



Centre for excellence  
for looked after children in Scotland



FINAL REPORT

# Recognition of Prior Learning and Looked- After Young People

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## Introduction

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This report describes the findings from a study designed to test out an application of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for young people from a looked-after background. The potential advantages of RPL profiling could have positive effects on the educational outcomes of the looked-after child. Many looked-after children leave school with few or no formal qualifications, but these same young people often have full and varied life experiences. These experiences may have led to a set of wider achievements that could be recognised by the RPL process.

The study was commissioned by Education Scotland, and included a pilot project and a research evaluation. The work was carried out by the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) between January and June 2012, with additional expertise and training provided by the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (LEAD) team at Glasgow Caledonian University.

An RPL profiling toolkit, previously developed by LEAD, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) partnership, was used in the pilot project. Professionals were recruited from West Lothian and East Renfrewshire local authorities, and received training to become mentors, or ‘advisors’, for looked after young people who are at risk of leaving school with few or no qualifications. Advisors came from a range of professional backgrounds, and included teachers, social workers, ‘More Choices More Chances’ keyworkers, a community learning and development worker, and a youth justice worker. In addition to a full day of advisor training in January, advisors attended two half-day support sessions, in March and June 2012.

The profiling toolkit contains cards which depict everyday activities, and details the skills associated with these activities. Young people were recruited by the advisors, and they worked together with the toolkit in a one-to-one setting to determine their skill areas, and to benchmark their skills against the relevant SCQF level. A recent addition to the toolkit, developed by CELCIS, also allowed benchmarking against Curriculum for Excellence ‘experiences and outcomes’.

Thirteen advisors and 13 young people gave their consent to take part in the pilot and research evaluation. Of these, eight advisors and 12 young people went through profiling. All eight of the advisors and eight of the young people contributed to the research evaluation.

A qualitative research evaluation was carried out using three methods: observational data were obtained at the advisor training day and subsequent support sessions; questionnaires were completed by advisors at the start of profiling, and by young people at the start and end of profiling; and interviews were conducted with all of the participants at the end of profiling.

The research evaluation was designed to address four questions:

- Were advisors able to adapt effectively to the role of RPL advisor with the training and support given?
- What were the outcomes of undertaking RPL profiling?
- Did the young people find the profiling approach useful in clarifying learning and employment ambitions?
- Were the existing materials suitable for looked-after children?

## Key Findings

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- Many of the resilience-building and success-promoting factors previously associated with RPL profiling occurred during the pilot.
- Although not all of the young people experienced all of these outcomes, benefits of RPL profiling for many of the young people included:
  - engagement with process;
  - increased skills awareness;
  - increased self-awareness;
  - feelings of being nurtured;
  - recognition of skills;
  - increased self-esteem;
  - increased motivation and ambition.
- Advisors reported that increased awareness of career options occurred more than increased awareness of opportunities during RPL profiling.
- Advisors were able to adapt effectively to the role of RPL advisor with the training and support given, irrespective of their professional background.
- Advisors and young people stated that the materials would be suitable for use with looked-after children.

## Background

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### Recognising Wider Achievement

Schools have been interested in recording wider achievements since the 1970s, with projects such as ‘pupils in profile’ of 1977 (SCRE, 1977), in which teachers indicated that recognition of non-academic qualities such as self-reliance and confidence should be recorded. Since that time, interest in this area has continued to grow within Scotland, and policy initiatives such as ‘Determined to Succeed’, ‘More Choices More Chances’, and ‘Life Through Learning, Learning Through Life’ all promote the importance of a celebration and recognition of achievements (Scottish Executive, 2002); (Scottish Executive, 2006); (Scottish Executive, 2003). Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2008) is a national programme which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people by providing a shared language and approach within a multi-agency framework. Recognising wider achievement fits well within the GIRFEC model.

Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004) is the collective name for the radically revised curriculum for early years and school education which has been introduced in stages since 2002. The curriculum aims to help learners to develop the skills they need for learning, life and work, and has a strong emphasis on the development of well-rounded individuals. The outcomes of Curriculum for Excellence are encapsulated in the four ‘capacities’: to enable each pupil to become a successful learner; confident individual; responsible citizen; and effective contributor. These areas are not fully examinable in the traditional ways, so it is clear that new ways of recognising achievement are necessary.

