

Making a Difference: Enhancing Care Experiences and Post-Care outcomes in Scotland with the Development of a 'Growth Mindset'

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Abstract

It is suggested developing a growth mindset for education and learning at the earliest opportunity combined with the added 'Plus' benefits of a comprehensive, sustained programme of experiential learning activities can only improve the potential for care leavers to thrive as content, responsible, involved contributors to Scotland's future

Keywords

Growth mindset, experiential learning

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Preparing looked after children for a successful, happy and fulfilled life after care requires a holistic response and schools must play a key role. Without a sound education and the tools to thrive (Utting, 1997; Slater, 2014; Scottish Government, 2008) they are destined for an unfulfilled life. Whilst outcomes are improving for looked after children, they are still significantly worse than outcomes for non-looked after children: in 2013/14 just 40% of looked after school leavers achieved one or more SCQF qualifications at level 5 or better, compared with 80% of the general population (Scottish Government, 2015) and for looked after children living in residential care, just 5% achieved an SCQF qualification at level 5 or better (Scottish Government, 2015).

However, improved educational outcomes on their own are not enough, particularly for those children in residential accommodation (See Duncalf, 2010). The difficulties young adults leaving care face are well documented (Utting,

1997; Slater, 2014; Scottish Government, 2008) and without emotional resilience, care leavers will remain overly dependent on support, to a greater or lesser extent, for most of their adult lives.

How can we prepare children in care for a life beyond care? How can we prepare care leavers for the challenges independent living without ongoing dependency? Several authors (Edgar, 2014; Duncalf, 2010; Rintoul, 2005) focus on education, including supporting the development of mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing. In addition, children's emotional resilience and sense of self-determination needs to be fostered. Rutter's (1990) research emphasises the importance of empowerment; children with positive feelings of self-esteem, mastery and control can more easily manage stressful experiences. In other words, children, particularly those in care, need to believe that they have the power to change their lives and have the skills to do it.

This article argues that such empowerment can be achieved through teaching the 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006), delivered through an experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning can be thought of as the process of learning through doing and reflection on that doing. It is proposed that this approach will have the greatest impact if it is delivered from a young age to give looked after children the foundations for a successful school career and a life of independence. In contrast with other approaches, such as the rights and responsibilities model or targeted interventions, this approach is non-confrontational. This is important because a confrontational approach can severely damage looked-after children's educational experience and emotional wellbeing due to the potentially 'hurtful effect of making mistakes at a time when those looked after are particularly vulnerable or fragile' (Halliwell & Richardson, 2009, p. 34).

Dweck found that people fall into two broad categories: those with a fixed mindset and those with a growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe that their educational characteristics, like intelligence or capacity for hard work, are unmoveable traits. They have limited belief in their ability to change; it is a 'you've got what you're born with and can't change it' attitude. On the other hand, those with a growth mindset believe that they can change these characteristics (and their related behaviour and abilities). The following table outlines some of the characteristics of each mindset:

Fixed mindset	Growth mindset
Believes intelligence is fixed	Believes intelligence can grow
Avoids challenge	Embraces challenge
Gives up easily	Motivated to overcome setbacks
Resists feedback	Accepts/considers feedback
Threatened by the success of others	Inspired by others

Dweck's research demonstrates that we can change our mindset and that a growth mindset can be taught.

In practice the experiential learning approach requires pupils to leave their comfort zone, to take the risk of 'getting it wrong' and to overcome their fear of failure (Jackson, 2010; Halliwell, & Richardson, 2009), particularly in an educational or residential setting. Experiential learning provides a positive vehicle for growth, a 'Plus' in that it not only serves the aims of the curriculum content but opens pupils' minds to what can and has been achieved, and how they can build upon those achievements. It also focuses pupils' minds on how to use mistakes to enhance learning. I have found in my work that the activities suggested below (and others suggested in Positive Images – Positive Effect, 2008) will form the basis of a 'Growth Mindset – Plus' experiential learning.

For example, through experiential learning pupils make a transition from relying solely on the teacher to regulate behaviour and subsequent learning to relying on each other and the teacher. This has a 'Plus' effect because pupils become empowered and responsible for the actions and inactions. For young people in care, empowerment is a vital component for being responsible for their actions or inactions which can improve their positive contribution to society in later years.

