Bridging the divide between education and social work in order to improve the prospects of looked after children.

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Abstract

In the same period that British researchers have revealed a lack of effort to promote looked after children's ability to cope with academic challenges, extensive and efficient methodologies have been worked out within the field of education. The first part of this article presents some of the research findings on the child welfare system. The second part describes relevant educational methodologies. The concluding section proposes that the methods described in Part Two should be implemented in the field of child welfare. Educational failure predicts both problems in care placement and severe social problems later in life. Despite improvement in the child welfare system in recent years, looked after children are still at high risk of educational failure. Effective educational methodologies exist, but are seldom applied by child welfare professionals. The author argues that the spectrum of tasks in social work should be enlarged. The social worker's competence and responsibility should include promoting looked after children's cognitive development and educational achievement.

Keywords

Nativism, educational achievement, looked after children, educational methods.

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A neglected priority

In several countries, clients in the child welfare system tend to be low achievers in school. A disproportionate percentage of this group experiences educational failure and enters adulthood without any vocational training or academic education (Berridge, Dance, Beecham, & Field, 2008; Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarson, 2005).

For looked after children, there is a correlation between educational achievement and adaptation to care placement (Jackson, 2002). If the child does well in school there is an increased probability that he or she will settle in the foster home or the residential care unit. There is probably a kind of circular causality where the child may enter into positive or negative spirals. Educational failure may cause problems in the foster home or at the

residential care unit, which in turn may exacerbate the failure in school. In the longer term, there is a correlation between educational achievement and quality of life. Educational failure predicts unemployment and social exclusion (Simon & Owen, 2006).

These facts give reason to ask what impact professionals in the child welfare system can have. To what extent is it possible to influence looked after children's ability to cope with academic challenges? This question brings us to the so-called 'nature-nurture' debate in modern child psychology. Here, the term nativism designates a paradigm where development is described as being mainly determined by the child's genetic dispositions. Pedagogical efforts carried out by caregivers to promote cognitive development are believed to have limited impact. Studies of cases where identical twins are placed in different adoptive homes are referred to as empirical evidence for this paradigm. In several such studies it is concluded that the intelligence scores of biological parents better predict the child's cognitive development than the scores of the adoptive parents (Loehlin, Horn, & Willeman, 1994; Scarr, Weinberg, & Waldman, 1993).

In the opposite position, the nurture paradigm, the new-born child is said to be a tabula rasa without any inborn knowledge or skills. Cognitive development is believed to depend entirely upon the child's inductive learning through experience, and grown-ups' endeavours to impart knowledge to the child.

Nature versus nurture should not be seen as a dichotomy, but should instead be seen as a continuous variable. Between the two extremes there are a number of positions. Several research reviews conclude that there is a lack of evidence for a radical version of nativism, so-called strong nativism (Aber et al., 2012; Rogoff, 1998). Genetic dispositions limit the child's potential but cognitive development is, to a large extent, dependent on the social and physical environment that surrounds the child. This implies that the child profits from the efforts made by parents and professionals to promote development.

There is also established evidence for the possibility of compensating for previous lack of support (Aber et al., 2012; Campbell & Burchinal, 2008). Experiencing a poor environment in early childhood does not have to be calamitous. Children suffering from cognitive deprivation can be helped to catch up with their peers and to reach their potential through compensatory support.

Many social work professionals are in a position to promote looked after children's cognitive development and thereby promote their ability to cope with academic challenges. Examples here are child and youth care workers employed at residential care units or at local child welfare offices. These professionals can also uncover deprivation and arrange compensatory measures. In addition to such important assistance directly to the individual child, social workers with relevant competence can make an important contribution by teaching foster parents how to promote development and the importance of such efforts.

In the UK, a number of researchers have sought to ascertain to what extent these efforts are a priority in the child welfare system. A pioneer in this research field is Sonia Jackson. She started her work more than three decades ago. Later, prominent scholars such as Jane

Aldgate, David Berridge, Joe Francis, Michele McClung and several others have entered into this field and have carried out replication studies and supplementary examinations.

The British researchers have interviewed child welfare clients, foster parents and social workers. Some have conducted field studies at residential care units. In addition, the corpus of specialist literature has been reviewed to determine to what extent these topics are dealt with by academic scholars in the field of child welfare.

