The Virtual School for Children in Out-of-Home Care: A Strategic Approach to Improving Their Educational Attainment

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In all countries where the evidence is available, the educational performance of children looked after away from home falls markedly below that of their peers. In the recent years this has become a subject of intense debate. Is it an inevitable consequence of the adversity they have suffered before coming into care, and only to be expected given the characteristics of their families of origin? Or does the care system itself bear some responsibility? This question is not simply one of academic interest. Longitudinal research on social exclusion has shown the strong association between low levels of education and negative adult outcomes which disproportionately affect those with a background in care. This paper argues that efforts to narrow the gap in achievement between children in public care and their home-based peers will meet with little success as long as the problem is only tackled at the individual level. In an attempt to bring about systemic change, the English government in 2006 introduced a new concept: the Virtual School for "looked after" children. The Virtual School encompasses as pupils all children and young people in a particular area who are in public care, but has no physical existence other than an office base. The children continue to attend their own schools, which are responsible for their progress. Initially a difficult concept to grasp, the model now seems to be fully accepted and all local authorities in England are legally required to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH). The article reviews the limited available research and offers an illustrative case study. In conclusion, it suggests that the virtual school may be a model with potential to help raise the attainment of children in care in countries other than England.

The Virtual School for Children in Out-of-Home Care: A Strategic Approach to Improving Their Attainment

The idea of a "virtual school" for children in care appears to be unique to England, but this paper suggests that the model may be applicable in other countries where a public authority has responsibility for the care and upbringing of children and young people who are looked after away from home within a defined geographical area.

A virtual school encompasses as pupils all children and young people who are in public care in a particular local authority area but has no physical existence other than an office base – no classrooms, blackboards, whiteboards, laboratories or assembly halls. The children continue to attend their ordinary schools or educational facilities. Otherwise it may mirror the organisation of any other school, with a head teacher, a Board of Governors, staff with specialisms and responsibilities for different age groups, its own bud-

get and ability to commission services from outside bodies. Research in progress by the present author finds that the Virtual School, originally introduced by the 1997–2010 Labour government (DCSF, 2010) is now an established part of the child welfare system in England. Since 2014 every local authority in England has been legally obliged to appoint a VSH (DfE, 2014a). Where did the idea come from and how far might it succeed in improving the educational opportunities of children looked after away from home?

The Under-Achievement of Children in Care

In all countries where statistics are available, the academic attainment of children in public care falls far behind that of

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their family-based peers (Flynn, Tessier, & Coulombe, 2013; Healy, Lundström, & Sallnäs, 2011; Jackson & Höjer, 2013; Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014; Smith & McLean, 2013). Cross-national research was funded by the European Union from 2008 to 2011. Höjer I et al. (2008) in a study known by the acronym YiPPEE (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe). In all five very different countries studied (England, Spain, Hungary, Denmark and Sweden), the educational careers of young people in care were found to be blighted by disruption, delay, official neglect and low expectations (Jackson & Cameron, 2012, 2014). Coming into care might have improved their lives in other respects, but only in a minority of cases had it enhanced their educational opportunities (Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Jackson & Höjer, 2013; Montserrat, Casas, & Malo 2013; Racz & Korintus, 2013). Support from teachers and, to a lesser extent, social workers and pedagogues, could be very helpful to individual young people but made little impression on the wide gap in attainment between those in care and their peers.

Children are expected to spend a high proportion of their waking hours in school, and if their experience there is mainly one of failure and being unable to meet their teachers' expectations, their self-esteem is likely to be severely undermined (Bombèr & Hughes, 2013). Their feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy often manifest themselves as disruptive behaviour, further reducing their opportunity to learn and achieve and sometimes resulting in exclusion from mainstream education (Francis, 2000; Jensen, 2013; Poyser, 2013). The result is that they are much less likely to reach the expected standard by the conclusion of compulsory school attendance and seldom qualify to continue into upper secondary and tertiary level education or advanced vocational training (Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Mendes et al., 2014; Mendis, 2012; Montserrat et al., 2013).

