Case study

STRIVE*- a targeted programme to improve educational outcomes for looked after young people in Aberdeen

Following a year of research and development Barnardo’s Scotland recently received confirmation from the Aberdeen City Education Culture and Sport Service of an agreement to work in partnership to test the Strive* programme.

Strive* is a ‘booster programme’ for children and young people aged between 11 years and 16 years who are ‘looked after’ at home or away from home and are struggling with mainstream school provision in terms of attainment, attendance and/or being at risk of exclusion.

Programme aims
1. Engage young people in learning and improve educational attainment.
2. Stem the flow of looked after school leavers entering negative destinations.
3. Champion a more holistic approach to the needs of looked after children amongst present and future frontline staff.

Young people
The programme has been designed to unlock the potential of young people, rather than simply respond to pre-identified limitations. STRIVE* will achieve this by offering:
- Out-of-school hours coaching which seeks to engage young people in individual, group and family activities which are inspirational, fun and structured in order to promote learning and achievement.
- A £500 learning fund for each young person which adds a freedom and focus to the coaching relationship and gives the relationship resources to make change happen.
- One-to-one sessions with specific school focus. Connecting success and motivation from out-of-school hours learning to school performance. A shoulder to shoulder approach to supporting young people to navigate challenges and barriers to educational attainment.

The family
STRIVE* uses a specific tool to draw in the wider family network in the successful learning of each child. The ‘Family Learning Signature’ provides a baseline for understanding learning strengths and challenges and encompassing the prevailing cultural, behavioural, environmental and resource conditions within a young person’s system.
Integrating care and education
STRIVE* aims to make a contribution to the better integration of the care and education of looked after children which is necessary if we are to bridge the attainment and opportunity gap. STRIVE* will achieve this by:

- Recruiting social work and teaching students as coaches to support young people on a one-to-one basis and to facilitate activities. By offering this experiential learning opportunity to students we can encourage a more holistic approach to the care and education of looked after young people.
- Encouraging social work and teaching students to develop an appreciation of the importance of school for this often marginalised group of young people. STRIVE* will expect coaches to gain a sophisticated awareness and understanding of what it means to be ‘looked after’ in terms of the environmental and situational barriers to learning which may be faced by looked after children.
- Paying coaches a Professional Development Bursary to help ensure commitment and longevity of the coaching relationship.

Supporting evidence for Strive*
Our evidence review generated five clear themes that were ultimately incorporated into the design of Strive*.

The five themes listed below were drawn from seven studies of the views of looked after young people on the subject of their educational experience. All seven studies included were published within the last 10 years. They were chosen on the basis that they were recurrent across the samples who participated in the studies.

1. Children and young people often have to deal with low expectations and negative stereotyping from teachers, social workers and carers as a direct result of their looked after status. The attitudes of adults working with looked after children towards their education are crucial to supporting learning and achievement.

2. Good communication and collaboration between social work and teaching staff is necessary for adequate educational support for looked after children. Experiences of stigma and intrusion suggest a need for a sensitive and individualised approach to information sharing.

3. Young people value the encouragement they receive from consistently supportive individuals who take an interest in their learning and achievements.

4. Like most young people the influence of parents and families on the attitudes and motivation of looked after children to achieve are highly influential, even in cases where parents have been absent from their lives for some time.
5. Young people want the same opportunities for leisure time activities such as cultural pursuits and sports as their more advantaged peers. It is important to them that their achievements are recognised and acknowledged by the adults in their lives.

The following is a summary of evidence which informed the design of STRIVE*:

- High achieving looked after children are differentiated from those who do less well by greater self-efficacy. (Jackson & Martin, 2002)
- Self-efficacy, as a characteristic, is a strong predictor of success in later life including educational attainment. (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009)
- Self-efficacy is key to motivation which is strongly related to success and the belief that success is possible. (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001)
- Dozens of studies in the United States have emphasised the 'powerful impact' of providing out-of-school hours learning opportunities for young people within well structured programmes aimed at supporting positive learning outcomes including academic achievement. Successful programmes offer opportunities to ‘practice new skills through hands–on, experiential learning … which compliment, but do not replicate, in school learning’. 

…balancing academic support with a variety of engaging, fun, and structured extra-curricular activities that promote youth development in a variety of real-world contexts appears to support and improve academic performance.

- Giving young people the support to make choices about how to manage and spend a personal allowance for OSHL activities could act as an incentive to participate as well as consolidating ownership of learning and promoting self efficacy.
- Gilligan argues that specifically mentoring the talents and interests of young people could make an important contribution in terms of the progress and resilience of those young people.
- The quality of the mentoring relationship as perceived by young people is crucial. The relationship needs to be one based on helping and supporting as opposed to policing. Young people can disengage if a conflict of roles occurs with the mentor perceived as acting for authority and not on behalf of the young person.

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5 Ibid
• Longevity of the relationship is crucial. Mentoring relationships of short duration could do ‘more harm than good’ and ‘the longer the mentoring relationship, the better the outcome for young people.’\textsuperscript{8} Successful programmes in the USA usually employ paid mentors. Remuneration may incentivise mentors to ‘perform better than volunteer mentors’ and may encourage longer term commitment.\textsuperscript{9}

• Frequent and regular contact with the young person which should encompass communication with parents and carers to encourage their support.\textsuperscript{10}

Moving forward
In designing new programmes, such as STRIVE*, Barnardo’s Scotland employs a five step development process that includes a pre-pilot test. This test enables us to prototype programme delivery and make any adjustments prior to conducting a fully evaluated pilot. In March 2011 we secured funding to run a one year test of Strive* in Aberdeen. We are currently looking at sources of funding for the pilot phase of the programme.

\textsuperscript{8} Hall, J. (2003) Mentoring and Young People: A Literature Review, SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow
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