

# A relational approach helps change teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of young people who are looked after

**David Woodier**

## **Abstract**

The inclusion of a young person who is looked after may<sup>1</sup> present teachers with a dilemma. Including a child who is looked after and acting out the effects of past maltreatment can mean that other pupils miss out. Helping teachers solve this dilemma may be the key to changing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Using practitioner enquiry, I examined my role as a teacher supporting three children who were looked after and at risk of exclusion. I used a reflective dialogue to support teaching staff in the implementation of a relational approach. Interviews with teachers and a teaching assistant revealed that they became more reflective in their practice and more confident in relating to children who were distressed. In addition, the skills teaching staff acquired readily transferred to support other pupils. These results suggest that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of young people who are looked after can improve when the skills they master to support individual children who have suffered maltreatment are shown to have a wider benefit.

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 children are looked after are defined as those in care of their local authority; young people, previously looked after, may also be referred to a care experienced. <https://beta.gov.scot/policies/looked-after-children/>

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## **Introduction**

Considerable attention has been drawn to the problem of school exclusions in Scotland and the difficulty of sustaining the inclusion in mainstream schools of young people who are looked after. Legislation alone seems unable to bring about sufficient change in the complex milieu in which educators find themselves (Pirrie, 2008). In addition, teachers may struggle to build relationships with children who are looked after and who are acting out the effects of being maltreated in the past.

In order to change teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, I facilitated a reflective dialogue with teaching staff in three primary schools. This focused on helping adults become more insightful about young people's behaviours and developing skills that would enable children to experience relational support. Teachers were able to see how this approach benefited other children.

This article is structured around the method of practitioner enquiry and begins by describing two critical incidents that helped me identify the challenge of changing teachers' attitudes towards including young people who are looked after. It reviews research literature and redefines the challenge as a set of objectives. Finally, it describes the implementation of the project, which took place during the 2015-16 academic year, and the interpretation of the observations. Young people were followed up with after six months. In the analysis of the critical incidents, I use a narrative framework similar to Farrell's Narrative Reflective Practice (2013).

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## **Critical incidents: Understanding teachers' attitudes to inclusion**

Someone in headquarters decided it would be good for morale if the heads of education, social work, and health met with some of us who work directly with young people who are looked after. One of the three visitors asked me, 'Why should my child's education suffer because the teacher has to deal with the behaviour of a young person who is looked after?'

My answer sounded unconvincing, 'If I could take you to some of my schools, you would see that schools that are the most inclusive are good for all young people'.

Later, I realised that his question expressed a concern shared by many educators. It represents a view that inclusion and achievement are often mutually exclusive (Florian, Black-Hawkins & Rouse, 2017). As I searched for what meaning and value this critical incident could have in practice, I realised that I had underestimated the importance of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Most teachers in Scotland do not have a choice about whether a young person who is looked after and whose behaviour is disruptive is educated in their classroom. Teachers may feel that this one pupil, however needy, is taking up much of their time to the detriment of others. For various reasons, the experience of inclusion may be an emotive one.

Research on teachers' views of inclusion of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) revealed that many teachers have negative attitudes (de Boer, Jan Pijl & Minnaert, 2011). This may be due in part to the

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frustration of trying to build relationships with them (Spilt, Koomen, Thijs & van der Leij, 2012).

Some researchers have investigated whether teachers' lack of knowledge is a significant barrier to inclusion (Florian, 2008). Other studies have found that teachers' attendance at inset days did not indicate a greater willingness to work with the pupils with SEBD (MacFarlane & Wolfson, 2013). Improving teachers' knowledge alone was not sufficient to overcome their negative attitudes.

Teachers' negative perceptions regarding inclusion of young people who are looked after may in part come from the sense of being caught up in a 'force field of competing priorities', where education is viewed 'as both a producer of human capital and a generator of social capital' (Pirie, 2008, p. 70). Teachers may feel that they are expected to help children attain their potential through acquiring knowledge and skills (human capital) and help children acquire values that increase their ability to learn and work together (social capital) while at the same time trying to help a child who is looked after and demanding of their attention.

The legislative framework in Scotland around inclusion has not resolved this dilemma for teachers. The right to exclude a pupil is permitted when a pupil's 'attendance at school is likely to be seriously detrimental to order and discipline in the school or the educational well-being of the pupils there' (Scottish Government, 2000). However, Scottish law also enshrines a child's right to be educated in a mainstream school as 'a presumption of mainstreaming' (Pirrie, 2008, p.66). This sense of being trapped between contradictory imperatives may only add to a teacher's sense of angst.

