Institute of Education

UCL

Promoting the achievement of looked after children and young people across the Central South Consortium in Wales

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Case studies of education provision for children and young people in care in Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Vale of Glamorgan

Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children
PALAC

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Introduction

Education of children in care

As of March 2017, there were 5,955 children and young people in care in Wales.[1] Across the Central South Consortium (Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynonn Taf and Vale of Glamorgan) there were 2,170 children and young people looked after. The majority of these children are in care as a result of birth families being unable to provide a level of care that meets their emotional and well-being needs. Children and young people who are in or have experienced care remain one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational outcomes. In 2016, eleven per cent of young people in Wales achieved A* to C grade at GCSE. Care leavers can experience poorer employment and health outcomes after leaving school compared to their peers; for example, 45% of young people who were looked after were not engaged in education, training or employment (NEET) or not in touch with their local authority on their 19th birthday in 2015. This compares with around 4.9% of all other children who leave school at the end of Year 13.[2]

However, the education and achievement of children and young people in care is currently the focus of renewed policy, research and practice attention across Wales. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 provides the legal framework for improving the well-being of people who need care and support. A national strategic approach to improving outcomes for children looked after is underway with a focus on promoting and improving collaborative working across agencies, identifying and sharing good practice and making improvements where they are needed.[3,4] The purpose of this report is to share practice in selected in Central South Consortium (CSC) schools that is contributing to improved outcomes and school experiences for children and young people in care.

1 StatsWales (2017). Children looked after at 31 March by local authority, gender and age. https://statswales.gov.wales/catalogue/health-and-social-care/social-services/childrens-services/children-looked-after/childrenlookedafterat31march-by-localauthority-gender-age.
2 Careers Wales (2015). Pupil Destinations from Schools in Wales 2015. http://destinations.careerswales.com/2015/.
3 Welsh Government (2016). Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales. http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/160127-lac-strategy-en.pdf.
4 Mannay et al. (2015). Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales. http://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2015/151111-understanding-educational-experiences-opinions-looked-after-children-en.pdf.

In 2017, the CSC collaborated with UCL Institute of Education to deliver the Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children (PALAC) programme with 11 schools and one Educational Psychology Service across four of the five the local authorities (LAs). This report presents an account of the programme, including the activities undertaken by the participants and the outcomes of the programme to date for pupils in care and staff in the participating schools.

What is PALAC?

PALAC is a knowledge exchange programme that seeks to support practice in schools to improve outcomes for students in care. It originated as a result of the dearth of evidence available to support schools in developing practice for a group of children and young people who continue to underachieve both academically and subsequently in adult life. At its core is the collaborative relationship that exists between practitioners in school and university researchers to seek to improve our collective understanding of how students in care can thrive in school. As a knowledge exchange programme, PALAC places considerable emphasis on the generation of evidence from practice. The programme promotes evidence-informed practice in schools and the structure of the programme itself is based on the current understanding of how to best support professional learning and development in schools.

PALAC began in 2014 is now in its third year and it engages schools and VS in a collaborative six-month programme through access to research findings, a school audit tool and regular support from facilitators with research and school practitioner backgrounds. Participants have the opportunity to share and evaluate their findings at the end of the six months. The PALAC team links with an LA to support the development of teacher practice in a more systemic way and to help ensure that learning from the programme can be sustained once the formal PALAC programme comes to an end.

The PALAC programme has identified seven evidence-informed domains around which schools can focus professional development and learning:

- **Supporting emotional development and wellbeing**
- **Raising and monitoring attainment**
- **Supporting learning**
- **School environment**
- **Effective deployment of staff**
- **Supporting equality and diversity**
- **Working with carers and other professionals.**

Schools focus their PALAC projects around one or two domains that are most relevant to their settings.

Case Studies

Llanedeyrn Primary
Supporting literacy and engagement with carers through paired reading

Background

Literacy outcomes for pupils in care remain a cause for concern and there is a dearth of research into the impact of literacy interventions for this group of pupils. Specific research into literacy interventions for children in care remains thin on the ground. Whilst there has been some evidence for effectiveness of certain literacy interventions with children in care[5] such as 'Catch Up Literacy',[6] 'Letterbox Club',[7] 'TextNow',[8] and 'ARROW';[9] further work remains to be done.

Paired reading has the potential to support the development of reading skills, whilst nurturing the development of strong attachments between children and their carers.[10] Paired reading[11] is a method that typically involves a skilled reader (peer, carer, parent or practitioner) and a child who is learning to read, reading a book together.

Paired reading can be used with any book, taking turns reading by sentence, paragraph, page or chapter and each paired reading session includes a series of activities that the reading partners can engage in. For children in care, the approach has the additional benefit of supporting a 'key' adult who takes an interest in them, which research has shown to be seen to be an important factor in the educational progress of children in care.

Llanedeyrn Primary School is a large primary school in Llanedeyrn, Cardiff. The school provides two special resource bases for pupils with moderate to severe learning difficulties and has a high number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Andrew Price, the Resource Base teacher and a member of the Senior Leadership Team

5 Brooks, G. (2016). What works for children with literacy difficulties? The effectiveness of intervention schemes. 5th edition. Dysleixa-SpLD Trust. Sheffield.
6 Holmes, W., Lawes, J., Reid, D., Dowker, A. & Walker, S. (2011). Catch Up Literacy: an intervention for struggling readers. Thetford: Catch Up. www.catchup.org/interventions/literacy.php
7 Winter, K., Connolly, P., Bell, I. & Ferguson, J. (2011). Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Letterbox Club in Improving Educational Outcomes among Children aged 7–11 Years in Foster Care in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University. https://www.booktrust.org.uk/.../our-programmes/letterbox-club.
8 Adams, M. (2014). Outcomes of TextNow at LAC sites 2008-14. Norwich: Unitas (mimeograph). www.unitas.uk.net/textnow.
9 ARROW tuition: https://www.arrowtuition.co.uk.
10 Osborne, C., Alfano, J. & Winn, T. (2010). Paired reading as a literacy intervention for foster children. Adoption & Fostering, 34(4), 17–26.
11 Topping, K.J. and Lindsay, G.A. (1992). 'Paired reading: a review of the literature', Research Papers in Education, 7, 3, 199–246.

collaborated with Lynette Pole, a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) to investigate and implement a reading intervention for pupils in care, as it had been identified that reading was an area in which children in care did not always make sustained progress. Paired reading would not only offer opportunities to support the development of reading skills, but at the same time support the development of relationships between the school and foster carers and in turn foster carers and the children in their care.

What did the school do?

The school aimed to improve outcomes in literacy for pupils in care and set a target for 75% of pupils to have met their personalised literacy targets by the end of the project (to make 2 sublevels of progress at completion). Andrew set up a rigorous system for comprehensive baseline assessment of learners' literacy skills, the tracking of progress and the measurement of post-intervention outcomes. With the support of the PALAC facilitator a paired reading handbook was written and training materials and resources developed. Pupils were all provided with a welcome present in the form of a book in a bag.

The school hoped that carers would become more engaged in the school community and skilled in supporting their child's education. A meeting was held with all foster carers as a starting point for introducing the paired reading project and after the end of the intervention to reflect on progress and successes. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis was conducted with carers during the training session to identify their strengths and areas for development with supporting the paired reading approach with the children in their care.

Outcomes for the young people and staff

The paired reading self-rating questionnaires were revisited at the end of the project which demonstrated a positive impact for all pupils involved in the project. At the pupil level it was possible to identify positive outcomes, academically and socially as evidenced by data provided by the school, both quantitative and qualitative. All children made gains in reading levels and reading ages increased (above 60% made accelerated progress between 6 months and 26 months progress). Five of the seven pupils in the project made two sublevels progress in reading. Less progress was made by pupils who also had special educational needs and where carers/parents had not attended the training session. Staff felt positive outcomes extended beyond attainment and questionnaires also demonstrated a positive improvement in pupil engagement and attitudes to reading.

The project also had a positive impact on the relationships between the school and carers and developed carers' skills to support their child's reading. The initial meetings encouraged conversations which spurred the sharing of personal history and life stories and were particularly powerful when the child attended too. Carers now felt an increased sense of engagement and skill in supporting education.

'I now know how to help improve my child's reading by using questions before, during and after the reading…' Carer

'Paired Reading' was a good way for me to help my children read harder books…' Carer

'I liked reading all the different books…' Child

'It definitely helped me with my ability of reading out loud…' Child

Follow up meetings with carers involved tea, cake and certificates of achievement and a chance to reflect on the project and look to the future, forging further links between home and school. The impact of the project extended to the wider school community, with, for example, Lynette using the paired reading approach with children in the nurture group and other LSAs using it in the reading sessions for all children in the school. The school planned to bring the pupils involved together within a focus group to reflect on the use of paired reading and other reading approaches in the future.

Implications for practice and research

Improvements in outcomes for pupils require schools to change and develop their practice across many elements of school life. As demonstrated by the project at Llanedeyrn it is never possible to identify one action that 'will make all the difference'. As part of this project, for example, data needed to be carefully extrapolated, analysed and reflected upon, children were supported to secure relationships with adults; support staff devoted to working with children in care and a well chosen reading intervention were just some of the contributing factors. Finally, this case study, once again, shows that at least one member of SLT needs to be part of the project team to ensure impact and sustainability. Andy confirmed that this was key to the project's success and support from the SLT for the project was crucial in supporting change. The school hopes to now to look at why paired reading did not work for all their pupils/worked better for some than others and look at research for alterative reading interventions that could be use when paired reading is not effective. Adopting a one size fits all approach for intervention is not the answer and as we know some children may not respond to an intervention and a more personalised approach may well be needed.[12, 13, 14]

The project at Llenedeyrn drew on evidence-informed approaches. Teaching Assistant (TA)/LSA Research[15] points out that if TAS/LSAs are well supported and trained can have a positive impact on pupil attainment. This was certainly seen to be the case with Llanedeyrn where LSAs subsequently felt empowered to transfer and generalise skills acquired through the project to different contexts. Further empirical research is needed on a wider scale looking at the use of paired reading with children and young people in care as a specific target group. The research carried out so far has shown positive outcomes and further research could look at factors that support paired reading to work for children in care.