A combination of developing a 'Growth Mindset' in primary school in concert with short, fun, creative thinking and problem-solving, experiential-learning activities, has the potential to reduce the institutional effects for looked-after children, particularly those looked after in residential care, with better outcomes for care leavers. For example, this combination promotes enthusiasm for learning, empowerment through experiences of self-agency, capacity for self-direction and a sense of responsibility to others.

The activities used need to be selected carefully because they require a sensitivity to the needs of looked-after children, recognising that some activities, such as the 'trust fall' (Rohnke, 1984) will not be suitable for those whose feelings of vulnerability are so strong that the level of trust necessary for this activity is beyond their capacity at that time. Activities should also be exciting, purposeful and with multiple solutions so that they capture the imagination of all involved. Examples of activities that provide the 'Plus' benefits are illustrated below; this is not a definitive list but examples of the types of experiential learning activities for 'Growth Mindset – Plus' development:

- 'TP Shuffle' (Rohnke, 1984, p. 110): participants stand on a horizontal log or plank and rearrange themselves without stepping off, in (for instance) height order. Rope, cord or chalk can also be used as an alternative. Similar activities by Lee & Bishop (2008, pp.42-43) provide further variations.
- 'The Bus' (Cains & Smith, 2002, p.74): two lines are drawn on the floor, with one side of the line symbolising a bus. Participants 'alight the bus' (cross the line) if they like a certain thing (e.g. cats, dogs) or have had a particular experience (ridden a roller coaster or felt confused about school work). The group is then asked to look around to see who shares their preferences and/or experiences during each 'bus stop', providing the opportunity to make comparisons. (This activity is illustrated to dramatic effect in the film 'Freedom Writers', directed by Richard LaGravenese and released in 2007).

Experiential activities can provide a great way to review life experiences and share ideas and feelings. For example, with a little imagination and sensitivity, the issues and experiences of looked after children (as well as their non-looked after counterparts), could be explored using this simple yet effective tool in a class or group setting.

Realising the potential of any experiential learning activity to develop children's growth mindsets is the structured review. Themed paper slips are a good way of doing this and support participants to reflect on what was achieved, how they achieved it, and what they learned about themselves; this is done through short statements which they can either select from pre-written cards or write themselves (Hunt & Hitchin, 1986).

Statements can fall into different categories:

- Personal statements such as 'I like to help solve problems', 'I am a good listener', 'I like to make others laugh';
- Looking back statements such as 'The idea I liked best was...', 'Good things about working with the group are...', 'Something I achieved today was...';

- Looking forward statements such as 'People can help me during the next activity by...', 'I know we can do better if we...', 'I want to use what I have learnt from past activities by...'. (Lee, 2013, pp. 67-74). These statements use the same structure as the looking back statements, but are intended to support the transfer of experience into learning.

Participants give the feedback either to the group or to a learning partner. This process empowers participants because it encourages choice of partner, giving and receiving 'kind' feedback and sharing ideas and feelings with personal growth in mind.

This method of facilitation is none intrusive, adaptable to medium and small groups and easy to facilitate. These and other ideas and templates are contained in 'The Pocket Facilitators Handbook (Lee, 2013) downloadable FREE from <http://www.positiveimages-positiveeffect.com>.

Conclusion

Preparation for a successful and worthwhile life beyond care should be the paramount consideration from the outset of a child being looked-after. The introduction of corporate parenting is an important step forward. Improving care experiences by improving knowledge-based training and service delivery, coupled with a clear commitment to improve the outcomes for looked-after children will go a long way to improving after-care outcomes. But, and it is a big but, without emotional resilience and the mental tools to thrive, after-care will remain reliant on others.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime (Moshe ben Maimon, 1135 - 1204).

It is suggested developing a growth mindset for education and learning at the earliest opportunity combined with the added 'Plus' benefits of a comprehensive, sustained programme of experiential learning activities can only improve the potential for care leavers to thrive as content, responsible, involved contributors to Scotland's future.

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Alan, Paul Lee is the co-author of 'Positive Images – Positive Effect' and author of 'The Pocket Facilitators Handbook'. He spent 14 years in residential care, before joining the British Army as a physical training/outdoor activities instructor for 12 years. After leaving the army Alan, Paul Lee 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. Alan, Paul Lee is an anti-restraint campaigner in this area.

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