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RESEARCH BRIEFING RB: 2014:09:02

Improving Educational Outcomes for Children Looked After at Home: Use of 'Improvement Methodology'

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September 2014

Improving Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children: Use of ‘Improvement Methodology’

CELCIS has been working with a number of local authorities throughout Scotland using ‘Improvement Methodology’ to improve educational outcomes for looked after children. Improvement Methodology works on the principle of applying and studying small changes which can be tweaked until improvements can be measured. A ‘test of change’ is carried out by implementing Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) cycles. Here we introduce the use of the methodology in this context, and share the experiences of City of Edinburgh Council, which was the first local authority to take part in this work.

Key findings:

- Improvement Methodology was found to be appropriate for use in schools;
- Interviewed staff made a series of observations about the work, which may be used to inform the work in other local authorities. These included:
 - Negotiations should be made with each school separately, and class teachers should be involved in discussions if they are the ones who will carry out the work. This will avoid miscommunication of plans.
 - Schools require support from somebody who can oversee the various projects.
 - Parents/ carers should be presented with options if possible, in order to increase buy-in.
 - When working with schools, plan carefully to avoid issues with timing. Summer term can be extremely busy for schools.
 - Do not overwhelm schools with demands; keep it small.

Background

City of Edinburgh Council has adopted the GIRFEC multi-agency Child's Plan (Scottish Government, 2012). This plan is made available to the team around the child, and ideally should be a standalone document which will contain meaningful targets that evolve with time. The work described in this paper was prompted by the findings published in The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration¹ report on inclusion of education within the Child's Plan in local authorities throughout Scotland (Henderson & Whitehead, 2013). The SCRA report discussed the Child's Plans of 250 children on supervision requirements, including 96 Child's Plans of children looked after at home. The findings were that: the plans were almost exclusively produced by social work services; less than half of the plans included specific actions for the child's education; plans were more likely to address children's educational problems than their abilities; and the majority of plans did not take a long-term view of the child's education. The report also considered children looked after at home as a group. Education was often the reason why these children were subject to compulsory measures of supervision in the first place. The authors suggested that greater prioritisation should be placed on addressing the educational aspects of the Child's Plan for children looked after at home.

The current study has been carried out as part of a broader research and consultancy programme, based on the Improvement Methodology (Langley, 2009). This approach, recently adopted by the Scottish Government's Education Directorate, provides a model through which organisations can improve structures, procedures and practice. Small changes known as 'tests of change' are planned, implemented, studied and refined using plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles. If successful, the changes can then be tested more widely across the organisation.

¹ <http://www.scra.gov.uk/publications/research.cfm>

Methodology

In order to obtain a baseline for improvement, and to benchmark City of Edinburgh council against the findings reported in the SCRA report, 23 Child’s Plans were studied during the summer of 2013. A spreadsheet was created using SPSS comprising a series of questions to be answered for the Child’s Plan. From this, frequencies were obtained for responses to all of the questions.

Following establishment of this baseline, a driver diagram was developed. A template driver diagram is shown in Figure 1. The overall aim can be broken down into primary drivers, secondary drivers and tests of change. Primary drivers are aspects which must be achieved in order to fulfil the overall aim, and secondary drivers are aspects which must be achieved in order to fulfil the primary drivers. The language used in the drivers should contain verbs such as ‘increase’ or ‘improve’. Each secondary driver should lead to a test of change, which can be carried out using PDSA cycles. The driver diagram is a dynamic document, which can itself be tweaked and improved as more information becomes available.

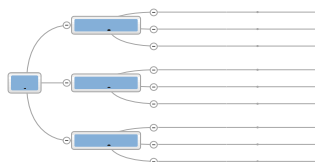


Figure 1: Driver Diagram Template

A driver diagram was developed. Building on the SCRA research, the primary drivers were concerned with increasing the educational content of the child’s plan and improved recognition of a child’s abilities.

Interviews were carried out with a quality development officer (QDO), a Senior Education Welfare Officer (EWO) and a learning support teacher in order to obtain their views on the application of Improvement Methodology in this context.

Findings: Use of Improvement Methodology in Schools and Implementation of PDSA cycles

Use of Improvement Methodology in Schools

Improvement Methodology was thought to be appropriate for use in schools, due to its emphasis on making small, incremental changes.

'I think it's a great way to work. It breaks down this huge piece of work into achievable chunks. It's great for going into schools and saying to people, "We're not asking you to do a lot. We're only asking you to do one or two small things, and then we'll review it and see how that goes, and we might change it." I think you get buy-in back from people much more, so that's great.'

