

Developing Quality Indicators for Learning with Care

Graham Connelly

Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Support and Guidance, University of Strathclyde

Introduction

Much more is now known about shortcomings in the education of looked after children and young people than when Professor Sonia Jackson first highlighted major concerns in her seminal monograph, *The Education of Children in Care* (Jackson, 1987). In particular, an authoritative review of research, policy and practice helped to identify the key issues affecting a section of the school population which has often been marginalised and forgotten (Borland et al., 1998). The inadequacies of care and education policy and practice in Scotland were further detailed in the *Learning with Care* report (Scottish Executive, 2001).

As part of its response to this report, the Scottish Executive commissioned work to develop training and other support materials aimed at improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people. The project was undertaken by a consortium of agencies (BAAF Adoption & Fostering, Save the Children, Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, University of Strathclyde Department of Educational Support and Guidance, Professional Development Unit and Quality in Education Centre, and Who Cares? Scotland). The products of the project included a training pack (Hudson et al., 2003; and see Judy Furnivall and Barbara Hudson in this issue), an information booklet (Connelly et al., 2003) and a report presenting the educational experiences of looked after and accommodated children and young people (Ritchie, 2003; and see Alison Ritchie, Elizabeth Morrison and Steven Paterson in this issue).

The project team was also asked to undertake the development of quality indicators in response to Recommendation 7 in the *Learning with Care* report:

‘As part of their quality assurance procedures local authorities should undertake an audit of their residential units to assess how far they are educationally rich environments and, where shortcomings are found, make plans to take appropriate action’ (Scottish Executive, 2001, p.7).

The project brief specified an audit instrument which would assist carers and their managers to monitor the quality of support provided to help children and young people to have satisfying school experiences, to attain qualifications,

and to develop cultural and sporting interests. This, however, was subsequently expanded to include quality indicators which could be used by a range of care settings, by schools and by local authority managers. The underlying rationale for this wider view lies in the 'corporate parent' role which requires that different local authority services work together to provide support for looked after children and their families. Thus, for example, problems in attendance are not exclusively the responsibility of carers and poor behaviour in school is not only for teachers to resolve.

Developing the audit instrument

The project team decided to adopt the framework used in *How Good is Our School?* (HM Inspectors of Schools, 2001). This approach, based on self-evaluation by school communities, and its related series of documentation has gained widespread respect.

'During its half-decade of use it has moved progressively from a peripheral, and even irksome, imposition to a more integral and welcome place within ongoing school life and development planning. Once viewed as the province of senior management, it is now more and more seen as relevant to all staff.' (MacBeath and McGlynn, 2002, p.135).

It also seemed sensible to use a format already familiar to one of the target constituencies. The *How Good is Our School?* approach uses quality indicators to help practitioners recognise key strengths, identify areas where good quality needs to be maintained or where improvement is needed, identify priorities for a development plan, and report on standards and quality. In essence, the audit process invites staff groups to ask themselves three questions: How are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do? Quality indicators assist this process by defining good practice; after discussion staff can grade their own setting on a four-point scale (1 = major weaknesses; 4 = major strengths) which helps to identify an agenda for improvement.

The initial work to develop the Learning with Care quality indicators was conducted in workshops with 21 student teachers who had elected to study a module on the education of looked after pupils. The workshops involved giving the students sets of resource material and asking them to devise statements which could be used to assess or monitor practice. The resource material included information about *How Good is Our School?*, the National Care Standards (Scottish Executive, 2002) and summaries of the research literature. This work was particularly assisted by the expertise of one participant who had previously been a management consultant involved in developing quality indicators and who, coincidentally, had close personal experience of the care system.

The quality indicators produced by this process were refined by a sub-group of the project team and subjected to critical comment by a group of practitioners studying for the M.Sc. in Residential Child Care. Finally, they were piloted in a small number of residential units in one local authority.

The nature of the audit instrument

The framework of quality indicators provided in the audit instrument is set out in three distinct parts to allow separate self-evaluation at the level of local authority, school and care setting. This separation recognises the different issues which impinge on the distinct contexts. However, an important principle of the *Learning with Care* initiative is the need for local authorities to work across contexts and to ensure that there is close collaboration between the key departments and agencies in seeking to improve practice. The description which follows relates to a draft version of the audit instrument which was piloted before being refined and finally made available to local authorities along with the other products of the project in May 2003. A revised version to be launched by the Scottish Executive in November 2003 is described later in this article.

An important feature of this development is the continuing collaboration between HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) and the Social Work Services Inspectorate (SWSI), underlining the crucial needs for carers, social workers and teachers to work together to improve the support arrangements for looked after children and young people. The quality indicators are also the first in the *How Good is Our School?* series to be developed for use in contexts beyond schools and other educational settings.

