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Me and My Education - Who Cares?

The Voice of Our Young People

Summary of the Day

Virtual School Regional Designated Teacher Conference
Wednesday the 23rd October 2024



www.wmvscicfoundation.org.uk

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Wednesday the 23rd October 2024

It was well attended with around 300 candidates and included: care experienced children, young people and adults, designated teachers, education and social care colleagues, reviewing officers and charity organisations, and many others who are invested in and interested in understanding and working better together to support our care experienced children and young people in education.

The morning was introduced by setting the scene and providing a current context around the issues facing our children within education today.

This was followed by passing over to our children who were supported to express their views, describing and sharing their experiences of education in collaboration with the Geese Theatre Company.

Following lunch there were speakers from the Attachment Research Community (ARC), Virtual School and Educational Psychology all sharing perspectives, research and practice.

The conference was concluded by our children asking delegates to think about what they could do differently and how the day would and could lead to change.

The Voice of Our Children

Some quotes from our children about what they wanted to share and communicate during the day. They show how important it is for our children to be noticed, respected, kept in mind.

> “No grand gestures – just “how are you” is enough”

> “Please be present for us”

> “We are still learning and growing up… don’t blame us”

> “Help us integrate into society”

> “When a teacher says he will do something and he does it this is a good teacher for us”

> “Teach us to believe in ourselves”

Reflections from an Educational Psychologist

The messages and quotes for our children show how important it is for our children to be noticed, seen and heard, to be respected, kept in mind and just how crucial it is to be present and consistent. For us to follow up on all the small things, consistently, and make these things important to show that we have listened to them and that they matter to us too.

Being part of this day was a true honour. From the welcome and reception to the messages and interactions from everybody throughout the day, which embodied a strong sense of compassion, acceptance, openness and a tangible feeling of been in a place of safety where people sought to listen, hear and understand and I felt as though the relational approaches we currently seek to translate into our practices were truly taken on by those attending, creating a place where everyone was welcome to belong. Facial expressions were soft, smiles and eyes were warm, people relaxed, accommodating, caring and there was a real sense of safety within the room.

This was combined with a palpable sense of willingness to move forwards and an energy for change. The day felt as though it was a real and genuine collaboration between the care experienced children and young people, virtual schools and education and other professionals involved. The voice of our children carried throughout, where care experienced children and adults shared views, led interviews with CEO's and the Director of Children and Families and led the final activity of the day.

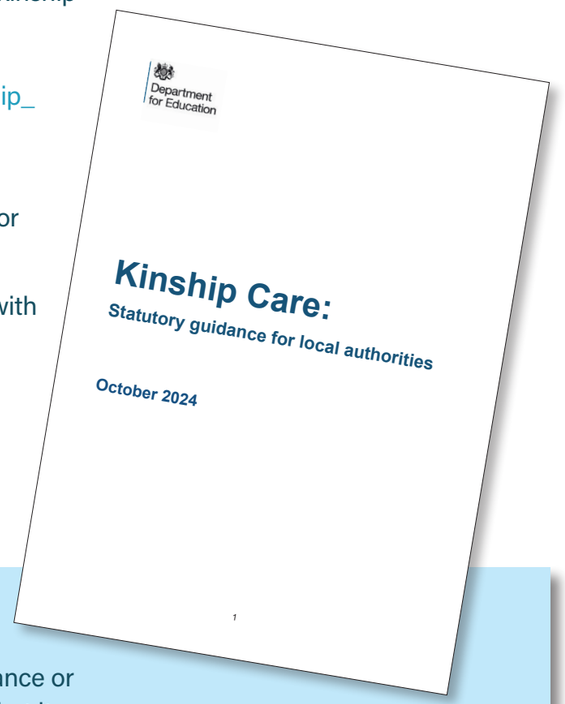


> **"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to experience and be part of your day!"**

Introduction and Context – National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH)

