

## **Effective communication between schools and residential houses: Establishing a good practice framework.**

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### **Introduction**

This paper documents a summary of the research I carried out during my second year of training as an educational psychologist in Scotland. The issue that I was investigating concerned the effectiveness of communication between schools and residential houses about the education of young people who are looked after away from home. The educational outcomes for this group of young people have been of concern to policy makers as their achievements tend to be lower than the general population (Jackson and Sachdev, 2001). The Scottish Executive expressed this concern well:

*Access to education is a basic right for every child. Too many of those cared for by local authorities are still being let down. They are being denied the same chances as other children. It is not acceptable that six out of ten young people leaving care at 16 and 17 are doing so without any qualifications. (Scottish Executive, 2003)*

A constant feature of the looked-after population has, for many years, been the poor outcomes for individuals, of which educational attainment and achievement is just one facet (see, for example, Francis, 2000). This is in spite of a raft of legislation, policy and guidance designed to improve the life chances for the most vulnerable young people in our society, including *Getting it right for every child* (Scottish Executive, 2005), *We can and must do better* (Scottish Executive, 2007) and *These are our bairns* (Scottish Government, 2008).

The over-riding aim of this research was to attempt to improve one small aspect of the education of children who are looked after away from home. To achieve this aim, the research sought to investigate the systems currently in place in one local authority for communicating about the education of children in residential houses. Where systems are not operating effectively I have attempted to offer some solutions.

### **Methodology**

The four stakeholder groups identified for the research were young people of secondary age who are looked after within a residential house; care workers

from residential houses; social workers with at least one young person who was looked after away from home on their case load and LAC co-ordinators from the schools the young people attended – these were all depute head teachers. (It should be noted that the co-ordinators in schools have a strategic role relating to all looked-after children, not just those who are looked after away from home). Of the 13 young people invited to participate, seven responded, giving a response rate of 54%. For the three professional stakeholder groups, 32 individuals were invited to participate. Six teachers who had the responsibility for being LAC co-ordinators, five social workers and five care workers eventually took part, giving a response rate of 50%. The participants in the study were selected using convenience sampling.

The research aimed to use an Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Hammond, 1998) to investigate the communication between residential houses and secondary schools about the education of children who are looked after away from home. This approach focuses on finding out what is already working. To gather the views of the stakeholders, an online questionnaire was generated using *Participating In Consultation Online* (PICO). PICO is an internet-based survey tool developed jointly between Fife Council Education Service and the Department of Applied Computing at Dundee University. It allows users to access a questionnaire from any computer with internet access and to give their answers in a safe and secure environment. There were a number of reasons why this method was chosen. As the link could be emailed, it would allow the questionnaires to reach the target groups quickly and efficiently with no associated postage or printing costs. Secondly, research has shown that this method of data collection results in a higher return rate than traditional paper copies of a questionnaire (see, for example, Oliver, 2006). PICO asked stakeholders and young people what they thought about communication between residential units and schools.

The responses gathered were subject to a thematic analysis. An amended version of Attride-Stirling's method of thematic network analysis (2001) was used as a starting point to facilitate the exploration of the data collected, in combination with a theoretical, 'top down' method of coding, as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

The final phase of the research aimed to collate the most significant themes across the stakeholder groups in order to feed back this information to contributors and form the basis of the good practice framework. I selected the most commonly occurring themes from the three professional stakeholders' responses to use as the basis for a number of tasks in a workshop session to be held with a group of self-selected contributors. The plan of the session was designed to offer as much opportunity for discussion about the themes and the resulting framework as possible. The first task involved the co-researchers ranking the themes in a

'diamond ranking' task (where themes are laid out graphically to symbolise the importance attached to them by the group), so that the themes could be ranked in order of significance to the contributors. In reality, this task took the majority of the time available during the session, although it did generate a full discussion about some of the issues arising through the themes.

## **Findings**

As a result of the diamond ranking task four main themes emerged: planning, dealing with one key person, understanding each others' environments and good working relationships. These themes also consistently emerged during the thematic analysis of the professional stakeholders' responses.

The majority of the young people who contributed to this research felt that they had people in their lives both at home and at school in whom they could confide when they needed to. While this is good news, the fact that two individuals were unable to identify anyone to confide in is of concern. This should perhaps lead to care workers and school staff reflecting on whether there are any steps they could take to minimise the likelihood of this response occurring in the future.

