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Promoting the achievement of looked after children and young people in South Tyneside

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Case studies of education provision for children and young people in care in South Tyneside

Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children
PALAC

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Introduction

Education of children in care

As of March 2017, there were 72, 670 children and young people in care in England. The number of looked after children has continued to increase steadily over the last eight years.[1] Sixty per cent of these children are in care because of abuse or neglect and three-quarters are placed in foster care arrangements. Children and young people who are in or have experienced care remain one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational outcomes. The average Attainment 8 score for children in care is 19.3 compared to 44.5 for non-looked after children and 19.3 for children in need. In 2017 there was an increase in the percentage of children in care achieving a pass in English and mathematics from 17.4% to 17.5% and also in entering EBacc. Care leavers can experience poorer employment and health outcomes after leaving school compared to their peers. They are over-represented amongst the offender population and those who experience homelessness.

However, research is emerging to show that children and young people in care can have very positive experiences of school if they are supported effectively to reach their full potential academically and socially.[2] The purpose of this report is to share practice in selected South Tyneside schools that is contributing to improved outcomes and school experiences for children and young people in care.

In 2017, South Tyneside Virtual School (VS) collaborated with UCL Institute of Education to deliver a second programme of Promoting the Achievement of Looked after Children (PALAC) with five schools in the local authority (LA). This report presents an account of the programme, including the activities undertaken by the participants and the outcomes of the programme to date for pupils in care and staff in the participating schools.

1 DfE (2017). Children looked after in England (including adoption) year ending 31 March 2017. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf.
2 Carroll, C. and Cameron, C. (2017). *Taking Action for Looked After Children in School.* London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

What is PALAC?

PALAC is a knowledge exchange programme that seeks to support practice in schools to improve outcomes for students in care. It originated as a result of the dearth of evidence available to support schools in developing practice for a group of children and young people who continue to underachieve both academically and subsequently in adult life. At its core is the collaborative relationship that exists between practitioners in school and university researchers to seek to improve our collective understanding of how students in care can thrive in school. As a knowledge exchange programme, PALAC places considerable emphasis on the generation of evidence from practice. The programme promotes evidence-informed practice in schools and the structure of the programme itself is based on the current understanding of how best to support professional learning and development in schools.

PALAC began in 2014 and is now in its third year: it engages schools and VS in a collaborative six-month programme through access to research findings, a school audit tool and regular support from facilitators with research and school practitioner backgrounds. Participants have the opportunity to share and evaluate their findings at the end of the six months. The PALAC team links with an LA to support the development of teacher practice in a more systemic way and to help ensure that learning from the programme can be sustained once the formal PALAC programme comes to an end.

The PALAC programme has identified seven evidence-informed domains around which schools can focus professional development and learning:

- **Supporting emotional development and wellbeing**
- **Raising and monitoring attainment**
- **Supporting learning**
- **School environment**
- **Effective deployment of staff**
- **Supporting equality and diversity**
- **Working with carers and other professionals.**

Schools focus their PALAC projects around one or two domains that are most relevant to their settings.

Case Studies

St Joseph's Catholic Academy
The impact of a Student Support Centre

Background

Increasingly, schools are developing attachment aware practices to support children and young people's emotional needs and development.[3] Alongside staff professional learning and adaptations to school procedures, such as whole school behaviour policies, the physical environment of a school should also be considered as part of a review of attachment aware practices. The physical environment can make an important contribution in helping to 'hold' the emotional lives of a children and young people. Louise Bomber describes very clearly how school life can be a daily challenge for some pupils in care and that the provision of a safe base offers a familiar place for students and can provide an anchor from which to face these daily challenges.[4] A safe base also requires the presence of a familiar, knowledgeable and skilled adult with whom young people can work and interact if such a resource is going to have a meaningful and long-lasting impact. It is through the ongoing experience and maintenance of these relationships with the secure adults, that a pupil can start to make lasting changes to their lives. A recent national survey of 219 practitioners in English settings across the age range, reported the use of a 'safe space' as one of the most common approaches to supporting pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties.[5] However, despite the popularity of the approach, there is little empirical evidence that specifically addresses the efficacy and contribution of such an approach to the education and wellbeing of pupils, including those in care.

St Joseph's Catholic Academy in Hebburn had set up a safe space called the Student Support Centre (SSC) in 2016 (Figure 1). The room was zoned into different areas including areas for group work, individual study computer zone and a sofa area and was staffed full time by Beverley Foden, a teaching assistant at the school. Originally designed as a safe space to be used as and when needed, the Centre had already developed an 'offer' of:

3 Attachment Aware Schools: https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/.
4 Bomber, L. (2011). *What About Me? Inclusive Strategies to Support Pupils with Attachment Difficulties Make it Through the School Day.* Belper, Derbyshire: Worth Publishing.
5 Johnson, H., Psychologist, E., Carroll, J. M., & Bradley, L. (2017). *SEN Support: A Survey of Schools and Colleges.* Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/628629/DfE_SEN_Support_Survey_Report.pdf.

- **Open at all times to pupils in care when needed**
- **Providing a safe space for pupils refusing to attend school**
- **A reduced timetable for pupils who are struggling with attending all lessons**
- **A place for pupils who may have suffered a 'crisis'**
- **Support for pupils with medical conditions**
- **Support with integration after exclusion**

The purpose of the PALAC project, led by Helen Hall, the school SENCo and DT, was to investigate methods of gathering empirical data that demonstrated the contribution and impact of the SSC for pupils and staff.

