



# Looked-After Children and Literacy

## A brief review

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*Transforming Lives*

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The National Literacy Trust's Young Readers Programme has always worked successfully with schools and libraries in areas of deprivation for over 15 years. We have recently started some pilot work with looked-after children both in residential and foster care. As part of this work we undertook some desk-based research to assess the current situation as to looked-after children and literacy, what interventions were already out there and what we could learn from previous projects. We hope this information will be useful for other projects and interventions working to improve literacy and reading for pleasure with this group.

## **Looked-after children and educational attainment**

There has been a growing awareness in the last 25 years that educational standards achieved by looked-after children are lower than should be expected and education of these children has not been given sufficient priority in the past (Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010; C4EO, 2010a). By 2005 this had "become an important policy issue" (National Children's Bureau, 2005). There is growing evidence (C4EO, 2010a) that initiatives such as virtual school heads, personal education plans and designated teachers are having a positive effect on the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people. However, statistics for looked-after children in education still remain well below national averages:

"At 30 Sept 2009 in England, 68% of children looked-after continuously for at least 12 months obtained at least one GCSE or GNVQ compared with 99% of all school children who gained any qualification; 15% obtained at least 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades A\*-C compared to 70% of all school children." (DCSF 2010a, cited in National Children's Bureau, 2011)

In Scotland the statistics are similar. Looked-after children in Scotland have lower school attendance, gain fewer qualifications and are over eight times more likely to be excluded; only 44% of school leavers in 09/10 were engaged in work, training or study, compared with 85% of all school leavers (Scottish Government, 2011).

The Reading Champion Report (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010) describes looked-after children as: "Some of Edinburgh's most challenging and vulnerable children ... some of whom:

- Have difficulty accessing services because of disability/communication difficulties
- Have experienced multi-deprivation/neglect or abuse
- Are experiencing difficulties with their education
- Are excluded from school
- Are marginalised or excluded from mainstream services within the community
- Present very challenging behaviours and are sometimes regarded as a threat to the community."

Although many children enter care with poor experiences of education and from positions of social disadvantage, there is a danger that low expectations about young people in care can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (C4EO, 2010a; City of Edinburgh Council, 2010).

## **Brief history of looked-after children and library/literacy interventions**

As part of the increased focus on looked-after children and education there has been an effort to ensure that looked-after children have the same access to books and reading as their peers. Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984, cited in Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010) state:

“If the conditions are conducive, home life can have a profound and positive influence on children’s developing literacy skills, their attitude to reading and responses to text. These conditions include the need for highly accessible literacy materials for reading and writing and an inclusive approach in which child and adult are engaged in everyday literacy practices together.”

These conducive conditions need to be emulated in residential and foster care.

Policy changes since 2003 such as Every Child Matters have meant there is a requirement for a wide range of organisations (including libraries) to work together to play a role in improving and transforming lives. “This shift in approach has provided new...opportunities for public libraries to develop their role and demonstrate their impact and contribution in wider policy arenas, with a focus on well-being and civic participation” (Carpenter, 2010).

In 2003 the Paul Hamlyn Foundation launched the Reading and Libraries Challenge Fund. This comprised three funding streams, one of which, Right to Read focussed on looked-after children and young people in public care. Over 40 of the 60 projects supported by the Challenge Fund were part of this stream. The £3.7 million invested in libraries was one of single largest investments in public libraries in the UK since the time of Andrew Carnegie.

Other large scale projects, such as Reading Rich, funded by the Scottish Government, have also worked to improve access to and enjoyment of books and reading for looked-after children.

### **Looked-after children and the Young Readers Programme**

The Young Readers Programme works with children in areas and situations of disadvantage to encourage reading for pleasure. It helps children develop the skills to find personally interesting and relevant books which they are then able to keep.

Reading for pleasure has been revealed as the most important indicator of the future success of a child, with reading attainment and writing ability positively associated with reading for enjoyment. Based on its research the OECD suggested “finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change” (OECD, 2002).

