

Social media meets international Community of Interest: The LinkedIn Education of Children in Care Network

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Abstract

The LinkedIn Education of Children in Care Network was established in 2011. After briefly contextualising this development, this article first describes the group's establishment and aims, as well as membership and geographical reach. A discussion of the main features of the group, along with some recent spin-offs, is then presented. The article concludes with an exploration of current challenges and learning, as well as providing some comment on possible future developments.

Keywords

LinkedIn, community of interest, education, child care

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Introduction

Over recent years, engagement in social media has become an increasingly important professional tool for many. Now with 400 million members, LinkedIn has been a major part of this development. This article looks at one group on the LinkedIn platform: the Education of Children in Care Network.

Background

LinkedIn is a business-orientated 'publicly-held social networking site with a diversified business model; funded by member subscriptions, advertising sales and recruitment campaigns' (Powers, 2015, p.196). Founded in 2003, LinkedIn's stated mission is to 'connect the world's professionals to make them more

productive and successful' (LinkedIn, 2016a). As well as Facebook, other popular social media platforms include Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram. While Facebook has a significantly larger global membership, LinkedIn claims to be the largest professional network on the internet, with its 400 million members across 200 countries and territories (LinkedIn, 2016b). LinkedIn Groups are online professional forums where like-minded professionals can engage in content and conversation with fellow group members on specific topics.

While Communities of Practice have been around for some time (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and have become popular in both social work and education, the rise of social media and increasing internet use has also been accompanied by, and stimulated, a growing professional interest in Virtual Communities of Practice (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2005) and other online professional forums. Most notably in Scotland in this particular context, we had the Education of Looked after Children online community; a Scottish forum for educators, social workers and academics interested in the education of looked after children. This forum was hosted on the (then) Learning and Teaching Scotland's website. We also had, and still have, the UK Residential Child Care Network (<http://www.residentialchildcarenetwork.org>) and the International Child and Youth Network (<http://cyc-net.org>).

Establishment and Group Aims

Reflecting a growing international interest in the education of children in residential and foster care at the time, the Education of Children in Care Network, was established by the two authors, as a LinkedIn group, in October 2011. The primary aims of the group then, and now, are threefold. To provide opportunities for members to:

1. Discuss good practice experiences and ideas from different jurisdictions.
2. Exchange information on practice and policy initiatives and research and evaluation studies.
3. Support endeavours to raise educational attainment and understanding of this issue.

Membership and geographical reach

At the time of writing, the group has approximately 3,000 members. It has particularly strong membership in Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scandinavia, Scotland and USA. However, we also have members from Asia, South America and Africa, and indeed most countries in the world have at least one member in the group. Membership is by application, and approximately one in four are declined.

The majority of group members are child welfare (including aftercare) and education practitioners, as well as managers, researchers, policy-makers, and students. The group also has a reasonably large contingent of members who are working in allied professions (e.g. mental health, training and employment).

Group Features

Online discussions

The most obvious feature of the group is the online moderated discussions that take place. Most members are free to initiate discussions and post responses. A discussion with the most engagement, by far, was on the question: 'For YOUR own country AND IN 5 WORDS OR LESS what, in your opinion, is the single most important change needed to improve the education of children and young people in care, or formerly in care?' This discussion comprised 144 comments. Other more popular discussions have related to questions on:

- Scottish Government education data on looked after children;
- Children in care and dyslexia;
- Raising the care leaving age to 21;
- Preventing permanent exclusion from schools;
- Residential schools;
- Foster carer experiences of supporting the education of children in care;
- Whether it should be a baseline requirement that foster carers are literate.

Information sharing

The group provides a useful means of disseminating national and international information to members, which is directly relevant to the education of children in care, such as news items, new legislation, books, major research studies, reports, journal articles, conferences, conference presentations, training events, organisations and new services. Some of these announcements also turn into discussions; for example a notification about one recent conference resulted in 32 comments.

Networking

Group members can network in a number of ways. As well as commenting on each other's posts (we also have a thread for new members to introduce themselves), group members are also able to privately message most others in the group, and can use a search facility to find members from a particular organisation, city or country etc. With the majority of the world's leading researchers and writers on the education of children in care as members, and

over 20 doctoral candidates, the group also functions as an important informal research network.

Jobs

Last year, after consulting members who then made the decision to permit a small number of recruitment consultants to become members, there is now a jobs section on the main group page, and recruiters also make use of the ability to privately message group members.

Book reviews

Another new development on the group page is publishing reviews of new books that are specific to the education of children in care. Jessica Kingsley Publishing recently invited us to review *Educating Children and Young People in Care: Learning Placements and Caring Schools* by Claire Cameron, Graham Connelly and Sonia Jackson, as well as *Improving Access to Further and Higher Education for Young People in Public Care*, by Sonia Jackson and Claire Cameron.