What did the school do?

The team introduced the following methods of data collection in order to evaluate the contribution and impact of the SCC for pupils and staff:

I. **A monitoring sheet was used to record who, when, why and for how long the Centre was used by pupils over a term. This was sensitively completed by Beverley as pupils came or when they left the Centre.**
II. **Pupil views were gathered via the 'pot of gold' where they could write down their thoughts about the Centre, how it had helped them and how it might be improved (Figure 2).**
III. **The perspectives from heads of year and Beverley were collected**
IV. **Relevant school data such as attendance and behaviour were analysed.**

Figure 1: Student Support Centre

Outcomes for young people and school staff

Feedback from the pupils identified the following benefits of the Centre

Feel safe	*Can chill out*
Take the pressure off	*Can calm down*
Think about problems without hassle from peers	*Can do work in silence*

From the staff perspective the following practices were important:

- **To have a specific member of staff allocated**
- **For pupils to be escorted to the Centre by staff**
- **Timetables on the wall**
- **A large space with different zoned areas**
- **Art therapy/ Lego / building therapy**
- **10 minute get together game at the end of the day**
- **Feelings board**
- **Displays by the pupils**
- **Pupil views in the 'pot of gold'**
- **Pupils not to experience extended periods in the room**
- **Small team of staff deciding who could access the room**
- **Have all work sent from teachers to ensure pupils did not miss out**
- **Work with students on integration and exit strategies.**

Implications for practice and research

Apart from the resource implications, senior leadership teams can be reluctant to establish a safe space due to fears that it might end up becoming a place of punishment rather than a proactive, evidence-informed response to supporting a range of pupils at different times in their school life. Moreover, such a space is not always seen as compatible with a whole school positive behaviour approach and high quality teaching and learning in the classroom. However, the St Joseph's case study shows that when a centre is predicated on a clear rationale and educational philosophy, is fully resourced, has clear protocols in place for use and is regulalry monitored and evalauated in terms of pupil outcomes and resources, it has the potential to make a posiitve contribution to achievement and wellbeing.

Figure 2: Pupil views via the 'pot of gold'

There is much theoretical research and practitioner support for the potential benefits of safe bases in schools. However, the short and long term impact of safe bases in schools has yet to be empirically investigated in depth and is an area for future research. It would be a challenge to subject the use of a safe space to any form of experimental research study. However, it would be possible to use a variety of data collection methods, as demonstrated in this case study, across settings, where the findings could inform the wider research literature.

Mortimer Community College
Making PEPs work for pupils in care in the short and long term

Background

Many of us adults will have kept in our attics (or our parents' attics) our school reports. As time passes, they become a record of (for good or bad) a major part of our childhood and youth. For children and young people in care and especially those who experience many placement and/or school moves, having ready access to this 'memory box' is more challenging. The PEP, held centrally by the Virtual School (VS), has the very real potential to become more than a plan with targets but a meaningful opportunity to 'listen to children, record their hopes and worries and clearly show their stated aspirations' and in doing so act as a form of 'collected memory' of each child's education.[6] Many care leavers report experiencing difficulties with a sense of identity as adults, partly as a result of their experiences growing up but also complicated by the fact that they often have little that is tangible, such as, for example, objects, reports and photos from their past.

Not only do PEPs have the potential to contribute to future wellbeing, the PEP and the meeting with a pupil can contribute to wellbeing on every occasion that they are completed. Children and young people seek 'recognition' from their relationships (as do adults) and the PEP provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate that recognition and to show the child or teenager that they are cared for, respected and valued. If viewed in this context, it is not too difficult to imagine the immediate and long-term impact for pupil wellbeing of a rushed and bureaucratic PEP experience.

Nevertheless, there still remains research to be conducted in schools as to how better

6 Department for Education (2011). The introduction of personal education plans for looked after children. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/looked-after-children-0.

support the PEP process. This case study presents an account of how Amy Maddison, the Student Support Officer at Mortimer Community College in South Shields, led a PALAC project to bring consistency in implementation of PEPs and in the experience of the process for pupils in care.

What did the school do?

The school took the decision that Amy as Student Support Officer would take a leading role in coordinating and chairing all PEPs across the school for pupils in care (including those pupils from outside of the LA). Previously, PEPs had been completed by year leaders which had resulted in variation in the implementation and quality of PEPs. As a new area of responsibility for Amy, a colleague from the VS chaired a PEP meeting at Mortimer to model a 'good' PEP meeting and met afterwards to reflect on the process, discuss the content of a PEP and go through the checklist used by the VS to support quality assurance of PEPs across South Tyneside. Amy also attended external training on PEPs offered by the VS.

The next step was to schedule PEPs for all pupils around the same time to have specific times across the school year where the profile of pupils in care was regularly brought to the attention of staff. One reason for this was that a lack of consistency in in the quality of assessment data had been identified as an area for development and Amy was able to have these discussions with colleagues. During this window, Amy met with all the pupils concerned to gather their views on achievements, progress and relevant targets for next steps.

Outcomes for pupils and staff

Towards the end of the year a SWAN (strengths, weaknesses, achievements and next steps) analysis was completed by Amy and the DT to review the progress of the project to date and the VS returned data and feedback from their quality assurance review of the PEPs. Six of the seven PEPs that year achieved the quality assurance top grade from the VS. The one PEP that did not achieve the top grade was the one PEP meeting not chaired by Amy. Feedback from the VS included a recognition of the inclusion of SMART targets, comprehensive plans for pupils and the active involvement of pupils in the process.

