

# Inclusion Can Make us Better Teachers

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## Introduction: Back to the Floor

Someone in headquarters decided it would be good for morale if the heads of education, social work, and health met with some of us who work directly with young people. The initiative was called 'Back to the Floor.'

One of the three visitors, dressed in a grey suit, asked me, "Why should my child's education suffer because the teacher has to deal with the behaviour of a young person who is looked after\*?"

My answer sounded unconvincing, "If I could take you to some of my schools, you would see that schools that are the most inclusive are best for *all* young people." I wasn't prepared for the question, and I couldn't back up my view with any evidence.

## Inclusion: the Issues

The inclusion of children who are looked after (LAC) in mainstream education is often a contentious issue. Sometimes it is characterized by simplistic thinking<sup>1</sup>. "We can't meet Johnny's needs here" may be true, but is there really some magical other place where Johnny can be 'fixed'?

Inclusion can also define and strengthen important values. When faced with the challenging behaviour of a looked after child in her school, one head teacher said, "I don't want him to go to a special school. He needs the relationships he has with children here who don't have attachment difficulties. He won't have those role models in a special school. I am not going to exclude him."

Inclusion can also create ambiguity. It can force teachers into an uncomfortable position, one in which we feel we have to choose between contradictory imperatives<sup>2</sup>:

*Is my job to teach my subject or is teaching about helping children develop as individuals?*

*I am here to make sure the young person who wouldn't say boo to a goose can learn, but what do I do when that young person is threatened by the child who acts out the effects of the neglect they have suffered before becoming looked after?*

Inclusion requires substantive change<sup>3</sup>; it challenges us to look at ourselves and to question the commitment to our values.

## Definitions

"Inclusion is about the process in which children are encouraged to participate within the school in a meaningful way...." It is more than just access to a mainstream school. It also includes belonging and achievement.<sup>4</sup>

Attachment difficulties are maladaptive behaviours that arise from disrupted attachments in early childhood and affect a child's ability to thrive in relationships<sup>5</sup>.

\*Under the provisions of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, 'Looked after Children' are defined as those in the care of their local authority.

## Research Questions

1. How does inclusion benefit children who are looked after?
2. Is the learning of other children negatively impacted by the behaviour of a young person who is looked after?
3. What kinds of skills and attributes does a teacher need to successfully include a young person who is looked after?
4. Do the skills teaching staff gained from learning to support a looked after young person benefit the other children in their classes?

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## Method and Approach

- This study took place over a period from September to June 2016.
- It included looked after pupils attending three primary schools.
- Pupils were 6, 9 and 12 years old. The pupils were referred to the LAC support teacher. All of the referrals highlighted that the children were having difficulty sustaining learning in mainstream classrooms.
- Schools were selected based on the availability of teachers and teaching staff to meet with the LAC support teacher on a weekly or fortnightly basis.
- Three teachers and one teaching assistant engaged in a reflective process<sup>6</sup> with the LAC support teacher, in order to understand the children's behaviours and take the perspective of the children- a mentalization based approach<sup>7</sup>.
- The teachers and the teaching assistant were given training in skills such as, Wondering Aloud<sup>8</sup> and PACE<sup>9</sup>.
- Evaluations made using semi-structured interviews with teachers, teaching assistant and a group of six pupils.

## Inclusion can Transform Lives: One More Chance?

Successfully including young people who are looked after and who may have attachment difficulties in any kind of mainstream setting can be difficult. Paul was fourteen years old and had been signed up by his foster carer to go to summer camp. It soon became apparent that his carer was under a lot of stress. She said, "I told Paul if he gets sent home, the moment he comes through the door, I will put him in respite care. He has been excluded from school, and people have come to the house to say he is causing trouble in the community. His mum doesn't even want to see him." Paul probably felt being sent to camp was just another rejection.

I met Paul as he stepped off the bus and introduced him to his group. He seemed to take an almost instant liking to his group leader, an easygoing and energetic young man. I noticed after a couple of days they were rarely apart. However, Paul also mercilessly bullied another boy.

The head of the camp wanted to send Paul back home. "It's not fair on others in the group. He is ruining their week," she said to me.

I pleaded for one more chance. Then I took Paul aside. "We are going to do everything we can not to send you home, but you have to stop bullying. You are going to spend the rest of the morning with me and help me clean the kitchens."

After that Paul's behaviour wasn't perfect, but he stopped bullying. A couple of days before the end of the camp, I asked him about his birthday. "I see you have a birthday when you get home. Will you do anything special?"