The importance of interest and choice in motivating reading for pleasure has been noted in various studies (see Clark and Phythian-Sense, 2008). It has also been noted by projects working directly with looked-after children. In Edinburgh, a “Reading Champion” took a young person to the bookshop so that she could choose stock for the residential home. “The process of finding the right book for her really improved her confidence” (Colm Linnane quoted in City of Edinburgh Council, 2010). The importance of empowering looked-after children to make choices has also been recognised in policy over the past decade, where the need to appreciate the individuality of looked-after children and young people and the need to focus on helping them achieve their individual potential has been emphasised (C4EO, 2010a).

As Dymore and Griffiths (2010) state: “Ownership of texts, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, is a significant element in the process of becoming and perceiving oneself as a reader...if children are to become confident, independent readers they need to be able to develop their own tastes and preferences in books”. Recent research has also found that volume of books in the home environment is a significant factor in predicting academic success: the number of books in the home has as great an impact on children’s attainment as parental education levels and having as few as 20 books in the home still has a significant impact on propelling a child to a higher level of education (Evans et al., 2010). Providing an environment with books has been recognised as important in residential care. The evaluation of the Right to Read projects in 2005 stated, “resources must be found ...to ensure that [looked-after children]

have books of their own and that there are well-stocked libraries in every residential home” (Griffths et al., 2005).

The Young Readers Programme also encourages a link with local libraries to ensure sustainability. This should also be encouraged as “[l]ibraries can be the only source of access to the internet for some Looked After Children and young people and care leavers, and may be their principal source of support for homework” (Scottish Government, 2008). The Scottish Government includes libraries as part of its corporate parenting structure and states, “When libraries are inclusive places where Looked After children and young people and care leavers know they can go to get help with their schoolwork, you will have made a difference” (Scottish Government, 2008).

Reading not only impacts on academic success but also has an impact on emotional and social wellbeing. There is evidence to suggest young people’s amount of reading has a positive impact on social skills and community participation (Guthrie Schafer and Hutchinson, 1991, cited in Finn, 2008) and the Scottish Government (2008) recognises “Participation in the arts and cultural boosts confidence, fulfilment and contributes to young people leading happier lives”. Staff in Edinburgh residential care settings are all trained in theoretical models about attachment and resilience and are expected to work in an attachment-promoting style. The evaluation of the Reading Champions Project (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010) notes “the link between storytelling, literacy skills, good attachments and the development of resilience.”

*Children’s Homes: National Minimum Standards* (Department for Education 2011) lays out the values which underpin the standards for children’s homes. Relevant values for the Young Readers Programme, and other literacy interventions include:

- The child’s welfare, safety and needs should be at the centre of their care
- Children should have an enjoyable childhood, and benefit from excellent parenting and education, enjoying a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills leading to a successful adult life
- Each child should be valued as an individual and given personalised support in line with their individual needs and background in order to develop their identity, self-confidence and self-worth
- It is essential that staff receive relevant development opportunities in order to provide the best care for children.

Other specific standards also tie in with the Young Readers Programme:

- 6.3 Children are encouraged to participate in a range of positive activities that contribute to their physical and emotional health.
- 7.2 Children pursue individual interests and hobbies...
- 8.1 Children, including pre-school and older children, have a home which promotes a learning environment and supports their development.

The equivalent guidelines in Scotland (National Care Standards) state, “You live in an educationally-rich environment...Books, newspapers, computers, and educational, artistic and other cultural materials are available in the care home” (Scottish Executive, 2005).