Quality Development Officer

Teaching staff found the evaluative process useful in promoting sustainability following any initial changes:

'I like the fact that you stop and evaluate how things have gone in going forward. I think it makes a lot of sense, because quite often when everybody's so busy and schools are so busy, if something's not working it might get pushed to the side. If you've got this I think it's good to know that you're going to stop and evaluate how things have gone, and move forward with it. Often things don't work, or they don't go quite as planned and I like the fact that there's accountability for picking it up again and seeing how that's going.'

Learning Support Teacher

Plan Do Study Act

Establishment of a baseline

On examination of 23 Child's plans, it was found that attendance and behaviour were the only educational aspects mentioned at all in 12 of the reports. Achievements, talents and ambitions were mentioned in one Child's Plan; the remaining plans tended to focus on problems requiring resolution.

These findings echoed the national findings reported in the SCRA report, and prompted the development of a test of change which focused on these areas. The test was to determine whether improved communication between school and home had any effect on a) parental engagement with school, and b) assisting the school to view the child in terms of their strengths, in line with the principles of GIRFEC. The PDSA cycles involved communication between primary school staff and home, and ran from August 2013 to June 2014.

PDSA 1

A planning meeting between CELCIS, a QDO with City of Edinburgh Council, a head teacher and a learning support teacher took place in an Edinburgh primary school. This involved consideration of three children in Primary 6 who were looked after at home. The group decided to introduce a system of fortnightly communication with the child's home. This communication would be positive in nature. In preparation for this, one of the learning support teachers administered a questionnaire to the parents to determine their preferred mode of communication. This was found to be phone calls, initiated by the school, in every case.

In the 'do' phase, the school staff carried out this test of change as planned. The process was studied qualitatively through interviews with the school staff. Initial feedback was positive: parents enjoyed the contact, and requested weekly phone calls, rather than the fortnightly ones initially proposed. From the school's perspective, communication felt worthwhile and purposeful. According to the learning support teacher, the main success of this test of change was improved relationships between school and home.

'Parents felt more supported, and improvements were observed between the relationship with school and some parents.'

Learning Support Teacher

Alongside the positive reports initially proposed, the school found that the in-depth conversation provided a positive platform to air concerns:

'Parents felt listened to. Because of the two-way dialogue, it was found to be easier to share concerns and discuss a way forward.'

Learning Support Teacher

In the 'act' phase, the changes tested (namely, more regular telephone contact and the sharing of concerns) were formally implemented into the school's standard practice, which led on to a second PDSA cycle.

PDSA 2

Negotiations began with other schools in the local authority, in order to identify sites which may be willing to test similar changes in their parental engagement practice. Three primary schools became involved, and eleven pupils were identified for the PDSA cycles. An Education Welfare Officer became involved at this point. The EWO spoke to relevant staff in the schools and individual parents. This was done because the EWO wanted to ensure that everyone was clear about the aims of the project. Parents were given the choice of how they would prefer to receive communication, and this was seen to vary: some preferred telephone, while some preferred email. The previous PDSA

cycle had found that a combination of positive points and concerns worked well, and the primary schools adopted a format described as ‘two stars and a wish’, where any concern was sandwiched between two positive stories. Interviews were carried out with the EWO and QDO in the study phase of this test of change. Feedback on the PDSA cycle is given here:

Impact on Teachers

Teachers were said to enjoy an improved relationship with parents and carers:

‘What we’ve got from all of this is an enormously high level of buy-in from class teachers. They’ve really seen the benefits of it. They’re hearing back from parents and carers, “It’s lovely to hear these positive things about my child”, and the relationship between the school and these carers is changing enormously.’

Quality Development Officer

The EWO reported that positive results had been observed in all of the schools, and reflected that the process had helped teachers to focus on children’s strengths and abilities:

‘It’s made them more aware of looking at strengths, and more aware of the principles of GIRFEC...when you’re working with challenging young people, it’s very easy to focus on the negatives, and the things that are causing concern; it’s actually more difficult to look at the positives. This has shown me that it works.’

Senior Education Welfare Officer

Impact on parents/carers and children

Parents/ carers expressed approval of the project, and because of the informal nature of the calls, were able to share things that were happening at home:

‘One grandparent actually contacted the school and said, “This is absolutely fabulous. I’m now more aware of what’s happening in school...By the way, my grandson got a new badge in cubs.”’

Senior Education Welfare Officer

This may have been partly due to improved relationships with their children and with the school:

‘...in quite a few of the cases, it has generated a discussion at home about what’s happening in school. The parents/ carers felt that they had more immediate

contact with the school instead of waiting until there was an official GIRFEC meeting.'

Senior Education Welfare Officer

It was suggested that there may be an even more basic reason for the success of the project:

'It was just lovely for them to hear. They're usually so ground down by hearing negative things and criticism, and feeling guilty...the positive contact makes such a fundamental difference, and we're all like that if somebody says something nice to us.'