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Florian et al. (2017) suggest that a more nuanced and relational way of responding to difference is needed. They observed that schools that were both inclusive and high achieving had a different approach to the equity-excellence dilemma; they 'ensured equity by changing the conditions for all learners' (p.147) From their observations of teachers, they were able to define an inclusive pedagogy, which, rather than using specialist knowledge to differentiate for some, 'extended what was generally available to everybody' (p.27).

The dilemma implicit in the question in the critical incident helped me understand the need for a conceptualisation of inclusion that could demonstrate a wider benefit. As I planned my study, I realised that I would need to challenge teachers' attitudes by showing them the evidence from their own practice that inclusion could provide a better service to all their pupils.

The second critical incident demonstrated how inclusion can be transformative experience.

Paul (all young people's names have been changed in order to protect their identities) was 14 years old and had been signed up by his foster carer to go to summer camp. In my role as a group leader at the camp, I visited Paul's carer and it soon became apparent that she was under a lot of stress. She said, 'I told Paul if he gets sent home, I will put him in respite care. He has been excluded from school, and people have come to the house to say he is causing trouble in the community. His mum doesn't even want to see him'.

I met Paul as he stepped off the bus and introduced him to his group. He seemed to take an almost instant liking to his group leader, an easy-going and

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energetic young man. I noticed after a couple of days they were rarely apart.

However, Paul also bullied another boy. The leader of the camp wanted to send Paul home. 'It's not fair on others in the group. He is ruining their week', she said.

I asked for another chance. I took Paul aside. 'We are going to do everything we can not to send you home, but you have to stop bullying. You are going to spend the rest of the morning with me and help me clean the kitchens'.

After that Paul's behaviour was not perfect, but he stopped bullying. A couple of days before the end of the camp, I asked him about his birthday. 'I see you have a birthday when you get home. Will you do anything special?'

'No one has ever done anything for my birthday', he replied.

The next day, I was sitting at lunch on the table next to Paul. Without warning, the other young people came into the dining room and sang 'Happy Birthday'. Paul stood up as if he wanted to run away, but he couldn't. He was surrounded by the other campers.

A year later, we had a call from his foster carer. 'Paul looked through the camp brochure until he found the same group of leaders. He asked me to sign him up'. She added, 'It has been a much better year at home'.

I also noticed that Paul and some other young people who were similarly vulnerable had an effect on the adults at camp. Special effort was made to invite the young people to events during the year. A couple of the leaders made home visits, and the organisers of the camp were keen to invite Paul and others to the camps in the following years.

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When I first met Paul, he was like an outcast, unclaimed and unwanted. Being included in that camp was a transformative experience for Paul and the leaders who made that possible.

Despite the differences between camp and school, there are similar issues around inclusion. When the behaviour of a child who is looked after has a detrimental impact on others, exclusion may be seen as the only option. Children who are looked after and who act out the effects of maltreatment are often seen as detrimental to the cohesion of a group and adding nothing to the social capital side of the equation. At the heart of this calculation there seems to be something about how we value difference, or as Pirrie puts it 'there are unanswered questions about the relative power and values of different types of potential' (2008, p. 71). Could it be that Paul's presence at camp could enhance the experience of others?

Florian et al. (2017) highlight the importance of relationships in schools that effectively support high levels of inclusion and achievement. They propose that those relationships are shaped by the values and beliefs of teaching staff.

At camp the values and beliefs of the leaders were underpinned by the importance of relationships. Leaders were selected and trained with these values in mind. By seeing how Paul's situation at camp was resolved, our values were strengthened. We came to camp with perhaps an idealistic notion that the experience would be good for young people like Paul. It was only when those beliefs were challenged and had to be acted on that they became proven values. Those kinds of experiences taught us that having young people with diverse needs does not present us with unresolvable dilemmas. We grew not only in our

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convictions but in our sense of agency. We learned that we could work together to accomplish something of value. Paul needed a group of people with diverse experiences and skills. It is perhaps only when we express those kinds of social values and skills that we realise our potential social capital, 'we define who we are, what we do, and why we do it' (Falk, 18 October 2000, para.2).

