Improving the Educational Attainment of Looked after Children ~ Kinship Care

1. Every child in kinship care is capable of success in learning and in life, yet too many are let down educationally by the system that is supposed to look after them. There are several factors which cause this situation:

1.1 in the first place, of course, a number of children in care have been through a lot prior to being taken into care, and this can create barriers to learning;

1.2 secondly, the school system itself does not do enough to help looked after children catch up and keep up – either because schools do not know that children are in care or because they do not know what can be done to accelerate their learning;

1.3 thirdly, children are embarrassed to admit to their teacher, or their peer group, that they have been taken into care and are living with a relative, (usually their grandparents), because of their parent/s unsuitability; [this usually involves their parent/s involvement with alcohol / drug addictions].

2. Kinship carers believe the current levels of educational attainment can be transformed if the system is changed so that the joint efforts of all those who care about the learning of these children can have maximum outcome and effect.

We, as kinship carers, propose therefore that the fundamental elements of that system should be:

2.1 in every local authority, a senior official, should rigorously track the schooling of every child in care, making sure that schools, whether primary or secondary, are aware when they have a child or children in care on their register;

2.2 the school, itself, should actively monitor the child or children’s performance and if there is cause for concern, or signs of under-attainment, then this should be brought to the attention of the kinship carer and the child’s social worker. A plan of action should be implemented to try and rectify the situation before despair sets in and the problem spins out of control;

2.2 kinship children feel isolated in school where the majority of children live and are encouraged, at home, by their natural parents. This special bond, “natural-child-to-parents”, is unfamiliar to a kinship child as they work through their feelings of rejection. Learning must be sympathetically handled by the class teacher especially if the kinship child has been removed from one school and sent to another to assist the kinship carer in their guardianship of the child.

3. There are around c.20,000 kinship care children in Scotland at any one time, although this is a changeable group as more and more children are taken into care and placed within a kinship care placement. Obviously this type of care is more favourable and offers more stability than other forms of care, but many children have experienced serious mental health issues, which are not of their own making. These kinship care children do not automatically receive access to proper treatments or therapists to deal with the abusive affects which they have suffered, resulting in their poor concentration and lack of educational attainment.
4. The truth is though, (and another factor adding to the quandary), is that many kinship children do not receive a good quality learning experience because of financial constraints placed upon their carer. Kinship carers are generally not earning and therefore cannot contribute, or subsidise, outlays for school projects and extra-curricular activities. Music lessons (plus the musical instrument), art appreciation/gallery visits, field trips/history and science outings, the list is endless, all influence a child’s ability to appreciate the willingness to learn. Children are very perceptive and deeply affected by not being able to get involved in the same activities as their peer group and this too affects their motivation to learn.

5. Although some kinship children do well, their average attainment is far worse than that of their peer group who live with their parents and are encouraged by their parents to achieve.

6. By the end of the fourth year at secondary school the achievement of a kinship child sharply declines and the gap between the kinship child and their peer group increases.

7. With the right supports in place, every child in kinship care is capable of progressing, achieving and succeeding. Taking children into care is suppose to improve their life chances, but still their outcomes remain unacceptably low because of lack of direct financial investment in a kinship child’s welfare and education.

8. As a result of the problems that have affected the lives of kinship children they could sometimes exhibit challenging behaviour. Bad behaviour and poor attendance could be improved with “good lessons” suited to the damaged child’s ability to encourage their good attendance. If these “good lessons” are provided daily, and the wider barriers to learning addressed, with perhaps encouragement and rewards for positive behaviour, this would reduce exclusions and should in turn improve the attainment of a kinship child.

9. Academically-focused study support could be directly related to the core curriculum, and could be focused on raising standards of attainment. It might include activities such as homework clubs, peer education programmes, book clubs, mentoring or catch-up sessions delivered by enthusiastic subject specialists.

10. Children in care are more likely than their peers to value the consistent personal support and attention of an “identified adult” or “mentor” who is able to understand the issues facing the child and provide advice, support and high expectations over time. Feeling valued and supported by an adult is key to promoting attainment amongst looked after children. An adult, or mentor, in every school should be concerned for the welfare and achievement of children in care so that every child feels supported, appreciated and valued.

A designated teacher should be:

10.1 responsible for co-ordinating strategies to raise the attainment of the child or young person, in particular agreeing a high quality Personal Education Plan (PEP) and creating opportunities for the kinship child, or young person, to access additional resources for learning, particularly one-to-one tuition.

10.2 a central point of contact for a kinship child to provide the link between the child, the kinship carer, social worker, senior local authority official and other children’s services.

10.3 responsible for understanding the wider needs of the looked after child or young person;

10.4 the designated teacher should agree a Personal Education Plan for each child in care;
10.5 the key mechanism for addressing the needs of the child or young person and improving their attainment is the PEP.

10.6 The key element about a PEP is that it should set high expectations of rapid progress and put in place the additional support the child or young person needs in order to succeed. The designated teacher is responsible for working with social workers to develop the PEP. Each child’s social worker should be aware of the child’s educational needs and be involved in decisions on how these should be addressed.

The designated teacher should make sure that the child's carer is consulted throughout.

10.7 The preferences of the child should be taken into account when producing the PEP involving the young person in the design of their learning. This helps them to take ownership of their learning goals, and promotes confidence in the classroom. The designated teacher should ensure that the PEP is written, implemented, reviewed regularly and the impact assessed.

10.8 Of course, social workers and schools do not work in isolation; carers should contribute to improving attainment by creating a suitable environment for study, instilling a positive stance to learning, and maintaining regular contact with the school.

11. In conclusion therefore, the key to success is the multi combination of secure schooling, a senior official from the local authority tracking the progress of all kinship children, personalised supports at school and a kinship carer who receives an appropriate, realistic level of help and assistance that they so rightly deserve.

With this system in place, we believe that every child in care could and should flourish and in time achieve their full potential.

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