Using the indicators in care settings

Pilot work undertaken in residential units provided encouraging results. The units tackled the process in different ways. For example, in one unit, senior staff completed the audit document independently. In another unit, the audit was debated at an open staff meeting. In yet another, both staff and residents completed the audit independently. The quality indicators in the draft version for care settings were sub-divided under three headings: 'staff knowledge and training'; 'procedures and arrangements'; and 'supporting young people'. Table 1 shows an extract from the audit completed independently by a member of staff in a residential unit. The worker is able to offer evidence in support of a view that this aspect of staff knowledge and training is a major strength of the unit's practice.

Table 1			
Key Feature	Description	Level (1-4)	Comment
Staff know the importance of education and its significance in helping looked after young people to achieve their potential	There is research evidence indicating that positive school/college experiences can help to minimise the effects of adversity, as well as enhancing feelings of confidence and developing relationship skills.	4	“Open, regular discussion informally and in meetings emphasises the importance of education for life long achievement and life choices.”

Table 2 shows a comparison between the ratings and comments given by a carer and a 16 year old resident in relation to an aspect of the ‘supporting young people’ section of the audit instrument. In this case both agree that this aspect represents a weakness in practice, though the young person rates it more severely. Both describe the nature of the inadequacies, though understandably the young person’s view is very personal; another young person might have had different priorities.

Table 2			
Key Feature	Description	Level (1-4)	Comment
Books, newspapers, computers and educational, artistic and other cultural materials are available	Young people need to have access to writing and drawing materials, reference books and computers to help in completing homework and for intellectual stimulation. Carers should actively encourage young people to purchase books of their own.	2	“Presently books, computers, space available for study is not adequate and craft materials not always in use due to other priorities. New educational room described before will address this as will an allocation of money to each young person...” (residential worker)
		1	“We need more books and magazines.” (young person)

Self-evaluation using quality indicators

The final, public, version of the indicators was prepared by a consultant to HMIE who restyled the document to fit closely with the format used in the series of self-evaluation guides which build on *How Good is Our School* and *Quality Management in Education* (HM Inspectors of Education, 2000). The guide relating to looked after children is the first in a mini-series with the generic title, *Inclusion and Equality* (HM Inspectors of Education, 2003). Section three of the document:

‘... is designed to help:

- Staff teams to evaluate the educational environment of a children’s home or other residential unit, and
- Social workers, or foster or relative carers to evaluate the educational environment of a family placement’ (HM Inspectors of Education, 2003, p.19).

The main body of the self-evaluation materials is prefaced by a set of key questions, cross-referenced to the relevant National Care Standards, as shown in Table 3 below. The materials are presented in tabular form as 20 key questions, alongside explanations of their importance. There are columns to record evidence, both ‘strengths’ and ‘areas for improvement.’ The full text of the questions is provided in Appendix 1 of this article. As with other self-evaluation documents in this series, the materials is available on the HMIE web site, and will also be produced in CD-Rom format as an aid to carers who prefer to document their evaluations electronically or who might wish to customise the questions and explanations for particular requirements.

Table 3: Overall Evaluation

Key Questions	National Care Standard	Overall Evaluation
How effectively do you support looked after children and young people in their studies and provide an ‘educationally rich environment’?	National Care Standards for care homes for children and young people: Standard 13 National Care Standards: foster care and family placement services: Standard 2	
How effective are your procedures for linking with schools and other agencies to support the educational achievement of looked after children and young people?	National Care Standards for care homes for children and young people: Standard 13 National Care Standards: foster care and family placement services: Standard 2	
How effectively do carers advocate on behalf of looked after children and young people?	National Care Standards for care homes for children and young people: Standard 13 National Care Standards: foster care and family placement services: Standard 2	
How effectively do you help looked after children and young people maintain relationships that are important to them?	National Care Standards: care homes for children and young people: Standard 3	

Conclusion

The experience of the pilot exercise and two launch conferences for the Learning with Care materials indicates that carers, social workers, teachers and their managers in general welcome the development of self-evaluation indicators as one element of a multi-strategy approach to enriching the educational experience of looked after children and young people. The indicators are intended to emphasise the broad range of experiences which contribute to an educationally rich environment. The self-evaluation approach is meant to be empowering rather than inspectorial. Whether this proves to be the case in practice depends on the encouragement and practical support given to unit teams, foster and relative carers and schools. In this respect, good, informed leadership and the provision of support and resources are vital. The way in which the quality indicators are used to improve the conditions which support good educational experiences, is the subject of another study.