In addition to national policy frameworks such as the National Minimum Standards/National Care Standards and Every Child Matters/Getting it Right for Every Child, there will be policies and strategies at a local level which most likely tie in with the aims and outcomes of the Young Readers Programme. For example in Edinburgh, The Reading Champion Project (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010) stated that its outcomes were informed by the following City of Edinburgh Council policies and strategies:

- *Culture and Leisure service plan 2006-2009*
- *Library and Information Services service plan 2006-2009*
- *Children and Families Service Plan 2009-2012*

## Foster care

Foster carers play a vital part in supporting looked-after children with their literacy. In the evaluation of the Reading Rich scheme, Finn (2008) reported the following areas where foster carers indicated they lacked confidence and would welcome support:

- Knowledge of suitable literature
- How to share reading (especially with older children)
- Their own reading habits.

Reports also suggest reading activities can help improve the bond between carers and looked-after children, especially where birth children were included in the activities:

“Giving looked-after children and young people opportunities to develop strong, stable relationships with their carers is...vital for their emotional wellbeing” (Knight *et al* 2006 in C4EO 2010b).

“encouraging carers to involve their own children in activities with looked-after children was seen to be valuable to the process” (Finn 2008).

“Looked-after children and young people felt that being treated by their foster carers as an equal member of the family was an essential part of feeling that they belonged. The following analysis by Schofield (2003) also illustrates this:

What was also central in defining a real family was the experience of being treated the same as other children, particularly birth children of the foster carers. It was important to be seen as equally loved and loveable, with the message, ‘you don’t have to be a blood relative to belong’. (author analysis – Schofield 2003 p 151)” (C4EO, 2010b).

## What are the challenges?

Many projects and libraries working with looked-after children have found similar challenges. One of the biggest factors seems to be the unpredictable nature of young people’s lives while in the care system. Placement changes and a variety of other factors can lead to cancelled meetings, non-attendance and difficulties in maintaining contact (Finn, 2008). The two most common issues that library staff stated they needed to be aware of when working with looked-after children were transience (no permanent address/move at a moment’s notice/difficulty getting materials back) and disruptions/circumstances in the children’s and young people’s lives that can affect attitudes to reading, learning, adults and authority (Vincent, 2003).

Staff working with looked-after children often have very busy workloads and are “very busy with other priorities” (Finn, 2008). Library staff said the most important skill needed when working in partnership was to understand the different priorities, workloads and systems of the looked-after children sector (Vincent, 2003).

Negative attitudes of staff as well as a lack of understanding or knowledge can also have detrimental effects on the delivery of literacy projects. Finn (2008) found “residential care staff had not been briefed on the background/ambition of the project”, and for the Edinburgh Reading Champion a “key objective of the project [was] influencing and challenging the sometimes negative attitudes of both residential unit and library staff to the relevance of books and reading for looked-after children and young people” (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010). Summarising the first four years of the Right to Read projects, the authors found “that foster carers and residential workers are often very ill-equipped to support the reading of those in their care” (Griffiths et al., 2005).



There is also a need for specialist knowledge when working in this area. For example, one project in Gloucestershire was unaware that children could require individual risk assessments when attending events and that a general one would not be sufficient (Gloucestershire CC, 2008). Sourcing relevant books also requires specialist knowledge and skill: an in-depth knowledge of the child, “knowledge of the role books can play, i.e. distraction, inspiration, escape, positive association” and good knowledge of books available (Finn, 2008).

Finally, Finn (2008) found an additional challenge with projects that seek to encourage literacy by motivating children to read for pleasure. Focusing on changing reading attitudes and inspiring young people to begin reading when they lack the relevant skills and there isn't a skills development programme available can lead to frustration and further disengagement.

### What has worked well?

Scottish Government's guide to “Improving the Education of Looked After Children” (2009) provides advice on setting up a project to raise the attainment of looked-after children and young people. Its key research findings state:

- “...the motivation and passion of individual practitioners was frequently referred to by project leaders as having been crucial to the success of interventions...”
- Organisational factors which improved the success of projects included strong leadership, clear and achievable aims, detailed planning, interdisciplinary training, positive communication and good management.
- Attitudes and values of project staff were found to be crucial in successful direct work with children and young people and their families...”