The other campers experienced relationships with adult leaders who they could see were deeply committed to making camp work for all young people, even the most vulnerable. After camp one young person told me that she enjoyed camp, because the leaders made an effort to ensure all the young people felt that they belonged there. Including Paul and some other vulnerable young people communicated a message about the purpose of camp and the value of all young people.

This critical incident motivated me to consider how I could help teachers think differently about inclusion. I realised that the experience of successfully including a young person, a turning point experience, might be a powerful motivator for teachers. I realised that teachers would need to master a different kind of approach and set of skills in order to overcome the difficulties of providing relational support to young people who were looked after.

## **Practitioner enquiry as a driver of inclusive practice**

Practitioner enquiry has been defined as 'a form of self-reflective enquiry by participants, undertaken in order to improve understanding of the practices in context with a view to maximizing social justice' (Carrs & Kemmis as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrision, 2011, p. 345). The General Teaching Council for

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Scotland <sup>2</sup>(GTCS) envisage practitioner enquiry becoming an integral aspect of practice that will enable teachers to question beliefs and assumptions with a view to driving systemic change (GTCS, 2018c).

In order to understand the behaviours of young people who were looked after and had suffered maltreatment in the past, we needed to learn to adopt an enquiring stance from which we could rigorously question our assumptions (Hart, 2012). Practitioner enquiry seemed to offer a fitting way to examine alternative explanations for difficulties the teacher or young person might experience.

The process of enquiry in this study mirrored the one recommended by GTCS (GTCS, 2018b) and was similar to the method described by Cohen et al. (2011, pp. 354-356). In order to ensure rigour in this kind of qualitative enquiry, I implemented some 'verification strategies', for example, 'appropriate sampling' and 'thinking theoretically', as suggested by Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers (2002, p.18).

## **Thinking theoretically: reconnaissance of the research literature**

Children who are looked after come to school having suffered maltreatment often in the most important, formative early years of their lives. This kind of interpersonal trauma has been frequently observed in victims of childhood abuse

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gtcs.org.uk>

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and neglect (Arvidson, Kinniburgh, Howard, Spinazzola, Strothers, Evans, Andres, Cohen and Blaustein, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2015).

Each of the three children in my study had experienced maltreatment and this affected their ability to cope with various aspects of school life. For example, David, nine years old, had suffered emotional abuse after the death of his mother. In class, he refused to work and would run out of class when challenged. His foster care placement had disrupted over the summer, and he was living with temporary carers. Damien, six years old, was also living with temporary foster carers. Teachers reported that he did not like getting things wrong, his behaviour was quick to escalate, and his peers often felt threatened. He spent most of the school day in the deputy head teacher's office. Lewis, 12 years old, had witnessed domestic violence. He was anxious about his transition to secondary school and had threatened to harm himself.

Relationships between teachers and children who suffer from interpersonal trauma are often characterised by conflict and teachers may respond by becoming less sensitive and more controlling in their relationships with children (Spilt et al., 2012). One of the purposes of my reflective dialogue with the teachers was to help them understand the effects of interpersonal trauma and disrupted attachments (Virmani & Ontai, 2010). A key component involved helping teachers interpret behaviour in terms of the child's underlying intentional mental states such as beliefs, feelings, and goals. This kind of imaginative mental activity is referred to as mentalization (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 2018). Bevington, Fuggle, Fonagy, Target, and Asen have found that 'well-functioning (accurate) mentalizing in individuals or families makes for improved relationships' (2013, p.7). Similarly, a dyadic intervention

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that engaged teachers in relationship-focused reflection improved teacher sensitivity and changed how teachers responded to disruptive behaviours (Spilt et al., 2012).

The relational approach draws on some other therapeutic practices derived from the theories of intersubjectivity, attachment and mentalization (Hughes, 2006; Bick & Dozier, 2013; Bevington et al. 2013). These practices have been used to help teachers support children with attachment difficulties (Bomber, 2007; Geddes, 2006).

Some studies have found that, 'a close, supportive relationship with a teacher is a key feature distinguishing at-risk children and adolescents who succeed in school from those who do not' (Pianta, Hamre & Allen; 2012, p. 370). In addition, it is not only children who are at-risk that benefit from improved relationships. A review of research into relationships between students and teachers found that improving student-teacher relationships had positive and long-lasting implications for young people's social and academic development (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, n.d.).