The Building the Curriculum series is a suite of literature which provides advice, guidance and policy for different aspects of Curriculum for Excellence. *Building the Curriculum 3: A Framework for Learning and Teaching* (Scottish Government, 2008) states:

‘Gaining recognition for their achievements, and the skills for life and skills for work that are developed through them, can benefit all young people. It can increase their confidence, raise their aspirations, improve their motivation for learning and keep them engaged in education. In addition the process of planning, recording and recognising achievements can help young people to reflect on their learning and development and can be valuable starting points when it comes to articulating themselves in applications to and interviews with employers, colleges or universities’ (page 45).

It then goes on to say:

‘Many young people in Scotland are already involved in a range of activities, both in and out of school and college, and have developed skills and capacities for which they are not currently gaining recognition’ (page 45).

*Building the Curriculum 5: A framework for assessment* (Scottish Government, 2011) discussed the pupil profile to be completed at the end of S3, which should recognise their progress and achievements. It recommended that this time be used as an opportunity to reflect on previous and future learning and development, but also suggested that the profile should not be restricted to S3:

‘It could be part of a continuous process of personal learning planning and reporting from 3 to 18 and could continue to be updated as the young person moves through the senior phase. It could be used to inform future decisions through personal learning planning, by helping the learner to identify areas for development, qualification and award choices and to decide on possible future learning paths’ (page 44).

Although the *Building the Curriculum* series states clearly that wider achievements should be recognised, there is no formula or model for how this should be done. A review of the ways in which recording and reporting of the wider achievements of young people takes place was carried out in 2007 (Boyd, 2007). One of the key findings was that stakeholders considered that recognising achievement is not simply about carrying out activities, but rather it is about the learning gained in the process, and the reflection that takes place during and after the activities and events.

In 2008, The Scottish Government and Learning Teaching Scotland set up collaborative enquiry projects in 12 local authorities to investigate and pilot approaches to recognising wider achievement (Scottish Government, 2010). This study also emphasised that reflection on and understanding of the achievement was more important than the recognition itself. Reflection should be carried out soon after the experience has taken place, and both reflection and recording should be youth-friendly and imaginative.

All of the projects felt that the approach to recognising achievement should be flexible, rather than follow a strict model. It was acknowledged that this could prove difficult in practice, with potential variations in outcomes for the young people in Scotland. The report also emphasised the important principle that any approach to recognise achievements should reduce, and not widen, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged young people.

## Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

RPL represents a possible method for recognising achievements obtained beyond school and college. Formative RPL is an informal process, which allows learners to understand the level and nature of their skills and learning, in order to use that knowledge for personal development. The person undergoing RPL profiling works with an advisor to draw out and reflect on their experiences and skills. Whittaker (Whittaker, 2006) has written that learner self-awareness can be developed through participation in RPL due

to interaction with, and validation by, peers and advisors. A review of RPL in 2008 (Inspire Scotland, 2008) identified further possible outcomes:

- gaining recognition for skills and competencies based in the workplace, alternative settings or community;
- potential to assist individuals to widen their career choices;
- potential for individuals to review skills regularly, to monitor progress, and remain engaged in lifelong learning;
- motivational benefits for individuals.

Other potential benefits include engagement with the process, increased self-esteem, and feelings of being nurtured by the advisor.

## The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and RPL

The SCQF is a framework which contains ‘level descriptors’ to define and link the full range of qualifications available within Scotland (Figure 1). In addition to this, the framework allows comparison between Scottish qualifications and those from other countries, and it has the capacity to recognise all forms of learning. This clarifies possible learning pathways, and helps to identify credit transfer opportunities, in order to avoid repetition of learning.

It is possible to use the SCQF for RPL. A review of the use of SCQF in RPL was published in 2005 (Whittaker, 2005), which indicated that benchmarking prior learning with the SCQF served to promote the self-definition of individuals as learners, and helped learners to choose their next steps in learning and careers.

The social services sector piloted integration of RPL in tandem with the SCQF into workforce development in 2006. The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) altered the qualification requirements of staff in 2006, so that all staff must now hold or obtain a relevant qualification appropriate to their role. Experienced but unqualified staff may be reluctant to undertake formal training, and this project was done in order to increase learner confidence, and to allow them to obtain the qualifications needed to maintain registration. Evaluation of the project, which had a formative and a summative (for credit) dimension, confirmed that learners experienced increased confidence, and felt motivated to undertake further learning and development. Learners obtained a greater understanding of how they learned, as well as an increased ability to express and demonstrate their learning.

