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Improving Transitions to Secondary School for Looked After Children

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Improving care experiences

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Improving Transitions to Secondary School for Looked After Children

CELCIS carried out work in North Lanarkshire with a secondary school and one of its feeder primaries. This work was designed to enhance the transition experiences of looked after children within the learning community, and formed part of an action research project which used 'Improvement Methodology' and 'tests of change' to achieve its aims. Changes were implemented, studied and adapted until improvements were measured. Bespoke enhanced transition visits for the children and presence of secondary school staff at relevant meetings led to an increase in the children's readiness for secondary school.

Key findings:

- Observations of two Primary 7 pupils (aged 12) over a five-month period suggested an increase in their readiness for secondary school.
- Secondary school staff displayed increased awareness of pupil's strengths and needs, understanding of family context and commitment to developing the child and family's relationships with people who can provide support to the child.
- Bespoke visits to secondary school reduced anxiety of primary school pupils by increasing their familiarity with teachers and layout of the school.

Background

The current study has been carried out as part of a broader research and consultancy programme within CELCIS, which utilises Improvement Methodology (Langley, 2009). This approach, recently adopted by the Scottish Government's Education Directorate, provides a model through which organisations can improve structures, procedures and practice. Small changes known as 'tests of change' are planned, implemented, studied and refined using plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles. If successful, the changes can then be tested more widely across the organisation. Use of this method has previously been described by CELCIS in its work on improving the educational outcomes of looked after children (Hennessy and Connelly, 2014; Hennessy and Connelly, 2015).

Methodology

A steering group of North Lanarkshire Council employees and partners identified improved transition experiences for looked after children as a key area for improvement within the local authority. One learning community was given the opportunity to become involved in an improvement project focused on transitions. The methodology stresses the critical importance of practitioner (in this case teacher's) involvement in the planning stage, therefore representatives from the secondary school and each of the feeder primaries developed an action plan. This plan, called a 'driver diagram', prioritised a number of key issues the schools wished to investigate. These included: earlier transition planning; improved multi-agency planning; and improved knowledge regarding the needs

of looked after children. A number of ideas for improvement PDSA cycles were shared. These ideas were largely based on teacher's experiences and 'hunches' of what may lead to improvement; to help adjudicate between them, CELCIS provided insight from the research literature about which methods had proven successful in the past. Teachers were then invited to select an idea for an improvement project. One secondary and one primary school elected to focus on earlier transition planning. Two tests of change were identified:

- Does secondary school staff attendance at looked after children reviews improve pupil readiness for secondary school?
- Do bespoke enhanced transition visits to secondary school for looked after children in Primary 7 (age 11/12) improve pupil readiness for secondary school?

The head teacher of the primary school gave a monthly assessment of the two Primary 7 pupils in the school who were looked after. A scale of 1- 10 was used to describe pupil readiness for secondary school, with '0' being not ready and '10' being completely ready. Ongoing consultation and support for the process was provided by CELCIS. This gave an opportunity to observe incremental adaptations of the original plan in line with Improvement Methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted after several months with the head teacher of the primary school and the relevant deputy head teacher of the secondary school.

Findings

Secondary School Attendance at Key Meetings Involving Primary 7 Children

The deputy head teacher was invited to, and attended, all looked after children reviews and key meetings involving the looked after Primary 7 pupils who would be transitioning to the secondary school in August. In interviews with CELCIS staff, the deputy head teacher of the secondary school stated that attendance at these meetings had been a valuable step in building relationships with the children.

'I can now recognise these children. Visually I know who they are, and they know me.'

Secondary Deputy Head Teacher

It was said to be extremely helpful in creating class lists in the best interests of the children.

'When you've got that bit of additional information it just means you know they would be better with that pupil support teacher or better not in that class with that group of children from that

primary school...The more information you have the better you can plan.'

Secondary Depute Head Teacher

The head teacher of the primary school reflected that secondary attendance at a review, which took place at the child's home, was also important on an even more basic level.