Key messages

- There is a real shortage of foster care placement leading to our children living and being educated across and between authorities.
- There are current moves to improve the SEND system.
- There is a growth in alternative provisions (AP) although not all are regulated.
- There is a new kinship care policy (October 2024) statutory guidance document for local authorities (LAs) which place new duties to promote outcomes for children under Special guardian orders (SGOs) and to publish a kinship local offer.
  https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670d3ed5e84ae1fd8592f2fa/Kinship_Care_-_statutory_guidance_for_local_authorities__October_2024.pdf
- New guidance is currently being written for virtual school leads.
- The replacement of behavioural policies with relational policies and the importance of work being translated into practice.
- The importance of advocating for our children, championing, having empathy and working to reduce suspensions.



What can we do differently?

- Familiarise yourself with the new guidance or ask someone to summarise this and what it means within your service/authority.
- Think about whole service/school relational policies to replace behaviour policies.
- Think about asking the children and young people within schools to co-construct these policies or part of these and to evaluate these.

The Voices of Our Children

Geese Theatre worked with our children to identify issues important for them to share. They shared these themes and highlighted supportive and unsupportive practice around these using drama and theatre. Geese Theatre used masks in the performance, taking them off to reveal their genuine feelings, opinions and views. This made a really poignant and visual representation of the importance of genuine and caring interaction, curiosity and asking to listen and understand. Conference candidates were asked to participate and share practice based on the following key themes identified:

- Transitions – especially to secondary but also between settings – the importance of preparation and attention to details so that children and young people can feel seen, heard and cared for, able to participate, integrate and feel welcomed.
- The idea of assertive advocacy was discussed to ensure that children and young people voices are heard in a busy school with competing demands on staff time.
- Transition from school into college and support systems, housing, independent living.
- Children and young people as carers for siblings.
- The effect of using relational approaches and how important individual interactions can be.

What can we do differently?

- Consider children in your setting, do they have a trusted adult they can turn to?
- Consider if your policies take a relational approach, consider what additional support do you put in for children in care
- Consider how you manage transitions for children in care joining or leaving your setting. Being understood from the start and positive endings are really important.
- Do you have a good understanding from the social worker and carers around care factors? Sibling relationships can have a big impact on our children, do you know when contact visits with family are taking place, what are the long-term care plans? All of these can have an impact at school.

Delegate Pledges

Some quotes from what local authorities have done/ plan to do following the conference.

An example of assertive advocacy and corporate parenting

> **One designated teacher who attended was trying to persuade headteacher of a high school not to perm-ex a child, they were going back with raft of additional information to try and change their mind.**
>
> Staffordshire HT Virtual School

An example of supporting transitions and planning for all the details, as these really matter...

> **Following the conference we have reviewed and are working to improve the support around transitions, to ensure successful transitions especially in year transfers.**
>
> Dudley Virtual School

The importance and presence of a strong pupil voice

> **The voice of the child throughout the day made this event meaningful and those attending accountable, this will be influencing changes when designated teachers are back in school.**
>
> Solihull Virtual School

> **The Geese Theatre mask on/off was outstanding and powerful, it explored adults' communication/behaviour to bring out the best outcomes, leading successes, and inclusivity as well as the opposite where exclusion becomes the easy answer.**
>
> Solihull Virtual School

The Attachment Research Community (ARC) – Andrew Wright, OBE, Director of Partnerships and Member of ASCL Council

Key messages

- Who is losing learning – attendance hot topic nationally, internal truancy, child poverty increasing in working families. Conversations with ASDAN and the re emergence of these 'alternative' qualification routes.
- The importance of developing partnerships and collaboration. The connection between health, social care, criminal justice and education is key – keep on connecting.
- The importance of developing the workforce. Trauma Informed approaches are increasingly being linked into teacher training – ITT framework (not yet there but the ARC are working on this)
- Recognition of the power of relational approaches in schools – Ofsted is beginning to recognise these approaches and quotes were shared to show shifting narratives. Ofsted will begin to look at subgroups within schools including those who are suspended or excluded.