12 Rose, J. (2009). Identifying and teaching children and young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties: an independent report. http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk/media/downloads/inline/the-rose-report.1294933674.pdf.
13 Brooks, G. (2016). What works for children with literacy difficulties? The effectiveness of intervention schemes. 5th edition. Dysleixa-SpLD Trust. Sheffield.
14 Griffiths, Y. & Stuart, M. (2013). Reviewing evidence-based practice for pupils with dyslexia and literacy difficulties. Journal of Research in Reading, 36(1), 96–116.
15 Webster, R., Russell, A. & Blatchford, P. (2015). Maximising the impact of teaching assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers. Routledge.

Cyfarthfa Park Primary School
Play Therapy and ELSA support for pupils in care

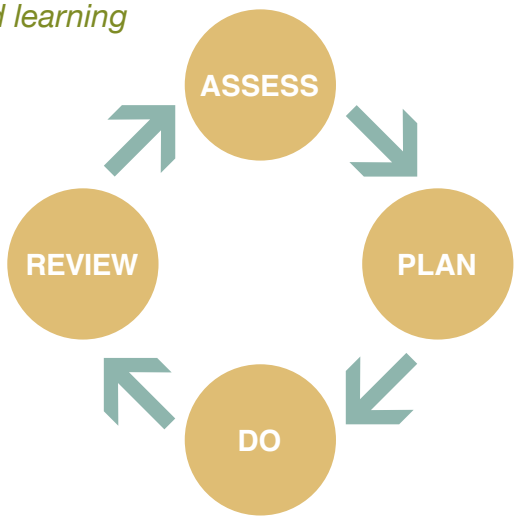
Background

Research from the past thirty years continues to explain the long term impact of childhood abuse and neglect. Maltreatment can have negative consequences for academic achievement as well as implications for experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and stress disorder.[16] In addition, research is also emerging of the potential detrimental effects for physical and health development. The majority of pupils in care are due to neglect and/or abuse. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find rates of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties are considerably higher for children and young people in care compared to their peers. Finding evidence-informed ways in school to support pupils in care who experience SEMH needs is a priority.[17]

Cyfarthfa Park Primary School in Merthyr Tydfil is a two form entry school, and at the time of the project had a number of pupils (N=18) who were in families receiving support from social services through foster care, Special Guardianship Orders and as family arrangements. Using the APDR approach (see below), Donna Stone, a teacher and play therapist at the school, led the PALAC project to investigate the impact of play therapy and an Emotional Learning Support Assistant (ELSA) group was led by Lisa Bailey on the social and emotional development of nine of these pupils after assessing eleven pupils who had been identified as needing additional support.

The Special Needs Code of Practice for Wales,[18] emphasises the importance of a graduated approach to teaching and learning to ensure better outcomes.[19] The graduated approach can be described as an assess, plan, do, review (APDR) cycle of teaching and learning (Figure 1) and is the approach adopted by Donna and Lisa.

Figure 1: Graduated approach to teaching and learning



16 Widom, C. S. (2014). Long term consequences of child maltreatment. In Handbook of child maltreatment (pp. 225–247). Springer Netherlands.
17 Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S. & O'Higgins, A. (2015). The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data. http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/EducationalProgressLookedAfterChildrenOverviewReport_Nov2015.pdf.
18 Welsh Government (2001). Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales. http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/131016-sen-code-of-practice-for-wales-en.pdf.
19 DfE (2015). SEND code of practice: 0–25 years. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf.

Play therapy is an empirically supported counselling intervention that is grounded in child development principles and recognises the importance of play as integral to a child's development. Play therapy helps children to adjust their behaviours, clarify their self-concept and establish positive relationships.[20] It allows children to express their feelings and thoughts through the medium of play – a natural form of communication for children and one without a heavy reliance on words and language. A recent meta-analysis of 52 studies of child-centred play therapy found that the intervention had a statistically significant and moderate treatment effect size (.47).[21]

What did the school do?

The first step of the project was to assess the specific SEMH needs of the eleven pupils using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).[22] Using this data combined with teacher observations and feedback, the pupils were allocated to a play therapy group or an ESLA group (Figure 2). Once permission and consent had been received pupils joined a group and Figure 3 summarises the support activities.

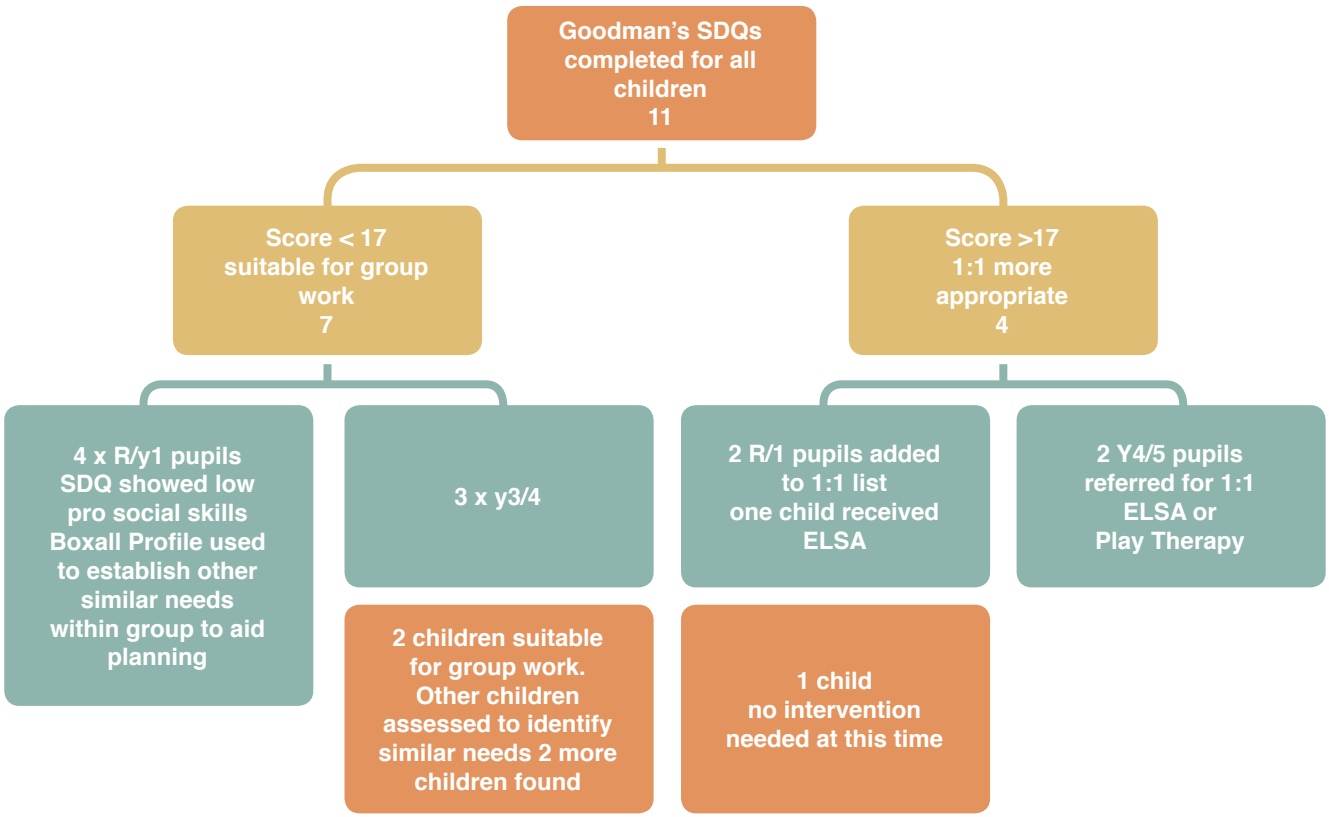


Figure 2: Assessment of pupils

20 British Association of Play Therapy (2017). http://www.bapt.info/play-therapy/info-professionals-employers/.
21 Lin, Y. W. & Bratton, S. C. (2015). A meta-analytic review of child-centered play therapy approaches. Journal of Counseling & Development, 93(1), 45–58.
22 http://www.sdqinfo.com/.

R/1 group	Yr 1 - 1:1	Yr 3/4 group
4 children	1 child	4 children
To improve social skills and develop a sense of self	To develop self awareness and self esteem	To build and strengthen sense of self
Delivered by ELSA. one 50 minute session a week for 12 weeks with a review at week 8	Delivered by ELSA. One 50 minute session a week for 12 weeks with a review at week 8	Delivered by play therapist. One 50 minute session a week for 12 weeks with a review at week 8
		Meetings held with parents/carers. SDQs completed by parents and children.

Figure 3: Graduated approach to pupil support: play therapy and ELSA support

Outcomes for pupils and staff

Progress for the pupils was assessed using the SDQ score, staff observations and pupil feedback. Two of the four pupils in the ELSA-led group made progress as measured by the SDQ. One pupil's score remained the same and the score for the fourth pupil went down by one point. For the two pupils who did not make progress on the SDQ, one of the pupils was recommended for one-to-one play therapy. The other pupil was observed in the group as being happy and making progress so the ELSA, as follow up, explored ways of widening the friendship circle for the child. A year later and the second pupil has received 1:1 play therapy and is thriving in a long term placement.

The results of the play therapy group were similar with two of the children making progress as measured by the SDQ score. One pupil left the group after three weeks and the fourth member saw a negative trend in their SDQ score. For the two pupils where there had been an improvement in the SDQ scores, monitoring and 'as and when' ELSA support was recommended. Individual play therapy was decided as the next step for the pupil where the SDQ score had not improved, which also reflected staff observations and feedback.

For staff, whole school attachment training has now been delivered and the school is beginning the National Nurturing Schools Programme. The assess-plan-do-review approach is being used with all pupils in care and closer links with carers have been established with plans to deliver Parent Child Attachment Play.[23] All children will be assessed using the online Boxall [24] programme to establish early interventions for developmental needs.

23 Big Toes Little Toes (2018). Parent Child Attachment Play. http://www.bigtoeslittletoes.org/single-post/2017/04/26/Parent-Child-Attachment-Play-PCAP-book-is-published.
24 The nurture group network (2018). Boxall Profile. https://nurturegroups.org/introducing-nurture/boxall-profile.

Implications for practice and research

The Cyfarthfa Park Primary PALAC project demonstrates very clearly that a comprehensive and carefully considered APDR cycle is fundamental to contributing to better outcomes for pupils with additional needs, including children and young people in care. It demonstrates that interventions can 'work' for some pupils, including play therapy and ELSA support, and not for others, despite thoughtful consideration of the nature of support offered, as in this case study. The reasons for this will be many and complex including the timing of an intervention of this nature for a pupil and their readiness developmentally to respond. Often, only trying an approach will determine if a pupil is ready or not and then practitioners being prepared, based on learning from standardised data and observations to try another approach. The 'failure' of an intervention is not about the failure of the pupil, or indeed the efficacy of a particular approach/intervention, but is a signal that the support needs to change. This is one of the central tenants of inclusion as evident from this case study.