Why does this matter? Some have argued that it is only to be expected when children in public care almost all come from very disadvantaged sections of society, and are unlikely to be educational high flyers in any case (Berridge, 2007). Others would say that, on the contrary, these are the very young people who deserve our most strenuous efforts to enable them to follow a different life path from that of their families of origin. Research on the issue of social exclusion, however, has shown that people formerly in care continue to be greatly over-represented on negative indicators such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, physical and mental ill-health, substance misuse, alcoholism, too-early parenthood and criminal behaviour (Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Simon & Owen, 2006). Lacking the family support and community networks of children growing up in their own families, the future employment prospects of those leaving care with no educational qualifications are very limited (Jackson, 2007; Stein & Munro, 2008). Many negative adult outcomes are associated with poor education and not having the credentials needed to enter the labour market (Hick, Visser & MacNab, 2007).

A study commissioned by the UK government found that raising the educational attainment of children in long-term care to the average level in the population could lead to savings of billions of pounds annually (Jackson & Simon, 2006).

The substantial body of research linking low educational achievement and social exclusion led to the UK government commissioning a special study of the education of children in care (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) followed by a series of measures designed to improve their outcomes (Jackson, 2010). The two most important of these were (1) the Children Act 2004, which for the first time laid an explicit duty on local authorities to promote the educational *attainment* of the children they looked after, as opposed to "having regard to" their education, and (2) the joining up in 2004 of schools and educational provision with the social care of children in Departments of Children's Services, usually headed by people with a background in education rather than social work (Jackson & Cameron, 2014). The split between care and education had long been identified as a major factor in the poor attainment of children in care (Jackson, 1987). Although these changes provided a good foundation for improving their educational outcomes, it did not necessarily change the behaviour or expectations of schools, carers or social workers, and the gap in achievement between looked after children and others remained stubbornly resistant to change (Jackson, 2013).

What is a Virtual School?

The idea of a virtual school was one of several innovations proposed for piloting in the government Green and White Papers *Care Matters: transforming lives* (DFES, 2006) and *Care Matters: time for change* (Berridge, 2012; DCSF, 2007; Jackson, 2010). It was not by any means the most prominent of these new ideas, and was initially received with derision or puzzlement. The name seems to have come from the United States, where it was used in a quite different sense, to mean an institution that teaches courses entirely or primarily through on-line methods. The virtual school in England, however, is not a teaching institution although most employ qualified teachers, usually as members of a multi-disciplinary team. As already explained, the children are enrolled in ordinary neighbourhood schools, which are responsible for their progress as for any other pupil. The virtual school has a clear educational objective, to raise attainment, but is not concerned with the curriculum.

The virtual school was able to build on the work of pre-existing services designed to improve the educational performance of looked after children. In many, though not all local authorities, there were already teams which went by a variety of names, most commonly LACES: "Looked After Children Education Service". Some were long established, and highly valued by schools and foster carers, as described in Felicity Fletcher-Campbell's 1997 book *The Education of Children who are Looked-After*. Their weakness was that they were predominantly staffed by social workers, with limited

knowledge and understanding of the education system. A later report by the government inspection agency, Ofsted, commented that social workers regularly expressed concerns that they did not have the skills or capacity to carry out the growing expectation that they should address children's educational needs (Ofsted, 2012). They generally saw their job as promoting good attendance and conforming behaviour, with academic attainment or lack of it rather low on their list of priorities. They often did not trouble to enquire or record if young people were entered for examinations or qualifications or what the results were (O'Sullivan, Westerman, McNamara, & Mains, 2013). Much of their time was taken up in mediating between schools and looked after children in danger of school exclusion, rightly a matter of great concern as it might also jeopardise their care placement (Francis, 2008; Parker & Gorman, 2013). Most catered for a limited age group, the years of compulsory schooling, at that time five to sixteen.

The priorities of the virtual school are very different, and so is its position within the local government hierarchy. This paper focuses in particular on the role and activities of its head teacher, the VSH. This was the subject of a formal evaluation by a team of university researchers which is discussed further below (Berridge, Henry, Jackson, & Turney, 2009). By 2008 considerable progress had already been made at both policy and practice levels in creating structures to support the education of looked after children. Almost all local authorities had adopted the principle of Corporate Parenting, the idea that all sections of the council, not only the social services department, share responsibility for their children in care, and should aim to promote their welfare as a parent would hope to do (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). Three measures introduced around that time are especially relevant to the virtual school:

- Every (ordinary) school is obliged to appoint a "designated teacher" responsible for tracking the performance of their looked after pupils and acting as their champion (DfEE/DH, 2000).

- Every child in care must have a Personal Education Plan (PEP), regularly reviewed along with their care plan. After the age of 16, this becomes a Pathway Plan for education or training and social support, in some cases up to 25.

