

Scotland's Looked After Children: best educated in class, or do they need a 'Hole in the Wall'?

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Abstract

How can looked after children with special educational needs be supported outside the school day? Research suggests a significantly high proportion of looked after children have special educational needs. This piece briefly explores my own educational experiences in the 1950s and '60s with reference to my recent discovery of the apparent benefits of peer supported, 'unsupervised' learning in the 'hole in the wall' experiment in the slums of Kalkaji, New Delhi, initiated by Sugata Mitra, Chief Scientist at NIIT, in 1982.

Keywords

Peer Support, residential care.

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This piece is written at a time when education is decades beyond my own educational journey during my time in care in the 1950s and '60s, but outcomes for looked after children suggest that education needs to move on still further to cater for the unique needs of those looked after in residential care. In 2014 around 40% of children in care without a special educational need achieved 5 or more GCSEs. Only 11.7% with a special educational need did so (Morse 2014, p.27). Add to this statistic that 68% of children in care in England have a special educational need (compared with 19% of the general school age population), the scale of the problem becomes apparent. Children looked after in Scotland, however, classify under the provision for additional support needs since 2009 through the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009. The focus on the diverse needs of children places Scotland ahead on considering the 'welfare of [the] child [as] paramount' (Children (Scotland) Act 1995, Part II, 16(1)) for Scotland's looked after children.

Children in residential care need opportunities to learn outside the classroom, freedom to take appropriate risks, and support to learn from their experiences, the good and the not-so-good. This will build their desire and capacity to learn, as well as instilling self-confidence and the belief that they can learn. This is crucial, as self-confidence is often lacking among children in care. Being in residential care is a statement that you are different – it certainly was for me. You have somehow failed: you have no family, no one at Christmas, no one on your birthday. You have no support network, no one to cheer you on. It never goes away. This makes overcoming educational setbacks so much more difficult. It is no wonder that children in care often look for a 'hole in the wall'; somewhere or something that will help them escape these feelings. The

importance of finding ways to help these vulnerable children acquire the confidence and passion to learn, and helping them to find a safe escape, cannot be underestimated.

Until I took the English 11-Plus I was almost blissfully unaware of my educational shortcomings. At school we sat in segregated rows, with the brightest and best on my far right, with me diagonally opposite in the far left corner, like the dunce's corner. But this didn't really bother me, because I could understand much of the work given to the brightest tier and in fact I found it more interesting than my own basic mundane work. I found my inability to read or express myself through the written word incredibly frustrating, but I didn't consider it a reflection on my ability. Failing the 11-Plus brought my educational shortcomings home to me with a bang and was a severe emotional set-back that was difficult to recover from. It still haunts me today. It would have been easy to give up.

In some ways I was lucky, because growing up in the '50s and '60s I had more freedom and independence than children do now, and I found solace on local coal slag heaps. I would play on them, running down the scree as I did later down the screes of Great Gable during the Vaux Mountain Trials in the 70s; they became my 'hole in the wall' where I escaped the frustrations of the classroom. At the time of my 11-Plus I had the freedom to do this but it would be frowned upon (if not impossible) today! The slag heaps provided a wealth of opportunities to link what I liked to do outside of school to what I learned inside it. It was a different way of learning, a way that worked for me. When I later found myself in a geography class in secondary school learning about fossils and

minerals, with links to coal and even a local Roman copper mine, I knew I wanted to be a geologist. Well, the teacher was inspiring, encouraging and kind.

To add to my forays onto the coal slag heaps, I now found myself cycling to Alderley Edge, south of Manchester, to explore the open workings of Engine Vein, an abandoned Roman copper mine dating as far back as the Bronze Age; no more than a gash in the earth now, but what an adventure for a boy of 13 or 14! With the aid of an old torch I found fragments of malachite and other minerals, which the teacher appreciated. I was buoyed with such encouragement that I moved on to fossils, splitting the poor quality coal and shale deposits on the slag heaps to uncover the treasures they might hold. One fossil of a fish scale was considered by the Manchester Museum as an important find, and should still be in its archives today!

However, I was soon to face another 'severe' setback. Despite the support of my geography teacher, the school refused to allow me to sit my O-Level in Geography, citing my poor grasp of written English and writing skills. I remember I was devastated, truly devastated, and it damaged my desire to learn for many years. But my experience of taking learning into my own domain had showed me I could learn.

Supporting children in care to learn experientially doesn't need to be difficult, and doesn't need to include risky visits to disused and dangerous Roman copper mines and slag heaps! Peer learning and support can be useful ways of getting those in care to take responsibility for their learning and build their self-confidence and self-worth.

Peer support certainly helped me: I remember once, an older girl helping me with my reading and homework when I made a muddle of it and became angry and frustrated. She had more time to spend with me than the teacher, and I felt much more comfortable working with her because we were both 'in care'. It was better than asking the teacher for help.

The power and possibilities of peer learning have been highlighted by Sugata Mitra's 'hole in the wall' experiment in the slum of Kalkaji, New Delhi. With no instruction, children taught themselves and each other to read, to use the computer set in a wall in the slum district, download programmes and surf the internet with little or no adult contact.

Encouraging children in care homes to support one another with homework is one way of getting a system of peer support in place. Other ways of helping children to learn from experience are explored in my article in the September 2016 issue (Lee 2016)

Ensuring that learning needs are diagnosed early and that appropriate support is in place is also vital; when I was diagnosed with severe dyslexia in my late 40s it was like a new start. Finally, I had an answer! With the aid of computers and other technologies I went on to complete a number of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, buoyed with confidence from my years of independent learning.

There are no limits on what can be achieved with early support in education, but it has to be the same for all, both for looked after children in Scotland and their not-looked-after counterparts.

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About the author

Alan, Paul Lee is the co-author of 'Positive Images – Positive Effect' and author of 'The Pocket Facilitators Handbook'. He spent 12 years in the British Army as a physical training/outdoor activities instructor. After leaving the army Alan worked at senior management level in special residential schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, during which time he gave an oral submission to the Children's Safeguards Review (Utting, 1997) concerning the challenges faced by senior staff to safeguard children in English special residential schools and the 'hidden agenda' involving the use of power, control and restraint. Alan campaigns against the use of restraint on children, particularly those looked after or in residential care.

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