Research, policy and practice links shared:

- The COVID-19 pandemic may be a thing of the past – its impact in schools is not ASCL
- The-COVID-19-pandemic-may-be-a-thing-of-the-past.pdf - Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Who_is_losing_learning_Sept24_2024-09-06-103617_euht.pdf - The Case for Reducing Exclusions across Mainstream Schools – Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)
- Full article: The academic achievement gap between students with and without special educational needs and disabilities written by Johny Daniel, April 2024.
- The Sutton Trust – Life Lessons 2024 – The development of oracy and other life skills in schools
- London's Inclusion Charter

Take Aways

What can we do differently?

- A call for schools to be brave and focus on our children and young people and not numbers and outcomes. This is being recognised and the more we do this the more it will recognised. We can help to shift the narrative!
- Dip into the research and find out more.
- Access the Attachment Research Community Resources, some virtual schools have purchased membership for all schools in their area.

> **"Influence teacher training and early career teachers induction to be trauma informed from the get-go! Ensuring this group understand the impact of not using trauma informed and therapeutic approaches daily."**

> **"The conference explored the importance of being a trauma informed school and the need for therapeutic approaches to be the norm.
> The impact of the above on raising standards, improve outcomes and this would be accelerated."**
>
> Solihull Virtual School

Morgan leads interviews with CEO of Arthur Terry Learning Partnership – Richard Gill, and Staffordshire County Council, Director for Children and Families – Bernie Brown

Key themes:

- The importance of recognising and seeing each children and young people as an individual and treating them all differently. Equity versus equality.
- What makes a good teacher?!
- Placing children and young people at the heart of approaches and change.
- Having conversations with people at all levels and making what difference you can, little by little.
- Reducing the stigma around being care experienced.

Consider if children in care have a genuine voice in school, are they supported to engage with school councils, shape policies affecting them, are they involved in the wider life of the school?

5 Pieces of Research You Should Know- Aaron Lawrence (Stoke Virtual School Headteacher)

Research shared:

- Virtual School Model pilot: initial evidence gathering from local authority pilots | GOV.WALES
  - Insights from the impact of the model of using virtual school across LA's and regions.
  - Introducing the model of the virtual school to Wales and Scotland. It is called LACE in Wales (as it holds things together).
  - Scotland – explored different models and developed different models in different regions of Scotland.

- Research review on services for looked after children in Scotland
  - Malcolm Hill (2011) University of Strathclyde
  - Themes included: decision making especially in the early stages of a child's care career, application of understanding of child development in planning, emotional stability or instability in care, monitoring of progress, reunification with birth families, learning care issues.

- Final-report-effectiveness-virtual-schools.pdf
  - Differences in the ability for VS to ensure children and young people have stable school attendance (resistance to admission/ availability of places in specialist)
  - Unnecessary complexity of management of SEND leading to delays in securing placement.
  - Universal concerns regarding the availability of appropriate care placements and pressure on social workers.
  - Limited and inconsistent engagement of Ofsted in support the education of children in care in relation to LA and school inspections.
  - No evidence that any particular model of VS was more effective than others. Effectiveness was impacted by stability in funding, skills/experience of the virtual head and their relationships with key decision makers.

- School non-attendance by children with a social worker in the UK: a rapid review of extent, risk factors and interventions - What Works for Children's Social Care
  - **Aims:**
    - To review non-attendance in school among children with a social worker (CSW)
    - Identify risk factors associated with absence
    - Determine the effectiveness of existing interventions to improve attendance
  - **Key Findings:**
    - CWS more likely to be absent from school compared to those without. CLA had double the absence rate (12.2%) compared to all other children (6.8%).
    - CSW have higher exclusion rates than children without a social worker.
    - CSW more likely to miss education due to becoming unenrolled from school before school leaving age.
    - Some risk factors shared: level of social work intervention, length of placement and placement type, age on entering care, SEND, SEMH difficulties, gender, school instability.