References

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Scottish Executive (2002) *National care standards: care homes for children and young people*, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Appendix 1

Key questions: How effective are your procedures for linking with schools and other agencies to support the educational achievement of looked after children and young people	
Questions to ask	Why is this important?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How effectively do you encourage and support young people to do their homework? Is there good provision of special quiet areas for study? • To what extent do you understand, and demonstrate, the importance of education in helping children and young people to become more resilient and achieve their potential in all areas of their lives? • How good are you at helping children and young people to develop and maintain hobbies and interests? • How well do you encourage children and young people to read for pleasure, and to be active, regular users of their local public library? What level of financial help do you get to allow young people to take part in wider educational opportunities such as school trips, clubs, and help with travel to events or matches? • How knowledgeable are you about the legislation, procedures and provisions relating to children and young people with special educational needs? • How many books, educational toys, newspapers, computers and educational, artistic and other cultural materials are there in your care placement? How suitable are these for children and young people of different ages and abilities? • How well does your care placement use its budget for purchase (or replacement) of educational materials and activities? 	<p>The ethos of the care placement is very important. Carers should expect that children and young people will attend school and will complete homework. Carers can help by checking homework diaries, ensuring that children understand what is expected of them and providing support where they lack confidence to seek help from teachers. Some carers undertaking courses have found that studying openly is encouraging for young people.</p> <p>Carers should be familiar with local authority guidelines in relation to provision for special educational needs</p> <p>The <i>Learning with Care</i> report described units where ‘staff complained they had no money for basic educational resources such as books, pencils and rubbers.’ By contrast, some children’s homes have subscriptions for daily newspapers, and can pay fees for private tutoring and music lessons. Unit budgets and foster carer allowances should take account of such needs.</p> <p>Main recommendation 7 in the <i>Learning with Care</i> report states: ‘As part of their quality assurance procedures local authorities should undertake an audit of their residential units to assess how far they are educationally rich environments and, where shortcomings are found, make plans to take appropriate action.’</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How knowledgeable are you about the education system, public examinations and assessment? • How good are you at working with teachers to help young people to attend school or college regularly? Where non-attendance is unavoidable, how effective are the alternative arrangements provided? • If a child or young person is excluded from school, do you know how to advise about their right of appeal? What level of support do you provide when an appeal is made? • To what extent do you ensure that young people receive appropriate support in considering career options, including access to careers advisers, and planning to meet particular job/educational entrance requirements? • How good is the advice you give to young people about applying for and obtaining grants for further or higher education? How do you help them to get appropriate information about financial and other support from the social work department, education authority or government to continue with education after school or college? • To what extent do you receive relevant training, support and advice in relation to education? 	<p>It is important for carers to be familiar with how the curriculum is organised and the requirements of the 5-14 curriculum, Standard Grade, and National Qualifications. Carers should make arrangements to obtain school handbooks, and to attend curriculum meetings and other advice sessions run by schools.</p> <p>Carers should keep in regular contact with schools, including going to parents' meetings or other school or community events. Carers should consider joining parent-teacher associations and participating in other aspects of school life, such as School Boards</p> <p>Where exclusion is unavoidable, carers should collaborate with the school to ensure that alternative options are explored. Where parents retain parental responsibility, they have the right of appeal against exclusion. Where the local authority has parental responsibility, it has the right of appeal. Young people with 'legal capacity' have the right of appeal against exclusion: <i>Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991</i>. Most young people of 12 years and over are deemed to have legal capacity. This may also apply to some younger children.</p> <p>All young people receive career education and participate in work experience. Looked after young people may require additional support and encouragement to access these services. Where non-attendance or exclusion is an issue, it is important to check that these opportunities have not been missed. Helpful career planning information is now available on the Internet, for example, at the Continuing Education Gateway site (www.ceg.org.uk) and career advisers can advise carers on suitable approaches for individual young people.</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How good are you at providing advocacy on behalf of young people to ensure that high priority is given to educational attainment in reviewing care plans? • How good are you at ensuring that schools hold accurate, up-to-date information about young people's legal status and their personal and contact details? • When children or young people need to change schools, how good are you at consulting with teachers about the most appropriate schools for them to attend? • How good are you at helping young people to understand how schools will treat confidential information, and the consequences of disclosing information about their home circumstances to teachers, so that they can make appropriate decisions? • How good are you at counselling and supporting children and young people with anxieties about school or other concerns which are affecting their ability to study? 	<p>In some residential units, one member of staff liaises with particular schools, which can help to develop good working relationships. Some young people prefer to have the same carer attend all meetings and in residential units ideally these commitments should be taken into account in drawing up staff shift rotas.</p> <p>Disruption to education, including changes of school, should be avoided wherever possible. Carers should be aware of the advantages of stability in this important area of the child's life, and should advocate on behalf of the young person at care planning and review meetings to ensure that education and schooling are given prominence in discussions. Where necessary, transport should be provided to maintain children and young people in their present schools.</p> <p>The <i>Learning with Care</i> report found that some young people were very anxious about attending Children's Hearings and that this could affect their concentration or behaviour in school. Others were anxious about family problems or about gaps in their own education.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How effectively do you consult and involve parents and other friends and relatives in educational aspects of their child's life, where this is appropriate? • How effectively do you advise schools on how to consult with, and involve parents in the educational aspects of their child's life? 	<p>Parents are usually interested in their child's educational progress and can be an important source of encouragement and support.</p> <p>School staff may need advice and sometimes help from carers with practical matters. This could include advice on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involving parents in correspondence, school reports, curriculum meetings; and - The implications for parental involvement with the school of overnight home visits or temporary placements.