Developing Quality Indicators for Learning with Care

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Introduction

Much more is now known about shortcomings in the education of looked after children and young people since Professor Sonia Jackson first highlighted major concerns in her seminal monograph *The Education of Children in Care* (Jackson, 1987). In particular, an authoritative review of research, policy and practice conducted by the Centre for the Child & Society at the University of Glasgow (Borland et al., 1998) helped to identify the key issues affecting a section of the school population which has often been marginalised and forgotten. The inadequacies of care and education policy and practice within Scotland were detailed in the *Learning With Care* report (HM Inspectors of Schools & the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001) which also outlined nine main recommendations for tackling the deficiencies identified.

As part of its response to the report, the Scottish Executive commissioned work to develop training and other support materials aimed at improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people. The project was undertaken by a partnership led by the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care (SIRCC), and including the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, Save the Children, Who Cares? Scotland and the Faculty of Education in the University of Strathclyde. The products of the project included a training pack (Hudson et al., 2003), an information booklet (Connelly, McKay and O'Hagan, 2003) and an independent report prepared by Who Cares? Scotland and Save the Children (Ritchie, 2003).

The project team was also asked to undertake the development of quality indicators in response to Recommendation 7 in the *Learning With Care* report:

> 'As part of their quality assurance procedures local authorities should undertake an audit of their residential units to assess how far they are educationally rich environments and, where shortcomings are found, make plans to take appropriate action' (ibid., p.7).

The project brief specified an audit instrument which would assist carers and their managers to monitor the quality of support provided to help children and young people to have satisfying school experiences, to attain qualifications, and to develop cultural and sporting interests. However, the original proposal was subsequently expanded to include quality indicators which could be used by a range of care settings, by schools and by local authority managers. The underlying rationale for this wider view lies in the 'corporate parent' role which requires that different local authority services work together to provide support for looked after children and their families. Thus, for example, problems in attendance are not exclusively the responsibility of carers and poor behaviour in school is not only for teachers to resolve.

Developing the audit instrument

The project team decided to adopt the framework advocated by the HMI Audit Unit in *The Quality Initiative in Scottish Schools* (HM Inspectors of Schools, 2000) and adapt it for the three different audiences. We justified our decision in two ways. Firstly, the approach based on self-evaluation by school communities using the *How Good is Our School?* framework (HM Inspectors

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of Schools, 2001) and its related series of documentation has gained widespread respect.

> 'During its half-decade of use it has moved progressively from a peripheral, and even irksome, imposition to a more integral and welcome place within ongoing school life and development planning. Once viewed as the province of senior management, it is now more and more seen as relevant to all staff' (MacBeath and McGlynn, 2002, p.135).

Secondly, it seemed sensible to use a format already familiar to one of the target constituencies. The *How Good is Our School?* approach uses quality indicators to help practitioners to recognise key strengths, identify areas where good quality needs to be maintained or where improvement is needed, identify priorities for a development plan, and report on standards and quality. In essence, the audit process invites staff groups to ask themselves three questions: How are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do? Quality indicators assist this process by defining good practice; after discussion staff can grade their own setting on a four-point scale (1= major weaknesses; 4= major strengths) which helps to identify an agenda for improvement.

The initial work to develop the Learning With Care Quality Indicators was conducted in workshops with 21 student teachers who had elected to study a module on the education of looked after pupils. The workshops involved giving the students sets of resource material and asking them to devise statements which could be used to assess or monitor practice. The resource material included information about *How Good is Our School?* (and the *Taking a Closer Look at…* series associated with this approach), the National Care Standards (Scottish Executive, 2002) and summaries of the research

literature. This work was particularly assisted by the expertise of one participant who had previously been a management consultant involved in developing quality indicators and who, coincidentally, had close personal experience of the care system.

The quality indicators produced by this process were refined by a sub-group of the project team, which also wrote the indicators for local authority managers. The draft indicators were finally subjected to critical comment by volunteers from a group of practitioners studying for the M.Sc. in Residential Care, before being piloted in a small number of residential units in one local authority.