Aspelin notes that a key attribute in developing such a relational stance is the teacher's ability to understand the perspective of the young person (Aspelin, 2014, p. 240). However, this kind of insightfulness immediately poses difficulties for many children who have suffered maltreatment. It may be experienced by the young person as intrusive (Geddes, 2006). Building relationships with children who have suffered interpersonal trauma needs sensitivity and persistence.

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The relational approach mirrors the kinds of interactions that are part of most children's early attachment experiences; it depends on an adult developing the capacity to read the child's behaviours as communicative cues. Bomber (2007) describes 'attending to the child' as the first of a series of strategies designed to help the child experience a relationship in which they feel safe and secure.

Some of the other interpersonal skills described by Bomber (2007), such as Wondering Aloud build on this key capacity to read the significance of the child's behaviours. The process of noticing a change in the child's behaviour, describing that change to the child and then making a tentative remark as to what this behaviour communicates allows the child to experience self-awareness and the opportunity to co-regulate their internal states (Van der Kolk, 2015).

Within the relational approach, the teacher also learns to gently challenge a child's internal working models, not by retracing past experiences but by working with the here and now. Mary Dozier describes the gentle challenge as being able to respond to a child who has not learned to signal their need to an adult. When done with sensitivity, it can challenge a child's distorted worldview (Dozier & Bates, 2004; Woodier, 2017).

The relational approach also draws on the experience of other therapeutic approaches. The framework of Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy, PACE, was developed through the work of re-parenting an adopted child (Hughes, 2006). It can help teachers think about their communication with young people, who may be easily overwhelmed by shame (Phillips & Melim, 2014). Swarbrick suggests that it 'should be central to the skill sets for all adults

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working with children with severe social, emotional, and attachment difficulties' (2017, p.223).

Teachers' capacity to offer relational support may critically depend on their experience of being part of a network of supportive relationships (Bevington et al., 2013; Valle, Massaro, Castelli, Sangiuliano Intra, Lombardi, Bracaglia and Marchetti, 2016). The relational approach, therefore, as well as having its focus on the adult-child relationship should also consider how to support the key adult(s) and help them sustain an open, sensitive, and engaged stance.

Creating a sense of collaboration and partnership may also be vital to engaging teachers in a more reflective type of work. I used a framework for reflective dialogue similar to Hawkins' and Shohet's CLEAR model (as cited by Black, Bettencourt & Cameron, 2017). It typically begins with the teacher communicating a specific challenge, involves facilitated listening and exploration of the challenge, and results in some kind of action, and finally reviews the results of the action. This kind of reflective supervision has been shown to improve the capacity for insight among workers in children's services (Roberts, 2017).

CLEAR also allowed me to model qualities such as curiosity and empathy in my interaction with teachers. I was hopeful that if the teaching staff in this study were given a 'safe space' they would be able to develop their capacity to mentalize and empathise with the young people.

I also believe that a relational approach is an example of what Florian et al. (2017) describe as an inclusive pedagogy. I wanted to help teachers to think about individual differences not as something that would use up valuable

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resources but as an opportunity to develop ways of interacting with pupils that could have a wider benefit.

However, I was aware that a more inclusive approach might create some challenges for head teachers as well as classroom teachers. One head teacher told me that parents had complained that their child's learning was being held back by the behaviour of the child who was looked after. Another teacher felt that she was being criticised by some of her colleagues for not taking a more punitive approach. I wondered what style of leadership and culture within schools would be required in order to support a relational approach.

Rather than listing a set of characteristics of inclusive schools, Florian et al. suggest that 'a more nuanced and relational way of considering how schools can respond to difference is needed' (2017, p. 27). From their studies of experienced teachers who were able to sustain a commitment to inclusive education without neglecting the pressure to raise academic achievement levels, they defined an inclusive pedagogy as 'an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners'. In addition, Florian et al. observed from detailed analysis of case studies that: 'It is the values and beliefs that shape the culture of the school and the nature of the relationships among its members that are at the heart of practices that encourage both high level of inclusion and achievement' (2017, p. 145).

Given the level of difficulties each of the young people in my study were presenting, I anticipated that teachers would need to feel that they were supported and trusted by their line managers and colleagues. Having 'high ideals' about social justice would not be enough and values and beliefs would

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need to become sustained courses of action within the school and not just in the individual classrooms.

## **Objectives defined**

Having identified specific challenges related to my professional practice: to change teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and to help teachers resolve the sense of dilemma associated with supporting a young person who is looked after, I generated a set of research questions that act as a segue into the planning and implementation phase (GTCS, 2018b).

