



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Putting the child first – the role of virtual school heads

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for England

Opinion piece

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Virtual school heads (VSH) and their often tiny teams cannot work magic.

Also, anything they do achieve is not done by them working in isolation. So what should they be striving to do, for some of England's most vulnerable, but often aspirational, children and young people? What is their bottom line? I write from a children's rights perspective because my statutory role is to promote children's rights. I also triangulate what both Ofsted and the All Party Parliamentary Group said in autumn 2012, and what the Children and Families Bill aspires to do for and through virtual school heads. The time is now, and as some readers have heard me say before, the chance is here. Now is the time for every school and local authority to revisit how seriously it takes aspiration and ambition for this population, and for every school leader to seize the moment. It is vital that those in the education sector, especially its leaders, take on the many and complex challenges the in-care population faces. These challenges are only in part about their status as being in care. For example, as an aspiring headteacher, you may be working with a virtual school head to champion the life chances of children coming to your school from a range of local authorities – given out of area placement and some moving around due to placement changes. Sustaining achievement in these circumstances is really difficult. The virtual head and their team will advocate on behalf of looked after children, and are a critical source of support, guidance and challenge for school leaders.

The virtual school head's remit

Virtual school heads are increasingly likely to have under their remits, the educational wellbeing and outcomes for wider groups than the in-care population. They should be champions of the rights of the children whose chances they are striving to improve. The opportunities offered by the role becoming a statutory requirement on every local authority with a Children's Services Department are considerable, and should be seized. Readers should find for themselves, and learn sufficiently well, the materials that underpin the changes to the law proposed in the Children and Families Bill 2013, which is expected to gain Royal Assent 2014. They should, equally, read and digest the October 2012 Ofsted report on the effectiveness of VSHs' work so far, even though at times it is hard reading if you happen to be a VSH. A month before Ofsted published their report, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (APPG) published one on the chances and curtailments for children in care in the education system. Again, a salutary and exhorting, if sometimes an uncomfortable read.

Virtual school heads also have a vital safeguarding role in respect of liaising with schools about the wellbeing of these children in particular, as well as their education. Schools are most likely to pick up on issues about children's safety, bullying and worries about placements, are two of a range of examples. My office has evidence of such issues from much of our work with children, who have experience of the systems virtual schools heads work within. This includes our Autumn 2013 report on how children and professionals work together to recognise that what they are going through is unacceptable, and could be abuse, and how the environment is made safe for them to tell their stories, and get help.

And so, to the children...

The population of children in the care of the state, in residential or foster homes, is currently around 70,000 in England. Approximately 44,000 of them are of school age. Some will be pre-schoolers and some care leavers. Spread evenly across every state funded school in the country – were such an even distribution likely – every school in England would have two to three of these vulnerable, sometimes also challenging children and young people in its cohort at any given time – they may be in your school now. Their need for additional support to stand on the same playing field as their peers is clear, and the facilitator of that help in any locality is likely to be the VSH and her or his team, working alongside you in your school.

The presence of even a small number of children in a school who need more than their peers should, surely, prompt us to provide more to meet those needs. We should not seek to explain why we can't meet them. There lies the heart of the work of a virtual school head: challenging the entire system to do right by the child, in every school and every community that schools serves, no matter what. Is this a tall order or an expectation that we should all seek to ensure schools live up to? You will not be surprised to read that I consider that both are true. Service, surely, is about meeting tall orders and delivering them.

We have known for a very long time that, whilst being in care is often the very best option for the life of the child concerned, the in care children of England tend, with marked and I hope loudly celebrated exceptions, to do less well than their peers in school. They achieve less than they could, and less than they should. I will return to that under-performance issue later, backed in my opinions by some doughty champions, namely children in care and care leavers themselves. Those who speak to me and my staff are clear: they have often had disrupted childhoods, and find they are running to catch up with learning to be a balanced, successful and responsible adult in a very short time as they leave care and some of the supports they have been accustomed to begin to fade away. Many are keen to remind us that care has actually done a great deal for them that was positive. How life goes afterwards, needs to help them continue on that steady onward track. How good are care leaving teams, schools and virtual school heads at working together on these crucial transition and ongoing support needs?

The school leader's role

Let's look at your role if you are a school leader, through the eyes of the child. And remember your core mission, which is best summed up in the question you have at the heart of your work: "if this were my child, would this be good enough for them?" Nothing less than a resounding 'yes' will do in answer to that question.