The findings from the SWAN analysis identified improved communication and relationships with colleagues on the education of pupils in care. Class teachers were now more open to the importance and contributions of discussions around teaching and learning, including progress data prior to the PEP meeting. This element of planning was helped by the fact that Amy had developed sufficient knowledge to challenge staff on the rigour of targets and practice if necessary. However, it was recognised that setting meaningful and robust targets was an ongoing learning process for all staff involved. Finally, the change in the process had allowed Amy, as well as the DT, to develop stronger relationships with the pupils in care and have an overview of their progress.

Implications for practice and research

OFSTED in 2016 reported that the quality of PEPs, from inspections across England, were found to be inconsistent in nearly half of local authorities with PEPs not up to date, lacking in SMART targets and in ambition on behalf of the children and young people in care.[7] This case study from Mortimer College shows the impact that one coordinator of PEPs (other than the DT) can have in leading to better quality and implementation by the school and more consistent experiences on the part of the young people. Regular communication between practitioners was identified as central to the process. It was also clear that PEPs in themselves can be a mechanism through which class teachers take part in active and on-going CPD to improve teaching and learning for pupils in care. The PALAC team at school reported, that being involved in an external programme like PALAC gave the project more status in school and helped to ensure its success.z

If relationships and recognition are integral to wellbeing and development, we need to consider opportunities strategically across the school year as well as from day to day, to demonstrate (openly and obliquely) how important and valued the young person is within the school community. The PEP process is perhaps the most obvious opportunity but there are many other examples such as some schools in the PALAC project introducing their 'Pledge' to pupils in care and include, for example, work experience, residential trips and tutoring. Many children and young people in care can clearly articulate their aspirations and the corresponding support needed. For others, this is a skill that needs time and space to develop and stands a much better chance of happening if the pupil believes that the PEP process is valued by the school.

PEPs are one of the least researched areas within the field. Longitudinal studies that investigated and tracked the relationship between PEPs and pupil outcomes would be a complex study but one that would provide empirical data on a process that is predominantly based on some theoretical and practical foundations. In the short term, greater understanding and guidance on writing SMART targets would help to strengthen the process.

7 OFSTED (2016). The report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2016. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/574464/Ofsted_social_care_annual_report_2016.pdf.

Whitburn Church of England Academy
Supporting transitions

Background

Findings from research indicate that both placement and school changes are risk factors in terms of educational outcomes and wellbeing for pupils in care. In a study of 7852 year 11 pupils in care in 2013 in England, one in ten of the group had experienced ten or more placement changes during their time in care.[8] Just 17 per cent of the year 11 cohort had lived in one foster placement. Moreover, findings from a Swedish study highlighted the prevalence of placement breakdown in adolescence. A sample of 136 foster children, in long-term placements, born in one region between 1980–1992 and followed until eighteen years old showed that one in four placements, where the child had been in the same family for four years on his/her twelfth birthday, broke down in adolescence.[9] The median age for breakdown was fourteen with the child having lived more than ten years in the same foster home – more than three-quarters of his or her life.

Pupils will have different degrees of apprehension and anxiety as they experience and respond to these major transitions, even if they are at the request of the pupil. To date, there has been very little research as to what schools can do to support children and young people during a placement and/or change in school. However, it is possible to look to other areas in education for guidance. The first area is evidence drawn from research, practice and policy on 'managed school moves' which endorse 'good' moves that:

- **are transparent, with all those involved having an awareness of what is happening;**
- **ensure that pupils and their parents/ carers should be listened to throughout the process of arranging, implementing and reviewing a move;**
- **provide support for the child/young person and their family/carers throughout the process;**
- **ensure good communication between the initial and receiving school and**
- **should be planned as a positive step in the life of a child/young person.[10]**

8 Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). *The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data.*

9 Vinnerljung, B., Sallnäs, M., & Berlin, M. (2017). Placement breakdowns in long‐term foster care – a regional Swedish study. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(1), 15–25.

10 Bagley, C., & Hallam, S. (2016). Young people's and parent's perceptions of managed moves. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 21(2), 205–227.

The second area is that of research in school transition between primary and secondary schools. McLellan & Gatton (2015), drawing on occupational psychological theory and research, identified four stages to transition – preparation stage, initial school encounters, adjustment phase and stabilisation. In addition, and in many ways complementary to the stages concept of transition was Rice et al.'s (2015) identification of a successful transition consisting of pupils being supported to function well in two areas.[11] The first was being academically and behaviourally involved in school and the second was for pupils to feel a sense of belonging to the school. At secondary school, the research team found that transition strategies were focused around six main themes including: information sharing; social needs support; environmental support; friendship monitoring; extended induction activities and home information gathering.

Aware of the challenges of changing foster and school placements, Deborah Smith and John Crowe, Deputy Headteachers at Whitburn Church of England Academy in South Tyneside, wanted to investigate how to improve systems and practice for:

I. **Pupils in care already at Whitburn who moved to another school and**

II. **Pupils at Whitburn who experienced a change in foster care placement but remained at the school.**

What did the school do?

The first task was to write a protocol for supporting a school placement change. Often, the reality of school moves for pupils in care is that they can happen with little warning for all involved. However, Whitburn had the opportunity to implement the protocol with a pupil in the autumn term for a move in the new year. The protocol (Figure 3) drew on the managed moves school literature and models for supporting transition.