More widely, the social and emotional development of all pupils in a school is in and of itself important and valued by school practitioners. Nevertheless, this area is also a focus in schools in light of the theory and evidence that there will be a positive effect on academic achievement and progress. Current findings from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Toolkit[25] now reports four months additional academic progress as a result of social and emotional approaches. Research in this area is complex. Findings from research in schools and education more generally, can only ever show 'associations' and not causal links between a specific social and/or emotional intervention or programme and any subsequent increase in academic attainment. Furthermore, how long it might take to see any increase in academic attainment is yet not clear due, in large part, to the different variables in studies such as the child, school context and programme content and length. Nonetheless, further research would help to strengthen our understanding of how to take full advantage of social and emotional approaches and academic attainment.

25 Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit (2018). https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit/social-and-emotional-learning/.

Rumney Primary School
Tuning in to pupils in care

Background

Attunement describes how responsive an individual is to another's emotional needs and is marked by language and behaviour which reflect awareness of the individual's emotional state and has its origins in attachment theory.[26] The approach seeks to enhance communication and attachment in relationships with, for example, the practitioner demonstrating the main behaviours that foster reciprocal interactions. To help the practitioner there are six attunement principles summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Attunement Principles

Principle	Examples of behaviours
Being attentive	Looking interested, friendly posture, wondering about what others are doing
Encouraging initiatives	Waiting, active listening, naming positively what you see
Receiving initiatives	Showing you have heard, positive body language, returning eye contact
Developing attuned interactions	Receiving the responding, checking pupil understanding, giving and taking short turns
Guiding	Scaffolding, judging the amount of support required
Deepening discussion	Sharing perspectives, collaborative discussion , managing conflict

26 Cubeddu, D., & MacKay, T. (2017). The attunement principles: a comparison of nurture group and mainstream settings. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 22(3), 261-274, p. 264.

The following case study presents an account of how Lynette Holme, teacher responsible for pupils in care in Rumney Primary School, led a PALAC project to investigate different types of individualised support that incorporated attunement principles. Rumney Primary School in Cardiff has 500 pupils, with a high number of pupils in care (N=16) or with special guardianship orders (N=6). Two of the individualised approaches implemented by the school – the Big Red Bus (BRB) and Social Stories are described in this case study.

The BRB is an approach designed to identify a group of adults within a school who have special significance to a pupil in difficulty, chosen by the pupil, and who are willing to work with the pupil over a short period to offer some additional support to that pupil. The main principle running through the approach is that it is primarily the people who make the difference not the approach itself. The stages of the approach are:

i. **The child identifies who he or she wants on their bus to the theme park, why they have chosen them and their role on the trip**
ii. **The team then work together to share thoughts about what the child is telling us about their needs**
iii. **The specific tasks and roles are discussed and allocated by team members and how they will be implemented across the school week.**
iv. **Each role and task is subjected to the 'Five minutes a Day' rule for approximately six weeks.**

Social Stories[27] is an approach that has been more commonly used to support pupils with autism. However, many of the challenges faced by pupil with autism such as anxiety brought on by different contexts, has the potential to support some pupils in care in certain situations. Social Stories are a social learning tool that support a learner to function more effectively within a defined social situation. They are constructed around four types of sentences (descriptive, perspective, directive and affirmative) and can be written with a pupil to support social interactions, behaviours, skills or with concepts. They are an inexpensive, personalised approach that requires consideration about the content and when it is most appropriate to use. Reviews of the impact of Social Stories are currently mixed but they are likely to be more effective when the language and comprehension levels of a Social Story match that of the individual pupil.[28]

What did the school do?

The team in school identified a key stage 2 pupil who was experiencing specific difficulties with mathematics and social skills, resulting in underperformance and regular conflict with peers. Support had been regularly provided previously but there was a feeling of needing to 'go back to the drawing board' with exploring and assessing the pupil's strengths and areas for development. The pupil completed a questionnaire devised by the school which focused on school life and views on their learning. In addition, the pupil completed the Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS)[29] with statements such as:

'I know how to be a good learner'

'I know how to solve problems that I meet'

27 Carol Gray (2018). Social Stories™. https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/what-is-it/.
28 Kokina, A. & Kern, L. (2010). Social Story™ interventions for students with autism spectrum disorders: A meta-analysis. Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 40(7), 812–826.
29 https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/evaluating-projects/measuring-essential-skills/spectrum-database/myself-as-a-learner-scale/.

Findings from these different assessments were used to help inform the content in collaboration with the pupil for the BRB and the writing of the Social Stories. The adults directly involved with the interventions were guided and discussed how the attunement principles might be integrated into the approaches.

Outcomes for pupils and staff

Feedback from the pupils showed that they had a much clearer picture of their progress and next steps and was moving away from a fixed mind set. The pupil's language had changed from 'I need to work properly', 'not be stupid' to more specific comments 'I don't understand the word problems', 'I need to learn my times tables' and could identify more of their strengths than before.

The staff involved in the project felt more confident in providing specific support as they were now more aware of the next steps for the pupil and used some of the more productive strategies such as social stories, and daily 'check ins'. There was also a drop in negative incidents over certain periods of time, but not consistent as the challenge of an imminent move to high school created additional anxieties.

For those staff involved in the BRB approach, teachers and support staff were communicating and connecting with pupils at a more meaningful level. Together they leant and saw the benefits of following the principles of attunement as pupils were more inclined to show their trust and share their thoughts, feelings, opinions; with 'fewer explosions'. As this group of staff continued to model these principles of attunement in their everyday conversations with pupils, so did others and this was growing. Practitioners were more likely to build those relationships, see the anxieties behind behaviours, notice things more, give the pupil time and ultimately strengthen relationships and trust.

Implications for practice and research

Although there is evidence of impact for one-to-one academic interventions for pupils in care, there are currently very few investigations of one-to-one social and emotional interventions delivered by school practitioners. Rumney Primary's case study demonstrates that one-to-one approaches with a focus on social and emotional development can be successful. Both Social Stories and the BRB do not require resources, are flexible and easy to implement. However, both require thoughtful preparation and consistency in implementation. In addition, these approaches allow for practitioners to develop and apply the principles of attunement which can then be implemented more regularly as part of everyday practice with more pupils.

A recent small scale study that found that attunement principles were more frequently and consistently applied in a nurture group compared to mainstream classes.[30] Such a finding may well have been anticipated. Indeed, the authors argue that it would not be expected that mainstream teachers would have the capacity to use such principles in the same way and to the same extent. Nonetheless, the principles do offer a way for practitioners, in a mainstream school setting, to adopt a more consistent approach to working with pupils in care whatever the context.

30 Cubeddu, D., & MacKay, T. (2017). The attunement principles: a comparison of nurture group and mainstream settings. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 22(3), 261–274.

Oak Field Primary School
Supporting ELSA colleagues

Background

ELSAs currently support pupils, often with complex social and emotional needs, in schools throughout Wales and England. Before beginning their role, ELSAs are required to undertake initial training delivered by Educational Psychologists (EPs) within a local authority (LA). This training includes an emphasis on psychological theory and how it might be applied practically to support the emotional development of children and young people. The training covers topics such as anger management, social skills, friendships, raising self-esteem and bereavement.

In recognition of the demands of their role, ELSAs should receive group supervision (approximately eight ELSAs) from an EP twice a term.[31] Supervision, in general, can help to develop the skills and competence of an individual, which in turn can support safeguarding in a setting by helping to improve the quality of an individual's practice. Thirdly, supervision helps to sustain and support practitioners in a role that can be both very rewarding and simultaneously demanding.[32] To date, there has been very little research that has evaluated the 'impact' of ELSA supervision. One survey of 270 ELSAs showed that:

- **the majority (89%) felt that supervision had met their needs**
- **there were good relationships between ELSAs and supervisors**
- **the structure allowed for discussing cases, problem solving and sharing of ideas.[33]**

The majority of participants reported that as a result of group supervision they felt more confident in their roles and the support they provided to pupils in school had improved. Some of the challenges of group supervision included: the lack of time in a session for all members of the group to discuss their priorities; a topic was not always relevant

31 ELSA network (2018). Supervision. https://www.elsanetwork.org/about/supervision/.
32 Hawkins, P., Shohet, R., Ryde, J. & Wilmot, J. (2012). Supervision in the helping professions. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
33 Osborne, C. & Burton, S. (2014). Emotional Literacy Support Assistants' views on supervision provided by educational psychologists: what EPs can learn from group supervision. Educational Psychology in Practice, 30(2), 139–155.

for all members and confidentiality concerns due to the size of the group.

Aware of some of the challenges of group supervision, the demands of the role and the importance of supporting ELSAs, the PALAC project at Oak Field Primary School in Barry, in the Vale of Glamorgan, sought to investigate and implement a programme of additional support fro ELSAs to supplement supervision. The project was led by Emma Sullivan, the deputy headteacher.

What did the school do?

Working with two other primary schools, two ELSAs from each of the three schools accepted an invitation and consented to take part in the project. In mixed school groups of three, the ELSAs met with Emma for an hour every two weeks. The project comprised six sessions. The purpose of the sessions was to provide an additional space for ELSAs to:

- **problem solve, share resources and ideas about their practice**
- **increase their knowledge and understanding of topics that were relevant to them at the time.**

During the first session, both groups were introduced to the project aims, issues of confidentiality and safeguarding. The ELSAs completed a questionnaire eliciting their views about the possible structure and content of the sessions. Both groups agreed that they wanted the sessions to be semi-structured, to include a topic update and the opportunity to discuss issues that were relevant to their practice that week. Thereafter, the content of the sessions differed for the two groups but some common themes requested for updates were attachment, anger management and bereavement.

Outcomes for staff

At the end of the twelve weeks, the ELSAs completed a questionnaire to help evaluate the project.

Some of the specific benefits reported by the participants included:

- **the small size of the group which meant that all participants had an opportunity to speak and have an input**
- **meeting regularly every fortnight which helped to address any recent events/ concerns quickly.**

The participants felt the semi-structured nature of the sessions had worked well, along with the mix of settings and years of experience of the ELSAs in each group.