1. Can a relational approach help teachers become more insightful about the behaviour of children who are looked after?
2. Do the skills and qualities teachers acquire when mastering a relational approach enhance what is generally available to all pupils?
3. Will the experience of being able to successfully support a child who is looked after change teachers' attitudes towards inclusion?

## **Planning for implementation**

The ethical considerations of practitioner enquiry are complicated because the researcher is intimately involved within the field being researched: 'This close relationship with participants may upset application of the four conventional ethical considerations – harm, consent, withdrawal, and confidentiality' (White, Connell, French, Hines, Stevenson, Stones, Sutton & Waltham, 2014).

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In order to make these ethical considerations an integral part of my planning, I used the protocol compiled by the Carnegie Faculty Research Ethics Committee and framed it as a series of questions (White et al. 2014). The first is based on the need to consider if the work is beneficent, and in that regard, it must be clearly linked to teachers' professional standards. For teachers in Scotland, these standards are defined by the GTCS (2018a).

1. Is the practice educational? Can I make a presumption of beneficence based on the educational value of the work with young people?

As part of the process by which schools in my local education authority make requests for assistance, I met with each of the head teachers represented in this study. For example, Lewis' head teacher, requested assistance because Lewis was anxious about his transition to the secondary school. However, Lewis stated that he did not want to appear singled out from the rest of his class. We decided to introduce me as someone who would be working with groups of children in order to listen to their concerns and answer questions about the move to secondary school.

The work was conducted in such a way as to, 'provide and ensure a safe and secure environment for all learners within a caring and compassionate ethos and with an understanding of wellbeing' (GTCS, 2012, p. 6). The work with Lewis and the other children was not planned for the purpose of my research. My aim was to enquire into what was being practised not to practise what I wanted to research.

2. Was there differentiation and could this cause harm in to young people involved?

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The only differentiation derived from the needs of the young people who were looked after and not from the study itself. For example, two of the children had been assigned teaching assistants under the additional support for learning framework and Getting it Right for Every Child<sup>3</sup>(Scottish Government, n.d.). There was no experimental treatment or control group in this study; the interaction with young people and teaching staff was essentially the same as that carried out in my day-to-day practice.

3. Does the study create a power asymmetry? Do participants feel pressured to give consent or comply with the requirements of the study?

The question of power asymmetry is relevant to my study. The feedback from the teaching staff formed an important source of information; I was aware that staff might be less candid for fear that I would be judging their competence. I anticipated that effective collaboration would take time to develop: 'time and space for thinking and decision-making are prerequisites' for counteracting any undue pressure or influence being placed on participants (White et al. 2014, para.16).

I began by explaining my role: 'I am not here to evaluate your teaching. I am here to help you understand this young person's behaviours. The notes I take are to help me think about the young person.' As teachers became accustomed to this manner of child-focused, reflective dialogue, they seemed to look forward to our meetings.

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<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/what-is-girfec>)

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4. Participants have a say in how they are presented even in studies where their identity is anonymised.

Florian et al. recommend that the process of research should be intentionally inclusive taking account of the views of the participants (2017). In order to conduct my study in a way that would not marginalize young people who are looked after, I sought the advice of a group of young people between the ages of 16 and 20, who were care experienced. I listened to their advice on how they wanted me to portray children who are looked after: I kept the details about past experiences of maltreatment to a minimum while at the same time showing how the children's behaviours were also linked to these experiences of severe adversity. The idea of a relational approach in the classroom also seemed to resonate with some of their experiences; one of the young men told me in some detail about a teacher in primary school who had reached out to him.

## **Implementation of the study**

At the beginning of the 2015-16 academic year, I responded to Requests for Assistance from five primary schools. Head teachers from three of the schools indicated that they were able to allow teaching staff to meet with me on a weekly or fortnightly basis. I selected these schools for the study; all highlighted that the children were having difficulty sustaining learning in mainstream classrooms.

I facilitated a relationship-focused, reflective dialogue with two teachers and one teaching assistant. The aim of the reflective dialogue was to help adults relate to children who felt vulnerable in relationships, were easily shamed, and who had

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difficulty with self-regulation. I trained teaching staff in the application of a relational approach that included learning skills, such as Attending to the Child, Wondering Aloud, the Gentle Challenge, and PACE. The meetings with teaching staff in two of the schools took place over a ten-month period. In the third school, the length of time was reduced to three months, because the teacher reported that the child was no longer at significant risk of being excluded.

