addresses identified miscues. Throughout, the emphasis is on providing effective personalised learning support for the individual – enabling learning through success within a clearly structured process.

Catch Up Literacy success

In schools, Catch Up Literacy has been shown to be effective with struggling readers aged between 6 and 14 years, enabling them to achieve on average more than twice as many months progress in Reading Age as the period of intervention.⁵ It has also been shown to enable learners to make significant Comprehension Age gains and to have a

positive effect on their confidence and self-esteem.

Currently, Catch Up Literacy is being used in more than 6,000 schools across England and Wales and has been implemented in clusters of schools by 70 local authorities. The charity estimates that more than 150,000 learners in England and Wales have benefited from Catch Up support. In addition, the DCSF has identified Catch Up Literacy as an evidence-based Wave 3 intervention (shown to provide effective one-to-one support for struggling learners).⁶

Catch Up Literacy and Compass Children's Services

In the first of the two pilot studies, Catch Up partnered with Compass Children's Services, an independent fostering agency based in Leicestershire, to carry out a year-long project in which foster carers were trained how to deliver Catch Up Literacy to the children in their care. Compass provides fostering services, for vulnerable children and young people from a range of backgrounds throughout the Midlands, including support and training for the carers themselves, helping them to develop their personal and professional fostering skills.

The study involved ten learners, aged between 11 and 14, whose Reading Ages were, on average, more than three years behind their Chronological Ages. The children in this group had experiences typical of children in care, including social care placement moves, school moves, exclusion from school, trauma and abuse, which together had resulted in a range of behavioural difficulties and emotional problems. At the beginning of the study, the learners were assessed using standardised assessments,⁷ while their carers each received three half-days of training, a file of resources, a follow-up home visit and a selection of age-appropriate books graded to Catch Up Literacy Levels.

Delivering Catch Up Literacy to children in the foster home environment proved to be far more challenging than

delivering the intervention in school (only three of the learners were able to complete the intended duration of the intervention); learners changed placements during the intervention period; carers had little or no background knowledge about the teaching of reading and thus found it difficult to make effective use of the resources (which were designed for use by school staff); carers found it difficult to ensure that sessions were delivered on a regular basis (homes are understandably less regimented than schools); and learners were sometimes resistant to engaging in formal learning activities outside of school.

Nevertheless, the results of the project clearly showed that Catch Up Literacy can be delivered effectively by Catch Up trained carers in the home environment and that the intervention can boost literacy attainment and self-confidence for children in care. After six months, learners achieved an average Reading Age gain of four times the period of intervention; the average after 12 months, with two learners receiving only nine months of intervention, was 1.85 times.⁸ Two of the learners made dramatic progress, achieving Reading Age gains three and four times the period of intervention, enabling them to catch up with their peers. (One learner commented: "I feel more confident in myself. I can now read aloud in class.") Carers commented that the intervention provided them with a tool to help and engage with the young people in their care ("I'm spending the same time working with them but getting better results"); and that the sessions provided productive 'quality time' they could enjoy together. Following the success of the study, Catch Up Literacy has become an integral part of a rolling programme of foster care training at Compass and, to date, more than 30 carers have taken part in the training and are delivering the intervention to children in their care where appropriate.

Catch Up Literacy and the Norfolk Virtual School

The second study involved Catch Up working in partnership with the Norfolk Virtual School for Children in Care, which, on behalf of Norfolk County Council Children's Services, oversees the education of all children in care in the county, regardless of which schools they attend. The study focussed on children in care whose educational experience or social care placements had been disrupted. In addition, more than three-quarters of the twenty-six children who participated had significant learning difficulties.⁹ As in the Compass study, the care workers (here, foster carers, residential workers and learning support assistants) were provided with three half days of Catch Up Literacy training, a file of resources, and access to a selection of age-appropriate books graded to Catch Up Literacy Levels; and the children were assessed using standardised assessments.¹⁰

Despite difficulties typical of pilot studies (such as the absence of key staff, difficulties with fitting the intervention into existing responsibilities, and problems with coordination across settings), the learners achieved average Reading Age gains of 14.7 months after five months of intervention and 17.15 months at the close of the seven-month pilot, a ratio gain of more than 2.4. Some learners made remarkable progress: more than 25 months over the duration of the study. Gains in confidence and self-esteem were also widely reported. (One carer commented: "We have really noticed a difference since the child we care for has been on Catch Up. She will pick up a book now and read for pleasure, whereas before she was reluctant to read.")

These achievements compare very favourably with those of Catch Up Literacy in schools; when the complex needs of this vulnerable group of learners are taken into account, they are particularly significant. The success of the study clearly suggests that Catch Up Literacy could make a significant contribution within the Virtual School to raising standards in reading and self-confidence and to promoting inclusion for children in care.

Following the success of the Compass and Norfolk Virtual School Catch Up Literacy studies, Catch Up is currently working with both organisations looking at how the Catch Up Literacy resources can be made more appropriate for use by carers, and at how the Catch Up Numeracy intervention can be used to support effectively children in care who struggle with numeracy. Catch Up is also working with the Lancashire Gypsy, Roma & Traveller Achievement Service to see how Catch Up Literacy and Catch Up Numeracy might contribute to the support of traveller children who have learning difficulties.

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Footnotes

- 1 Statistics drawn from: DFES (2006). *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care*. The Catch Up Project: a reading intervention in Year 3 for Level 1 readers. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 23 (1), 78-84.
- 2 DFES (2006). *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care*. The Catch Up Project: a reading intervention in Year 3 for Level 1 readers. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 23 (1), 78-84.
- 3 Thomas, G. and Davies, P. (1997). 'Special needs: objective reality or personal construction? Judging reading difficulty after the code.' *Education Research*, 39, 263-270.
- 4 Standardised data, for 6617 learners aged 6 - 10, reported by 23 local authorities across the UK, showed Reading Age gains of 18 months for an average 8 month period of intervention. Standardised data, for 395 learners aged 11 - 14, reported by 5 local authorities, showed Reading Age gains of 18.4 months for an average 11 month period of intervention. Standardised data, for 139 learners aged 11 - 14, reported by 5 local authorities, showed Comprehension Age gains of 15.6 months for an average 11 month period of intervention. Catch Up data.
- 5 DFES (2003). 'Targeting support: choosing and implementing interventions for children with significant literacy difficulties'.
- 6 NFER Group Reading Sentence Completion and Context Comprehension assessments.
- 7 The higher ratio gain at the mid-point of the intervention might be explained in terms of diminishing returns. The fact that the mid-point assessments were administered by the carers must also be acknowledged.
- 8 15 pupils had a Statement of Educational Needs, and a further 8 pupils were at School Action Plus.
- 9 Salford Sentence Revised Reading Test for primary school aged learners, NFER for secondary school aged learners.