Feedback included:

'Overall it has been very beneficial, meeting more regularly has been helpful as it makes dealing with issues immediately much easier'

'Knowing that someone in another school is doing the same things as you gives you the confidence to speak up more about the importance of ELSA sessions'

'Helps to have ideas bounced around'

'I've really enjoyed it, it has been a nice experience and seeing how other schools work'

Smaller groups are beneficial and certainly discussing issues with staff who work in a similar demographic is helpful.

Implications for practice and research

The current increase in children and young people experiencing greater mental health difficulties[34] has important consequences for the support we provide in school and the quality of that support. ELSAs play an important day to day role in supporting often very vulnerable pupils. They are frequently the first professionals to become aware that a pupil might be experiencing difficulties and their role in safeguarding is not as acknowledged as it might be. Therefore, in addition to formal supervision, any additional opportunities for support in school, led by experienced and qualified senior leaders, as shown in this case study is welcomed and appreciated by ELSAs. To succeed, the project also required the support of the head teachers, to allow for release time for attendance.

It is heartening to have one published study that has investigated the impact of ELSA supervision.[35] This is important for the ELSA role but also as it is one of the few studies that has investigated supervision for practitioners (teachers or support staff) in schools. Practitioners such as teachers and support staff, unlike other professionals working with children including speech therapists, occupational therapists, counsellors, residential child care workers and social workers, do not receive supervision as integral to their working practice. A rare recent study of group supervision for 12 teachers in a specialist school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties found that supervision facilitated stronger team work and provided a space to address issues such as feelings of stress in a 'safe space'.[36] Further investigations into the purpose, structure and efficacy of supervision for teachers and support staff is long overdue.

34 Polanczyk, G. V., Salum, G. A., Sugaya, L. S., Caye, A. & Rohde, L. A. (2015). Annual Research Review: A meta‐analysis of the worldwide prevalence of mental disorders in children and adolescents. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 56(3), 345–365.

35 Osborne, C. & Burton, S. (2014). Emotional Literacy Support Assistants' views on supervision provided by educational psychologists: what EPs can learn from group supervision. Educational Psychology in Practice, 30(2), 139–155.

36 Willis, J. & Baines, E. (2017). The perceived benefits and difficulties in introducing and maintaining supervision groups in a SEMH special school. Educational Review, 1–21.

Williamstown Primary School
The benefits of TALKABOUT in the blue room for pupils in care

Background

Children who suffer trauma at a very early age are at significant risk of delays in their development including their language skills, cognitive skills and social and emotional skills. A study of 55 preschool children who had suffered maltreatment identified 91% as having a significant developmental delay in one area and/or a significant behavioural difficulty, while two-thirds had both a developmental delay and a behavioural difficulty.[37] Acquiring strong early language levels is essential as it is well established that language skills are one of the strongest predictors of educational success.[38] Moreover, without support, research has shown that children who enter school with poorly developed speech and language are at risk of literacy difficulties and educational underachievement in primary and secondary school.[39]

Almost three quarters of the children who enter the care system in Wales do so because of abuse and/or neglect and are therefore at risk of language delay. However, there is currently little empirical data on the prevalence of language difficulties for children who enter foster care in the early years and how best to address their language needs. One recent Australian study of 82 primary aged school pupils showed that the cohort performed significantly below the normative mean on tests assessing both language and social skills. The researchers did find that social skills were more affected for those children who had suffered neglect rather than abuse.

37 McDonald, J. L., Milne, S., Knight, J., & Webster, V. (2013). Developmental and behavioural characteristics of children enrolled in a child protection pre-school. Journal of paediatrics and child health, 49(2).
38 Roulstone, S. and Law, J. Rush, R. Clegg, J. Peters, T (2011) Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes. Project Report. UK Department of Education, Bristol. http://eresearch.qmu.ac.uk/2484/1/DFE-RR134.pdf.
39 Dockrell, J. E., Lindsay, G., & Palikara, O. (2011). Explaining the academic achievement at school leaving for pupils with a history of language impairment: Previous academic achievement and literacy skills. Child language teaching and therapy, 27(2), 223–237.

Possessing social competence allows for positive interactions and relationships in the lives of children and plays a fundamental role in well-being and future success in life. Social skills are discrete specific behaviours, the teaching and learning of which can be supported. Social skills can be divided into three areas: verbal behaviour, non-verbal behaviour and assertive behaviour. Social competence encompasses the cognitive understanding of social skills and how to use them in interactions with others. Understanding the longitudinal association between social skills and academic achievement is complex, with research studies finding varied results, but one development is that social skills may act as a 'mediator' of the relationship between self-regulation and achievement.[40] In other words, a child's social skills are also part of the mechanism through which behavioural self-regulation affects academic achievement.

This case study describes how Alison Hall, the head teacher, and her team at Williamstown Primary School in Tonypandy in Rhondda Cynon Taf, led a project to investigate the impact of using TALKABOUT resources to improve the social skills of a group of vulnerable pupils including pupils with social and emotional difficulties, those with low self-esteem and limited social skills, pupils with a diagnosis of additional needs, as well as pupils in care.[41] The TALKABOUT programme adopts a hierarchical approach to teaching social skills which starts with developing self-esteem and self-awareness and this is the level at which the group of pupils began their development. Pupils were grouped carefully so that the dynamics of personality and need facilitated progress for all pupils in their specific targeted areas. The TALKABOUT programme was combined with a second initiative to develop a safe space in the school called the 'blue room'. This room was designed (on a small budget) by ELSA staff in conjunction with the pupils who would be using it for TALKABOUT and ELSA sessions. This gave those involved a sense of ownership and ensured that the environment would incorporate the needs of all those who would benefit.

What did the school do?

The PALAC team set up two TALKABOUT groups (year 5/6 and year 3/4) where pupils attended once or twice a week for twenty minutes over 32 weeks in the blue room (Figure 4). The groups were led by ELSAs in conjunction with the SENCO. Each session followed a similar structure which included a:

- **Fun game to develop group cohesion and enthusiasm**
- **Feelings board – sad, happy, tired, excited**
- **Card game – my favourite food, I worry about**
- **Main activity**
- **Self-assessment and use of positive words / phrases**
- **Fun game to finish on a high.**

The main activities focused on subjects such as developing relationships with those outside each pupil's usual circle of friends, learning to think about who was important to them and learning to describe themselves and their friends. The sessions as well as the environment of the blue room (Figure 4), gave the pupils an opportunity to voice their worries in a safe, supportive environment. It was agreed that the pupils would not talk with other children in the class about what was discussed in the sessions.

40 Montroy, J. J., Bowles, R. P., Skibbe, L. E., & Foster, T. D. (2014). Social skills and problem behaviors as mediators of the relationship between behavioral self-regulation and academic achievement. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 29(3), 298–309.
41 Alex Kelly (2018). TALKABOUT Programme. http://alexkelly.biz/TALKABOUT-faq/.

Figure 4: The Blue Room

Outcomes for pupils and staff

Post intervention assessment data including the TALKABOUT assessment and an additional social skills assessment demonstrated improvements for all pupils including with levels of self-awareness and self-esteem. Outside of the group sessions, staff had observed a positive impact with friendships and strategies transferring to the playground. Pupils had started to build relationships with pupils outside their friendship groups and in other classes. Two pupils joined up for new after school extra-curricular clubs and for two pupils there had been a significant improvement in attendance. All pupils enjoyed the sessions and were motivated and contributed to discussions. The blue room offered comfort and re-assurance that there is an opportunity and a place to go with a familiar adult, to talk and have fun.

'It's fantastic fun'

'I didn't think I had friends until I started TALKABOUT'

'The blue room makes me feel safe and calm'

For one of the pupils in care in the group there was evidence for a significant impact of the programme with social and academic achievement. The pupil's reading age had consistently been 24+ months below their chronological age, but two thirds of a way through the programme, the pupil's reading and comprehension ages were only three months below chronological age. The staff team had observed a considerable improvement in the pupil's ability to listen to and accept input from others. The pupil could lead a group politely without alienating others, was rarely falling out with others and had developed skills to resolve issues independently if they did.

The TALKABOUT programme and the blue room had equally positive results for the staff. The ELSAs enjoyed teaching the sessions and felt that they had ownership and autonomy to deliver the programme. It had proved an informative and rewarding experience of professional development. The use of the blue room was extended to all staff and for meetings with parents/carers and multi agency professionals. Feedback from staff, parents and carers was that they very much appreciated the calm, quiet atmosphere with no interruptions provided by the blue room.

Implications for practice and research

The Williamstown PALAC case study is a very good example of how an evidence informed programme, like TALKABOUT, when delivered and implemented with rigour and sensitivity, can have a beneficial impact on the social and academic outcomes of pupils in care. An example of the sensitive delivery on the part of the staff was the awareness of the need to adapt some of the resources, for example, a 'My Family' task was replaced with 'My Special Person' for all the pupils. The bank of vocabulary and scaffolded verbal structure of TALKABOUT encouraged literacy development. It is hard to 'measure' the full contribution of the blue room to the success of the programme at Williamstown but it certainly shows the importance of 'environment' when delivering any potentially sensitive group activity. Pupils involved in TALKABOUT sessions developed a greater sense of security and belonging; the impact of activities and 'blue room' environment have improved well-being, confidence and sense of happiness for all pupils who took part. An additional strength of the delivery of the programme was the observed transfer of skills on the part of some of the pupils to situations and contexts outside of the group. As with all additional group activities, there is a commitment on the part of any senior leadership team in terms of resources (staff and pupil time, programme costs, space, timetabling), but the decision to continue with the programme at Williamstown is testament to its efficacy.

Findings from this case study are sufficient to merit further research in using the TALKABOUT resources with primary aged pupils. In addition, although research is emerging to show the extent of communication and language difficulties for children in the early years and in primary school, more research is required. Further research that identified accurate levels of language and communication skills would help to illuminate the extent of the difficulties experienced and help to ensure more accurate and targeted support.

Fairwater Primary School and Cyfarthfa High School
Supporting the primary to secondary school transition

Background

The transition from primary to secondary school is a time of change and challenge for all pupils in year 6. Pupils will experience different degrees of apprehension and anxiety as they experience and respond to this major transition. To date, there are very few large scale studies in the United Kingdom that have followed children from year 6 all the way through to the end of year 7. One recent longitudinal study of 1110 pupils found that pupil well-being scores did not significantly change during the initial move from primary to secondary school but there was a drop in well-being from after half term in October to the end of the summer term.[42] Another longitudinal study of 2000 pupils from the south east of England found that although no single group of children appeared significantly vulnerable to transition, the within-child factors associated with stronger transitions were psychological adjustment difficulties, self-control and learning motivation.[43] Losing friendships was a major concern for the pupils along with getting lost, and concerns about homework and discipline.