## THE SCOTTISH CREDIT AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK



SCQF Levels	SQA Qualifications			Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
12				DOCTORAL DEGREE	
11				INTEGRATED MASTERS DEGREE / MASTERS DEGREE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA POST GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	SVQ5
10				HONOURS DEGREE GRADUATE DIPLOMA GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	
9			PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AWARD	BACHELORS / ORDINARY DEGREE GRADUATE DIPLOMA GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	SVQ4
8		HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA		DIPLOMA OF HIGHER EDUCATION	
7	ADVANCED HIGHER SCOTTISH BACCALAUREATE	HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE		CERTIFICATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION	SVQ3
6	HIGHER				
5	INTERMEDIATE 2 CREDIT STANDARD GRADE				SVQ2
4	INTERMEDIATE 1 GENERAL STANDARD GRADE	NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	NATIONAL PROGRESSION AWARD		SVQ1
3	ACCESS 3 FOUNDATION STANDARD GRADE				
2	ACCESS 2				
1	ACCESS 1				

scqf | SCOTLAND'S LIFELONG LEARNING FRAMEWORK | www.scqf.org.uk

Figure 1: SCQF Schematic reproduced from <http://www.scqf.org.uk>

The role of advisor was examined in the evaluation of this project. The researchers arrived at the conclusion that advisors must be given sufficient time, training and support prior to and during RPL profiling.

Whittaker and Anderson (Whittaker & Anderson, 2009), with SCQF partnership and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) developed an *RPL profiling toolkit* in 2008/09, designed to benchmark skills obtained carrying out non-academic activities, such as caring for relatives or work experience, in order to assist them in their career planning journey. In accord with Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004), this toolkit was designed to recognise wider achievement, and assist people from a variety of backgrounds in their career planning journey. The toolkit was successfully trialed with school leavers in 2009. The young people were mainly S4 pupils, who were at risk of having no positive destination. Evaluation of the pilot revealed that the process worked well when small groups of young people used shared experience as the focus.

Further development of the toolkit occurred, and the improved resource was piloted in 2010 (Whittaker, Angus, & Heaney, 2010). Incremental improvements led to the model which was used in this study.

SDS is now exploring the applicability of the model to other learners, including the long-term unemployed and individuals facing redundancy. The research detailed in this report explores whether the existing materials could be useful for young people from a looked-after background.

## RPL and Looked After Children

Of the 16,000 looked-after children in Scotland in 2011, a third are ‘looked after at home’, and live in their normal place of residence, which is usually the family home. The remaining two thirds are ‘looked after away from home’, either by foster carers or prospective adopters, in ‘kinship’ care, where a relative cares for the child, or in residential care.

The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 give the current legislation on assessment and planning for looked after children, and place a high priority on the education of looked after children. The guidance to the regulations states (Scottish Government, 2011):

‘Children who are looked after should have the same opportunities as all other children for education, including further and higher education, and access to other opportunities for development’ (page 34).

A joint investigation by HM Inspectors of Schools (HMI) and Social Work Services Inspectorate (SWSI) in 2001 highlighted the continued disadvantages experienced by looked-after children (Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Schools & the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001). Since that time, a series of government initiatives have occurred. These have included provision of funds, to be used to provide an educationally rich environment for looked after children, (Boyce, 2004), development of training materials for professionals working with looked after children, (Connelly, McKay, & O’Hagan, 2003) and pilot projects aimed at boosting the attainment of looked after children, (Connelly, Forrest, Siebelt, Smith, & Seagraves, 2008). Publications such as *We Can and Must do Better* (Scottish Executive, 2007), *These are our Bairns* (Scottish Government, 2008), and *Count us in: Improving the Education of Looked After Children* (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, 2008), illustrate the continued priority placed on this area by the government, but there is evidence that there is still a long way to go.

For the past two years, statistics obtained by linking social work and educational data have been made available (Scottish Government, 2012). These data have highlighted the relatively poor educational outcomes for looked-after children, compared with the general school population, especially for those looked after at home. Disproportionately high numbers of looked-after children were excluded from school, with 326 of every 1000 looked-after children experiencing exclusion compared with just 40 of every 1000 pupils overall. Overall school attendance rates for looked-after children were relatively



low, with 88.6% attendance for looked-after children compared with 93.1% for all school children. The average tariff score for looked-after children who left school during 2010/11 was just 79, compared to 385 for all school leavers. This was partly due to the younger average age of the looked-after school leaver; 88% of looked-after children who left school during 2010/11 were 16 or younger, compared to only 34% of all school leavers. This means that many looked-after children left school younger, and with corresponding lower qualification levels than their peers. When surveyed in the September following school leaving, 64% of looked-after children were in a positive destination compared with 89% for all school leavers. By the following March, this number had fallen to 55% for looked-after children, but had remained fairly static at 87% for all school leavers. Encouragingly, this represents an increase of 11% for looked-after children compared with the previous year; however, it should be noted that the later positive destination statistics included activity agreements, which did not exist the previous year.