'I think it gave a strong picture of educational unity, and that we were treating transitions seriously and that we were caring. To see both schools represented in a family home... I think that was meaningful for the children, maybe not in ways they would fully understand yet. Some of the things I thought they might have felt: suspicion, wariness, 'why are they here?', 'what's this about?'. There was actually just, in every single case, feeling a wee bit tickled, a wee bit of delight and you could see it was meaningful to them.'

Primary Head Teacher

Understanding of family dynamics was said to be helpful in understanding the young people's environment. It led to a deeper understanding of the context in which the young person was living.

'Going to a house or sitting down with a family was really meaningful for the high school, and they expressed that that just gave them an understanding of some of the dynamics that you don't always get from paper and you don't get from files. Seeing the looks across a room and hearing the tone in which somebody speaks and seeing the fragility or the strength or the persistence of parents.'

Primary Head Teacher

The initial plan had specified secondary school presence at 'formal' meetings. It was quickly realised, however, that there would be added value in extending the invitation to less formal enhanced transition meetings:

'In the less formal meetings, once the conversation starts it's not stiff; it's genuine. We're there because we mean it and that's allowed conversation to open up and it's not like somebody's taking notes; it's not minuted; there's not a reporter there. So I think that's been a useful offshoot as well that we didn't foresee.'

Primary Head Teacher

Bespoke Enhanced Transition Visits for Primary 7 Children

By providing bespoke visits to the secondary school, the schools aimed to create opportunities for the pupils to begin to develop relationships with the teachers and become familiar with the layout of the school; it was hoped that this would lead to fewer anxieties about the transition experience. Observations from school staff suggested that the children were excited about the visit, and enjoyed being asked details of how they would like the day to be planned. The bespoke visits took place before the scheduled whole cluster Primary 7 visit (when all of the Primary 7 pupils from the feeder primary schools visit the secondary school together), preparing the children for the latter experience as well. The two children chose to go to the school together, without teachers, and to be shown around by senior pupils. They were taken on a tour of the school, and met teachers and key staff members. They also spent time in the nurture base, where they carried out craft activities.

The head teacher of the primary school was satisfied that anxiety was reduced and the experience had been helpful.

'It's taken away the fear of the unknown, which has been a factor with all of these children and change. So there's less unknown and there's less change. "I know my way about that building. I know some people dotted about. I know some older pupils. I don't think stories about initiation tests for first years can be true based on what I've seen and heard." So it just takes away a lot of that, "Am I going to get lost? Are people just going to pick on me?"'

Primary Head Teacher

The deputy head teacher of the secondary school discussed how the relationship building that had taken place at the enhanced transition meetings and bespoke visit had shown its value when one of the children had come up for the later whole cluster Primary 7 visit.

'One of them came to me at the end, when we were lining them up to go on their school buses home, [the child] said to me, "Can I speak to you about something that happened today?" There was a wee concern and it was with the other child...I think the wee [child] had gone at interval to play with somebody different, just fairly minor, but the fact that [the child] was able to come up and say "Can I speak to you?" now that wouldn't have happened, would not have happened because [the child] wouldn't have known me, I wouldn't have known [the child].'

Secondary Deputy Head Teacher

Going through the process of the enhanced transition meetings and bespoke visits revealed the potential for small changes to these initiatives. The bespoke visit with the children involved art and craft activities which, while they were enjoyed, could have been tailored more to the specific interests of the children, giving added value to the day.

The enhanced transition meetings also revealed a potential need for secondary school visits for some parents/carers.