I met at least once a term, with the head teachers in each school in order to discuss the progress of the work. This also allowed me to corroborate the information teaching staff were giving on the progress of children.

I used a journal to record direct observations of the children, as well as comments made by the teaching staff during our meetings. At the end of the school year teaching staff completed semi-structured interviews that allowed them to report on the efficacy of the skills they had learned. Six to 12 months after the end of the project, I contacted teachers and social workers to ascertain the progress of each pupil.

## **Interpretation of the observations**

In all three schools, there was a reported increase in the amount of time the children were being educated with their peers. Lewis was no longer being excluded from school, and Damien was no longer spending periods of time in the depute head teacher's office. Teachers also seemed to grow in confidence.

Damien's teacher observed:

Wondering Aloud has given him the opportunity to see that his emotions are not wrong. Before, my whole focus was on trying to

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prevent him from having any meltdowns. If he has a meltdown

now, I am more confident that I can help him.

Some of the improvement in the behaviours of the children may have been as a result of teachers' improved confidence and more positive outlook.

I also observed some changes in the quality of interactions between the key adults and the children. When I first observed David, he seemed to act as if the teaching assistant (TA) was not there: 'He made no eye contact with his TA, didn't respond to her when she spoke to him, ran off several times to try and get help'.

In contrast, several months later I recorded this conversation in my notes:

David blurted out in a queue of children, 'I am going to court'.

TA spoke to him later: 'You said something that surprised me when you were in the queue, "I am going to court". I am wondering if you have been worrying about that?'

David replied: 'Yes'.

TA commented: 'No wonder you have been upset. Would you like me to find out more about going to court?'

David replied: 'Yes'.

When I first observed David, I do not think he viewed his TA as someone who could reassure him when he felt sad or anxious. The TA's way of expressing

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curiosity about his inner life was developed by using the qualities of curiosity and acceptance from the PACE approach.

An important component of the relational approach appears to have been the ability of the teaching staff to question their assumptions and become more insightful about how behaviour related to underlying thoughts and feelings. This seems to have allowed them to respond with greater sensitivity. One teacher reported;

I have learned to make fewer assumptions about the behaviour of other children in my class. I used to think some behaviours were because a child was spoiled at home. I have learned they may have real issues and need my help.

When asked what had made the most difference in supporting Damien, his teacher replied:

I have learned to show empathy. I say things like, 'If I thought so and so had done that, I would have been upset'. When I match the intensity of his emotions, he is able to calm down more quickly. Previously, I would have just told him to calm down but that didn't work.

Teachers' comments also indicated that they were able to take a more reflective stance: 'I have been teaching for fourteen years. Damien has helped me more than any other child to think about my teaching'. I suspect that the improvement in their reflective capacity, depended in part on teachers and teaching assistants having a regular time and space set aside for reflective

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dialogue. Modelling the qualities of PACE in our dialogue, probably helped teaching staff develop a more reflective stance.

In applying this kind of relational approach and inclusive pedagogy, staff needed reassurance that they would not be judged negatively by their line managers if some aspect of work was not going well. I also think they needed to see head teachers taking action to support the rights of their pupils. After a particularly difficult week for David, his head teacher said, 'He needs the kind of relationships he has here. He will not have those kinds of relationships if he goes to a special school. I am not going to exclude him'. My notes also recorded, 'She said she had spoken to the teaching assistants to explain that his hitting another vulnerable child was more about his own sadness and not just being bad'.

As part of the work in preparing Lewis' class for their transition to their secondary school, I worked with small groups of his peers. I asked them about their experiences of primary school, the relationships in their class, and their relationships to their teacher. They all acknowledged their learning had been held back to some extent by some of their classmates' disruptive behaviours. However, they all had something positive to say about their school: 'The work we produce is good and the staff are really friendly'. They all rated the relationships in their class as a 4 or 5 out of 5. One of the group commented on how her teacher had handled pupils' behaviour problems: 'She is good at it because she will sit down and have a chat with them and calm them down'.

During the weeks I spent with Lewis' classmates, I noticed how much they respected their teacher. In our small groups, many of them identified how they would miss her with their move to secondary school. I noticed also that when

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they told me about what they had accomplished, they communicated not only a sense of their pride but also a willingness to engage with learning. The children's comments seem to highlight the importance they placed on their relationships and the way that positive relationships can support learning.