Following publication of the 2009/10 data, a parliamentary inquiry was held by the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee, in order to examine the reasons why the educational outcomes of looked-after children had remained poor since devolution. The report from the event acknowledged that, while efforts had been made to close the attainment gap between looked-after and non-looked-after children, it remained unacceptably wide (The Scottish Parliament, 2012). Solutions were offered by expert witnesses, and others who had been invited to participate. The Committee considered that, whatever interventions should be made, they must be based on evidence of successful outcomes. They warned that changes may take considerable time to show improvement, and made a commitment to continue monitoring progress in the area.

Much of the research and literature on outcomes for looked-after children paints a bleak picture about their life chances. It has been suggested that this can be stigmatising in itself (Hare & Bullock, 2006), and that there should be more focus on the positive outcomes of being looked-after. The statistical data do appear grim, but it should be considered that the end of S4 is a time of transition for many looked-after children, as they prepare to leave care. A statistical snapshot, taken during a period of change, may lead to an inaccurate conclusion. Studies into the lifelong impact of having been in care yield a more balanced picture, with many care-leavers going on to achieve in life, in spite of poor beginnings (Duncalf, 2010; Guest, 2011).

In *Celebrating Success* (Happer, McCreadie, & Aldgate, 2006), the authors interviewed 42 adults and young people who had previously been looked-after. The participants were defined as 'successful' by two criteria: they were able to make and sustain meaningful relationships; and they were engaged in some kind of work, education, training or meaningful activity. The participants were invited to reflect on the factors that they felt were critical to their success.

Five points emerged:

- having people in their lives who cared about them;
- experiencing stability;
- being given high expectations;
- receiving encouragement and support;
- being able to participate and achieve.

In the section of the report entitled *Being able to participate and achieve*, the authors reported that discovery of a talent for something could contribute to the later success of participants. It was pointed out that:

‘sometimes, the key to promoting a child’s talents was an observant and interested adult, who recognised the child’s abilities’ (page 42).

Looked-after children, in common with many other children with unstable pasts, are often not ‘resilient’. Resilience is a psychosocial term which describes the ability of an individual to overcome the effects of adversity. Newman and Blackburn put this into everyday language in 2002: ‘Resilient children are better equipped to resist stress and adversity, cope with change and uncertainty, and to recover faster and more completely from traumatic events or episodes’ (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). In their review, carried out for the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), the authors examined the factors that promote resilience for looked-after children. Among their findings, the authors reported that taking part in everyday activities, e.g. housework and part-time work, promotes resilience by increasing confidence, competence and motivation. Employment, voluntary work, sport and household responsibility promote self-efficacy and self-esteem by giving the child a sense of control. Educational success is a key factor, and good relationships are important, including interaction with a supportive adult. While acknowledging that fostering self-esteem in children builds resilience, the authors warn against indiscriminate praise. Self-esteem is more likely to grow and remain high when a young person develops meaningful skills in real life situations. Along with other recommendations, the authors wrote that professionals should work to identify children’s strengths, even if they are not directly related to a formal curriculum.

Robbie Gilligan has written a series of publications on mentoring the talents and interests of looked-after children, and the positive effect this has on resilience and educational outcomes (Gilligan, 1999); (Gilligan, 2000); (Gilligan, 2007). Gilligan suggested that resilience of children and young people may be enhanced by ‘imaginative engagement’ with mentors, partly due to engagement with the activity, and partly due to engagement with an attentive adult. This is in accord with a journal article on the effect of study support, which stated that participation in non-subject-focussed activities can have an impact on attainment, attitudes and attendance, irrespective of the activity. (MacBeth, Kirwan, & Myers, 2001). A research evaluation of pilot projects in 18 local authorities, designed to increase the educational attainment of looked-after

children, was published in 2008 (Connelly *et al*, 2008). The authors confirmed that engagement in extra-curricular activities can bring about an increase in attendance and attainment, and that the process of engagement was more important than the nature of the activity. Qualities thought to lead to the most positive outcomes included flexibility, an individualised approach, high expectations of staff, a breadth of learning opportunities, and activities which promoted resilience.

It is clear that RPL has potential as a resilience- enhancing tool. Many of the factors which contribute to resilience and success are possible benefits of RPL profiling. The questionnaires and interview schedules used in the research evaluation were designed to address the area of overlap between these factors and benefits.