- In the interest of promoting social mobility, all children in a school entitled to free school meals (a proxy measure for family poverty) attract additional resources, known as the Pupil Premium, which is enhanced for those in care – the Pupil Premium Plus. The PPP is allocated by the VSH and gives him or her control over a substantial budget in schools with larger numbers of looked after pupils.

Researching the Virtual School

There is very little published research relating to virtual schools and even less that has produced hard evidence about their success in promoting their core purpose, to reduce the gap in attainment between looked after children and their peers, or, in the surprisingly emphatic words of the official government "toolkit" "to be *relentless* in driving up improvements in the educational progress and attainment of all children looked after by their authority" (DCSF, 2010). The government-commissioned evaluation of the work of VSHs remains the most substantial empirical research on the subject (Berridge et al., 2009). This was a mixed-method study of 11 virtual schools, with particular emphasis on the role of the head teacher (VSH). It included in-depth interviews with VSHs and Directors of Children's Services, web-based surveys of children and social workers, observation of interprofessional meetings and analysis of reports and statistical data. The main conclusion was that the virtual school model had good potential to improve the school experience and educational outcomes of looked after children. The essential features of a successful virtual school were, first, that it should be led by a person with an educational (rather than social work) background with a senior position within the local authority and second, that the role should be seen as strategic, tackling systemic problems and promoting new initiatives rather than simply offering support to individual children (Berridge, 2012).

Although the report acknowledged some weaknesses in the methodology, its conclusions and recommendations were accepted by the government and later provided the justification for rolling out the model to the whole country.

Simpson (2012) made an in-depth study of the virtual school in one English local authority. The specific detail in this research throws considerable light on the strengths of the model. Simpson concluded that the virtual school was highly effective in focusing attention on the educational needs of looked after children as a group, in fact so effective that the model ought to be extended to other disadvantaged groups, such as children adopted from care. Driscoll (2013) suggests that the virtual school and designated teachers could play an important part in encouraging and supporting looked after children to stay in education post-16, or return to it if their GCSE results were disappointing. These two qualitative studies are informative but too small in scale to tell us much about the success of the virtual school in improving attainment overall.

Berridge (2012), who led the official evaluation of the Virtual School pilot, used it as a case study in a paper reflecting on the interaction between child welfare research and the policy process. He was critical of the tendency of government to enact policy measures before commissioned research had time to report, as in the case of virtual schools. However, what seems to have happened was that the model proved so attractive to local authorities that the majority adopted it independently without waiting for a lead from the centre.

In the same year Ofsted, the body that sets educational and care standards nationally, published a report entitled "The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress

of looked after children" (Ofsted, 2012). This observed that the existence of the virtual school had led to great improvements in cooperation between different services and enabled social workers and designated teachers to exert far more influence as champions for looked after children. Like Simpson's account, this report details an impressive range of enrichment activities undertaken by virtual schools for school children in care. However, it did not attempt a critical evaluation of the concept or any systematic assessment of its impact on attainment or participation in post-compulsory education. In fact it is notably lacking in hard data.

One other relevant publication, an All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry on the education of children in care (APPG, 2012), proposed among many other recommendations that the appointment of a VSH should become legally obligatory. Fortuitously, Edward Timpson, who co-chaired the APPG was appointed Minister for Children in the coalition government which took office in 2010, and the Children and Families Act 2014 did indeed make the VSH a statutory position within every local authority.

Research in Progress

In view of the lack of research on virtual schools noted above, it seemed worth including in this paper some preliminary findings from a study in progress led by the present author. Funded by a modest grant from the Leverhulme Trust, the main research method consisted of in-depth telephone interviews with a representative sample of VSHs. Like real schools, virtual schools vary greatly in size and resources, partly related to the number of children looked after by their local authority (Ofsted, 2012). Some have staff teams of up to 14 while others consist of the VSH and two or three workers, not necessarily full-time. Much depends on the commitment of elected members of the council to the principle of corporate parenting and the resources they are prepared to make available. This is likely to become even more important in the future, since the Conservative government elected in 2015 is proposing to make further deep cuts in local authority funding.