On the whole the findings made by Jackson and her successors have been discouraging (Aldgate, Heath, Colton, & Simm, 1993; Berridge & Brodie, 1998; Francis, 2008; Jackson, 1994, 2001; McClung, 2008). Many residential care units offer a poor educational environment with a lack of necessities, such as a quiet room with a desk, books, magazines, and computers. TV programmes of educational value are seldom utilised. Many residential care employees and foster parents have low expectations concerning the educational achievements of looked after children, and truancy is often ignored. A large number of child welfare professionals do not realise the importance of meeting the educational needs of the clients, and often also lack the relevant competence to fulfil such a task. In the specialist literature, topics on how to determine cognitive deprivation and how to promote development are barely discussed. On most parameters examined, the state in foster homes seems to be somewhat better than in residential care.

The researchers have discovered some encouraging exceptions in the form of social workers and foster parents who do make substantial efforts to promote looked after children's cognitive development and school achievement. In a study, Jackson and colleagues (2005) examined the background of care leavers who became university students. Several of these informants commend their former caregivers.

An argument put forward for not prioritising education is that children with bad experiences must recover before they can be expected to give attention to schoolwork. It is claimed that to uphold a concern for education would lay an additional burden on children struggling to handle severe emotional problems. Jane Aldgate is among the scholars who have opposed this claim. Aldgate and her colleagues emphasise the fact that 'educational achievement could be a factor in building confidence and self-esteem' (1993, p. 33).

Jackson (2001) criticises both the lack of adequate efforts and the reasons put forward for such a lack. She describes the low expectations for looked after children as a self-fulfilling prediction. A study often referred to in connection with the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prediction was performed by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen (1968). The study had an experimental design and was carried out at an American primary school. Initially, all the pupils at the school were tested. The teachers were told that the test results could predict cognitive development and that they revealed a certain potential in some of the pupils. The teachers were told what pupils were expected to make significant progress in the coming months. The test results, however, gave no reason to expect more from the selected children than from the other pupils, as they had been selected by a method of random sampling.

In other words, the only thing that separated the selected pupils from their peers was the teachers' expectations. When all the pupils were tested again eight months later, it turned out that the selected pupils had made more progress than the others. According to Rosenthal and Jacobsen, these pupils had profited from the prediction by having more attention and support from the teachers. For ethical reasons, the researchers examined only the effects of positive predictions. This study is well known in the social sciences. Nevertheless, looked after children are very often exposed to pessimistic predictions.

At the beginning of this century, Jackson summarised her own and her successors' research with a clarity that is unusual in social sciences: 'The conclusion is inescapable: researchers and practitioners do not see education as a particularly interesting or important aspect of care for separated children' (2001, p. 15 -16). There is no reason to question Jackson's main conclusion which is based on an extensive amount of empirical evidence. However, these findings are surprising given the fact that social work with children and young people is a wide field which holds a large number of topics and specialities, such as behaviour problems, attachment disorders, mistreatment and abuse, emotional disorders, social networks and social functioning, personal narratives and self-image, ethnicity and self-definition, meta-cognition and pro-social emotions, discrimination, care placement, and economic social assistance. Even incomplete, this list proves that the field has a broad focus that holds many aspects of human life. Unfortunately, this broad focus has not included how to promote cognitive development and educational achievement. According to Jackson (2001), there is a divide between education and social work. These two disciplines exist separately from each other.

The description in the preceding paragraphs may be valid for other countries. Social work is an international discipline and some of the texts reviewed by the British researchers make up central parts of an international canon of social work literature. In France, a lack of support for education has been revealed in residential care units. Also, there is no training for French child welfare professionals in how to meet the educational needs of looked after children (Denecheau, 2011). A study carried out in Norway revealed that methods to promote cognitive development were not addressed in the training of foster parents, either in the initial training, or in subsequent support (Halvorsen, 2011). If one explores Scandinavian readers, academic textbooks and journals on the need to promote looked after children's cognitive development; one will make very few discoveries.

The works of Jackson and her successors have had an impact. In recent years, progress within the British child welfare system has been reported (Berridge, Dance, Beecham & Field, 2008; Denecheau, 2011; Jackson & Simon, 2006). Among child welfare professionals, there has been rising awareness of the importance of providing educational support and encouragement. Also, cooperation procedures between the child welfare system and schools have improved. The fact that the UK traditionally has been influential in the professional discipline of social work gives reason to hope for similar improvements in other countries in the coming years.

Relevant methodologies

In the same period that Jackson and her successors conducted their investigations, educational methodologies to promote children's cognitive development evolved. Today, a

wide range of methods are described in the educational literature. These methods come from three theoretical traditions: Logical constructivism, social constructivism and philosophy for children. Logical constructivism was postulated by Jean Piaget (1953), but was later developed further by scholars such as Kurt Fischer (Rose & Fischer, 2009) and Annette Karmiloff-Smith (1994). Logical constructivists see the child as an active being that explores and formulates descriptions of the world that surrounds it, descriptions that may be incorrect, but still appear as reasonable and logical to the child. The child's development is described as a movement through a universal, hierarchical series of stages which mark distinct changes in the underlying structure of reasoning. Extensive accounts of the child's cognitive capacities and limitations at the different stages are given.