For the second element of the project, Deborah and John collaborated to design and implement a support protocol for pupils in school who were experiencing a change in foster placement. Although schools are usually not as closely involved in placement changes as, for example, social workers, it is important that schools have an awareness and understanding of what a pupil might be experiencing at this time and what proactive and constructive support might look like.

Support included

- **daily verbal liaison with new carers,**
- **regular liaison with the pupil concerned and ensuring effective use of Pupil Premium to meet bespoke needs**
- **ensuring a quiet space was available in school to access whenever needed**
- **ensuring a key adult was always available if needed.**

11 Rice et al. (2015). Identifying factors that predict successful and difficult transitions to secondary school http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/STARS_report.pdf.

Phase	Actions (pupil, carers, current school and receiving school)
Preparation	Profile of the child/young person prepared to include up-to-date assessment of their academic, social and emotional needs; should include a full list of strategies and interventions that have been attempted, including information about what has worked; why the pupil might benefit from the move; details of any external agencies that have been involved; and the pupil's own views as to their social, emotional and learning needs Discuss with all: • additional support that might be needed, including homework, • how relationships with current and new peers will be maintained and initiated Arrange familiarisation visits to receiving school Receiving school to send a carer prospectus (modified school prospectus for carers if available) Agree with pupil and carers information the pupil wishes to share in the receiving school Receiving school to share assessment data and PEP targets with relevant new staff Receiving school to allocate a key worker • Regular weekly contact with foster family to keep them informed of developments • School planner to include rules and expectations • Move to take place to agreed timetable • No more than one week out of school • Induction timetable shared with pupil and family/carers • Both schools to agree 'indicators' of a successful transition and how this will be reported
Initial (first two weeks) in school	Daily check-ins with pupil and carers Provision and agreed use of a safe/quiet space Allocation of a 'buddy' for support around school
Adjustment (first term)	Monthly check-ins with pupil and carers Review of targets/support provided Emphasis on relationship building
Stabilisation (terms 2–3)	Review of targets/support provided Proactive/preventative support to anticipate any issues early Keeping open channels of communication

Figure 3: Supporting school placement changes model

Outcomes for pupils and staff

A year on, the pupil who moved schools made a very good transition and is making progress in the receiving school. Pupils who experienced changes in foster placements did so without any negative consequences or impact in school attendance or progress – two indicators that the greater awareness and support provided by the school might have had an effect.

Implications for practice and research

Transitions in the lives of all children and young people can be challenging. Children and young people in care will generally experience more transitions, many of which are potentially traumatic in nature. A change in school includes the loss of familiar adults, the loss of a physical place and usually loss of some friendships, and therefore might result in increased feelings of anxiety. What the Whitburn case study shows is the importance of schools:

- **taking a longitudinal approach to transition;**
- **planning for the different stages of transition;**
- **offering bespoke support based on pupil and carer voices**
- **providing stability for pupils whilst building up their capacity to respond to change gradually.**

The bespoke element is fundamental as pupils will experience the school and/or placement changes differently. This approach will inevitably draw on school resources but may well help to prevent a poor start to a new school or foster placement with inevitable consequences for the pupil, foster family and school.

From a research perspective transitions for pupils in care is another subject area in need of focus. There are many different transitions in their school life but it is clear from studies that adolescence and the move from KS3 to KS4 is a particularly vulnerable period for foster placement changes, even for children and young people who have been in stable placements since a very young age.[12] Perhaps we should not be surprised by this when we consider the impact of adolescence for all young people, but more knowledge is required as to how schools might work with carers and pupils to anticipate and plan for this potentially vulnerable period.

12 Vinnerljung, B., Sallnäs, M., & Berlin, M. (2017). Placement breakdowns in long-term foster care – a regional Swedish study. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(1), 15–25.

Bamburgh School and West Boldon Primary School
Supporting social and emotional development in primary aged pupils with Sunshine Circles

Background

Research from the past thirty years continues to explain the long-term impact of childhood experiences of abuse and neglect. Maltreatment can have negative consequences for academic achievement as well as implications for experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and stress disorder.[13] In addition, research is also emerging on the potential detrimental effects for physical and health development. Of the 70, 4440 children and young people in care in England as of March 2016, 60% were in care as a result of some form abuse or neglect.[14] Given the well-established link between trauma and abuse, it is not surprising that elevated rates of SEMH difficulties are considerably higher for children and young people in care compared to their peers.

The fact that not all adolescents and adults are affected by their traumatic childhood experiences has led researchers to investigate potential 'protective' factors including personal attributes, relationships and environmental conditions. For some children in care, the failure to develop secure relationships with a care giver in the early years hinders their ability to establish positive and lasting relationships in adolescence and adulthood. This in turn can result in erratic behaviour patterns in school. Increasingly, schools are implementing whole school,[15] group and individual attachment aware practices to help compensate for missed earlier experiences.

Sunshine Circles group activity is based on the Theraplay[16] approach and draws on the principles of attachment theory to strengthen the social and emotional development of primary-aged pupils through a series of 'playful, cooperative and nurturing' activities. After attendance at a two-day training course, school staff are qualified to lead Sunshine Circle groups in their setting supported by the programme handbook. This case study describes how Sunshine Circles was introduced and delivered in two schools in South Shields.