All the VSHs interviewed were quite clear that their primary task was to raise the educational attainment of looked after children, as measured by the standard national assessment tests (SATs) at what are called Key Stages, and above all the examination at the end of basic secondary schooling, the General Certificate of Secondary Education. Although this no longer denotes the end of formal education, the proportion of pupils who obtain five or more GCSE passes at Grades A*–C still acts as a benchmark and an entry point to further and higher education. In high performing schools almost all pupils achieve this level, dropping to about 40 per cent for schools in low income areas. For children in care as a group, it is closer to 15 per cent (DfE, 2014b). Some virtual schools have made good progress towards reducing this disparity, but because of the small numbers there can be wide fluctuations between one year and the next which makes comparisons difficult.

Most VSHs have held senior positions in mainstream schools, and they usually have a variety of other relevant experience, as advisers on inclusion, special educational needs, school improvement and sometimes in residential childcare or social work. They are acutely conscious of the need to demonstrate their effectiveness by quantitative measures like test scores and examination results but at the same time all those interviewed in the current study took a view of education as encompassing social, emotional and cultural development as well as academic learning, an approach broadly in line with the European philosophy of social pedagogy (Cameron, 2013; Lorenz, 2008; Zeller & Köngeter, 2012)

Because they are all so different, no single virtual school can be considered representative. However, perhaps the model is best illustrated by a description of one well-established virtual school with a very experienced VSH.

The Virtual School for Looked After Children: A Case Study

This virtual school is in a mainly rural area but with some quite large towns and pockets of high-tech industry. At any one time it is responsible for over 1000 children in out-of-home care. This is not a stable number, however: up to 40 per cent of the looked-after population join or leave in the course of a year. The VSH is a graduate teacher with a Masters in Special Education and has been passionately committed to improving the education of looked after children over many years, previously as head of the education support service for these children. However she considers that her position was transformed when her role was made statutory in 2014. "It has moved us from the sidelines to the centre of the pitch".

She has greatly expanded the scope and authority of her virtual school, which currently employs a staff of 12 "education advisers". She is very clear about its core purpose: "to *support schools* to raise the achievement of children in care: we hold schools to account for the outcomes for these young people, to enable them to become economically viable young adults". The two main levers to "hold schools to account" are the PEP and Pupil Premium, the £1900 (4140 AUD) per pupil additional funding allocated to the VSH to promote the education of looked after pupils. In order to obtain an allocation of this money, schools have to show through the PEP that it is being used effectively to raise attainment and provide robust evidence of the child's progress. The objective is to tackle under-achievement at a systemic level, not to take over from schools their responsibility to educate looked after children. At the same time the VSH was quick to emphasise that "we're absolutely not losing sight of our more vulnerable children". Virtual school education advisers go into schools that may be struggling and model approaches to working with children in difficulties so that they can get the best from education. Their aim is to keep as many children as possible in mainstream education and resist attempts to move

them to alternative provision, which would usually curtail their opportunities to access upper secondary and higher education.

One major change introduced by several virtual schools is to widen the age group served to incorporate young children placed in foster care and university students with a care background (Cameron, Connelly, & Jackson, 2015; Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005; Jackson & Cameron, 2014). That would have been very unusual previously. The VSH believes that care leavers who make it into higher education need one to one support in their journey through university – "that's when their mental health issues rise to the fore". One of the virtual school staff has special responsibility for these students. She holds a financial advice day that they have to attend before they start, runs a closed Facebook account for them, visits them at university as a parent would do, liaises with student services and is available to help if they run into problems. The VSH is very proud of the fact that none of the 41 care leavers at university who were looked after by her local authority has dropped out, though some needed longer than the standard 3 years to complete their degrees. Two of the 41 were awarded First Class Honours. Every one of these students, she noted, is from a family where they are the first ever to go to university.

At the other end of the scale, this VSH is well aware of the multiple factors that stand in the way of achievement for children looked after away from home, which are well documented in the literature (Cameron, Jackson, Hauari, & Hollingworth, 2012; Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Mendes et al., 2014; Tilbury, Creed, Buys, Osmond, & Crawford, 2014). Some of these arise from abusive and chaotic family backgrounds, but others are clearly related to weaknesses in the care and education services, such as unplanned placement and school moves, low expectations and inadequate remedial and mental health services. The nominal commitment to inclusion often fails to be realised in practice. One size does not fit all, as Kathy Mendis has noted (Mendis, 2015). Some disadvantaged groups, such as asylum seekers and girls from minority ethnic families do surprisingly well in education, whereas among looked after children as well as in the general population, white working-class boys tend to fall to the bottom on measures of achievement.