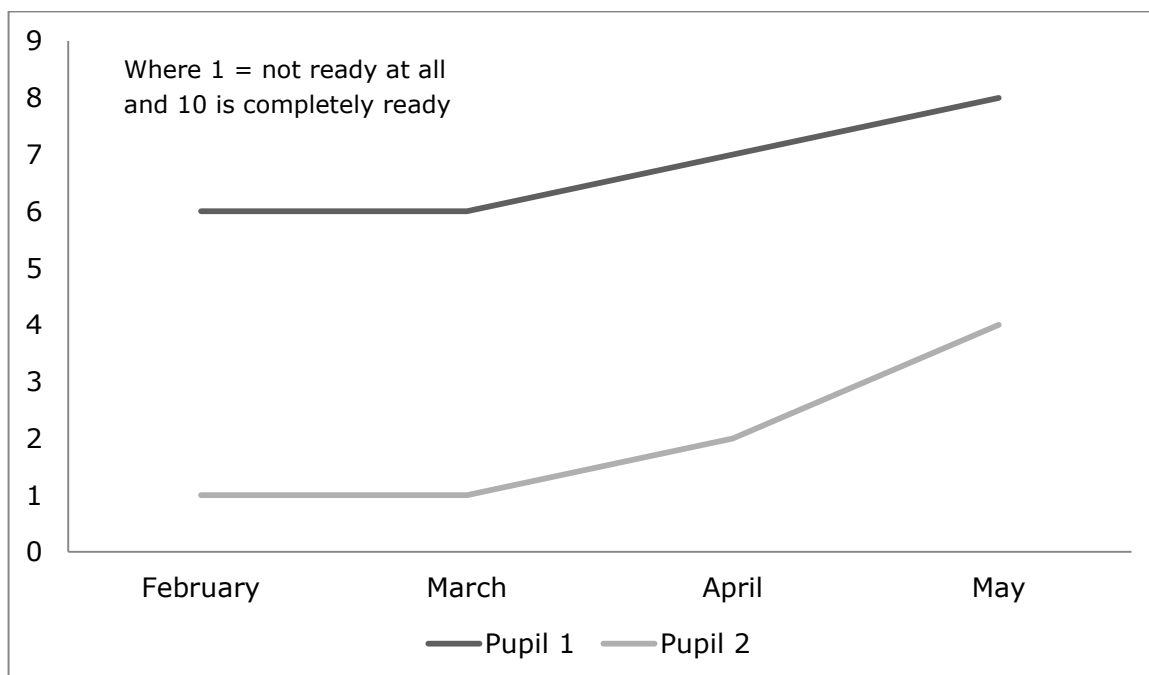
'What we were able to do at that meeting was see very clearly the absolute fragility of one of the guardians, a gran, that actually got really upset at the very idea of her girl going to high school. That turned into an offer of coming up to the school and looking about and meeting people because she needed that reassurance and stability because that then will help her granddaughter when she comes to school.'

Primary Head Teacher

Teacher Estimated Pupil Readiness for Secondary School

The primary school head teacher recorded monthly estimates of pupil readiness for secondary school. Figure 1 shows that the values improved over time. The primary head teacher, however, had some reservations about attempts to quantify impact in such a way; he felt that numerical data should always be contextualised with in-depth qualitative data, which would allow for detailed descriptions of circumstances.

Figure 1: Changes in pupil readiness for secondary school over a four-month period



The primary head teacher reflected that the impact (of work with a pupil) does not always show itself straight away. He advised caution in attempts to place numerical values on success, as impact could be instant, but may equally be long term. Positive experiences and relationships in childhood may not show their full impact until much later on.

Future Work

The enhanced transition work carried out is being extended to other schools in the cluster using a model of 'adaptive spread.' Different schools will have different needs and contexts, so evaluation data will continue to be collected as the work is rolled out, so that adaptations may be made and issues addressed as they occur. This will enhance the knowledge base and establish it in the transition programme for looked after children.

The greatest levels of commitment lie with the secondary school, as secondary school staff plan to attend all relevant meetings and host bespoke visits for looked after pupils across all the feeder primaries. The depute head of the secondary school has suggested that pupil support colleagues will become involved as more primary schools join the project.

Conclusion

The participation of secondary school staff at the reviews and other key meetings associated with P7 looked after pupils appeared to improve their understanding of the child's strengths and wellbeing needs. Staff from the secondary school stated that this knowledge was helpful in compiling class lists, as well as increasing understanding of family context and strengthening relationships. Bespoke, enhanced transition visits to secondary school appear to improve pupil readiness for secondary school, reducing their anxiety by increasing familiarity with the secondary school layout and teachers.

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