## Details of the RPL Profiling Toolkit Used in this Study

The toolkit used in this study is presented as a brightly coloured, tactile and user friendly folder. Following feedback from previous pilots, it was felt that the profiling should take place over at least two, but preferably three, sessions. A total of 34 ‘about me’ cards list skills associated with common activities, e.g. caring for others and work experience. Examples from the most recent version of the toolkit are shown in Figures 2a and 2b.

In Step 1, called ‘About Me’, participants are invited by an advisor to choose two or three cards which represent their interests. The skills relevant to the activity are listed on the back of the card, with skill types represented by different symbols, e.g. thinking skills are represented by a cloud. The young person ticks the skills that reflect his/ her actual experience. In the ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ activity, participants count symbols from all the cards to find out their skill ‘personality’, in the style of a magazine quiz. This is a good time to end the session, and the young person is given a card with their work to take home. In the next stage of the profiling, called ‘Think About It’, participants choose one activity, and, along with the advisor, benchmark the highlighted skills against the SCQF level descriptors, which are written in easy-to-understand language.



Figure 2a: The Front of the 'About Me' Cards reproduced from the toolkit.

The level descriptors for the skill area 'Being Responsible and Working with Others' are shown in Figure 3. A mind map can be used if the young person prefers this approach. 'Being Responsible and Working with Others' is used as the benchmarking skill, since it is very relevant for young people at periods of transition between school and work/ further education.

Prior to starting the research component of the project, cards detailing possible Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes for each of the 'About Me' cards were developed. Advisors may work with the young people to identify whether any of the experiences and outcomes have been met for the chosen activity and, if so, at what level.

If you have ever been a carer or looked after a friend or relative, you may have some of these skills and abilities.

## Caring for Others

SCQF	Description:	✓ Tick all that are true for you
	I talk to the person I'm looking after and find out what kind of help he or she needs and wants.	
	I find out about their likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests to ensure that we have interesting things to talk about when we're together.	
	I try to learn about any illnesses or disabilities they have and how best to help them (either by talking to them or by researching on the internet or in medical books).	
	I think of ideas for how to spend time with them, keeping in mind their routines and any possible limits (e.g. physical or mental conditions).	
	I am aware of health and safety issues and follow guidelines to stay safe and well.	
	I am aware of potential problems that could develop, and make sure that I have emergency contact numbers in case I need help.	
	I try always to be patient and take my time with people who have physical, mental or emotional problems.	
	I take responsibility for the physical part of their care, including things like helping them with bathing, hair, skin and dental care.	
	I help them with medications, making sure that medicines are organised so they take the correct doses at the right time of day.	
	I respect their customs, beliefs and traditions, even if they are very different from my own.	
	I pay attention to changes in mood or emotions. I am sensitive to their feelings and try to make things as nice as I can for them.	

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Symbol	What it means:	How many of these?
	<b>Knowledge and Understanding</b> (Knowing a lot about a particular subject, such as how a car engine works or how to look after small children)	
	<b>Practical Skills</b> (Hands-on stuff, like the ability to design and make a table, or draw a picture or repair a broken bicycle)	
	<b>Thinking Skills</b> (Figuring things out, solving puzzles, sizing up situations, solving problems)	
	<b>Communication, Numeracy and IT Skills</b> (Listening, talking, writing, working with numbers and using computers and gadgets)	
	<b>Being Responsible and Working with Others</b> (Planning things, getting things done, working on your own or with others, making sure that work is finished and is of good standard)	

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Figure 2b: The Back of the 'Caring for Others' 'About Me' Card reproduced from the toolkit.

The final stage of the profiling is to complete the 'Skills Profile'. This is a card that the young person can take away to use as tangible proof of their achievements, and details the approximate SCQF level on the front, and the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes on the back.