Both these large scale longitudinal studies have helped to conceptualise our understanding of transition. McLellan & Gatton (2015), drawing on occupational psychological theory and research, identified four stages to transition:

I. preparation stage
II. the initial school encounters
III. adjustment phase
IV. stabilisation.

In addition, and in many ways complementary to the stages concept of transition, was Rice et al.'s (2015) identification of a successful transition comprising pupils being supported to function well in two areas. The first was being academically and behaviourally involved in school and the second was for pupils to feel a sense of belonging to the school.

With this greater conceptual understanding, what does research tell us about what we can practically do to support pupils though the primary to secondary school transition? Rice et al. found that primary schools used a variety of strategies which they categorised under three psychological themes summarised in Table 2.

42 McLellan & Gatton (2015). The impact of primary to secondary transition on students' wellbeing.. http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/impact-primary-secondary-transition-students-wellbeing.
43 Rice, F., Frederickson, N., Shelton, K. H., McManus, I. C., Riglin, L., & Ng-Knight, T. (2015). Identifying factors that predict successful and difficult transitions to secondary school. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/stars.

Table 2: Strategies to support transition in primary school

Strategy	Purpose	Examples
Cognitive	Sought to change any negative beliefs or fears held by the pupils	Provision of written information about secondary school, class discussions about worries, assemblies about transition and the use of web based resources
Behavioural	Sought to reduce potential anxieties through exposure to 'threatening' situations	Visits to secondary school, additional visits to secondary school, PHSE teaching key skills, increase in homework, adapting timetables to reflect primary arrangements, additional responsibilities at secondary school, drama workshops to develop skills needed for transition and teaching secondary vocabulary
Systemic	Concerned with the wider context within which pupils function, such as their peers and family	Bridging projects, peer support groups with students going to the same secondary, pupil passports, meeting parents and parent support groups

At secondary school, the research team found that transition strategies were focused around six main themes including:

- **information sharing**
- **social needs support**
- **environmental support**
- **friendship monitoring**
- **extended induction activities**
- **home information gathering.**

We currently have little published empirical evidence that has investigated the primary to secondary school transition for pupils in care. This research is important as it would allow for a comparison with their peers to identify the similarities and any qualitative differences with experiencing transition. In turn, this would illuminate more accurately the type of support that might be provided. Findings from a doctoral thesis[44] and a case study in Scotland[45] showed that pupils in care in these studies did experience very similar anxieties prior to their transition including worries about friendship, getting lost and bullying. Moreover, they did not want to be singled out or to made to feel different to their peers during transition. However, it is important to note that although the fears and anxieties of pupils in care may be similar to their peers, pupils in care already experience multiple stressors in their lives and additional transition challenges can have the effect of magnifying experiences. The little research available suggests that what supports all children will support pupils in care but additional consideration needs to be given to:

- **planning and sharing information between key professionals**
- **a holistic approach that also recognises that pupils in care are different and support needs to be personalised**
- **minimising any differences between pupils in care and their peers.**

44 Walker, M. (2009). Supporting the transition from primary school to secondary school for children who are looked after. http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10019904/.
45 Hennessy, A. (2016). transitions to secondary school for looked after children. https://www.celcis.org/files/7314/6367/6206/Imp_transitions_to_secondary_school_FINAL.pdf.

Fairwater Primary School
Holistic approach to secondary school transition

Background
The PALAC project at Fairwater Primary School in Cardiff, led by Jane Drinkwater-Evans and Kate Lawrence, aimed to create a bespoke transition package for two year 6 pupils in care. In the past, transition had been particularly challenging for more vulnerable pupils who were in the resource base for pupils with social and emotional difficulties. It was planned that learning from the project with the two pupils would later be adapted and implemented for all pupils in the base.

What did the school do?
The team understood the importance of looking at transition holistically, as an on-going process throughout year 6 into year 7 and the need to tailor support for individual pupils. As a result, the final transition programme for the two pupils in care included the elements and activities summarised in Table 3. Throughout the year, the programme was supported and monitored by a Transition Mentor.

Outcomes for pupils and staff
During the transition period there were incidents of high anxiety and emotional outbursts, however, all children involved transitioned successfully to mainstream high schools and are now close to completing a successful year 7 in their high school. The children's carers felt confident about the transition due to the support they had received. A new Boxall profile was undertaken after their first term in year 7 and showed progress in all areas. In addition, attendance had been excellent.

Table 3: Transition support activities

Element	Examples of activities
Activities in the resource base to support further development of social skills	Language rich social activities including TALKABOUT, Language Links and LEGO® therapy
Resilience building focused on managing smaller transitions and changes	Pupils joined School Council, took part in whole school assembles, the Eco Committee, and gardening club with members of the local community
Participating in transition activities provided for all pupils including two visits to the high school	Pupils attended transition activities in the high schools, starting with visiting the building when the children were in lessons and eventually covering a variety of subjects with support
Additional visits and bespoke activities with the high school staff	Pupils attended a variety of team building activities i.e. den building, rock climbing, outdoor obstacle courses
Inclusion of carers	Coffee morning with carers and parents to discuss transition and any worries, concerns and questions
Evaluation	Boxall Profile data (baseline and post intervention) Attendance, incident and exclusion data

Cyfarthfa High School
Peer mentoring and transition

Background
Cyfarthfa High School in Merthyr Tydfil is a mixed high school for pupils aged 11 to 16. The PALAC project was led by Louise Morgan (SENCO) and Sam Edwards (Family Liaison Officer) and the school has a high number of pupils in care (N=18). The team understood that a successful year 7 transition for pupils in care was an essential foundation to making progress academically and socially throughout their time at high school. In addition, they saw the PALAC project as having further benefits by including other pupils in care in years 8 and 9 as transition mentors.

What did the school do?
Underpinning the transition programme at Cyfarthfa High was an understanding of the ongoing nature of transition into and throughout year 7. The programme consisted of the following elements:

- **SENCO attended all the year 6 PEP reviews for the six pupils from the three feeder schools. This meant the pupil and their carers had met Sam. The wider team at team at Cyfarthfa had an informed understanding of each pupil, their strengths, areas for development and any concerns about transition. At the meeting Sam was also able to discuss the transition support available including the opportunity to be mentored by a year 8 or 9 pupil in care if they wished.**
- **At the same time, 5 pupils in care in years 8 and 9 were invited to act as mentors to the year 6 pupils when they started at Cyfarthfa. A meeting was held in the spring term to discuss with the mentors the aims of the programme and possible activities – but agreed that the final programme would be a consensus between the mentors and new pupils when they arrived.**
- **The programme was evaluated by questionnaires completed at the start of the programme by the year 6 pupils, mentors and carers.**

Outcomes for pupils, staff and carers
During the autumn term of the new year in high school, the year 7 pupils felt better prepared, welcomed and less anxious about starting their new school as a result of the whole transition programme and the mentoring received once they had started. The mentoring programme was proving to be a positive experience for all involved. The year 8 and 9 mentors felt valued and confident in their new role and the fluidity of the programme allowed them a sense of ownership in the role.

Implications for practice and research
Without more empirical evidence, it is not possible to say with some certainty how many pupils in care make poor primary to secondary school transitions and experience elevated levels of anxiety compared to their peers. What we do know, however, is that all children in care have, for example, experienced loss at varying degrees and that stability is important in their lives. The transition to secondary school includes the

loss of familiar adults, the loss of a physical place and usually loss of some friendships and therefore might result in increased feelings of anxiety. For those pupils in year 6 who have experienced going into care shortly before moving to secondary school, it might be difficult to imagine the effect of a further upheaval in their circumstances.

Both the Fairwater and Cyfarthfa case studies demonstrate the benefits of:

- **taking a longitudinal approach to transition**
- **planning for the four stages of transition as described by McLellan & Gatton**
- **offering bespoke support within a wider programme of support**
- **providing stability for pupils whilst building up their capacity to respond to change gradually.**

The Fairwater case study showed that transition activities should start early and with looking at the whole school curriculum through a transition lens by seeking cognitive and behavioural opportunities to support the skills for a successful transition. In the preparation and initial phases of transition, communication and joint planning between the primary and secondary school, which includes carers, is essential to ensure success. At this time, year 6 pupils need to have as many opportunities as possible to become familiar with the new school including staff, routines and curriculum. The Cyfarthfa peer mentorship programme is a good example of an implementing framework that provides support for a bespoke adjustment and stabilisation transition phases.

Further, published longitudinal research on the transition of pupils in care that include experiences in year 6 and throughout year 7 is required to better understand the extent and nature of the challenges, as well as the possibilities for support. In addition, along with the important emphasis on well-being, granular tracking of academic progress would help to illuminate the transition journey and identify any dips in performance at an early stage in their secondary education.

St Teilo's Church in Wales High School
Using a mentoring programme to foster agency

Background

Research studies for children in care and other disadvantaged groups that have examined the within-child characteristics that are associated with higher attainment at 16 years of age and with wider post-16 outcomes, repeatedly report a strong sense of agency on the part of a young person as a key attribute.[46] Agency as a concept can be challenging to define but it has been described as the 'capacity to self-direct/regulate one's effort, attention and behaviour over time to achieve goals'.[47] Adults can support the development of agency using two main approaches – directive and facilitative assistance.[48] Directive assistance encompasses devising and maintaining relevant structures and activities for children and young people to experience opportunities and undertake tasks over time that develop capacities for exercising agency. Facilitative assistance is concerned with the adult 'thinking strategically about how to accomplish work, including anticipatory reasoning, as well as contingency planning and task prioritisation'.

Mentoring in schools is used extensively to support pupils in a variety of ways, such as aiming to improve attendance and behaviour. At present, according to the EEF toolkit, the effect of mentoring on academic outcomes is low, with on average, one month's additional progress.[49] Although there is some evidence, that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds might benefit by up to two month's progress. However, youth programmes that draw on either facilitative or directive approaches have been found to be effective in fostering agency in young adults.