They have the same rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as any of their peers. The UN Convention applies to EVERY child, universally, indivisibly, inalienably. They can neither lose nor be denied the rights it contains, whoever they are, whatever their lives throw at them. These rights are not contingent on their behaviour. At its heart lie the best interests of the child, contained not only in Article 3 of this convention, which the UK signed in 1990 and ratified in 1991, but the paramountcy principle of the 1989 Children's Act. That Act was a seminal piece of legislation, rounding on a nation that needed to up its game for those who are most vulnerable, and very specifically those whose parent is the state because for whatever reasons, their own families cannot guarantee their upbringing, safety, survival or dignity.

Article 9 of the Convention guides everybody's actions in ensuring the best and most stable lives for children who can no longer live with their parents. Schools should take notice of this article, not least because they should be involved in the reviews a child in care goes through as their time in care continues. There are ten articles that apply to ALL children, and therefore to every child in care, because they are educated in our schools.

What do school leaders know of the Convention's Article 12, which states unequivocally that children and young people ALL have a right to a voice that is not only heard but also taken seriously whenever a decision is made about their lives? In your locality, are children's voices on their education well heard and if so how is that celebrated? And if not, what could and should be done, including by virtual school heads? Do you, for example, liaise with children's champions such as your locality's independent reviewing officers (IROs) around personal educational plans and care planning in the context of education? There is a good deal of good practice across the country on this – is it shared, and if so how does it work in your locality, as part of the embedding of good practice? The emotional wellbeing of children in care is so linked with their ability to learn that it should not need stating in an article for professionals such as this one. The same connection between emotional and mental states and the ability to learn and succeed applies to my, or your own, life. For this particular population of children and young people, help with making the connections between the two, needs to be coherently part of overall plans for the child concerned.

Article 28 says that every child, regardless of all characteristics and issues in their lives, has a right to an education, in a setting where their dignity is respected by fair discipline ensures that respect. Whoever they are. Whatever their lives have thrown at them. No matter what.

Article 28 is backed and deepened, given richness and insistence, by Article 29, which says the purpose of education is to develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full, encouraging children's respect for human rights, their own and other cultures, and the environment. The UN Committee has published a deeper exploration of Article 29, called a General Comment, on the purposes of education. It is freely available on the UN Committee's website, and it will be of great interest to school leaders.

Given many children in the care system have a special or additional need, please also be aware of other things they are guaranteed in the Convention, that crosses the boundaries between home, school and services wider than education. Article 23 covers disabilities and special needs and covers their right to live a full and decent life, in circumstances which promote and support that dignity, developing their independence and enabling them to live to the fullest of their potential as human beings.

The school's role

What is your school and services you work with doing to guarantee these rights? Children as rights holders cannot even out the odds they face in life. The role of the virtual school head will be vital in ensuring the rights of looked after children are met by all services. Virtual school heads will stand firm on these children's behalf when anybody, in any service, tries to give them less than they would expect their own child to receive were they placed in the same situation? What role as a headteacher will you play?

Pupil premium and, from 2014 pupil premium plus, at £1,900 per in-care or care-experienced but now adopted child, is a valuable additional resource for schools but primarily for those children. How well do schools use pupil premium funding? How, as a headteacher will you ensure pupil premium and pupil premium plus are used for THAT child?

Children in care, corporately parented well by some local authorities and not by others, paid due account in admissions processes by some schools but having their right to a place ignored or evaded by others, rely – even more than their peers – on adults as rights bestowers and what the UN calls 'duty holders'. What concrete proof is there that the in-care population is getting into oversubscribed schools, a statutory requirement under the admissions code, being that they do so without sitting banding tests, and without passing "Go"? And who will report the school to the school adjudicator, if they are not abiding by their statutory duties in that regard? Children in care cannot fight the system that is meant to support and nurture them when it gets things wrong. We have to do it for them.

I will close with what children in care and care leavers have told me in recent months, and what they told the All Party Parliamentary Group's Entitlements Inquiry this year, in concrete and poignant terms, about the education system and so much more besides.

They want a system in every school and college, which sees them as children with potential to fulfil first, not children in care who happen to go to school or college. They want an end to the “what can you expect from a kid in care?” litany that places a ceiling on their chances, and allows educators to under-expect, under-demand and under-challenge. They want to know that when a school gets pupil premium plus funding from 2014 onwards, it is used to enhance, bolster, support and nurture their abilities and their potential. They want to be recognised as students with the same broad range of potentials and possibilities as their peers, just coming from a different and usually more disadvantaged starting point. Cycles can be broken, but they cannot break them alone. And neither can even the best virtual school head, who needs a team, some backing from their local authority and roots directly into other statutory services who should also be held to account: from health, to justice. These are, after all, our children. It is time for us all to work with, and have the same will to ensure they get the right chances and the right support to meet the challenges that accompany them.

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