The nature of the audit instrument

The framework of quality indicators provided in the audit instrument is set out in three distinct parts to allow separate self-evaluation at the level of local authority, school and care setting. This separation recognises the different issues which impinge on the distinct contexts. However, an important principle of the Learning With Care initiative is the need for local authorities to work across contexts and to ensure that there is close collaboration between the key departments and agencies in seeking to improve practice. The description which follows relates to a draft version of the audit instrument which was piloted before being refined and finally made available to local authorities along with the other products of the project in May 2003. A revised version is due to be launched by the Executive in November 2003 and is described later in this article.

An important feature of this development is the continuing collaboration between HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) and the Social Work Services

Inspectorate, underlining the crucial needs for carers, social workers and teachers to work together to improve the support arrangements for looked after children and young people. The quality indicators are also the first in the *How Good is Our School*? series to be developed for use in contexts beyond schools and other educational settings.

Using the indicators in care settings

Pilot work undertaken in residential units provided encouraging results. Units tackled the process in different ways. For example, in one unit senior staff completed the audit document independently. In another unit the audit was debated at an open staff meeting. In yet another, both staff and residents completed the audit independently. The quality indicators in the draft version for care settings were sub-divided under three headings: staff knowledge and training; procedures and arrangements; and supporting young people. Table 1 shows an extract from the audit completed independently by a member of staff in a residential unit. The worker is able to offer evidence in support of a view that this aspect of staff knowledge and training is a major strength of the unit's practice.

Table 1

Key Feature	Description	Level (1-4)	Comment
Staff know the importance of education and its significance in helping looked after young people to achieve their potential	There is research evidence indicating that positive school/college experiences can help to minimise the effects of adversity, as well as enhancing feelings of confidence and developing relationship skills.	4	"Open, regular discussion informally and in meetings emphasises the importance of education for life long achievement and life choices."

Table 2 shows a comparison between the ratings and comments given by a carer and a 16 year old resident in relation to an aspect of the 'supporting young people' section of the audit instrument. In this case both agree that this aspect represents a weakness in practice, though the young person rates it more severely. Both describe the nature of the inadequacies, though understandably the young person's view is very personal; another young person might have had different priorities.

Table 2

Key feature	Description	Level (1-4)	Comment
Books, newspapers, computers and educational, artistic and other cultural materials are available	Young people need to have access to writing and drawing materials, reference books and computers to help in completing homework and for intellectual stimulation. Carers should actively encourage young people to purchase books of their own.	2	**(carer)** "Presently books, computers, space available for study is not adequate and craft materials not always in use due to other priorities. New educational room described before will address this as will an allocation of money to each young person…"
		1	**(young person)** "We need more books and magazines."

Revisions following the pilot experience included changes to the column headings: 'key feature' was changed to 'quality indicator' in keeping with usage in other, similar documents; 'description' became 'rationale' to emphasise the explanatory rather descriptive nature of the text; 'comment' became 'notes and action points' to emphasise the need for forward planning. The (draft) Audit Tool for Carers made available in paper format at the launch of Learning with Care materials in June 2003 includes six indicators of Staff Knowledge and Training, covering aspects such as knowledge of the education system and training in relation to education. The Procedures and Arrangements section has seven indicators, covering aspects such as advocacy in relation to educational attainment in reviewing care plans and

working with teachers in relation to school attendance. Supporting Young People is defined by 12 indicators, covering aspects such as helping young people make decisions about disclosure of personal information at school and encouraging reading for pleasure. The full set of draft indicators are set out in Appendix 1 for information of readers. It is important to point out that the audit tool is more extensive (and more wordy) than the version planned by the Scottish Executive for incorporation into the How Good is Our School framework which is based on standards 3 and13 of the National Care Standards. However, the broader version described here should be helpful to carers who want to give special emphasis to education in their development planning.

Conclusion

The experience of the pilot exercise and two launch conferences for the Learning With Care materials indicates that carers, social workers, teachers and their managers in general welcome the development of quality indicators as one element of a multi-strategy approach to enriching the educational experience of looked after children and young people. The indicators are intended to emphasise the broad range of experiences which contribute to an educationally rich environment. The self-evaluation approach is meant to be empowering rather than inspectorial. Whether this proves to be the case in practice depends on the encouragement and practical support given to unit teams, foster carers and schools. In this respect, good, informed leadership is vital. The way in which the quality indicators are used to improve the conditions which support good educational experiences is the subject of another study.

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