According to the logical constructivists, the child adapts to the environment through assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the process where the child uses its acquired cognitive schemes to make sense of stimuli. Accommodation is a complementary process which involves changing, or expanding, the structure of schemes as a result of new information acquired through assimilation. Through accommodation the child moves towards a more mature and realistic construction of reality. The theorists of this tradition claim that the child has an inborn need to experience coherence between the different parts of the schema structure, and between the schema structure and stimuli. This need works as a driver in the child's development towards a capacity to perceive and to reason in a more realistic way.

According to scholars in this tradition, the best way to promote development is to facilitate the child's active exploration (Bradley et al., 1989; Jardine, 2006). The child should be exposed to nature and built environments that invite exploration. Also, the child must be given access to exciting toys and tools, and he or she must have freedom to move around and to engage actively with the environment.

There is a link between logical constructivism and the research fields of environmental psychology and architectural psychology. Environmental psychology deals with how people experience, and are influenced by their physical surroundings. Architectural psychology is the part of environmental psychology that deals with the built environment. Based on research in these fields, a number of educational textbooks have been published. These give accounts of how to utilise natural environments and how to adapt indoor and outdoor environments for children's play and explorations (Francis & Lorenzo, 2006; Freeman & Tranter, 2011).

Social constructivism is based on the pioneering work of Lev Vygotsky (1962) and the works of successors such as Jerome Bruner (2006), Harry Daniels (2008), and Barbara Rogoff (1990). Vygotsky emphasises the role of language as a tool of thought. He claims that all higher psychological functioning must involve the use of language, and that the child at an early age applies acquired words and syntactical forms in his or her reasoning. Vygotsky thereby opposes Piaget's description of 'egocentric speech' which can be observed in early childhood as an epiphenomenon of the child's egocentric thinking. Vygotsky claims that these monologues are verbal reasoning voiced out loud, and not utterances directed towards others. Later, the child's thinking becomes soundless, but it continues to be formulated in words and sentences.

According to Vygotsky, the syntax of inner verbal reasoning to some extent differs from the syntax of external social speech. Compared to external speech, inner speech appears as incomplete, holding several abbreviations and short cuts. The words, concepts, and syntactical forms of social language, however, are prerequisites for inner verbal reasoning. Furthermore, Vygotsky maintains that human mental functioning is shaped by how the physical and social reality is categorised in the particular language which the child learns. When children learn a language, they simultaneously adopt a 'social construction' of reality. Therefore, followers of Vygotsky's theory claim that a path is a better metaphor for development than a stair or a ladder. Cognitive development implies following one of several possible paths to one of several possible terminal points (Rogoff, 1990).

From the assumption that reasoning is linguistic, it follows that adults can support the child's cognitive development by promoting language acquisition, i.e. the learning of words, concepts, and syntactical forms (Bodrova & Leong, 2009; Rogoff, 1990; Woude, Kleeck, & Veen, 2009). In infancy this is done through what is called infant-directed speech or motherese. This is a way of communicating that most parents' practice with their child. The parent talks with a high-pitched voice, and repeats the child's sentences in a slightly extended and more correct form ('Daddy, shoe' > 'Yes, that is daddy's shoe'). The parent also introduces a number of syntactical variants for the child ('Can you see the ball? Where is the ball? Is it under the table?').

Later the caregiver can promote language acquisition by carrying out conversations with the child, by reading, by teaching literacy, and by taking part in joint task-solving. When talking with the child, the caregivers should use a vocabulary and a syntax that is more advanced than the child's. By doing this, the adult becomes a model from which the child can learn. The reading material used should be engaging and should have a wording that permits the child to acquire new words, concepts and syntactical forms. Phonological awareness can be promoted by the use of poems, jingles and songs. When it comes to task-solving, it is emphasised that this should happen in the so-called proximal zone of development. That is the range of tasks that are slightly too difficult for the child to do alone, but that can be accomplished successfully by guidance from a more competent person.

