

Editorial

Coming of age for research about the education of looked after children

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this special edition of the Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care, devoted entirely to the education of looked-after children and young people. Twenty-one years ago when Sonia Jackson published her influential monograph on the educational disadvantages faced by children in the care system, I was undertaking a part-time secondment with the Open University which was then developing a distance learning course for the Certificate in Social Service. Jackson's work came up in a literature search (Jackson, 1987). As a former secondary school teacher, by now working with care staff, I found Jackson's characterisation of the typical educational experiences of children in care (low attainment and disrupted schooling, low expectations and a lack of attention to education by carers, teachers and social workers, problems with literacy, lack of access to books and poor study facilities) made compelling reading, and I later wrote a whole supplement on these issues for a new edition of the OU course.

It took a number of years for concerns about the attainment of children in care to be raised seriously in Scotland, notably in a study commissioned by the former Lothian Regional Council. This study drew attention to a tendency to concentrate on behaviour rather than academic performance in child care reviews (Francis, Thomson, & Mills, 1996). The landscape of research, policy and practice looks very different in 2008. There is now a substantial literature covering a range of themes, including attainment and other measures of educational outcomes, the achievements of looked-after children and the difficulties in getting accurate data, and research on the quality of the educational environment of care settings. Following on the publication of *Looked-after children and young people: We can and must do better* (Scottish Executive, 2007) considerable energy has been expended in implementing the action points identified. This has included the preparation of two key guidance documents, *Core tasks for designated managers* (Scottish Government, 2008a), and *These are our bairns* (Scottish Government, 2008b). University of Strathclyde researchers reported findings of government-funded pilot projects in 18 Scottish local authorities (Connelly et al., 2008) and an exciting collaboration between colleagues in the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, Speakeasy Productions Ltd and The Scottish Government has resulted in the production of an interactive training DVD-ROM. More information on all of these developments can be found on the looked-after children website at www.ltscotland.org.uk/lookedafterchildren.

This special issue comprises eight papers which collectively demonstrate how research in this area has come of age. The collection starts with a staff development theme. Janet Guild's paper discusses the development of a training package, based on attachment theory, aimed at teachers, social workers and carers. Lesley Fraser's paper reports small-scale research in one Scottish local authority to investigate communication between residential children's houses and schools, and in particular focussing on what appears to work. Fraser concludes that it is important to plan a communication strategy to allow for different approaches to communicating by professionals. In the third paper in this collection, Emmanuel Grupper outlines the results of research, conducted in four residential schools in Israel, to improve the involvement of parents in their children's education. The increased presence of parents in the residential schools, and the improvement in the relationships between staff and parents, benefited the children's attitude towards their education.

We have included two papers with a literacy theme. Colm Linnane outlines the Edinburgh Reading Champion Project and explains how sharing his own love of books and reading can help looked-after young people to develop self-esteem, communication and creative skills. Irene Stevens, Claire McNicol and Ruth Kirkpatrick report on their evaluation of the process of storytelling in residential houses in one Scottish local authority. They found that as well as enhancing various skills associated with literacy, storytelling encouraged the development of a different kind of relationship between young people and staff.

Robin Jackson's paper focuses on the ideologies of market forces and inclusion, and considers how these can affect residential special education, concluding that there is room for diversity in provision and that decisions on placements should be made by keeping the child at the heart of the process. Susan McCool, writing from the perspective of a speech and language therapy professional, sets out to explore the claim that there is a high rate of undetected communication impairment among looked-after children, and discusses how services can respond.

This unique collection ends with a policy-based paper by Joe Francis set within the context of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. Francis argues, possibly controversially, in favour of applying automatically the measures contained within the Act, to all looked-after children, since he is persuaded of the potential educational benefits, particularly by ensuring the young people receive a comprehensive assessment of their educational needs.

It is my sincere hope that you enjoy this first special edition of the journal as much as I have enjoyed editing it.

Dr. Graham Connelly

References

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