Suggestions for practice include:

- A successful project needs to have a clear purpose, achievable goals and success indicators.
- Senior management support is vital
- Plan the evaluation strategy before beginning the project
- Investigate other projects.

Foster carers and residential staff were almost universally seen as crucial to the success of any literacy intervention or programme. Carers' involvement in children's reading has been shown to be important in improving literacy skills (National Children's Bureau 2005) and more generally carers “provide essential day-to-day emotional and practical support, which is pivotal to children's educational achievement” (C4EO, 2010a).

In a residential setting, the evaluation of the Reading Rich project saw the involvement and commitment of care staff as “key to the success” of the project and stated it was important to work with senior management to ensure buy in from front-line staff (Finn, 2008). Additionally, for the Edinburgh Reading Champion project residential staff were trained jointly with library staff helping to establish contact and breakdown barriers of communication (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010).

Suggestions from looked-after children on what support might assist the educational progress of children who were looked-after included opportunities for children to purchase their own books (Harker et al. 2002). The ability to choose books and the types of books made available to looked-after children can affect the motivation they have to read. Finn (2008) argues “the motivation [to read] also appeared to have stemmed from the careful selection of books, suggesting that it is vital to make books available that relate to the young people's interests and abilities”. As stated earlier, knowledge of books available and the young people involved are crucial as for “some boys a gritty, chilling or realistic genre will be effective whereas it will have a negative effect on others” (Finn 2008). Different formats of books have also proved beneficial. A

pilot of audio books with looked-after children in Warwickshire found “some confirmation that listening helped those who would not otherwise have read a book to ‘have a go’ at the printed word” (Thebridge, 2009) and the CD provided as part of the Letterbox Club “was a positive choice for [the children] while carers commented they had not realised children would enjoy *listening* to a story rather than reading it” (Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010).

Storytellers and writers in residence were also found effective in several projects, with Finn (2008) stating writers’ interventions “appeared to have the greatest impact”. The personalities and abilities of the individual writers were seen as an important part of this, with some writers being more successful than others (Finn, 2008; Thebridge, 2009; Gloucestershire CC, 2008).

Other key factors that the Reading Rich report (Finn, 2008) picked up on from its own and other projects included:

- The importance of informal setting to encourage participation in reading, particularly when young people were underachieving in formal settings
- Activities are short and achievable and take place in an informal atmosphere
- When promoting reading there is a benefit from making links with popular leisure activities and venues enjoyed by young people
- Looked-after children will be more likely to get involved if activities are seen to have a sense of purpose.

## Evaluation – what works and what doesn’t

Evaluating project work with looked-after children presents big challenges.

The first wave of the Reading Rich project in Scotland set out to evaluate the project through attainment data and questionnaires. Challenges with this included lack of available data from schools due to transience and absenteeism; difficulties in attracting and retaining participants; and difficulties in tracking participants as they moved placements. Reading Rich had the aim of working with 50 children but only four participants completed the year with all of the evaluation in place (Finn, 2008). These challenges with attendance, tracking of participants and measuring attainment were also present among many other projects.

Using child surveys as evaluation had its own problems also. The L4L project in Gloucestershire noted inconsistencies in the children’s questionnaires: “2 children who had attended the final L4L event at a library only the month before said they had not been to one in the last 6 months!” Perhaps less rigorous but potentially more realistic was their approach to obtaining baseline information which was to *talk* to foster carers and residential unit staff with regard to attitudes to reading, use of books and libraries (Gloucestershire CC, 2008).

Although attainment data had been too difficult to obtain from schools for the first wave of the Reading Rich programme, it was also suggested it was “unrealistically ambitious to expect measurable impact on the lives of the young people (with for example attainment data). Evidence suggests the type of knowledge, experience and skills gained in projects such as Reading Rich are more likely to have delayed impact... and they will rarely be immediately measurable.” Instead in the second wave, the project shifted to focus on how to report on potentially longer-term outcomes (Finn, 2008).

