

Zara's Story: Sailing into Success

Context

There is a consensus in society, supported by education research literature, about the inherent benefits of learning in the community, including through sport, voluntary and work experience for children and young people. A body of evidence points towards multiple benefits of paid, voluntary work and spare time activities, in particular, for children and young people with care experience.ⁱ This includes the social capital gained through work, the value of social connections and opportunities to transform their identity, 'sense of self'ⁱⁱ and build resilience.ⁱⁱⁱ A North American study found a strong association between early work experience and later employment stability for those with care experience well into later adulthood.^{iv}

South Ayrshire Council is on the west coast of southern Scotland. There are over 400 care experienced school aged children and young people cared for by the local authority, and the VSHT, Kimberley Keenan came into post in 2019. This case study describes how Kimberley and her team, in collaboration with a range of professionals, worked together to provide intensive support for Zara during a particularly difficult time.

What were the circumstances?

Zara was in her second year of secondary school and had recently gone to live in a Children's House^v following a build-up of pressure at home and a period of being 'looked after' at home.^{vi} In her young life, Zara had experienced several bereavements, and was going through significant change as she navigated the reality of moving away from her family and community and leaving the responsibilities she had at home. The VSHT team felt that Zara had lost trust in the adults around her. She found it difficult to attend school and did not see value in engaging in school and learning while she was making sense of her situation, her identity, and dealing with the psychological impact of moving away from her family.

What did the team do?

The team at the Virtual School started by getting to know Zara so that they could build a relationship with her. They wanted to find out what

sparked her interest and what she enjoyed doing. They were looking for a way in and an opportunity to offer her something that she could buy into and enjoy. A welfare officer from the team visited her regularly to slowly build up familiarity and get to know her. At times, Zara didn't feel like talking, but the team kept in touch so that she knew they were there when she felt ready to speak with them. The team felt that Zara had lost confidence in adults and was angry about her situation.

Eventually Zara started to open up and expressed an interest in sport, and this galvanised the team into action. Working closely alongside staff at the Children's House and the local authority Active School's team, an approach was made to a local sailing club. They supported Zara to attend sailing lessons and worked around her schedule, for example, by adjusting the working hours of the welfare officer to enable Zara to attend in the evening at a time that suited her. Zara thrived in this setting. The Virtual School, in collaboration with Active Schools, used pandemic recovery funding to pay for her membership at the Club and she subsequently attended their Summer School. This experience became the linchpin around which a bespoke plan was built with Zara to support her and which promoted both her confidence and her attendance back into school.

What difference did this make?

Zara thoroughly enjoyed and learnt a great deal from the sailing lessons that were arranged. She grew in confidence as a result of her time at the sailing club and the experience helped Zara to develop positive relationships with her peers and the adults who worked alongside her. Zara became a valued and integral part of an organisation that she otherwise may never have come across.

Zara has since achieved a sailing qualification and has undertaken volunteering at the sailing club, leading to her achievement of a [Saltire Award](#). A certificate to recognise her commitment and achievement was presented to her and she took the awards to show her school. Zara has also achieved her Bronze Duke of Edinburgh award and is working towards the Silver award. Zara's school attendance has improved and there is work underway to identify and record learning from her activities to support her achievement of National Qualifications in the future. The

Virtual School is considering how to use opportunities like this for Zara and other learners as a pathway into modern apprenticeships.

Implications for practice

A key takeaway for the South Ayrshire Virtual School was the need to explore options for learning and growth in settings out of the school context. VSHTs work with care experienced learners of many different ages and abilities, who have a diverse range of needs and interests, and there can be a narrow window in which some young people are interested and motivated. A key strength of the Virtual School model lies in being able to support care experienced learners throughout their educational journey and offer different pathways. The ability to match learners' needs quickly with an out-of-school learning opportunity matched to their interests can be key in contributing towards positive educational progress.^{vii} A large-scale study with care experienced graduates^{viii} also points towards ready-made access to multiple opportunities as a factor associated with future success.

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ⁱ Webb, L., Cox, N., Cumbers, H., Martikke, S., Gedzielewski, E., & Duale, M. (2017). Personal resilience and identity capital among young people leaving care: Enhancing identity formation and life chances through involvement in volunteering and social action. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(7), 889-903.

ⁱⁱ Arnau-Sabatés, L., & Gilligan, R. (2015). What helps young care leavers to enter the world of work? Possible lessons learned from an exploratory study in Ireland and Catalonia. *Children and youth services review*, 53, 185-191.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilligan, R. (1999). Enhancing the resilience of children and young people in public care by mentoring their talents and interests. *Child and family social work*, 4, 187-196.

^{iv} Stewart, C. J., Kum, H. C., Barth, R. P., & Duncan, D. F. (2014). Former foster youth: Employment outcomes up to age 30. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 36, 220-229.

^v Children's House is a term used in Scotland to describe what may have previously been called a residential care home and is synonymous with the term children's home

^{vi} Looked after at home describes a situation where a child continues to live at their normal residence but receives regular support from social workers

^{vii} Gilligan, R. (2007). Spare time activities for young people in care: What can they contribute to educational progress?. *Adoption & Fostering*, 31(1), 92-99.

^{viii} Harrison, N. (2017). Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education.