13 Widom, C. S. (2014). Long term consequences of child maltreatment. In *Handbook of Child Maltreatment* (pp. 225–247). Netherlands: Springer.
14 DfE (2016). Children looked after in England (including adoption) year ending 31 March 2016 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/556331/SFR41_2016_Text.pdf.
15 Attachment Aware Schools (2017). http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/.
16 Theraplay (2017). http://theraplay.org/index.php/sunshine-circles.

Bamburgh School

What did the school do?

Bamburgh School provides education for primary and secondary pupils who experience a broad spectrum of additional needs including medical, physical, SEMH and moderate learning difficulties. The PALAC project in school was led by Natalie Lascelles, the school counsellor and Darren Carter the school's occupational therapist.

After attending the two-day training, Natalie and Darren set up two groups of Sunshine Circles with four pupils in each, from year 2 to year 5. The groups included pupils from care backgrounds as well as those living with their biological families. The sessions took place once a week, for 20 to 30 minutes and were delivered by Natalie and Darren. Initially, the sessions took place in a classroom but successfully moved to an outside classroom which allowed more space for the different activities (Figure 4).

Sessions followed the programme outline but in a way that was responsive to the profiles and targets set for the individual pupils. Once consistent activity was 'no hurts', where the children and staff use cotton wool on one another's hands to symbolically heal any concerns of individual pupils. A typical session will also include, for example, singing and feeding each other (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Box of resources for a Sunshine Circle session

Figure 4: Sunshine Circles Venue

Outcomes for pupils and staff

After just a term of the programme, the pupils were responding positively and Natalie and Darren were able to observe progress by pupils in and across the sessions. For example, some pupils who had been reluctant to speak and fully participate in sessions at the start of the programme were fully participating by session five. Another pupil who had struggled with touch, gradually began to take part in the holding hands activities and sit near members of the group. Friendships that were established in the group extended to the playground. Those pupils who struggled with, for example, rules in the classroom were able to self-regulate emotions in the group. As part of pupil voice in school, the children in the two groups were asked to give feedback on their experiences. Six of the seven pupils who completed a supported questionnaire reported that they had enjoyed all of the sessions. Their favourite activities included singing the Sunshine Circles songs, feeding each other and the 'no hurts' exercise.

More than a year on from the start of the project, the school continues to run two weekly groups, with four pupils in each group, with a focus on those pupils who are in care but also expanded to include those children who display anxieties around social interaction. The team in the school continue to observe progress. After attending the sessions for a number of weeks, one pupil has started to interact more confidently with the male members of the group which had been a challenge beforehand. There have been positive friendships formed between peers who struggle to develop meaningful relationships. It has also been observed that members of the groups have become more relaxed when interacting in group peer environments. For example, a child who felt unable to perform a dance move during song time was able to do so three weeks into the sessions. The school plans to continue to deliver Sunshine Circles into a third year due to the progress observed since delivery began in 2016.

West Boldon Primary School

West Boldon is a one and a half form entry primary school in South Shields. The PALAC project was led by Stephen McCormack, SENCo, Elaine Askwith and Christine Clay, Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs). Stephen, Elaine and Christine wanted to investigate how Sunshine Circles might help to improve targeted behaviours for a group of children with a range of SEMH which included pupils in care, in SGO placements and recently adopted.

What did the school do?

In January 2017 the school introduced Sunshine Circles to 11 pupils across two groups. Pupils from years 1 to 6 attended the weekly sessions. The sessions were led by Elaine and Christine who had attended the two-day training offered to all schools by the VS across the authority. Each session lasted 20 to 30 minutes. Very quickly the staff observed immediate benefits for the pupils and in May 2017 introduced another five groups with 27 participating pupils. Each of the groups were predominantly made up of one age group from reception to year five. This has been further increased again to 30 children with 10 on a waiting list.

Outcomes for pupils and staff

Some of the changes in behaviour observed in the first two groups included repaired friendships, a cessation in self-harming and participating positively in the group despite exhibiting externalising behaviours across the rest of the school day. As with all interventions, it is not possible to claim that all of these changes were as a result of Sunshine Circles, but they occurred as the groups began and staff were sufficiently confident of the impact to introduce another five groups after just one term.

Implications for practice and research

To date the PALAC project has reported on three schools adopting and delivering Sunshine Circles, although more schools are implementing the programme in South Tyneside. All three projects have led to immediately observed changes and progress for pupils. The programme is a positive and rewarding experience for the practitioners involved. There are considerations for those schools thinking of adopting the programme. There is the initial cost in training fees and staff cover and, as with many programmes, it takes time for practitioners to know and feel competent in delivery. This is a consideration that is often overlooked when evaluating the impact of interventions in schools and in randomised control trials more generally.[17] This links with another challenge: that of target setting for each pupil and how to measure progress. This was the next step for Bamburgh and West Boldon now that they felt more competent in delivering the programme. Assessments such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) were not sensitive enough to capture all the progress being made by pupils.[18]

17 Mendive, S., Weiland, C., Yoshikawa, H. and Snow, C. (2016). Opening the black box: Intervention fidelity in a randomized trial of a preschool teacher professional development program. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 108 (1), 130.
18 SDQ: http://www.sdqinfo.com/.

Additional baseline and post intervention assessment would be needed, as well as offering sessions to children over a longer period of time for those that needed greater support. A final consideration was how to support transfer of learning from the Sunshine Circles group to the classroom and across the school day. Transfer of learning from a one-to-one or group context is an often overlooked factor, with an assumption that somehow this learning transfers 'naturally' from the intervention to whole class context – including academic as well as social and emotional interventions.