In addition to a directive and/or facilitative approach, other characteristics of more effective mentoring programmes include a clear structure and set of expectations, providing mentor training and using mentors with professional backgrounds. Programmes that continue over longer periods of time and facilitate more frequent contact between the mentor and mentee are also associated with greater success.[50] There exists emerging evidence for the benefits of mentoring for children and young people in care including, for example, a programme in Scotland where university students mentored secondary aged pupils in care.[51]

St Teilo's Church in Wales High School in Llanedeyrn, Cardiff has a high population of pupils in care, with 26 young people at the time of the project. The PALAC team at St Teilo's, led by Ian Loynd, the deputy headteacher and with Karen Payne the Senior Pastoral Care Mentor, had identified that a lack of agency associated with learning identities was a barrier to progress for some of the pupils in care. Therefore, the team wanted to investigate implementing a

46 Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data.
47 Hansen, D. M., Moore, E. W., & Jessop, N. (2017). Youth Program Adult Leader's Directive Assistance and Autonomy Support and Development of Adolescents' Agency Capacity. Journal of Research on Adolescence.
48 Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2005). The development of strategic thinking: Learning to impact human systems in a youth activism program. Human Development, 48, 327–349.
49 Education Endowment Foundation (2018) Mentoring. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/mentoring.
50 Rainer (2008). Mentoring for looked after children. http://www.mandbf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Mentoring_for_LAC_national_pilot_Dissemination_Manual.pdf.
51 Elsley, S. (2013). Developing a national mentoring scheme for looked after children and young people. https://www.celcis.org/files/2714/4050/9227/LACSIG_Mentoring_Report-2014-09-02.pdf.

mentoring programme that would address agency around different aspects of learner identity within the school context.

What did the school do?

Cognisant of the evidence that shows why mentoring programmes can have little impact and especially aware of the growing literature of the potential detrimental impact to young people of poor mentoring or programmes that end early/abruptly, the team at St Teilo's spent a considerable period of the project reflecting on the lessons from previous mentoring programmes that had been delivered in school and the wider evidence base for pupils in care and other disadvantaged groups.
The practice and scoping literature review focused on four questions:

1. **Why mentor?**
2. **Who in school is best places to provide the mentoring?**
3. **How long should the programme last?**
4. **What form should the programme take?**

Findings from the scoping review highlighted that:

- **effective mentors can make a critical difference to a pupil in care's self-belief as a learner**
- **mentors should be sufficiently trained and able to create and maintain a strong relationship with a pupil**
- **mentoring relationships that involve frequent contact and continue over extended periods of time are associated with more successful outcomes**
- **it is important to consult young people about the interventions they are asked to participate in.**

Following the review, the programme, summarised in Table 4 was put in place.

The mentors all knew the pupils and this knowledge, along with the results of the MALS baseline assessment, gave them areas to focus on with the pupils in the sessions. However, it was important that there was a structure to each session that could accommodate all pupils but allowed each of the individual pupils to explore what was important to them. The sessions followed the structure in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Structure for each mentoring session

Ready…

- *An icebreaker designed to **promote fun** and enable the pupil to **talk to their mentor**.*

Steady…

- *A stimulus to **prompt discussion and questions** which allowed the mentor to **demonstrate reciprocity** and interest in the child.*

Go!

- *A forward look to the next session with a target to secure the relationship as one **based on trust and understanding**, rather than authority.*

Outcomes for pupils and staff

Mentoring at St Teilo's has been underway for six children for six months and four additional children have been added to the intervention. A convergent theme of field notes is that children have become more relaxed within the mentoring relationship and are more proactive in their participation during sessions. Mentors report that mentees talk more openly about their learning and are setting themselves more specific, measurable targets. Mentees have become more autonomous in finding

Table 4: Summary of mentoring programme

Participants	6
Mentors	1
Time and frequency of sessions	1 hour every fortnight
Content/Structure	Ready, Steady, Go (Figure 5)
Evaluation	Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS) – baseline and annually thereafter. Field notes by mentors after every session

solutions to their own barriers to learning. For example, one child had experienced a breakdown in relationship with a teacher. The child requested a restorative conversation, facilitated by the mentor, to get the relationship 'back on track'. Another child felt overwhelmed by the volume of learning in History and asked for in-class support. This was arranged by the mentor. A third child had truanted from a number of lessons because they felt 'stupid'. The mentor arranged after school support on a one-to-one basis to help build confidence without being singled out in class. All mentees report eagerly to their mentoring sessions and two children have begun to co-construct new activities for the 'Ready' and 'Steady' phases of mentoring. Mentees report that they feel more confident that they know who to go to if they need help with their learning. The mentoring team has been expanded by two additional members of staff: an HLTA for children who are looked after and a looked after child advocate.

Implications for practice and research

At some point in our lives, whether as children or adults, many of us have benefitted from the advice and support of a mentor, often this can happen spontaneously and often generously on the part of a friend, colleague or extended family member/friend. Pupils in care do not always possess the same levels of social and cultural capital as many of their teenage peers. Therefore, offering pupils in care a timely, purposeful and relevant mentoring programme had the potential to make a significant difference to their lives both in the short term and in preparation for the future.

The St Teilo's case study is a good example of such a personalised mentoring programme but one that is grounded in theory, evidence-informed and includes other characteristics of mentoring programme associated with success including, longevity, flexibility pupil voice/consultation and trained mentors. Schools considering mentoring programmes for pupils in care need to account for all these considerations but also fully commit to the long term nature of such support as poorly implemented programmes, from a pupil's perspective might just be another example of being let down by an adult. Not all pupils in care will be 'ready' for mentoring at all stages in their school life so the timing of mentoring programmes is also critical to success.

Despite its popularity as an approach, the research findings on the impact of mentoring remain mixed at best. What is increasingly evident is the complexity that underpins what on some level seems a relatively straightforward way to support young adults. Further evidence, both practice and research based, is required as to expected impact of mentoring programmes with different foci such as academic, agency, career or social and emotional outcomes and how best they might be implemented and evaluated.

Greenhill Special School
Having a say

Background

Pupil voice refers to ways of listening to the views of pupils in order to involve them in decision making. Children and young people have a voice, we don't give it to them, the challenge for practitioners is to listen, value and respond to their opinions and ideas to enable them to exercise control over their learning and education more generally. Evidence from psychology has shown the value of supporting pupil voice as it enables pupils to be metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active in their learning.[52] Moreover, learning comprises pupils making personal meanings from whole class teaching and facilitating pupil voice enables practitioners to explore in more depth these personal meaning and perspectives. Finally, in preparation for their adult roles in the world of employment and as active citizens, pupils will need to learn in a school context that encourages them to be active in decision making and develop the autonomy required for these roles.

To help better understand and break down the concept of pupil voice, models such as that in Figure 6 have been developed.[53] The model highlights the different levels or stages with respect to pupil voice and allows practitioners to think more about the nature of participation in addition to the more traditional 'how' and 'when' of pupil voice.

Such models are applicable for pupils in care and there are time points across the year, such as the PEP review meeting, when pupils are involved at a decision making level about their education. Nevertheless, there is a strong case to be made, that as a result of their specific experiences of being in care, it is even more important to find regular, purposeful and meaningful opportunities for

52 Zimmerman, B. J. 2008. Investigating self-regulation and motivation: historical background, methodological developments, and future prospects American Educational Research Journal 45(1): 166–183.
53 Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. Children & society, 15(2), 107-117. http://myd.govt.nz/documents/engagement/shier.pdf.

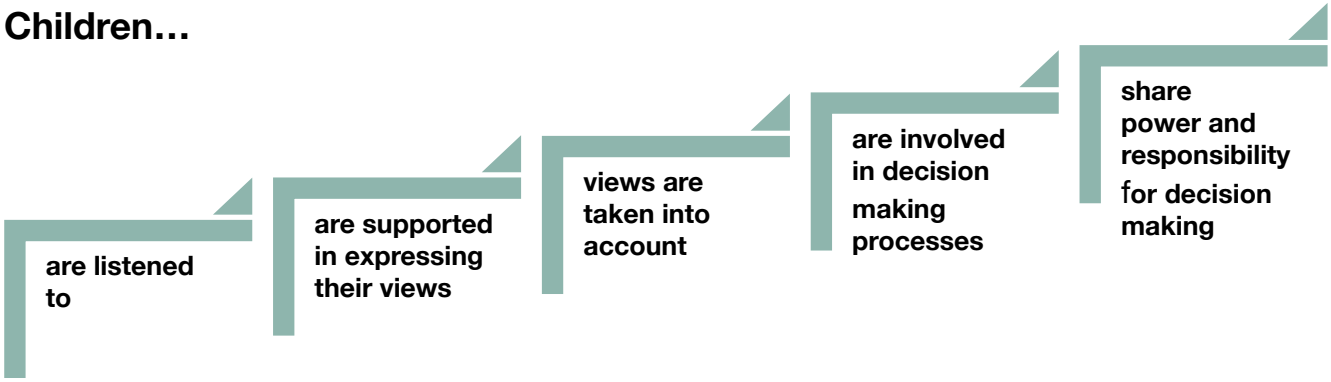


Figure 6: Pupil Voice Progression (Shier 2001 adapted from Hart 1992)

pupil voice and participation. The experience of going into care, albeit that many children and young people report positive experiences and research is increasingly showing the benefits of care,[54] has short and long term implications: losses in autonomy, agency and identity. Compared to most of their peers who are not involved with social care, they are subject to many more adults making decisions on their behalf. In order to understand the complexities of how pupils from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds adapt their thinking, choices and perspectives of what is of value to them, educational researchers[55] have conceptualised the 'capability framework' and developed lists of capacities that are considered important within education:

- **agency**
- **autonomy**
- **voice**
- **hope**
- **identity**
- **knowledge**

The importance and contribution of agency has been previously explored in the St Teilo's case study, but the capabilities of voice and hope are closely connected with regular opportunities for pupils in care to consider choices, preferences and options in the here and now but also to look positively to the future and in doing so foster hopes and aspirations. Active and meaningful reflection is a skill that takes time to develop and therefore needs to be a more regular and integral part of their education.

It was in this context that Greenhill School in Cardiff, an 11 to 16 specialist setting for pupils with social and emotional difficulties, wanted to investigate a very 'low key' and regular way of increasing opportunities for pupil voice and participation for pupils in care. The project was led by Jane Counsell the Headteacher and Judith Wayne.

What did the school do?

To advance and increase opportunities for pupil voice, the PALAC team understood the importance of combining the need to improve staff capacities to support pupil voice and structure more opportunities for pupil voice into the school week. The first part of the project emphasised the importance of practitioners developing their understanding about the lives of pupils in care in order to support them more effectively in school and how to encourage and respond to pupil voice and included:

54 Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data.
55 Hannon, C., Faas, D., & O'Sullivan, K. (2017). Widening the educational capabilities of socio-economically disadvantaged students through a model of social and cultural capital development. British Educational Research Journal, 43(6), 1225–1245.