Similarly, John Vincent, a respected expert in the field of looked-after children and libraries, suggests you cannot expect sweeping advances through these kinds of projects: “Working with looked-after children is about big impacts on small numbers” (cited in Thebridge, 2009).

Where attainment data wasn’t available, or indeed the most suitable form of evaluation, Reading Rich used the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO) Framework to assess impact. This



framework, outlined by the MLA in *Inspiring Learning for All* was also used by the L4L project in Gloucestershire.

The General Learning Outcomes are:

- Knowledge and Understanding
- Skills
- Attitudes and Values
- Enjoyment, Inspiration, Creativity
- Activity, Behaviour and Progression.

The Scottish Government's guide to "Improving the Education of Looked After Children" (Scottish Government, 2009) suggests using the SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) as a way of measuring softer indicators.

One of the most systematically and successfully evaluated interventions is the Letterbox Club. Its successful evaluation and impact was acknowledged by C4EO (2010a). Methodology includes before and after reading tests (using Neale Analysis of Reading Ability 2007) administered by experienced teachers, attitudinal questionnaires before and after, carer and child questionnaires at mid point and six months after on response to books and satisfaction levels and post-project, semi-structured interviews (Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010).

The Reading and Libraries Challenge Fund Report showed that several projects were able to document progression and development of individual project participants. However Carpenter (2010) stated there was "clearly a need for a more longitudinal approach that tracks impact over time". Given the difficulties in tracking and maintaining contact with participants as placements change, this will be a challenging prospect.

## Conclusion

The National Literacy Trust is seeking to adapt our Young Readers Programme for residential units and adapt our model for families to best meet the needs of looked-after children in foster care and their carers.

Many aspects of our programmes tie in well with the above summary of literacy interventions targeted at looked-after children. Our projects encourage children to enjoy reading for pleasure through events outside the formal education setting and provide the opportunity to keep and choose books of all formats. Our family project gives children and their carers the opportunity to share literacy practices together and also supports carers in their knowledge of reading and their confidence in sharing it with their children.

Our programme already encourages links with the local library. This should be further encouraged when working with looked-after children to ensure that any support for literacy can continue through the library service; where possible, library staff and care staff should be trained together. Our approach of working with volunteers in the settings to coordinate the programme should be strengthened as it is even more crucial for looked-after children that those who know them best are involved in selecting appropriate books and activities. Working with coordinators allows us to run a very flexible programme to best suit the needs of the children involved. This flexibility should be encouraged further to best meet the needs of a fluid population. What's more, the senior management buy-in that is always encouraged with the Young Readers Programme is absolutely paramount for these projects.

Based on the findings above we will also need to incorporate the following changes.

- The family project should be widened to encourage the participation of looked-after children and birth children.

- There should be an opportunity for foster carers to support their own literacy, possibly through the inclusion of Quick Reads.
- In residential settings, money for events should be included to allow authors and storytellers to attend events.
- The evaluation framework for the project needs to be looked at again to ensure we are capturing the most efficient feedback possible given the challenging nature of capturing data. Outcome-based frameworks such as GLO should be considered as well as the possibility of attainment data.
- We will need to focus on and improve our partnership working to ensure that we have the best possible understanding of the challenges and opportunities of working with this group.
- We need to be aware of what support is available and how children can access it if they wish to improve their reading skills rather than just their reading motivation. This should be included in training.

The Young Readers Programme has a proven history of engaging children in areas and situations of disadvantage in reading for pleasure. We have an opportunity to expand our work with looked-after children thanks to funding from Benoy which will allow us to run three pilots with families, and funding from the John Laing Charitable Trust that will allow us to pilot activity with residential care. We look forward to reaching more children through partnerships with foster carers and residential homes.

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