- CCN Policy In focus - VS resized (21.167 × 29.934 cm) – Virtual Schools, Education's Hidden Asset
  - This paper covers the scope and evolution of virtual school services to date and proposes how best to develop in line with local government aims and objectives in future.
  - 10 years of the virtual school and they have become established fixtures across most councils.
  - The virtual school has been flexible as a deliberate approach allowing for innovation and ability to meet local needs.
  - A need more equality in resources for CiC and CiN was highlighted.
  - A call for clearer boundaries of the role as recognized by schools, communities and the LA.
  - Areas including size, location, staffing, scope and how to measure success have been discussed.

What can we do differently?

Keeping up to date with the local and national picture of what is happening, where we need to focus our efforts, and what is working well!

> **The need for swift action to manage change and culture, to stop exclusions, off rolling, grey exclusions and start urgent inclusion interactions.**
>
> Solihull Virtual School

Healing Words: Engaging the Senses for Emotional Growth – Dr Dawn Bradley – SUMMIT Psychology

Key themes:

- The importance and context of children's mental health – see Childrens Commissioner for England report below.
- Theory and practice: how trauma affects cognition and emotional processing.
- How can we help:
  - Music as medicine: west African drumming circle feedback (Gustavson et al (2021). Exploring links between songwriting, self-expression and wellbeing in young people.
  - The idea of sensory soothing and how natural world experiences and sensations can bring regulating rhythms which can heal. Bruce Perry and the Neuroaesthetics and biophilic design (increasing connectivity to nature to improve wellbeing).
  - The Essex study, see below, showed an increase in reports of wellbeing and improved physical health with increased exposure and experience of being in nature, and experiencing green spaces.

Research shared:

- Worlds largest childhood trauma study uncovers brain rewiring | University of Essex
- Children's mental health services 2022-23 | Children's Commissioner for England
- Nature: How connecting with nature benefits our mental health | Mental Health Foundation

What can we do differently?

- How can we create connection to nature, green space, music within our schools and the lives of our children and young people?
- How do we think creatively and work alongside our children and young people to develop spaces to learn and be, which improve all of our mental wellbeing? Should we find whole spaces to devote to green spaces within our schools and settings, access to garden space/ courtyards, have outside learning, plants and nature within classrooms, colours, light, dance and music workshops etc.

“Following the input from Dr Dawn Bradley our Head of Social Care operations who was blown away by the whole day is supporting the development of creative arts opportunities for social workers and their children to experience together during social care practice fortnight and we are looking to explore how this can be continued in the longer term.”

Sarah Rivers, Staffordshire
(Headteacher Virtual School)





What Next?

The conference concluded by a panel of care experienced children and young people asking local authorities to think about a 'dragons den style' invention which could be trialed within their LA to change and improve things for care experienced children and young people.

> **Following the conference, and seeing the impact of the ypung people sharing their voices, we have continued on our journey of finding the most effective ways for young people to share their voices and co-produce with us. Some of this is an already established way of working. For example at our recent Christmas Fayre, our young people supported us in manning the stall and helped raise over £1000 which will be used to fund additional opportunities for our children in care. Our young people also share their voice at our Corporate Parenting Young People's Panels and we use their views to shape the direction of our Virtual School and bring their voice into our training for schools and other organisations to support them in embedding Trauma Informed Practice**

> **The child's voice was weaved through the whole conference, this raw truth will be making a difference in schools already.**
>
> Solihull Virtual School

> **It was a time for reflection and preparation for culture change and challenging decisions in a supportive way when returning to their schools.**
>
> Solihull Virtual School