- **all practitioners, with colleagues from mainstream schools, taking part in whole school attachment training**
- **meetings held with support staff to develop a 'team around the child' model for each pupil in care**
- **support staff being included in the PEP reviews.**

The second element of the project focused more on the pupils in care with a weekly 'hot chocolate' meeting for each pupil with a selected member of staff. In order to direct the content of these meetings, the pupils were asked to complete a questionnaire in the first meeting which included questions such as:

- **Do you know why you came to Greenhill?**
- **Is Greenhill the same or different to your last school? Prompt – What is it the same/ what is different?**
- **Can you remember your first day at Greenhill? Prompt – what happened?**
- **What do you like about Greenhill? Prompt – what is good about Greenhill?**
- **Is there anything you don't like about Greenhill?**
- **Do you have friends at Greenhill? Prompt - who are your friends and what sorts of things do you like doing? E.g. basketball**
- **Are there people that help you at Greenhill? Prompt – who are they and how do they help you?**
- **What would you like to do when you leave school? Prompt – what would you like to be when you are grown up?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to tell me about being at Greenhill?**

The second hot chocolate meeting then picked up on some of the answers in the first sessions and the member of staff and pupil discussed what topics they might address in more detail and how the pupil and the staff member would go about finding out how to make changes in the life of the young person.

Outcomes for the young people and school staff

The information gained from the pupil questionnaires provided insight and direction to transition planning. In addition, this helped to personalise the process and make Individual Learning Programmes more relevant and meaningful for the pupils involved. The questionnaire has now been used with a wider group of pupils who are not in care.

Implications for practice and research

Evidence has shown that for young people in care being more involved in decision making and being supported to develop a sense of agency is one the factors associated with more favourable academic progress.[56] Young people are able to comment knowledgably and with insight on how their education provision might be improved. However, quite often teenage pupils in care do not want additional attention or support in school. It can make them feel even more different from their peers than they already do. And in the spirit of the principles of pupil voice, it is important to recognise and respect this perspective as well as identify if a pupil has what has been described as the 'emotional readiness' to receive additional support. Therefore, practitioners have to show sensitivity and at times, some ingenuity, with what and how support is offered. In this Greenhill case study, taking a more informal or what might be described as 'light touch' approach meant that pupil voice could be facilitated regularly, in a safe space, with an

56 Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data.

informed adult and without the pressures sometimes associated with more formal review meetings. The questionnaire at the start of the project meant that it was personalised for each pupil with them involved, from the start, in steering the agenda for discussions.

The capability framework offers one possible route for research with respect to its application to the education and wider lives of pupils in care. Schools regularly provide opportunities to develop specific capabilities such as knowledge, but others such as autonomy, agency and identity do happen, but not perhaps in a well planned for, systematic way across the school life course and beyond.

Schools and Lifelong Learning Service, Cardiff
Fostering and Enhancing Emotional Literacy (FEEL)

Background

In the UK and internationally, children and young people in care have a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties in comparison to their peers.[57] Some of the most commonly identified difficulties are conduct disorders, hyperkinetic disorders, depression and anxiety.[58] This has worrying implications for the well-being and education of pupils in care, as well as the foster placement stability as emotional and behavioural difficulties have been cited by foster carers as causes of placement breakdowns.[59] In addition, studies that have investigated factors associated with foster carer retention and satisfaction have reported the importance of positive foster carer-child relationships and higher carer self-efficacy. An association has also been found between training and foster carer well-being, satisfaction and intention to carry on with fostering. Increased placement stability, in turn, has consequences for children and young people's education and well-being.

Fiona Prodohl and Jo Pike, two educational psychologists (with specialist roles working with looked after children) in the Schools and Lifelong Learning Service in Cardiff, through their practice, as well as the research, were knowledgeable of the potential of foster carer training for carers and the children and young people in their care. Initially, they planned to design and deliver a course just for foster carers on emotional literacy but the final group included participants included teaching assistants (TAs) and residential care practitioners. This case study describes the content, outcomes and learning from the course.

What did the service do?

The course entitled 'Fostering and Enhancing Emotional Literacy' (FEEL) included five, four hour sessions that took place fortnightly at St Teilo's High School. All the practitioners who took part were working with children at the school or with their feeder primary schools. The sessions followed the structure below and participants were asked to complete tasks in between sessions with their young person e.g. keeping an emotions diary, making a memory box, making a firework model.

Session 1: Attachment and an Introduction to Emotional Literacy
Session 2: Self-Esteem and Communication Skills
Session 3: Managing Emotions
Session 4: Social and Friendship Skills
Session 5: Loss and Bereavement

Evaluation of the course was planned from the start, integral to capturing learning across the sessions and took different forms. On the first day participants were asked to complete a reflection sheet outlining what they hoped to learn from the course. At the beginning of every session, participants were asked to reflect on their learning from the previous day to find out what they'd taken from it.

In addition, at the end of every day participants were asked to evaluate the course content itself: for example, had they learnt something new, was there anything that they would have liked to have happened differently? Finally, at the end of the last session participants completed an overall evaluation of the course which collected numerical as well as descriptive data.

57 York, W., & Jones, J. (2017). Addressing the mental health needs of looked after children in foster care: the experiences of foster carers. Journal of psychiatric and mental health nursing, 24(2-3), 143–153.
58 Meltzer, H., Gatward, R., Corbin, T., Goodman, R., & Ford, T. (2003). The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England. London: The Stationery Office.
59 Randle, M., Miller, L., Dolnicar, S., & Ciarrochi, J. (2014). The science of attracting foster carers. Child & Family Social Work, 19(1), 65–75.

Outcomes for the practitioners and service

All of the practitioners found the course very helpful and evaluated it very positively. Following the training all participants rated their knowledge as at least 7 out of 10 for each topic and there was on average a three point increase in each area between baseline and the end of the course.

Participants had learned:

- **to understand a child's behaviours and the reasons behind these behaviours**
- **how to open a discussion about feelings with a young person**
- **to be more open when talking to young people**
- **that it's ok for young people to be angry but we need to help them express it in the best way**
- **to have more confidence when addressing the issue of loss and bereavement**
- **to think more carefully about the words they use when talking to young people**
- **ways of building self-esteem.**

They had enjoyed:

- **Sharing and hearing the views and experiences of other people**
- **Hearing about research and evidence**
- **Doing practical activities**
- **Understanding the child from another person's perspective**
- **Hearing about new ideas and tools.**

Implications for practice and research

There is much for schools and multi-agency services to learn from this innovative course with three noteworthy features and strengths. Although recruiting foster carers was challenging, hosting the course in the school where the pupils attended rather than in a community venue meant that the foster carers felt familiar with the people and setting and therefore they were more confident about coming forward to engage with the course. Having a mixture of participants – foster carers, residential staff and teaching assistants – turned out to be a real strength of the project as it meant that the participants gained a better understanding of each other's roles and could see things from different perspectives and have a deeper appreciation for their work and contribution to supporting the individual pupils. A second strength of the course was the task to be completed at home as it allowed carers to put their learning into practice with the young person in their care and this enabled them to see behaviours and aspects of the young people that were less familiar and more positive. The chance to then share these observations and learning in the next session was particularly valued and enjoyed. Lastly, running the course over a number of weeks meant that the group bonded which meant they felt safe talking about their experiences. Foster carers do a very difficult job and very much appreciated and valued having the opportunity to share and to support each other.

The findings of this case study lend further support to the benefits of extended professional learning and development opportunities for foster carers in terms of improved feelings of self-efficacy as a carer. Despite the many responsibilities held by schools, this case study also points to the potential benefits of some of that training taking place in school with other staff and professionals who work with the same pupils as the foster carers. We know from the research on teacher professional learning and development that, for better results, pupil outcomes and where appropriate outcomes for individual pupils need to be the focus of learning. It would seem from this case study that research is needed to explore the benefits of extending this same approach to carers.

Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Edern

Using the Speech Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) as an audit tool and supporting social and emotional development through using 'LEGO®Based Therapy'.

Background

Severe and persistent language and communication difficulties have been found in children and young people in care and their needs can often remain unidentified and hence unsupported.[60] Moreover, as the number of children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) continues to grow, the need for schools to become 'communication friendly'[61] becomes more critical. Speech, language and communication skills are key 'life skills'[62] and underpin the development of literacy skills. The Speech Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) provides a freely available self-assessment professional development tool from the Communication Trust.[63] Participants can reflect on their current levels of 'skill, knowledge and confidence' in supporting children and young people (CYP) with SLCN and consequently find out about relevant resources and training.

Schools are increasingly developing attachment aware practices[64] to support CYP's social and emotional development. LEGO®-Based Therapy[65] was originally developed as a collaborative group intervention to support children with autistic spectrum conditions to improve their social and communication skills. Pupils are provided with opportunities to express themselves through play in a non-threatening environment and can develop strong attachments with the therapist and other group members. Research is emerging to demonstrate this is an easily implemented, cost effective group intervention that can be run in schools and facilitate a positive impact on communication and social skills. Key outcomes include development of greater empathy and tolerance for individual differences, alongside the enjoyable, rewarding and motivational aspects of the experience.

Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Edern is a Cardiff secondary school which recently opened to form the third Welsh speaking high school in the city. The school is open for pupils from years 7-12 and there are currently 637 pupils on roll. Bro Edern wanted to address two of the domains from the PALAC audit. Firstly, they aimed to make 'strategic' changes at a whole school level by using the SLCF audit tool to develop evidence based provision for the pupils with language and communication needs within the school. Secondly, they wanted to investigate the efficacy of trialling

60 Lum, J. A., Powell, M., & Snow, P. C. (2018). The influence of maltreatment history and out-of-home-care on children's language and social skills. Child abuse & neglect, 76, 65–74.
61 Crosskey, L. & Vance, M. (2011). Training teachers to support pupils' listening in class: An evaluation using pupil questionnaires. Child Language and Teaching Therapy 27: 165–82.
62 Bercow, J., (2008). The Bercow report: a review of services for children and young people (0–19) with speech, language and communication needs. Nottingham: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).
63 The Communication Trust (2018). Speech Language and Communication Framework. https://www.slcframework.org.uk/.
64 Bath Spa University (2018). Attachment Aware Schools.: https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools).
65 LeGoff, D. B. (2004). Use of LEGO© as a therapeutic medium for improving social competence. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 34(5), 557–571.

of LEGO®-Based Therapy as an intervention to support the speech social and emotional needs of children in care. The project team included the Head Teacher, Iwan Pritchard, Senior Leader/ALNCo, Trystan Williams and Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), Ffion Owen.

