

Encouraging reading among children in care: the Edinburgh Reading Champion project

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Introduction

The Edinburgh Reading Champion project is an innovative partnership project between two sections of City of Edinburgh Council: the Children and Families Department and Services for Communities. The project, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, seeks to improve access to books, libraries and reading activities for young people in residential care in Edinburgh.

Poor educational experiences leave many looked-after children with a lack of basic literacy skills and very low self-esteem (HMI/SWSI, 2001). Often, they may be left with a feeling of alienation from books and can be resistant to any form of reading. The project is designed to increase confidence and communication skills among looked-after and accommodated young people and enhance their social and personal development through access to books, libraries, stories and reading. At the heart of the project is support and collaboration with residential staff in sharing books, stories and other reading material with young people, and through training, visits to local libraries and bookshops. The project is coordinated with the children's mobile library Book Bus, bringing library and information services to young people in secure accommodation and residential schools.

Education in Scotland is undergoing significant change with the Curriculum for Excellence (Curriculum Review Group, 2004). The Reading Champion project supports the curriculum and aims to assist in supporting young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

How it works

The project started early in 2008 and has worked in a variety of innovative ways, thinking about reading in the broadest sense to engage everyone in reading for fun. Events have successfully been hosted in residential units with authors, artists and storytellers. Working directly with an artist or writer has proved to be a particularly effective way of engaging young people to read for enjoyment.

Well-known authors including Anthony Horowitz, Keith Gray and Alan Bissett have visited residential centres to take part in reading events.

Looked-after young people have also enjoyed visits to the Edinburgh Book Festival for events by Jacqueline Wilson and Kevin Brooks. Demand for Book Festival tickets from residential centres has been unprecedented this year with more than 60 young people and residential care staff attending. The project has also tried to encourage the interest of young people in drama. For example, it organised a link-up with Edinburgh International Festival securing discounted tickets to see the new National Theatre of Scotland production of *365*, a play which addresses the issue of young people leaving residential care.

By focusing on the fun side of books, the project has been able to help young people who have difficulties with reading. It has encouraged them to build up their basic skills as well as supporting staff in encouraging young people to read. For example, residential child care staff have become reading partners to particular children. Young people have made great progress with basic skills and have developed the confidence to read more difficult texts by reading to their interests with the support of their reading partner.

This is critical in terms of empowering looked-after and accommodated young people to engage or re-engage with education. By facilitating the development of a reading culture, rooted in the interests of the individual, the project hopes to contribute to an educationally rich environment among looked-after and accommodated young people in Edinburgh. This is a unique innovation in Scotland and one which greatly enhances the Council's Corporate Parenting role.

The project also encourages young people to choose their own books and, alongside staff, contribute to the development of their own reading culture both individually and in the places they live. Sharing books and stories is infectious and generates excitement and togetherness. Funding supplied from Edinburgh City Libraries has enabled the project to develop collections in fifteen residential centres across the city. The project has also arranged visits to bookshops to select books with young people. This has generated real enthusiasm in the units when the books arrive.

Collaboration between educational and residential staff in units has contributed to the most meaningful change in reading culture. For example, at the end of school year young people in St. Katharine's Secure Unit performed a student-scripted performance of *The Shooting of Dan McGruer* as part of a Wild West project learning week. This performance was assisted and enhanced by residential workers, education staff and librarians working together to design costumes and sets, sing songs, play instruments and support young people

in putting the show together. This flexible, collaborative work of the project epitomises the approach of the Reading Champion project: commitment to assisting looked-after and accommodated young people in telling or reading the stories that interest them. This in turn allows them to rely on themselves and each other, develops self-esteem, communication and creative skills.

Although there has been no formal evaluation of the project as yet, it recently won a Standard Life Edinburgh Achievement Award. This was in recognition of the innovative partnership work carried out by a multi-agency advisory group with partners, including the Scottish Book Trust, Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh International Book Festival, Barnardos/RAFT project, NCH Scotland and Who Cares? Scotland.

Conclusion

As the Reading Champion for this project I can say that reading has always been my greatest pleasure in life. Books provide me with a lens through which I view the world, letting me get inside the head of a character or an author. Being the Reading Champion allows me to share my love of books, reading and stories. There's something to read out there for everyone. Even if it is not a book, there are always magazines, newspapers, comics, websites, instruction manuals, song lyrics and even cereal packets out there to get young people started. The key message is that words can be the gateway to a whole new world of leisure and opportunity. For looked-after and accommodated young people, we must create as much opportunity as we can to make up for the disadvantages they face.

[For further information about the Reading Champion project contact the author at colm.linnane@edinburgh.gov.uk or 0131 529 5556].

References

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