Without losing sight of the primary objective of raising attainment, the VSH in the case study authority firmly believes in the social pedagogy approach, the importance of out of school activities and adults getting alongside children (Cameron et al., 2015; Hollingworth, 2012). The virtual school runs numerous visits to theatres, museums and art galleries, and strongly encourages looked after children to engage in music, drama, sport and volunteering. It organises residential trips during school holidays, which the VSH makes a point of joining "to keep her hand in". She has commissioned formal evaluation of the outcomes of these activities. The researchers find that these trips are of great benefit to some of the most troubled children and help them to make better relationships with adults in a less formal setting than school. The young people are often reluctant initially to take part in challenging physical activities far away from the urban environments they are used to, but feel very proud of their achievements and return much better motivated and prepared to engage with school.

This virtual school, like many others, runs an annual award ceremony, with the recipients nominated by the children, who also provide the entertainment. The VSH describes it as something between the Oscars and a school speech day; the most recent one was attended by 650 people. Another of the VSH's projects, designed to help young people learn about the world of work, is to arrange for them to run the local museum café during the summer holidays, not just as waiters or kitchen assistants but planning menus, managing orders and budgeting, just as if it were their own business.

A major part of the work of the virtual school is to provide training and information for others: foster carers and residential childcare workers, designated teachers, councillors (corporate parents), school governors and social workers. This is very precisely planned and targeted, briefing foster carers for example on education issues for a child of the specific age they are caring for, which has proved to be much more effective than simply emphasising the importance of education without telling them what to do about it. The virtual school produces workbooks and briefing papers for the different people concerned. They find that informing social workers about the education system, for example, helps them to feel more confident in negotiating with schools and acting as advocates for the children on their caseload.

The VSH has ambitious plans for the coming year. She is running a big conference for all the designated teachers in the local authority area, key players in her determination to achieve better outcomes for looked after children at every stage and to make the virtual school an effective force for improvement. She aims to make more extensive use of electronic communication and substantially improve data collection and dissemination (noted as a problem in both the Berridge, Henry, Jackson, & Turney, (2009) and Ofsted (2012) reports and by Smith and McLean (2013). She would like to extend the remit of the virtual school in collaboration with the adoption support team to include children adopted from care. Although she is apprehensive about likely reductions in public funding, her status as a member of the Council's senior management, puts her in a good position to defend and expand her service.

Several of the VSHs interviewed commented that it could be a lonely job. What has helped them is the development, over a relatively short period, of strong regional networks where they meet regularly to share ideas and discuss ways to overcome difficulties, together with an active National Steering Group which runs a very well attended annual conference and is shortly to be established as a registered charity.

Conclusion

Although analysis of the author's current research is not yet complete, it is possible to say with confidence that the virtual school model is now firmly embedded in children's services in England. The VSH is the leader and manager of the team which makes up the staff of the Virtual School, and a head teacher with equal status to the head of any other (conventional) school. The establishment of the VHS role as statutory in 2014 represented a sea change and greatly enhanced the authority and influence of VSHs. Their effective regional and national organisation enables VHSs to share innovative ideas and establish collaborative ventures. In some areas, though not all, there have been marked improvements in the average educational attainment of looked after children, including a big increase in the numbers being supported to go on to university. Attendance is much better, social workers and carers better informed, schools understand more about what it means to be in care and permanent exclusion from school for behavioural reasons, which used to be common, has almost disappeared. This evidence, however, is still mainly local and anecdotal. What is needed now is systematic research on a larger scale to produce quantitative data at a national level.

Would the model work in other countries? It is currently being considered for introduction in Scotland, where education has been fully devolved since 1999 and where concern about the attainment of looked after children has, if anything, been even stronger than in England (Cameron et al., 2015; Connelly, 2013). It would seem quite applicable in any country with semi-autonomous school districts of a reasonable size.

There are of course no simple answers. When the majority of those in care come from impoverished and stigmatised families and have often suffered extremes of abuse and neglect in early childhood, it is unrealistic to think that any one approach can enable them to overcome all the obstacles they face. However, what the Virtual School does is to support their schools and teachers to do a better job of educating them, keep education in the forefront of social workers' minds, and move the focus from the problems of individual children to tackle the systemic weaknesses of the services offered to them.

Acknowledgements

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