> **For next year, our young people will lead a workshop for all our Designated Teachers, exploring how we can use a strengths-based approach and ensure that our meetings with young people can make a genuine difference to their lives. And we will continue to explore ways in which our young people can lead, genuinely make their voices heard, and importantly then act on this to shape the support we offer them.**
>
> Telford and Wrekin Virtual School

> **All school leaders need a 'mini conference' showcasing all that was shared at this conference.**

Living out of a suitcase

Living out of a suitcase, has got to be one of the most gut wrenching feelings
Feeling like you're just a guest in someone's house, and not part of a family.
Being told only my real kids can have a slice of cake, your just a care kid your not special
Never being told goodnight don't let the bedbugs bite, instead go to bed your a nuisance.
Feeling like your out of place or that you don't fit the criteria
Being told you're hard to manage, because of your trauma.
People always say "being in care ain't that bad."
I would never wish this on my worst enemy.

The fear of being told your placement has broken down,
You're getting a good relationship, but they feel you're too much.
The trust issues from your past shining through again,
Spiralling into depression, feeling like you're just a burden, when will this heartbreak end.
When carers make fun of your trauma, saying "no wonder your parents couldn't cope, you're very difficult."
Those words that keep repeating in your head and won't go away.

Never emptying your suitcase, because your always moving,
The feeling you'll never be in a family,because you feel your own parents don't want you.
The side effects from care, should be discussed about more,
The flashbacks that make you feel as though you're back in that moment.
All the mental health problems, like PTSD, anxiety, depression and many others,
Imagining what it would be like if u were in a real family, if your family wasn't as helpless as it is,
Realizing everyone was right about them.

Imagining a fire burning in the living room, all your siblings gathered around it
With your parents beaming at you bc off how proud they are of you
Then you wake up, oh yeah it was all a dream i should've known
Because when you were a home, you were a parent for your siblings
Your mum was clinged to a bottle of smirnoff, while your dad was out taking overdoses
That's what a family feels like for me
So why are these families all gathered around a table eating a meal
Why is there no screaming, no passed out parents and no cold baked beans for tea

Then your meant to just forgive your parents, but its alot harder that they think
All your trauma comes back to you when u try to forget everything
But if u dont forgive them, it will make your life harder, they say
But forgiving them isn't in your future, can't even think of that day
I went years without speaking to my parents bc i was angry
Allow yourself time to heal if needs be
You will have lots of question that might need answering
I went through that too, i just couldn't understand the situation

I used to say i had mixed feelings for my parents
I loved them bc they are my parents
But i absolutely despise them bc of their actions
That was confusing to my 7 year old brain
Why say you love me, then treat a bottle of vodka better that your own flesh
How you gripped on that bottle i hoped you had cuddled me like that just once
How you kept popping those pills into your mouth
I wished i would even get one kiss, even if your beard was scratchy

The love that i feel, i don't know if its real
i've never been loved before, so i don't know the real meaning of i love you
Because the times people have said this to me, then they leave
Its hard being a teenage with no mother to talk to
Relationships aren't worth it, because i don't know how to love just yet
All the fake sayings like love you lots like jelly tots
"I'm never gonna let anything happen to you" is just lies

I don't want the presents, instead i want a mum that's present
Not the 30 quid lip glosses, just a heart to heart conversation
That's all i need, and thats all im longing
So please try mum to fix my heart
Even if it's just a plaster to fill in all the cracks
I know at the minute it's hard, bc no one wants me
But just know i did try to keep you all as family

I will always say to you, that i can't remember the day i went into care
But i remember it all, and everything was very complicated
You had ten minutes to explain to us why it was happening
Except you didn't do a great job bc we were so puzzled
If i look at a picture of myself when i was little, it breaks my heart
She deserved tlc, not ptsd, how i wish i could go back and give her a hug
Oh how i was terrified on the first night,
we were in a strangers home
And a new environment, i will never understand
why you would put us through this



Written by
One of our amazing children in care
(*who wishes to remain anonymous)*

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