Schools: partners in care, releasing potential

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Synopsis of article

Schools offer more than a formal curriculum. Learning happens within relationships where there is trust and positive regard. This article looks at the particular vulnerability in education of young people in the care system, by examining international evidence and an exploratory study undertaken in Ireland. It highlights the potential for education to make a positive difference, through understanding the nurturing role of education, relationship-building, and partnership between schools and foster carers. Gathering data on children in state care within the school system would be a first step towards recognition of their educational rights, and towards addressing the specific risks to the achievement of their potential in life.

Introduction

'School can offer many opportunities to young people in the care system and play a central role in personal and social development. Quite apart from its specific educational role, school may offer a whole host of opportunities that help to support the social development of the young people in care.' Gilligan (2009:48)

I sometimes feel dismayed, as a school principal and a foster carer, on hearing other foster carers speak about how some schools add to pressures on a foster placement that is already fraught with difficulties. However, I also appreciate the challenges for schools in keeping children and young people safe and why they respond to aggressive, dangerous or disruptive behaviour with suspensions, restricted timetables or even exclusion. Of course, it is heartening when the converse is true – when schools and foster carers work together to turn around the life chances of a young person who has experienced trauma, loss, abuse or neglect.

This article will look at some research into the experiences of children in care in education, what school has to offer in supporting children in care, and how shared and mutual understanding, and consistent partnerships between schools and foster carers can make a positive difference to these children's lives. It will argue that the lack of coherent policies on the educational care of children and young people in state care in

Ireland is a failure to recognise the responsibilities of the educational system, and that it also overlooks the potential of teachers and schools to contribute to meeting their needs. It is outside the scope of this article to make any recommendations, but rather it will reiterate the demands, made in 2013 by the then Ombudsman for Children, Emily Logan, who called for data-gathering on education and young people in care in order to formulate coherent policy.

Care in education

Feeley (2013) outlines the history of the State's failures in relation to the education of children in care. Her research, carried out with survivors of institutional abuse, showed that they were most likely to have had their literacy needs met when they had the support, albeit brief, remote or sporadic, of someone who cared. Not only did these schools fail to educate the children in their care, they failed to care, and it was precisely the failure to care in most fundamental ways that impeded many children in their learning.

It would be great to believe that educational experiences and outcomes have significantly improved for children in our care system now that the vast majority, 92 per cent, are in foster care in family settings, with almost one third of these in the care of relatives. However, there is no room for complacency, as international evidence points to the significant educational vulnerabilities of children in care, who indeed can present many challenges at school.

'Teachers are important players in a person's care life and how they care matters in terms of how and if people learn. If the focus on education is on performance, measured increasingly by limited indicators, and teachers are tested through their children's performance measured on a narrow range of cognitive skills, then care is peripheralised. There is little incentive for educators to attend to care needs of those who are unable to learn when such care will not appear on a performance indicator.' (Lynch, K. in Feeley, 2014:2)

As a teacher, I argue that it is not so true that there is little incentive to attend to the care needs of children – teachers are in fact compelled to do so, for children cannot and will not learn unless their social and emotional needs are being met. However, it is a fact that there is little official acknowledgement or resourcing of this. While there is a growing awareness of the importance of well-being in schools, nowhere in the assessment of learning outcomes is there mention of the measurement or tracking of 'learning care'

outcomes. 'Learning care' is the interest, competence, confidence and love to support a student to succeed in learning. Measuring formal attainment on standardised tests is important but measuring 'value added' to where the child started from in terms of their overall well-being, social skills and interpersonal relationships is also significant. This is accounted for as much through quality listening and observation as it is by assessment (Bomber, 2007).

Teachers may know little about the circumstances of a child's life. While they may know that a child is in the care of Tusla – Child and Family Agency, they may not know why or how this came about, nor indeed, what being 'in care' means. Respecting the child's privacy is important and the teacher does not need to know the details of trauma, tragedies and events that led to them being taken into care. What the teacher does need to know is that the child has suffered trauma and loss and that behavioural, learning and indeed physiological difficulties may be as a direct result of that (Cairns and Stanaway, 2004). The teachers working with that child or young person also need to understand that establishing positive, trusting and caring relationships with the child and fostering good communication and mutual support with the other significant adults in the child's life – foster carers, especially – is essential for the child's learning (Gilligan, 2009). They need to understand the importance of relationships and specific interventions for children with trauma and loss. Bomber (2007) reminds us that all the agencies involved with the child who has experienced trauma and loss need to work together if we are to honour our commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989:

'States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social integration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse [...] Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.' (United Nations, 1989:11)

Working together with other agencies can be difficult. Often, the only contact a school will have with the social worker is the wholly inadequate *Child in Care Review* form which is filled in before the annual or six-monthly review. This form says nothing at all about social or emotional care needs and asks nothing of what the school understands about the care system, being in care, or how to support the particular child.