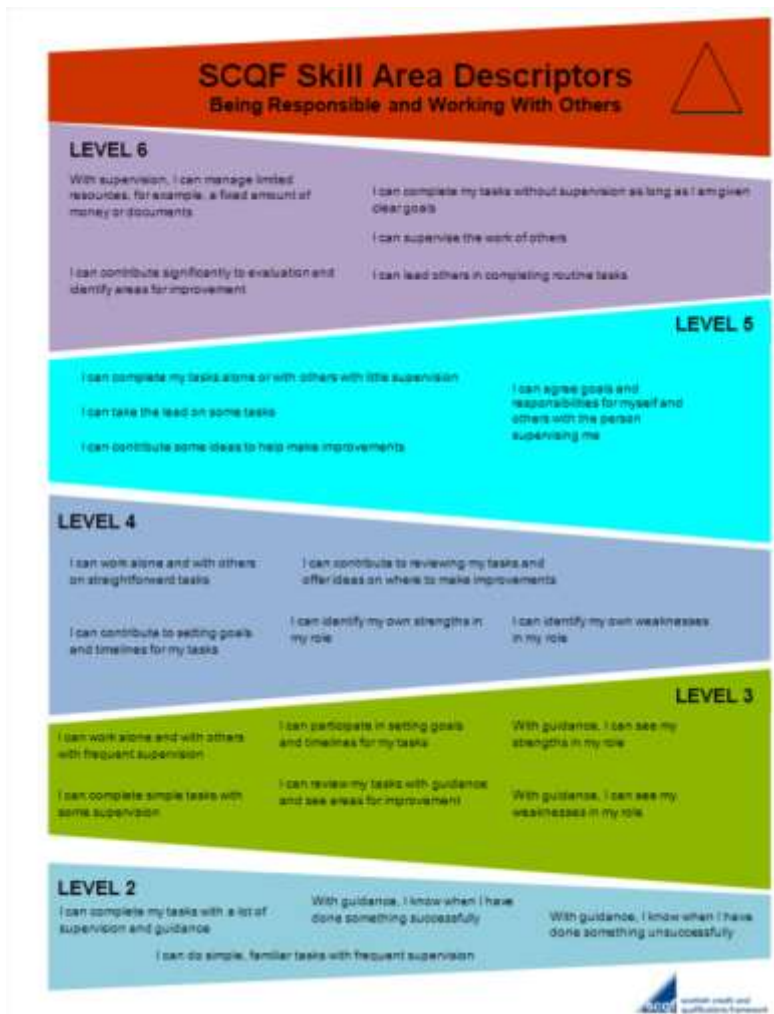


Figure 3: The Level Descriptors for the Skill Area: ‘Being Responsible and Working with Others.’ Poster reproduced from the toolkit; Level Descriptors from [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)

## Pilot

Advisors were recruited from West Lothian and East Renfrewshire local authorities and received training to become RPL advisors. Thirteen potential advisors attended the initial training day. Of these, eight advisors completed RPL profiling with one or more young people. Thirteen young people initially consented to take part in the project, and 12 of these young people undertook RPL profiling with their advisor.

In addition to the advisors, key stakeholders from both local authorities attended. All of the advisors worked with young people from a looked-after background; however, experience in using RPL was not thought to be an essential requirement. An advisor training day was organised in order to introduce the professionals to the RPL toolkit,

explain the pilot and research components of the project, and to prepare them for profiling. The advisors were encouraged to recruit a young person/ young people of their own choice. Profiling took place in the period February 2012 - May 2012, and was punctuated by two half-day support sessions.

## Research Evaluation

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### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study. In addition to a presentation given on the training day explaining the details of the research, a participant information sheet for advisors was distributed. Consent to use the questionnaires and interview data for research purposes was sought at the training day, and confirmed at the interviews.

The pilot and research evaluation were explained to the young people by their advisor, by means of a young person participant information sheet. The advisor was able to answer any questions that the young person may have had. Some of the young people were under 16, and in these cases, a parent/ carer information sheet was made available. Consent to use the questionnaires and interview data for research purposes was received prior to the research evaluation, and confirmed at the interviews.

Interviews and questionnaires were anonymous. Participants were asked their date of birth, so that it would be possible to link interview and questionnaire data for individual respondents.

### Participants

Thirteen advisors and thirteen young people initially gave their consent to take part in the pilot and research evaluation. Of these, eight advisors and 12 young people went through profiling. The advisors were mainly female, with only one male taking part. Seven advisors completed both the questionnaire and the interview; the remaining advisor was not able to complete the second interview, but was present at each of the training and subsequent support sessions, so was able to share impressions. Of the 12 young people who undertook RPL profiling with their advisor, eight young people completed the questionnaires and interviews. Gender balance was even, with four males and four females taking part, aged 14 to 19.

## Qualitative Research Methods

A mixed methods approach was used to evaluate the success of the pilot. Open discussion and observation took place at the training day and support sessions by the researcher. Questionnaires were completed by advisors after the first training session, to ascertain the background and expectations of the advisors. The young people were also asked to complete questionnaires at this stage, to find out about their ambitions, awareness of opportunities, and expectations. The young people were asked questions about their skills and interests, in order to prepare them for RPL profiling. On completion of the profiling, the advisors were invited to interview. The young people were invited to interview, and also to complete a further questionnaire.

Questionnaires and transcribed interview data were coded into themes by hand, and organised using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Several main themes emerged. Unsurprisingly, these were loosely based around the questionnaire and interview questions; however, additional themes emerged.