It is not possible to say definitively that my support helped Lewis' teacher develop a more relational approach. However, the young people's comments seem to support Florian's et al. (2017) proposition that a teacher's ability to act relationally may be significant in developing a more inclusive pedagogy. The responses of Lewis' peers reminded me of the way that Paul and other young people viewed their experience at camp. They felt they 'belonged' there. How we, as teachers, respond to the most vulnerable pupils may signify something about how we value all young people.

The teachers and the TA in my study, reported that they had been able to use the relational approach to support other children. One teacher remarked:

One of my pupils was playing up for another teacher. I used Wondering Aloud, and I gave him some different options for what might be upsetting him. If I hadn't used this approach, he would never have told me what was wrong.

Damien's depute head teacher commented, 'We are rolling out some of these things across the school. Damien has raised the profile of how we handle emotions'.

The TA, who worked so hard to reach out to David, wrote this comment at the end of the year:

I have been able to transfer the skills I have learned to help other children. For example, I noticed a change in another child's behaviour. He was getting upset and walking out of class. I used Wondering Aloud. I said I had noticed that he was spending a lot of time on his own and that he was distracted easily. I tentatively asked him if the class was too loud or maybe he had a lot on his mind. He said there was too much noise and that it was hard to concentrate. I tried to empathize with him. Later, this child told me he was worried about something happening at home.

## **Follow-up**

I did not interview the children in my study who were looked after. They were struggling with too much uncertainty in their lives; I felt that my intentions might have been misunderstood. Over the summer, two of the three were moved to different carers. Lewis ended up moving to a different local authority and a different secondary school. However, I was able to follow up six months later with two of the young people. Lewis' pupil support teacher reported that there had been no major difficulties, and he was enjoying playing football in the first-year team. Damien's head teacher reported that he was in his class full-time and that his behaviours were a lot less challenging.

## **Conclusions: limitations and future research**

The measure of improvement in the schools was based on the reports of pupils and teachers. The conclusions I make about the impact of the changes in the

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relationships between pupils and teaching staff would be stronger, if I could also show how this relates more directly to pupil achievement.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the purpose of this study was not to test the efficacy of some of the strategies such as Wondering Aloud and PACE. There is a need for more rigorous studies of these kinds of therapeutic approaches in the classroom (Bath, 2017), and it would be naïve to believe that the application of a strategy alone could improve the behaviour of young people who have suffered severe adversity. In my opinion, there is no 'silver bullet' to building trust and relationships, nor is there a panacea that addresses the complex needs of young people who are looked after and have suffered maltreatment.

Despite these limitations, there is some evidence that teaching staff in this study were able to develop the skills and qualities that allowed their pupils to experience relationships in a different way, I think it is important to recognise that this kind of inclusive approach required a more collaborative way of working. As Bevington et al. observe, 'the capacity to mentalize is a core team task' (2013, p. 7). The kind of support that teaching staff needed in order to think and act more reflectively and to become more insightful about young people's behaviours required ongoing, relationship-focused, reflective dialogue and supportive leadership that protected the rights of the most vulnerable.

Understanding more about how head teachers create an ethos that supports a relational approach, could be very valuable to improving the inclusion of young people who are looked after.

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This study shows that teachers' attitudes to inclusion can become more positive when they experience the successful application of a relational approach. This kind of success may allow teachers to see wider benefits of inclusion. Instead of seeing support for young people who are looked after as talking up valuable resources, the process of learning how to relate to young people can strengthen shared values, bring to life expertise, and define more clearly our purpose as educators. This study reinforced my belief that schools that are inclusive can be excellent, because the skills and qualities teaching staff acquire can enhance what is generally available to all.

### **About the author:**

David's interest in teaching began in a gym in the inner city of Chicago in 1987. New to America, with no idea how to coach basketball let alone manage the behaviour of some 40 boys from one of Chicago's toughest neighbourhoods, he had to learn fast.

His passion to include young people from diverse backgrounds took him to the University of Illinois in 1994 to study Special Education. After graduating, he taught in two Chicago schools.

Twelve years ago, David came to Glasgow and taught in a primary school in an area of deprivation in Glasgow and then in a residential school. For the past nine years, he has been supporting the inclusion of young people who are looked after and in mainstream schools.

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