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Tusla – Child and Family Agency, has direct responsibility for children in care and also has a remit in education through its management of the Educational Welfare Service (EWS), Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). Schools that are not part of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme to address educational disadvantage have no HSCL teacher nor SCPs and may have little or no contact with the Educational Welfare Service. Indeed, as the Department of Education and Skills does not identify these children and young people in the school system as being in the care of the State on either the Primary Online Database (POD) or Post-Primary Online Database (PPOD), even the Educational Welfare Service will not identify them or direct support to them unless they are referred to them following suspensions, exclusions or chronic absenteeism – that is, when relationships are already in crisis. It is a significant impediment to meaningful support and positive outcomes that we do not know how these most vulnerable children and young people fare in school, we know little of their experience of education, and their attendance, participation and attainment, as a group, are not recorded.

The need for research into the educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people in care was highlighted in 2013 in a report commissioned by the Ombudsman for Children's Office. The report pointed out that policy-making in relation to children in care needs to be based on evidence gathered systematically from the educational experiences of children in care.

In her introduction to the report, the then Children's Ombudsman, Emily Logan, pointed out:

'The specific deficit highlighted by this current study presents a serious impediment to evidence-informed policy-making and practice and needs to be addressed if effective policies, procedures and practices are to be put in place to mitigate the barriers to and in education that the literature indicates children in care can face.' (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2013:4)

The difficulties they face may be multiple: several moves, new schools, new relationships, and lack of preparation for the move by the professionals involved with the child. Other factors can include lack of time and resources to prepare, inadequate understanding by schools and teachers of the circumstances, challenges and needs of the young pupil in care, lack of training and support for teachers, and poor communication between carers, social workers and schools. Schools, in turn, report challenging behaviour as the principal difficulty in dealing with children in care (Cairns and Stanaway, 2004).

There is, in fact, substantial and consistent international evidence that children and young people who are or have been in care have particular vulnerabilities when it comes to education. The REES Institute at Oxford University produced a comprehensive report on the educational outcomes of 'looked after children' (the term used in the UK) in 2015, finding that:

- their attainment at GCSE level is lower than that of students from the general population

- they are twice as likely to be permanently excluded from school and five times more likely to have a fixed term exclusion (suspension)

- of more than 27,000 care leavers aged 19-21 studied, 38 per cent were not in education, employment or training. Of this group, there was an unemployment rate of 22 per cent and they made up 27 per cent of those in prison.

The report found that stability of the care placement, the age at which the child went into care, and the length of time spent in care were significant factors in success or otherwise at school. Not unsurprisingly, but encouragingly for foster carers, 'it was the educational encouragement and support that foster carers offered that were important rather than their educational qualifications *per se*.' (REES Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, 2015:29)

Young people in care identified individual teachers as having been the main sources of educational support. (It is important to note that in the UK, teachers are allocated not just responsibility but time and resources to provide this support.) Also, both higher- and lower-progress pupils benefited from one-to-one tuition. (ibid)

Carer attitudes, aspirations and home-based involvement predicted better educational outcomes for children in care across several studies. (O'Higgins et al., 2015)

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Building resilience in schools

School can make a difference. A child in primary school spends at least five hours a day with their teacher, and more time than this on days when that teacher supervises lunch or break. The teacher sees the child in the context of the small and large group, sees how they interact with peers, and knows their learning interests and strengths. At post-primary level, teachers see the young person negotiate a very complex system and hazardous peer interactions in large group settings. Foster carers know their child well but can only speculate about the side of the young person's life that a teacher knows, and vice versa.

School offers predictability and a child-centred environment where, hopefully, positive behaviour management strategies are being used by skilled teachers. It can offer opportunities for success in learning, in problem-solving, and in negotiating relationships. It offers opportunities to develop crucial peer friendships. It can promote resilience through strong, active and transparent anti-bullying policies and practices. Most importantly however, school can promote resilience by fostering caring, attuned and lasting relationships with and around the young person (Gilligan, 2009).