More widely, the social and emotional development of all students in a school, is in and of itself important and valued by school practitioners. This subject is also addressed in light of the theory and evidence that there will be impact on academic attainment and progress. Current findings from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Toolkit[19] now reports four months' additional academic progress as a result of social and emotional approaches. Research in this area is complex. Findings from research in schools and education more generally, can only ever show 'associations' and not causal links between a specific social and/or emotional intervention or programme and any subsequent increase in academic attainment. Furthermore, how long it might take to see any increase in academic attainment is yet not clear due, in large part, to the different variables in studies such as the child, school context and programme content and length. Nonetheless, further research would help to strengthen our understanding of how to take full advantage of social and emotional approaches to help improve academic attainment.

19 Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit/social-and-emotional-learning/.

South Tyneside Virtual School

Leading and embedding practice across a local authority, Sunshine Circles case study

Background

In 2016, 17 percent of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in England were identified with some form of SEMH difficulty.[20] It is estimated that approximately 70 percent of pupils in care have a SEN with SEMH the largest category. Moreover, schools report that this is a difficult area professionally and that they want to be informed of the evidence. However, a recent scoping review of whole school and targeted approaches to support pupils with SEMH found an emerging evidence base to support more effective provision for pupils with SEMH, but there remains, particularly at the group and individual level, a dearth of literature.[21] There is even less evidence available specifically evaluated in relation to pupils in care with SEMH.

In this context, the importance of having a strong theoretical foundation is imperative, such as the bio-psycho-social theoretical approach that proposes that our behavioural and emotional wellbeing through childhood and adult life is a consequence of continual reciprocity of interactions between our natural abilities and the context in which we live our lives. The model recognises that positive influences, such as social and emotional accommodations and support at school can be a force for meaningful change for pupils whilst acknowledging individual differences.

Once practitioners have decided a whole school approach and/or small group interventions there are other considerations to ensure successful outcomes. The first is the subject of programme fidelity – in other words, implementing a programme that adheres to the protocol defined by the programme authors. This means, for example, ensuring that the practitioners delivering the programme are sufficiently trained and supported, that the stipulated number and length of sessions are delivered (including full pupil attendance) and any specifically designed resources are used, to name just three. We know from research

20 DfE. 2016. Mental health and behaviour in schools edited by Department of Education. London.
21 Carroll, C., & Hurry, J. (2018). Supporting pupils in school with social, emotional and mental health needs: a scoping review of the literature. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 1–16.

(a review of 500 studies) that fidelity to programme implementation and outcomes are associated and that achieving good implementation increases the chances of programme success in statistical terms.[22]

Therefore, what is the role and contribution of a VS to support greater systemic and longitudinal practice across schools that supports pupils in care with SEMH? This was the question that Serena Middleton and Michelle Bland from South Tyneside VS wanted to investigate a part of the PALAC programme. Sunshine Circles, as an approach to support the social and emotional development of pupils in care, had been introduced to South Tyneside schools in 2015, with first schools delivering the programme in 2016. Aware of the challenges of delivering interventions in schools, Serena and Michelle wanted to establish a more consistent approach to the implementation and delivery of Sunshine Circles across schools in the authority and therefore increase the likelihood of better outcomes for pupils.

What did the Virtual School do?

The VS identified three strategic approaches to supporting implementation of Sunshine Circles across the authority. The first approach was to allocate responsibility for coordinating, monitoring and developing Sunshine Circles to two members of the team, namely Serena and Michelle. As practitioners in the VS they were well placed for this role in that they had knowledge of the pupils in care and schools delivering the programme. They had also delivered Sunshine Circles groups in schools which provided an in-depth knowledge of the programme and of the challenges with implementing it. The second action was to set up a Sunshine Circles practice network across the authority. This included practitioners in schools currently delivering the programme, those colleagues interested in the programme and multi-disciplinary colleagues including educational psychologists from North Tyneside who were experienced in the programme. The final action was to write an implementation guide for current and new practitioners which complemented the programme handbook. The guide included advice and support: why use Sunshine Circles; costs and resources; assessment; measuring the impact of Sunshine Circles and including parents/carers.

Outcomes for pupils and staff

The emphasis of the PALAC project was on staff development as opposed to pupil outcomes in this phase of the project. By the ends of the first year the practice network had over 15 members and the learning shared within the group had helped to build their confidence with implementing the programme. This knowledge was also used to inform the content of the implementation guide. One of the major concerns of the group was how to find a way to set targets and measure pupil progress that encapsulated the wide ranging and complex needs of pupils and which showed small steps in progress. Feedback from members of the network was that the SDQ and the Boxhall Profile had not always been sufficiently sensitive to demonstrate progress and the Children's Behaviour Checklist was too complex to administer. This led Serena and Michelle to develop a pre and post assessment tool based on the Early Years Foundation Stage profile areas but that could also be used with older aged primary pupils.

22 Durlak, Joseph A, and Emily P DuPre. 2008. Implementation matters: A review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology 41* (3-4), 327–350.

Feedback from practitioners who had received the implementation guide included:

This will be so useful, as I am starting to implement in school.

Thanks so much for this – I'm starting my group on Friday and it has been very helpful in my planning.