What did the school do?

The project began by requesting staff to complete the SLCF audit in order to support leadership to gain a better understanding of professional development needs in relation to understanding the impact of language for learning across the secondary curriculum. Outcomes of the audit were to be used to provide a school action plan and identify whether the school was at a 'foundation, universal, advanced or specialist level'.

Ffion had recently attended a LEGO®-Based Therapy training course and believed this would be an appropriate intervention for supporting the attachment as well as language needs of pupils in care. Whilst no evidence yet exists as to whether LEGO®-Based Therapy is effective for children in care as a specific group, the school felt a case study could provide a useful opportunity to explore the potential. Ffion set out a clear plan for implementation, beginning with assessment of children using the LEGO®-Based Therapy criteria supported with pre and post test data from other sources (including The Boxall Profile,[66] Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire,[67] British Vocabulary Picture Scales (BPVS3),[68] and Personal Education Plan targets). SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timebound) targets were then developed for participants. The school hoped to conduct a post intervention review of outcomes including both staff and pupils.

Outcomes for the young people and staff

The SLCF audit revealed that only 35% of staff felt confident in identifying everyday strategies for supporting CYP with SLCN. The school have since identified a need for the whole staff to be provided with training in supporting learners with SLCN. The school hope to look at using 'Secondary Language Link'[69] to improve assessment and intervention procedures in the future.

On a pupil level, whilst the school was aware that other variables in addition to the Lego therapy intervention may have had an impact on pupil outcomes, they celebrated the positive post intervention outcomes. The school reported that pupils were now able to express emotions more confidently and answered questions more within lessons. One pupil experienced less conflict with peers and had started to go outside at lunchtimes. The approach has had an impact schoolwide as it is now located in the additional learning needs (ALN) area and other children are drawn to it and are using lego based approaches to communicate their emotions and concerns.

'Lego has helped me to talk about things that I find difficult to talk about'

The Boxall Profile and BPVS 3 are now used on a regular basis to support the school for

66 The nurture group network (2018). Boxall Profile. https://nurturegroups.org/introducing-nurture/boxall-profile.
67 Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (2018). http://www.sdqinfo.com/.
68 British Picture Vocaulary Scales. https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/products/british-picture-vocabulary-scale-bpvs3/.
69 Secondary Language Link. https://www.secondarylanguagelink.co.uk.

identification and target setting purposes.

After attending the national PALAC conference and listening to sessions led by previous PALAC participants, they decided to set up a 'Hafan' (safe space) within the ALN department. Attendance of previous school non-attenders has since increased. Two pupils have returned to school as a result of the room and one is now using it as a safe space.

'I know that the Hafan is somewhere I am safe and can relax, and detached from the rest of the school in a positive way so I can do my work'

Implications for practice and research

It was felt that knowledge of change management models,[70] strong relationships and communication within the team and support from the Head Teacher and PALAC team helped drive the project forward successfully. The school felt there was a need to commit enough time to the project for it to work properly and that the complexity of the needs of children in care and frequent changes in circumstances called for flexibility in response. They felt strongly that engaging with a 'knowledge exchange' project had supported them to begin to interact with research and they hoped to develop further professionally through continued networking, and through creation of and engagement with new research in the field.

As other PALAC case studies demonstrate, the research base for supporting the education of children in care in school remains in its infancy. Bro Edern concluded that 'knowledge/network exchange has had a significant impact and promotes wider inclusive practice for all.' The school hopes to engage now with the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) Toolkit[71] and Brooks'[72] Welsh specific literacy 'What Works' and The Communication Trust's 'What Works' database[73] reports to support them to inform future practice and choices of approach through reflecting on the evidence available.

With regards to the 'safe space' which was created post action plan; there is strong evidence to suggest a 'safe space' can provide an anchor for which pupils can face their daily challenges.[74] Nevertheless further detailed research needs to be carried out to empirically investigate the short and long term impact of safe bases in schools.

Whilst research regarding LEGO®-Based Therapy has been undertaken with pupils with autistic spectrum conditions, it would be thought-provoking to carry out research on how this intervention could support the communication, social and emotional needs specifically of children in care. Future research into interventions such as LEGO®-Based Therapy and what impact they may have on children in care as a specific group would strengthen our understanding of the evidence base for wellbeing approaches that may work best to support the social and emotional development of this group of children.

70 John Kotter 8 Step Change Model. https://www.kotterinternational.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change.
71 Teaching and Learning Toolkit: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries.
72 Brooks, G. (2009). What works for children and young people with literacy difficulties in Wales? The effectiveness of intervention schemes.
73 The Communication Trust: What works database. www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk.
74 Bomber, L. (2011). What about me? Inclusive strategies to support pupils with attachment difficulties make it through the school day. Belper: Derbyshire: Worth publishing.

Eastern High School

Where do I start? Reflections from a newly appointed designated teacher with responsibility for pupils in care

Background

Taking on any new responsibility in school will come with its own challenges and rewards. This is the same for practitioners who take on the responsibility for pupils in care in a school. The rewards might be summed up as having the opportunity to make a very real difference and long lasting contribution to the life of an individual – the reason why most practitioners enter the teaching profession. The challenges will, on one level, be particular to the child and their context but there are sufficient challenges at a more operational and strategic level that are common across schools. What follows are themes taken from a personal account and reflections of an experienced practitioner in the first year as a designated teacher in Eastern High and on the contribution of the PALAC programme during that first year.

Reflections on the role of designated teacher

Knowledge and understanding of the role was limited

Not many teachers enter the profession planning to be a designated teacher and unlike most other roles in school it brings with it the need to become familiar with and understand the care system. The Welsh Government has recently published a new guide[75] for designated staff in schools which sets out the roles and responsibilities of the designated person for children in care in schools and the key personnel in place to support them in their work. Guidance is provided on topics such as the responsibilities of key professionals working across agencies to support pupils, the Pupil Development Grant, the PEP, supporting transition and post-16 education pathways. Taking part in the PALAC programme enabled stronger links with the LACE coordinator and LACE mentor which led to ensuring that information and concerns were shared appropriately. The links with the LACEs team have also led to the LACE coordinator allocating an additional LACE mentor for pupils, as the number of pupils in care almost doubled across the year. PALAC also provided an opportunity to discuss challenges of the role with colleagues from other schools and the team of researchers which allowed for extended reflection on practice in school and the changes that were needed.

…taking a more proactive role

During the first year the DT increasingly understood the need to take a more proactive role both at a pupil level and stategcially at a whole school level with colleagues. A priority was initiating and arranging all PEP meetings and ensuring that all relevant professionals (carers, social worker and LACEs team) were involved. Dates of the PEP and review meetings were added to Sims so that pastoral staff and the SENCO were aware of meetings and the schedule of meetings and attendance could be monitored. As part of the PEPs process, all teachers are now asked to complete a Pupil Enquiry Form which emphasises a pupil's approach to learning in a subject

75 Welsh Government (2017). Making a difference: A guide for the designated person for looked after children in schools. http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/171123-making-a-difference-looked-after-children-en.pdf.

including, for example, participation in class discussions, interest in the subject, independent work, response to guidance and support to complement school attainment and progress data. Systems were established to ensure that all of the pupils in care were given the first opportunity to attend school trips, outreach and extra curricular activities. The DT then focussed on working with and supporting a variety of colleagues, including, for example, the Achievement Leads, to oversee academic progress, behaviour and attendance, in order for her role to move more towards one of advocacy such as liaising with external advocates, IRO and the LACE team on behalf of pupils in care.

Taking a proactive approach was continued for carers with the publication of a Carer School prospectus with school information particularly pertinent for carers. This meant that materials for new carers were immediately available which proved helpful, as across the school year a number of new carers came in contact with the school.

My involvement with the PALAC programme has had a profound impact on my understanding of my role

One outcome of the PALAC programme was to bring back into focus the importance of the achievement and academic progress of pupils whereas before this, the main priority of the role had been concerned with the emotional well being of pupils in care and any safeguarding issues. The DT spent time with Achievement Leaders and the Communications Manager, finding out more about the systems used by teaching staff to record and analyse academic data. The DT worked more closely with the examination officer to ensure that pupils in care were entered for the qualifications that they should be, and that the information about exams was sent to the right people.

Moving forward, the school policy for pupils in care is in the process of being updated and the DT will be attending the Trauma Informed Practitioner Training with IATE: a 10 day course which will lead to Trauma Informed Practitioner Status and Eastern becoming a Trauma Informed school. Training on trauma and ACES has already been delivered to pastoral staff by the DT and will be delivered to all staff as the school looks to embed understanding of ACES into their work with all pupils as well as those in care. For the next academic year the school plans to link the PEP meeting to parent and carer evenings. There will also arrange a PEP before options evenings and careers evenings.

Implications for practice and research

To date, there has been very little research on the role and contribution of the designated teacher. In Wales, the appointment of a designated member of staff in schools has been a requirement since 2008.[76] Research that had a focus on listening to the voice of designated teachers would help with understanding the specific demands of the role and what forms of professional learning opportunities might better support staff in an emotionally demanding and sometimes lonely role. Such a study would complement the recent CASCADE[77] research that captured the educational experiences and opinions of children and young people in care and care experienced youth from across Wales.

76 Welsh Government (2008). Children and Young Persons Act. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/23/section/20.
77 Mannay, D., Staples, E., Hallett, S., Roberts, L., Rees, A., Evans, R. E., & Andrews, D. (2015). Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales.https://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2015/151111-understanding-educational-experiences-opinions-looked-after-children-en.pdf.

Conclusion

Participants in the PALAC programme implemented a variety of changes in their schools at pupil, practitioner and school levels. At practitioner and school levels, some of the participants used the PALAC programme as a springboard in their school to raise the profile of the needs of children in care through, for example, whole school professional learning. One of the aims of the PALAC programme is to continue to support developments in practice after the programme has ended through ongoing review of the audit and action plan. The schools in this PALAC programme have continued with their focus on the education of children and young people in care and in doing so are ensuring that they are helped to reach their potential and simultaneously contribute to an emerging evidence base for current practice.

Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children (PALAC) is a knowledge exchange programme that aims to support the development of practice in schools and to expand the evidence base to ultimately improve outcomes for children in care.

For further information on the programme please contact:

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