Philosophy for children is anchored in the analytical paradigm in philosophy where the claimed purpose of philosophy is to clarify reasoning. Scholars in the philosophy for children tradition have demonstrated young people's ability to acquire, enjoy and apply epistemological and ontological insights (Lipman, 1988; Matthews, 1984; Opdal, 2001). According to these scholars, the child's reasoning becomes cybernetic through the acquisition of philosophical insights. The child develops a meta-cognitive capacity to identify ambiguous or erroneous ways of thinking.

To help educators, a number of manuals describing relevant topics and examples have been prepared (Gaut & Gaut, 2012; Haynes, 2008; Kaye & Thomson, 2008; Lipman & Sharp, 1984; White, 2005). As a pedagogical approach, the Socratic method[i] is advocated. The educator should invite children to discuss philosophical topics and ask thought-provoking questions, questions that work as incitements to re-think and further explore

the topic. Hopefully, this further exploration will lead to accommodation and thereby provide access to more mature and adequate perspectives.

Some scholars in this tradition claim that children's spontaneous ponderings are often a better starting point for imparting philosophical insights than prepared lessons (Opdal, 2001). A question from the child about whether all giraffes have the same number of spots may be a starting point for a conversation about categories, defining characteristics, similarity and uniqueness. These are central elements in theories of meaning. A statement from a child that there is no such thing as time, because the past is gone and the future has not yet begun, may be a starting point for a conversation about what it means that something exists. This is what philosophers call ontology. To be able to utilise such initiatives from children, the educator must have a readiness in the form of philosophical competence, relevant pedagogical competence, and recognition of philosophical insights as tools to clarify reasoning.

As is evident from the account above, there are several ways to promote the child's cognitive development and thereby its ability to deal with academic challenges. The scientific efforts to work out complete methodologies have been going on for several years but have been intensified in recent decades. Piaget was a well-known researcher and theorist before the mid-20th century, but logical constructivism as an educational approach has been further developed up till today. Vygotsky's works became translated and known in Western countries during the 1960s and 1970s. His texts led to the so-called linguistic turn in child psychology, and social constructivism as an educational approach has been further developed since then. Philosophy for children was launched as an educational approach in the late 1970s through the pioneering work of Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews. During the last two decades, a number of scholars in philosophy and education have contributed to the development of this approach.

Rather than representing incompatible alternatives, these educational methodologies complement each other. In many cases, a combination of approaches will produce synergies (Aber et al., 2012). This insight has inspired scholars to develop multi-modal pre-school programmes in which the different methods are used in parallel (Campbell & Burchinal, 2008; Powell, 2009). In educational television series where vulnerable children are the primary target group, several methods have been applied (Fisch, 2004).

The methodologies outlined above are described in detail in a number of readers and manuals for students in teacher education, both for schools and pre-schools. There is also an extensive specialist literature for educators on how to promote cognitive development. The methodologies make up a significant part of the curriculum at teacher training colleges and are frequently presented at update courses, conferences, and seminars for educators. They are, however, barely mentioned in the social work literature.

Discussion and conclusion

As described, recent findings indicate that child welfare professionals in the UK more often than before express optimistic expectations and provide educational support. Also, to some extent structures for inter-professional cooperation between social workers and teachers have been improved. This gives reason for optimism. However, further

improvements are called for, given that educational attainment is a key factor in improving the life chances of looked after children, and that a considerable proportion of these children need more qualified assistance.

Social workers engaged in child welfare should to some extent be able both to assess the educational needs of vulnerable children and to apply the methodologies described in the previous section. In addition, training and guiding foster parents in these topics should become part of these social workers' competence. In other words, the defined spectrum of professional tasks for child welfare professionals must be enlarged and a new branch should be added to the field.

To realise such an ambition, substantial supplements must be added to the curricula of social work courses. For child welfare professionals that have already completed their basic training, universities should offer tailored courses to ensure that such professionals are fully aware of these ideas and how to implement them.

In addition to enhancing the competence of social workers as described above, there are major challenges in adapting the current methodologies to the field of social work. There is a need to prepare professional textbooks and manuals where the descriptions of methods are related to residential care settings and to foster care settings. Also, training programmes for foster parents should be developed. In such programmes, manuals with relevant examples which are written in an accessible way for lay people would have to be produced.

In years to come, these adapted methodologies should be examined and must undergo improvements. This requires both qualitative exploratory studies and quantitative studies with an experimental or quasi-experimental design. Also, longitudinal investigations will be needed. This innovation and research requires a further bridging of the divide between education and social work. The bridging must also take place at the universities. Researchers should follow the example of forward-looking social workers and teachers, and engage in the multi-disciplinary ventures needed to bridge the divide.

End Notes

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[i] For a more complete description of the Socratic method, see Brickhouse & Smith (2009).