Implications for practice and research

One clear implication of this case study for practice is that implementing interventions effectively relies not just on the 'right approach with the right child' (which is a challenge in itself) but also factors relating to the fidelity of implementation. VS can play a strategic as well as an operational role in contributing to sustaining effective approaches in schools through championing evidence-informed approaches and providing long-term support in programme fidelity.

This does require a significant resource commitment on the part of any VS, but the potential rewards for practitioner development and ultimately pupil outcomes make it potentially a more cost effective commitment in the long term. Although pupil outcomes have been observed at an individual pupil level as documented in the Bamburgh and West Boldon case studies, one of the significant outcomes of the VS project has been the development of the assessment tool which can be used across all the schools thus allowing progress data to be recorded over time in each setting and across the authority. In this way the VS will develop its own evidence base for the efficacy of Sunshine Circles. Without the allocation of staff time and the subsequent practitioner network and development of the implementation guide, the chances of Sunshine Circles continuing to expand and embed in practice were far from certain.

Testing the efficacy of any programme in school presents considerable resource challenges, whether it is conducted as part of a mixed methods, a randomised or quasi randomised control trial. Moreover, funding for research rarely allows for follow up once the study is over. It is ultimately in the interest of pupils to investigate longitudinally the impact of different practices, pedagogies and specific interventions. VS are in many ways well placed to coordinate and monitor longitudinally the approaches to teaching and learning that best suit pupils in care and, as in the case of the South Tyneside VS case study in Sunshine Circles, the approach does not always have to involve large scale research studies to elicit meaningful knowledge and understanding.

South Tyneside Virtual School
Working with carers

Background

Research, including the large scale, longitudinal Effective Pre School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) study, indicates that no single educational influence acts as a 'magic bullet' that can overcome disadvantage. However, parental actions that provide a better home learning environment and also supportive educational environments can make a difference to children and young people's academic and other educational outcomes. The limited research that has been undertaken has shown that this the same for pupils in care.[23,24] Studies from the UK and US have demonstrated that higher educational aspirations on the part of carers were associated with better outcomes and carer involvement in a greater number of school activities predicted significant improvement in the pupils' average marks.[25] A research team from Norway investigated what foster carers could do to support successful academic outcomes from the perspective of 16 young adults who had studied in HE and 13 foster carers.[26] The findings highlighted the importance of the promotion of a feeling of belonging in the foster home, valuing education and providing order and structure in the lives of the young people.

In terms of specific interventions, an English paired reading literacy programme for children in care and their carers that required weekly liaison between teachers and carers demonstrated an average improvement of each child making progress of one year in just over four months.[27] Additionally, the average amount of progress made for each month the child participating in the intervention resulted in a reading

23 Cameron, C., Connolly, G. and Jackson, S. (2015). A Practical Guide to the Education of Children in Care: Learning Placements and Caring Schools JKP.
24 Cheung et al 2012; Cheung, C., Lwin, K. and Jenkins, J. M. (2012). Helping Youth in Care Succeed: Influence of Caregiver Involvement on Academic Achievement. Children and Youth Services Review, 34, 1092-1100.
25 Flynn, R., Tessier N. and D. Coulombe. (2012). Placement, Protective and Risk Factors in the Educational Success of Young People in Care: Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Analyses. European Journal of Social Work, 16 (1): 70-87.
26 Skilbred, D. T., Iversen, A. C., & Moldestad, B. (2017). Successful Academic Achievement Among Foster Children: What Did the Foster Parents Do? Child Care in Practice, 23(4), 356-371.
27 Osbourne, C., Alfano, J. and Winn, T. (2010). Paired Reading as a Literacy Intervention for Foster Children. Adoption & Fostering, 34, 17-26.

age increase by just below three months. The impact of literacy interventions can also extend beyond literacy skills alone – including reported increases in the children's confidence and interest in reading.[28] Not only do children get to spend one-on-one time with their carer, the interventions also facilitated partnership working, building the trust and confidence in the relationship between carers, teachers and social workers.[29] This was very much the findings of evaluations of The Letterbox Club project in England which sends parcels of literacy materials directly to children in care not only to encourage learning with their carers but to also focus their energy on engaging with and owning educational materials.

Finally, findings from the London Fostering Achievement Programme, a project that aimed to improve the confidence and skills of carers to engage with schools and make a positive contribution to the education of children in care, found positive results from the introduction of Education Champions who were employed for four hours per week by five of the LAs.[30] They were experienced foster carers, often with education experience, who worked with less experienced foster carers to boost their confidence around supporting educational needs by, for example, attending meetings with them, working with them and their foster child at home on reading or maths or helping them to navigate the educational system.

Three members of the VS team, Michael Bettencourt, Dr Emma Black and Vicky Borrell wanted to investigate how carers can contribute towards the learning of children in care. This included questions around the facilitators and barriers carers can experience in order to have a deeper understanding of how to support carers to implement strategies, behaviours, mind sets or ways of being that contribute towards learning in the home.

What did the Virtual School do?

In order to find out about the different perspectives, the team from the VS undertook three main activities.