An information resource

A particularly important, and somewhat unexpected, function is the group's collective material as a learning resource. Many members want to be in a group and read about issues and developments on the education of children in care, but they don't want to necessarily actively participate in a discussion group of 3,000 people from around the world. This is the feature that members tend to talk about the most. In recognition of this, last year we developed a detailed 'table of content', along with URL shorteners (e.g. <https://goo.gl>), so that members could quickly access some specific areas of content.

Group Spin-offs

There have been a number of group spin-offs. The group has two companion pages on other social media platforms. On our SlideShare page (<http://www.slideshare.net/educationofchildrenincare>) are over 25 conference presentations and reports, with permission, on the education of children in care, including some from the likes of Dr Andrew Harvey (Australia), Emeritus Professor Bob Flynn (Canada), Professor Rami Benbenishty (Israel), Dr Karen Winter (UK), Dr Carme Montserrat and Dr Ferran Casas (Spain), and Professor Ingrid Hojer and Professor Bo Vinnerljung (Sweden). More recently we have also established a group presence on Twitter at @EdofChinCare.

In addition, a recent Best Practice face-to-face event on education, residential and foster care can be directly attributed to the existence of the Network, as can

a special forthcoming issue of the Australian professional journal *developing practice*; the majority of the articles are being written by Network members.

Challenges and Learning

Group name

We needed a name that clearly conveyed our purpose. However, if we were to appeal to professionals internationally, we had to be cognisant of the many different terms that were used to describe children in residential and foster care i.e. 'looked after', 'accommodated', 'out-of-home care', 'children in continuing custody', 'children on guardianship or custody orders', 'alternative care' and 'children in care'. Equally, we did not want a name that was not so broad that it would generate inappropriate membership applications.

International membership

As well as the use of different terminology in different countries, sometimes the use of the same terminology has different meanings, and this was more of a surprise to us. While we knew that terms such as 'residential care', 'foster care', 'schooling', 'residential worker', 'social worker' and 'teacher' were of course socially constructed, we were nonetheless still surprised at some of the differences across countries. Similarly, we had to take care with our use of terms, jargon, abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms, relating to our own context, and that of others.

Community of Practice?

The notion that the group would operate as a full Community of Practice, was perhaps never realistic. We had originally envisaged most of the group's activity being around practitioners (and managers, policy analysts and researchers) sharing tips and best practices, asking questions of other members, and providing support for each other. However, while our original target was to gain 50 members, this figure was very quickly surpassed. What we soon came to realise was that relatively few members, and particularly amongst those from outside of the UK, had much specific practice expertise in relation to the education of children in care; rather they were professionals who were interested in the subject, and of learning more.

Social media and professional life

Most of our members have busy professional lives and only a limited time for social media. Yet, since our group started in 2011, there has been a substantial growth in the number of LinkedIn groups; LinkedIn (2016c) reports that it now has over 1.5 million groups. LinkedIn now allows members to join up to 100 groups, and most of our members would be members of other LinkedIn groups too. Since 2011 there has also of course been a rise in the number of professionals using other social media platforms, such as Twitter. As one member recently put it, 'I think social media is a great vehicle for sharing information and enthusiasm, but I'm also sometimes drowning in a sea of too many sites'. We are competing for members' time across a full gamut of social media platforms and groups.

LinkedIn changes to groups

Since 2011, LinkedIn has continued to evolve and change. While some developments have been very positive, a number of LinkedIn group features, including multiple featured posts, a promotions tab, polls, a group search facility and group analytics, have been removed; this has made group management, and engaging members, much more challenging. The growing popularity of the LinkedIn mobile app has also been a mixed blessing for LinkedIn groups. Due to both of these developments, across LinkedIn, engagement in groups appears to have fallen dramatically over recent months. Furthermore, following a recent drop in the value of LinkedIn's shares last week (The Guardian, February 5, 2016) on the back of lower than expected forecasts, some financial commentators are even questioning whether LinkedIn (and Twitter) are even going to survive (Aikalay, 2016).

Future Developments

As we approach our fifth year, we are currently carrying out a review of the group, in order to plan for its future direction. While at the time of writing this exercise has only just begun, some issues are clear:

1. The group should generally be conceptualised as an online international Community of Interest, rather than a Community of Practice.
2. Members have joined, and remain with, the group for a range of different reasons. Some members want to be part of the Network, but do not necessarily want to post in to group discussions.
3. We need to strengthen engagement, in a variety of different ways, across our membership.
4. With 3,000 members, there is a need to grow group management.
5. We need a contingency plan, around safeguarding the Networks existing material.
6. Should we transition from being a LinkedIn group, to becoming a professional association that has a presence on LinkedIn - and elsewhere?

Conclusion

Social media, and its capacity to connect professionals in new ways, is becoming an increasingly important dimension of 21st century practice, research, and informal learning. While it remains to be seen what future direction the group will take, the Network still has an important role to play in relation to the education of children in care. However, just as important as any of the individual features for members, is the group's wider role in continuously advocating internationally on the importance of quality education for all children in residential and foster care.

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