"No one has ever done anything for my birthday," he replied.

The next day, I was sitting at lunch on the table next to Paul. Without warning, the other young people came into the dining room and sang "Happy Birthday" to him. Paul looked like a deer caught in the brightness of a spotlight. I think he wanted to run away, but he couldn't. About fifty young people surrounded him.

A year later, we had a call from his foster carer. She told us Paul had looked through the camp brochure until he found the same group of leaders and asked her to sign him up. She told us it had been a much better year at home.

It wasn't just one thing that made a difference. His group leader had worked hard to build a relationship with Paul, and the head of the camp was willing to take a risk and give me one more chance to reach out to him.

I believe Paul got the message that *he was wanted there*. Paul contacted us again this year. He apologized and said he plans to spend the summer with the Army and cannot come to camp. Two years ago, when I first met Paul, he was an outcast, unclaimed and unwanted. Being included in that camp was a transformational experience.

## Results and Analysis:

Teachers who successfully include children *prioritize the importance of relationships in learning, and this benefits all the children in their class.*

It had been a steep learning curve for Lewis' teacher. The impulsive and often angry twelve year old, who had also struggled in his foster care placement was in trouble almost every week.

At the end of the year, I interviewed a group of Lewis' peers. They all acknowledged their learning had been held back to some extent by their classmate's challenging behaviours. However, they all had something positive to say about their school: "The work we produce is good and the staff are really friendly." They also had no difficulty identifying the things they had accomplished. They all rated the relationships in their class as a 4 or 5 out of 5. One of the group commented on how her teacher had handled pupils' behaviour problems: "She is good at it because she will sit down and have a calm chat with them and calm them down."

The kinds of skills teachers and teaching assistants learn in order to support a young person with attachment difficulties seem to *transfer readily to other children.* Another teacher at the end of school year commented:

"I have been teaching for fourteen years. Callum has helped me more than any other child to think about my teaching.

"I have learned to make fewer assumptions about the behaviour of other children in my class. I used to think some behaviours were because a child was spoiled at home. I have learned they may have real issues and need my help."

"One of my pupils was playing up for another teacher. I used Wondering Aloud, and I gave him some different options for what might be upsetting him. If I hadn't used this approach, he would never have told me what was wrong."

"We are rolling out some of these things across the school. Callum has raised the profile of how we handle emotions."

A teaching assistant from another school wrote:

"I have been able to transfer the skills I have learned to help other children. For example, I noticed a change in another child's behaviour. He was getting upset and walking out of class. I asked the teacher if I could have some time with him. I used Wondering Aloud. I said I had noticed that he was spending a lot of time on his own and that he was distracted easily. I tentatively asked him if the class was too loud or maybe he had a lot on his mind. He said there was too much noise and that it was hard to concentrate. I tried to empathize with him. Later, this child told me he was worried about something happening at home."

In these classrooms, the behaviour of the children who are looked after had some negative impact on the other children. However, the teachers and teaching assistant were able to use the skills they had learned to identify and respond with sensitivity to children who were struggling. It also seems that the other children in their classes recognize that despite some difficulties, the relationships in their class were very good. They were generally positive about their school and what they had learned.

## Conclusion: Excellent and Inclusive

Inclusion matters because young people who are looked after find the acceptance they need in order to overcome their sense of rejection and shame. And to answer the question from the man in the grey suit, I would be happy to see my own children in a classroom with the kind of teacher who values relationships, who understands young people's needs, and who finds a way to support the learning of all young people.

### Features of Inclusive Schools<sup>10</sup>

- They understand the children. They are able to be inside the children's heads and understand what makes them tick.
- Relationships are good. Staff and pupils know each other.
- They value the learning of teachers as much as the learning of pupils.
- Teachers are encouraged to take risks with their teaching, and they're not made to feel foolish when things go wrong.
- They value a range of achievements, not just academic outcomes.
- Children have a real sense of belonging; they have a stake in the school.
- They are communities of belief, where there is common vision and teamwork.

"These are difficult things to achieve but there is hope because many schools are able to be both excellent and inclusive." Martyn Rouse, Professor Emeritus, Aberdeen University<sup>10</sup>

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### Keeping it Real: Where are you on the inclusion spectrum?

**The most important resource for supporting this young person is the commitment and expertise of the teacher.**

**In order to support this young person, I need resources from outside my classroom; he needs to see an expert.**