The first activity, was to work with a focus group of five carers over a term to reflect on the different learning opportunities that can happen at home such as; reading; homework; planning a trip; shopping or making something together and to complete a diary (approximately five entries) which asked them to:

1. **Describe the activity**
2. **What did you feel when it was happening?**
3. **How did the activity go?**
4. **What helped or did not help with supporting the child?**
5. **Could you have done anything differently?**
6. **What are you going to do next?**

The second activity was a six-week programme with children in care run by the VS in collaboration with Headliners. Headliners (UK)[31] is a charity which gives young people a voice by using journalism and media as a tool for learning and exploring issues. Children were asked to investigate how they were supported to learn at home. They participated in a number of learning activities and were supported by the VS to interview foster carers and other LA staff. They worked with an artist practitioner

28 Griffiths, R. (2012). The Letterbox Club: An Account of a Postal Club to Raise the Achievement of Children aged 7 to 13 in Foster Care. Children and Youth Services Review, 34, 1101-1106.
29 Dymoke, S. and Griffiths, R. (2010). The Letterbox Club: the Impact on Looked-After Children and their Carers of a National Project Aimed at Raising Achievements in Literacy for Children aged 7 to 11 in Foster Care. Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 10, 52-60.
30 Sebba et al. (2016. Evaluation of The London Fostering Achievement Programme Final Report. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_fostering_achievement_evaluation_final_report.pdf.
31 Headliners UK. https://www.headliners.org/.

and created two characters and depicted learning at home through comic strips. They also created five models of the 'Ideal (Learning) Home.'

Finally, interviews took place with four experienced DTs from four very different school contexts (including primary, secondary and a special school). Teachers were asked to consider the attributes of foster carers where the care and support for children and young people had been very strong. The DTs were asked what the carers did or said to support the education of children in their care.

Outcomes for pupils, carers and staff

The pupils were able to articulate the practical things that supported them at home like a desk, computer, books and resources. They also demonstrated an emerging understanding of the principles of social pedagogy which was introduced to them through the learning activities. The comic strips were nuanced and demonstrated numerous examples of children getting alongside foster carers, discovering and learning together in a number of informal contexts. They articulated that learning was not confined to schools but understood it in its broadest sense and in the everyday.

Some of the main themes which emerged from the carers' focus group included the importance of adopting a solution-focused approach, being aware of and using various support networks and being attuned to the emotional needs of children and young people in care. The message from teachers echoed the emerging themes from the discussions in the foster carers' focus group. The more effectiver carers were described as pro-active and could not be distinguished from other parents. They attended every meeting that was required whatever their home circumstances. Their role was akin to a vocation and was characterised by professionalism and a personal commitment. The stronger foster carers were curious, unrelenting and were often described as the 'model' that DTs wanted for all of their parents.

Using the findings from the three different activities with the carers, pupils, children and from the evidence base, the team devised a 'checklist' for carers (Table 1). This was to be used as a basis for informing practice generally in schools and with carers but also as a quick reference tool during meetings with parents that could be used by practitioners in schools and in the VS and provided to carers for their own reference.

Table 1: Carer Education Checklist

Working with schools	Learning culture in the home
• Take part and contributing to Personal Education Plans meetings	• Talk about high expectations
• Attend parent/carer meetings	• Talk about high aspirations
• Attend school functions	• Study space
• Annual South Tyneside Virtual School Carers' Conference	• Study resources
• Carer school prospectus	• Discover together (let's find out)
	• Look for opportunities for learning in the every day

Sources of support/information	Learning activities
• Know your Virtual School contact	• Reading
• Does your LA have an Education Champion for foster carers?	• Homework
• The Letterbox Club	• Planning a trip
• Paired Reading	• Making something together
• Using Pupil Premium	• 'Remember when we …'
• Connexions Officer	• Shopping
• National Curriculum website	• A visit to …
• Other websites – e.g. Home Education UK	• Talking, listening …
• National Association of Virtual School Headteachers	• Discussing the film, book or TV programme watched together
• The Fostering Network	• Practical activities like gardening, fixing the car

Implications for practice and research

Carers regularly report that they would like to increase their knowledge and understanding of how to better support the education of children in their care. Findings from this case study show that schools and VS can be an important source of information and support for carers and that it is important for settings to take a proactive approach with carers, especially carers new to a school. Some schools, for example, aware of the bureaucratic demands on carers, have introduced a slimmed down school prospectus for carers which can be quickly referenced to support the transition of a child in care into a new school setting. It is in the interest of schools to work proactively with carers, even during settled periods, to in order to be aware of any early warning indicators that a pupil may be experiencing difficulties in their school and/or foster carer placement.

We know from research that behaviour difficulties, particularly in adolescence, are strongly associated with foster carer placement breakdown.[32] Therefore, research that focuses on how to strengthen links between foster placements and schools in the first instance might help to prevent breakdown or at the very least enable a more responsive and collaborative approach between foster carers and schools when difficulties arise.

32 Vinnerljung, B., Sallnäs, M., & Berlin, M. (2017). Placement breakdowns in long-term foster care – a regional Swedish study. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(1), 15–25.

Conclusion

The participants in the PALAC programme implemented a variety of changes in their schools at pupil, practitioner and school levels. At the pupil level, changes included, for example, improvements in social and emotional development as well as academically. At practitioner and school levels, some of the participants used the PALAC programme as a springboard in their school to support the education of other vulnerable pupils as well as those in care.

One of the aims of the PALAC programme is to continue to support developments in practice after the programme has ended through ongoing review of the audit and action plan. The schools in this PALAC programme have continued with their focus on the education of children and young people in care and in doing so are ensuring that they are helped to reach their potential and simultaneously contribute to an emerging evidence base for current practice.

Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children (PALAC) is a knowledge exchange programme that aims to support the development of practice in schools and to expand the evidence base to ultimately improve outcomes for children in care.

For further information on the programme please contact:

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