



Reading remedy

Two recently published pilot studies show that trained foster carers and learning support assistants can significantly boost looked-after children's literacy skills

When Ofsted published *Looked After Children: good practice in schools* in May 2008, summarising good practice in raising the educational achievements of looked-after children in schools, the successful engagement of parents and carers was among the key elements identified. Despite some improvement in the situation, educational outcomes for looked-after children (LAC) remain dire. In 2006, only 12% of LAC achieved five GCSE A*-C passes, compared with 59% of all children, while over a third (37%) did not achieve any passes at all compared with just 2% of all pupils. Where schools had achieved markedly better results, Ofsted noted certain common features, including better relations with parents and carers. These schools:

- involved parents and carers in drawing up the personal education plan of their child
- ensured that parents/carers had sufficient guidance about how they could support their children's learning, using interpreters and translators where necessary
- kept parents/carers regularly informed about their child's progress
- in some cases produced information sheets that explained what progress had been made in a particular area and identified the most common difficulties the child encountered in their learning. Some even held special meetings to enable parents and carers to talk these through.

Catch Up literacy intervention

The benefits of involving carers in the education of looked-after children have been illustrated in two pilot studies published by Catch Up, a charity that aims to help children who have literacy and/or numeracy difficulties. Catch Up offers intervention for struggling readers at primary and secondary level; the primary programme is currently used in around 4,000 British schools and the secondary-level intervention has been shown to help students achieve a reading age gain of 22 months and a comprehension age gain of 28 months over an average intervention of 10 months. The Catch Up literacy intervention is a structured one-to-one programme that teaches children how to read. It begins with easily administered diagnostic assessments. These assessments are used to establish individual strengths and weaknesses, to set literacy targets and to identify the most appropriate book level (books that the targeted pupil can read without problem). For secondary school students on the Catch Up programme, there are two individual one-to-one 15-minute sessions per week. In a session, the child reads a book of the appropriate level and carries out a linked writing exercise (most often based on words or sentences that the child found difficult to read during the session). Continuous monitoring and assessment ensures that the children make steady progress.

Catch Up and Compass pilot for LAC

In the first of the pilot projects, Catch Up joined forces with Compass Children's Services, an independent fostering agency that supplies training and resources to carers of looked-after children in the Midlands. The aim of the study was to establish whether foster carers delivering Catch Up to looked-after children in the home environment

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could replicate the success of teaching assistants using the programme in schools with secondary students. At the time of the study Compass was responsible for 96 young people; 10 of them – five boys and five girls – were identified as eligible for the programme. The children ranged in age from 11 years and six months to 14 but had reading ages in the range of eight years and nine months to 11 years and nine months. Training was delivered to carers over three half-days in September 2005, with a follow-up home visit to ensure they understood the underlying principles and processes. The project began in October 2005 and ran for a year, including over the summer holiday. In March 2006, the carers administered mid-point assessments using the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) sentence completion and comprehension tests. These indicated positive progress. A Catch Up coordinator assigned to the project administered the final assessments and questionnaires. The results obtained for those who completed the programme – just five of the cohort – demonstrated that Catch Up can make a difference and that it can be delivered effectively by foster carers in the home environment.

However, as the small number who completed the programme indicates, delivering Catch Up to looked-after children is complex. In two cases the carer declined to participate in the project, in one the pupil refused and in three the child moved placements during the pilot. The study was further marred by the lack of rigour and discipline in delivering the programme in the home environment as opposed to in a school, the geographical dispersal of the children involved and by the scant educational background knowledge of the carers.

Norfolk Virtual School Catch Up Pilot for LAC 2007-08

The second pilot study was run in partnership with the educational psychology and specialist support service of Norfolk Virtual [online] School. This project involved 26 pupils spanning national curriculum year groups 2 to 10 and spread over 20 schools. Twenty-three of the pupils had significant learning difficulties: 15 were statemented and eight were involved in School Action Plus. Fifteen adults,

One carer's experience

Carer X has been using the Catch Up literacy reading scheme with A (10) and D (11) since March 2009. Both boys were on P levels and have a statement. The eldest boy had the greatest difficulty and although the school sent him home with a reading book every night, X says he couldn't read one page of it. He struggled with the simplest two-letter words. She approached the head of Compass Education Service for help, who suggested X enrol on the Catch Up course. X had this to say about her experience:

'It was one of the best and most helpful courses I have been on in a long time. It took me through every stage of reading and explained the things that I took for granted when reading. It shows from the first step how to begin teaching children who have difficulty to read. The assessment was helpful; I was able to assess D and A immediately after going through it with them. The other thing that I had never realised was that although the boys knew the alphabet, they got mixed up with the phonics and the letter names and interchanged them. I was doubtful whether the 15 minutes each evening would be enough for both boys, but was relieved to know that I didn't have to read with them for an hour each! The individual teaching lesson is a godsend. It helped me to concentrate on the important aspects of their reading instead of making up my own rules. I follow the teaching session religiously as it works so well.

Both boys' reading level has gone up by 18 months within the space of three months and they enjoy reading. At their school review the SENCO said that she has never seen two children improve so much in such a short space of time.'

including foster carers, specialist support assistants, learning support assistants and a project worker, were trained to deliver the programme. Eight went on to successfully deliver Catch Up. In light of the Compass pilot it is worth noting that the two foster carers who attended training were both very positive about the intervention but were unable to sustain delivery of Catch Up. For most of these pupils, the Catch Up programme started in November 2007 and mid-term testing was carried out in April 2008. During this time the average gain in reading age was 14.7 months. The average ratio gain (reading age in months divided by chronological time in months) was 2.4. Final testing, carried out in June 2008, revealed an average gain in reading age of 17.5 months and an average ratio gain of 2.05. This pilot study also experienced difficulties, but the report on the project, *Norfolk Virtual School Catch Up pilot for Looked After Children 2007-08*, concluded: 'The Catch Up programme clearly has an important contribution to make in helping to raise standards in reading, to improve pupils' wider wellbeing and promote inclusion.'