Quality Development Officer

The EWO was asked whether taking part in the project had had any effect on the children:

'Well the obvious one is improved attendance in school. (In the past) if there was a particular subject or topic, the child would come in late, but because of this, the child's attendance has improved. The child's homework's handed in on time, and because the teacher has a greater understanding of what's going on outside, there is a more complete picture. So we have, I think, engagement in the whole education process.'

Senior Education Welfare Officer

As a result of this test, this work will continue to be rolled out in Edinburgh primary schools, and talks have taken place with relevant secondary schools, so that the work may be continued post-transition for the children. Over time, it is hoped that measurable changes in attendance will be observed for a large cross-section of pupils, and that the perceived improved communication between school and parents will translate to improved representation of children's skills and aspirations within the Child's Plan.

Observations from the project

The experiences obtained within City of Edinburgh Council may be used to inform the work being carried out in other local authorities. The Quality Development Officer shared observations:

'In the first school, we left the school to make the contact, but what we learned was that the briefing that we do with head teachers isn't what gets passed on to class teachers. The heads took something away that was quite difficult for class teachers to do.'

Quality Development Officer

Following this observation, it was decided that class teachers should be included in initial discussions.

Having at least one individual to oversee the work and liaise with and support stakeholders was also seen to be essential:

'You need an ally to understand what you're doing, talk it over, nag if necessary, and remind people to do things.'

Quality Development Officer

One class teacher had reported to the Senior Education Welfare Officer that it was difficult to find two positive things to say about a child each time, and that it was difficult not to repeat things from previous communications. The officer explained to the teacher that the positives did not need to focus on classroom work, but could be something from the playground or similar. This point illustrated the point that staff may need continued support in implementing the PDSA cycles.

It was noticed that different groups of schools and parents/ carers had different preferences for mode and frequency of contact. It was thought that involving schools and parents/ carers in these decisions had increased buy-in in the process.

It was also noted that timing is critical when working in schools:

'The first term of the school year is the time to do the work, up 'til Christmas time, because after that you run out of time, and it's too late. It's not a 52-week piece of work, it's a 30-week piece of work.'

Quality Development Officer

A final observation was that it is important not to overwhelm schools, and to explain that there will be support in place to help them:

'It's about being clear about the parameters of what you're asking them to do. It's not going to be a lot of children; it's not going to be a huge amount of additional work; also being clear that they're not going to get any additional resources for doing it. We're not going to give them stuff, but we'll work alongside them to help them do what we're asking them to do.'

Quality Development Officer

Conclusion

Qualitative research interviews revealed that the Improvement Methodology worked very well in the school context. The idea that a large aim could be dealt with by breaking it down into manageable PDSA cycles was thought to be a key benefit.

The content of Child's Plans for looked after children in City of Edinburgh Council was found to be similar to the national pattern; mentions of education tended to be concerned with behaviour and attendance, and there was little mention of skills or aspirations. This prompted the Council, in partnership with CELCIS, to develop a project based on the improvement methodology. This project was premised on the assumption that changes in the way education was communicated to parents and carers (and reflected in Children's Plans) would lead to improved outcomes. Those outcomes were a) parental engagement with school, and b) assisting the school to view the child in terms of their strengths, in line with the principles of GIRFEC.

A small number of schools then went through the process of developing a driver diagram to identify appropriate changes to practice or systems, and these were then tested and refined using a series of PDSA cycles. The participating schools all decided to introduce a system of regular positive communication with parents and carers (although the method of delivery and regularity of communication chosen by schools differed). All schools concluded that regular positive communication with home increased parental engagement, and led to increased awareness at school of what was happening at home. Parents enjoyed hearing positive things about their children. The focus on a child's strengths was thought to have a positive effect on class teachers, and to complement the principles of GIRFEC. Early indicators of improved attendance were reported, and it is hoped that measurable changes in attendance will be observed in the future. It is also hoped that the perceived improved communication between school and parents will translate to improved representation of children's skills and aspirations within the Child's Plan.

Interviewed staff made a series of observations about the work, which may be used to inform the work in other local authorities. These included:

- Negotiations should be made with each school separately, and class teachers should be involved in discussions if they are the ones who will carry out the work. This will avoid miscommunication of plans.
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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge The Scottish Government for supporting this research. We would like to thank Edinburgh City Council for providing us with access to the Child's Plans and social work reports. We would also like to thank Colin Robb, Quality Development Officer with City of Edinburgh Council, and Irene Watt, Senior Education Welfare Officer, for their expertise and invaluable support.

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CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all looked after children in Scotland. We do so by providing a focal point for the sharing of knowledge and the development of best practice, by providing a wide range of services to improve the skills of those working with looked after children, and by placing the interests of children at the heart of our work.

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