One of the most salient comments from the young people was from the individual who responded that being back in school would help them. Research and experience tells us that school can be difficult for young people in care and perhaps there is a danger that as professionals, we sometimes assume that if things are difficult for a child then removing the pressure of school is helpful for them. What this comment tells us is that the normality of a school routine is very important to young people for whom life can be chaotic and difficult.

Young people also made comments about what they felt should not be shared. While they felt that personal history should be shared, some of them were quite clear that personal situations happening at home, or sensitive personal issues which were around in their lives, should not be shared. This highlights the fact that professional stakeholders need to think carefully about exactly what needs to be shared to ensure a positive educational experience. It also highlights the importance of talking to young people before their information is shared.

A recurring theme within the responses from professionals was the need for a key contact person both in school and at home. This theme was also rated highly in the diamond ranking task during the workshop session. This was of interest, as this system is effectively in place: residential houses operate a key worker system, social workers work by case allocation and schools have guidance teachers allocated to specific classes or year groups and they also have LAC co-

ordinators. It would seem, therefore, that there is a systemic problem which is preventing consistent communication. One solution, suggested by one of the social work contributors, is for a wider use of email for communication.

Problems with communication due to the shift work patterns of residential staff were also mentioned. The shift system for residential workers is complicated to organise and is additionally affected by holidays, sickness and staff changes. One suggestion would be for one person on each shift to take responsibility for liaison with other agencies as a matter of course. This system would also rely on the care staff maintaining records of phone calls and emails to enable information to flow freely not only during and between shifts, but also between agencies.

Planning was a recurring theme across all professional stakeholder groups and also rated as the most important theme in the diamond ranking task. Poor educational planning was shown by Fletcher-Campbell (1998) to have a negative impact on a young person's education. Generally, the comments made about planning in this piece of research were positive in that it was taking place and was seen as something helpful. Additionally, it was clearly viewed as highly important to the contributors who attended the workshop session.

### **A framework for good practice**

In devising the framework I have sought to extend the type of planning that is taking place, to include planning how best to communicate about a young person who is living in residential accommodation. This level of detail in planning might seem time-consuming and unimportant, but if, for example, one of the professionals around a child is consistently using a method of communication that is infrequently used by another professional, information can take longer to be passed on or be lost altogether.

A draft version of the framework has been drawn up and sent out to the professional stakeholders for consultation. The framework seeks to formalise the important aspects which emerged within one easy-to-use document. This will hopefully become part of the routine documentation required for the effective planning and support for looked after and accommodated children and young people. The draft framework is contained in the appendix of this paper.

### **Conclusion**

Sometimes, in the busy nature of professional lives, inter-agency communication can slip down the agenda. Research tells us that communication between

residential houses and schools is important if the best outcomes are to be achieved for children and young people in care. This small piece of research will hopefully go some way toward building upon and formalising good practice in this type of inter-agency communication.

## Appendix

### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND RESIDENTIAL HOUSES: GOOD PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Name of young person:.....

Home/School:.....

#### When planning a new placement:

- **Planning**

What information do we need to share about this young person to best support their education?

What does the young person think about this?

How would they like to be supported?

How often do we need to review this information?

Do we need to have a contingency plan for crisis situations?

What information needs to be passed on if this young person moves school/care provider?

<b>Has this information been shared?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>
<b>Has the young person been consulted?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>
<b>What is the next review date?</b>	
<b>Where is the contingency plan located?</b>	
<b>Is this information collated and ready to go at short notice?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>

- **Relationships**

Who is best suited to act as the key worker for this young person?

Do we have a relationship with their key person at home/school? If not, how can we go about establishing one?

<b>Does the YP have a key worker?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>
<b>Who are they?</b>	
<b>Do we have regular contact with their key worker at home/school?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>

- **Identify the most efficient way to communicate**

Is email the most appropriate?

Would telephone be better?

How can you make sure the information you need to share is going to the right person?

How quickly can a meeting be set up if something urgent comes up?

*Ensure all information that is shared complies both with confidentiality and data protection procedures.*

<b>Have we agreed the best way to communicate?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>
<b>Is the information reaching the right person?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>
<b>Do we have procedures in place for setting up meetings quickly?</b>	<b>YES/NO</b>

**Once a placement has been established:**

- **It is not all about the bad days**

What has gone well today?

Who should hear about this?

- **Achieving consistent communication patterns**

Do we have set days/times for regular catch-ups?

If yes, are these effective? If no, would they help improve your current systems?

Do we have set procedures for responding to messages?

If yes, are these easy to stick to? If no, would they be helpful?

- **Corporate parenting**

Are we communicating about this young person as a parent would?

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