Teachers who champion youth resilience:

- make themselves accessible to young people
- actively listen and engage with students
- are empathetic to the difficulties learners face
- take responsibility for educational outcomes
- advocate for the support of learners considered at risk
- address bullying
- promote pro-social bonding (Theron et al., 2014).

In other words, resilience-enabling teachers provide psychological and social support to vulnerable children (Ferreira and Ebersöhn, 2011).

Indeed, resilience is only as strong as the relationships around a young person. In an article published online, Woodier (2007) writes: '...*our* stand on your own two feet, *individualistic notion of resilience may be very unhelpful [...] We must stop thinking about resilience as something we do to fix young people; it is not an event or an activity alone that makes a difference. In addition, the onus should not be on the young person to change but on the school, family and community. [...] We should be asking how resilience-building is our school? How do the relationships in a family that is fostering or adopting contribute to the child's resilience? We are only ever as resilient as we are connected to those who love and nurture us and that is as true for adults as it is for children.'*

Foster carers and teachers both know that children and young people who have experienced significant loss and trauma can present huge challenges. A busy, over-crowded classroom can overwhelm the sensitive and already stressed child. Sharing teacher time and attention may feel too difficult, terrifying or even enraging (Bomber, 2016). There may be no additional, targeted resources available to children in care in school until either the bureaucracies of the Departments of Education or Tusla – Child and Family Agency, make the necessary professional assessments available in psychology, paediatrics, speech and language, or occupational therapy. Teachers attempting to develop a trusting relationship may have no knowledge or understanding of the particular vulnerabilities of the child in care. In the meantime, no meaningful learning will take place until trust is established.

Bomber (2017) points out that understanding attachment, and viewing behaviour as communication, are essential not only for learning to take place but also for breaking the cycle of trauma and loss. She outlines the role of a key adult as an attachment figure in school who can support the child to heal and to learn. Fletcher-Campbell et al. (2003) in Cairns and Stanaway (2004) state: 'The forging of strong relationships with pupils causing concern so that the pupils knew that schools were prepared to support them was considered to be one of the most effective ways of addressing undesirable behaviour'. (Cairns and Stanaway, 2004: vii)

The Department of Education recognises the importance of communication between school and home:

'As the recognised primary educators of the child, parents have a right to be assured that the child's needs are being met by the school. It follows that parents should be given as much information as possible on all aspects of the child's progress and development.' (Department of Education 1991:1)

However, in order to meet the child's needs the school also needs to receive information in order to understand the child and develop responses. They do not need to know all the details of why or how the child came into care, but they certainly need to know that the child has suffered severe trauma and loss. They also need to know whether the child is now in a long-term or short-term placement, how much the child knows or understands about their situation, what the access visit arrangements are, and how this impacts on the child. They need to know what the child's relationship is with their carer, and what their strengths are. They need to know the child.

Conclusion

Schools need support and training in supporting the child who has experienced trauma, loss and attachment difficulties. These children and young people may present some of the greatest challenges in school. At the same time, it is likely that their foster carers are living with these challenges at home. Living with trauma, loss and attachment difficulties can be extraordinarily stressful for the child and for all those around the child, and the school's response can support or add to the pressures on this placement. *'Living and working with traumatised children changes those who care for and about them (including other children). People who care for and work with victims of trauma can develop symptoms of post-traumatic disorders as though they themselves had been traumatised.'* (Cairns and Stanaway, 2014:44). This secondary stress and trauma is preventable and, if it does occur, it is manageable and treatable. The first step in doing this is having enough knowledge of the child's situation to be able to respond to them.

In summary, the key to supporting the child in care in the education system is shared knowledge and understanding, good communication, and consistent, positive relationships. Teachers are seeking training and support in this area but the Department of Education and Skills has yet to formally acknowledge its responsibility in relation to this very vulnerable group. The creation of a category for children in care on the Department's databases of POD (Primary Online Database) and PPOD (Post-Primary Online Database), would cost nothing but would allow the tracking and recording of the

objective facts surrounding the education of these children. Listening to children and young people, and to their teachers and carers, would then help to develop policies and practices which would support children and young people in care to realise their potential in education.

About the author

Anne is a foster carer and principal of a DEIS primary school. She has more than 15 years' experience in the area of educational disadvantage and has campaigned vigorously for improvements in educational supports for Traveller children. She has developed in-service training for primary and post-primary school teachers, aimed at increasing an understanding of the risks faced by children in care. Her course for teachers, *Attachment, trauma and learning,* has been run in collaboration with child psychotherapist Christina Enright, under the auspices of Dublin West Education Centre.

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