## Results

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### Advisor Data

The advisors who took part in the research evaluation completed a questionnaire before and after RPL profiling, and underwent an interview at the end of the process. In addition to these data, observational data were obtained at the advisor training and support days. The questionnaire asked advisors whether they had any prior experience of RPL, mentoring, and supporting the education of looked after children, and asked what they hoped to get out of profiling. The interview questions were guided by the research questions:

- What were the outcomes of undertaking RPL profiling?
- Did the young people find the profiling approach useful in clarifying learning and employment ambitions?
- Were the existing materials suitable for looked-after children?
- Were advisors able to adapt effectively to the role of RPL advisor with the training and support given?

Analysis will be considered under these headings, and the subheadings in the text represent the themes which emerged during data analysis.

The advisors were very open during interviews, and appeared to be relaxed during the training day and support sessions. They were asked in their questionnaires what their expectations of RPL profiling were. Respondents hoped that RPL would allow them to



support the education of looked-after children, provide increased recognition of skills, and increase the self-esteem of the young people.

## Young Person Engagement

All of the interviewed advisors reported good young person engagement with the process, especially during session 1 (About Me Cards):

‘I was quite surprised when she agreed first of all to take part in this study, and then she turned up every week, which was quite something because that wasn’t the pattern before.’

‘The first part I think he really, really enjoyed. He was talking much more about himself (than in previous meetings).’

At the initial advisor training day, one attendee commented:

‘In some ways this is a convoluted process, but the whole process is meant to engage the young people, so being so involved is a good way to do that.’

Another advisor later reported that the young person she was working with had brought his SQA certificates to the second session, completely unprompted.

The professionals recognised that engagement with a process is important for young people, and all of them considered that this did happen during the RPL profiling.

At the initial training day, advisors commented that they liked how the toolkit linked the SCQF and Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes. As the interview stage, however, it became clear that the advisors and young people either were not fully aware of the Curriculum for Excellence benchmarking exercise, or were actively choosing not to complete it due to time restraints or lack of interest. The Curriculum for Excellence cards were tagged onto the end of the toolkit, and many participants did not appear to be aware of them when interviewed. One adviser wondered whether unfamiliarity with the terminology and concept of Curriculum for Excellence was responsible for the lack of interest. Only two advisors completed the Curriculum for Excellence section of the final profile.

The SCQF benchmarking activity was found to be highly engaging:

‘They loved seeing where they were, you know where their (SCQF) levels were and things like that. They liked that part.’

‘[SCQF] is how schools operate...the mind-set at the moment might not be in the future; people still need to know where they are at...’

However, two advisors commented on the future potential of the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes benchmarking:

‘What schools are trying to do is benchmark skills with Curriculum for Excellence. So this would be absolutely brilliant to help them do that.’

‘So further down the line, doing it when kids are more aware of the Curriculum for Excellence, I think then it’ll be more worthwhile.’

## Increased Self-Esteem

An increase in self-esteem was a common expectation of the advisors. Two mentioned this in their initial questionnaires, and four others vocalised this hope in their interviews. Five of the advisors observed an increase in self-esteem:

‘That wee glow in her face when she realized she was higher than she thought...’

One advisor commented that although the young person she was working with did not have low self-esteem, she thought that the toolkit would be an effective way to increase self-confidence in other young people.

Another expressed concern that the initial benefits of RPL profiling, such as increased self-esteem, may be superficial or short-lived:

‘For the hour afterwards she was quite happy with herself...then two weeks later she’s still unemployed.’

## Awareness of Skills

All of the advisors interviewed reported increased awareness of skills. Many of the young people were unaware that activities that they undertook in everyday life were skills, and were delighted to learn that they were. One advisor commented:

‘...so they package themselves as someone who isn’t clever, or who doesn’t have skills...I’d hoped that this would let him see that...just because he’s not got the paper, doesn’t mean he’s not got the ability.’

Advisors worked with the young people to draw out their skills, and commented:

‘It turns out that he had taken a very natural role of...mentoring younger children. He didn’t recognise that he had been doing that...didn’t recognise the skill attached to it. Later he could see that this is skill led.’

‘I asked him what he did in terms of fixing bikes, and he said, ”I would just fix it.” Once I explained the process to him; actually he was analysing, assessing, communicating. He was doing mathematics. It was almost like you could see the light coming on for him.’

In addition to skills awareness, three advisors mentioned that the young person obtained an increased self-awareness:

‘It maybe made him think about how he works as opposed to what he knows.’

The advisor quoted above also commented that she learned a lot more about the young person.

One advisor found that going through RPL profiling proved invaluable in allowing the young person to acknowledge how his previous behaviour has stopped him from progressing in other ways:

‘...and that’s been quite insightful for him...that’s good, because he might think twice about behaving that way again.’

## Recognition

During the first training day, one advisor expressed his hope that the young people would obtain self-recognition of their skills, as well as recognition from their families. This sentiment was echoed by two other advisors during the interviews when they were asked what their hopes for the young person were.

Another common theme at the training and support days was a desire for a formal recognition of the process. Four advisors vocalised this during the interviews:

‘I would like to see it certificated in some way for the young people.’

‘...to make that commitment and stick to it when everything else is happening round about them, it shows how dedicated they are to it, so it would be nice if they could get some sort of (formal) recognition for that process.’

One advisor was concerned that going through the process could actually reinforce the fact that the young person has no qualifications:

‘This is what you would have got if you’d stuck in at school...’

She felt that this could be avoided if the RPL profiling were rewarded by achieving something tangible.

Three advisors saw the final profile as having some merit in its own right. It was felt that it could be used to support transition, or to show later professionals what the young person was capable of:

‘...he can use some of these sentences to really support his applications’.

## Motivation

All of the advisors interviewed felt that the young people would like to progress what they had learned about themselves on some level, and three advisors felt that going through the RPL profiling had catalysed a marked increase in motivation:

‘She did ask about going on to study a formal qualification, and that’s something that she’s certainly not mentioned to me when I worked with her.’

‘He said, “I should be back on track and I’ve only got a short time.”’

## Ambition

Advisors reported that ‘hopes and dreams for the future’ remained unchanged for most of the young people, although one advisor reported:

‘She’d had such a rotten time at school that any kind of formal institution, whether it be school or college, just didn’t appeal to her at all...so to hear her say, “If I do that could I go to college?” I’m sure there must have been some sort of switch.’

Another advisor commented that a young person had started considering a career which had previously been ‘a pipeline dream’, and another commented that the toolkit represented a good way of increasing the aspirations of young people.

## Feeling nurtured

It was clear from the training days and the interviews that the advisors in the pilot wanted the best for the young people they were working with. The young people were not always known to the advisors prior to the profiling, and advisors had varying views on this aspect. Six advisors felt that it was not critical; in fact, two suggested that it

would be a good ‘get to know you’ tool. The remaining two advisors maintained that previous knowledge of each other was fundamental, and that the young people may not feel comfortable being open with a stranger.

The advisors all affirmed that the young people responded to encouragement and support from them:

‘I’ve never come across a young person yet that doesn’t respond to praise...especially with my client group where the majority of people round about them are there to put them down.’

The toolkit was thought to represent a good nurturing tool:

‘It gives the worker a lot of information about them in a very natural way, and in a very non-threatening way. And if you’ve got a good memory...you can always use pieces of the interview to go back time and time again.’

## Career Awareness

According to the advisors, three young people had no idea or some idea about what they would like to do in the future, but RPL profiling allowed them to consider different options:

‘She changed her mind on a career choice. She was doing dog grooming...she’s thinking more of cooking...totally shifted from one to the other.’

One of these young people had not realized that supporting and mentoring younger people was a skill or a career option:

‘I think he does intend to keep doing (mentoring) on an informal basis...he’s definitely very keen on working with younger people.’

For the remaining five, going through RPL confirmed their current career choice:

‘It’s probably reinforced that that’s the route that he wants to go down.’

## Opportunity Awareness

Some young people already had a clear idea of what they wanted to do, but did not know how to get there:

'She's very set on what she wants to do...towards the end of the process she was saying, "I really could be doing with getting some qualifications, that would be good for my C.V. and it would help me get into the army."...She has agreed to come and work with us doing her core skills.'

One advisor commented that the young person she had worked with wanted to do well, but did not know how to proceed. Through RPL profiling, the young person had realized that they had a talent in mentoring young people. The advisor, who had a background in careers advice, was able to offer guidance:

'I spoke to colleagues in community development, and they were really keen to get him involved in doing group work with 10/11 year olds.'

Circumstances prevented the young person from proceeding at that time, but the advisor was able to liaise with the young person's key worker to explore avenues for the future.

Few advisors appeared to place much emphasis on discussion of opportunities with the young people.

## Suitability of Materials for Looked-After Children

All of the advisors felt that the toolkit would be ideal for use with looked-after children. It was felt that the flexibility within the tool may suit this client group:

'A lot of young people might like the visual thing; the tick box and cards, and other people just prefer talking. Some of the young people are much better just looking at things and not being interviewed in that way...it's going to be another communication tool I've got to engage with young people.'

Advisors felt that the young people enjoyed the bright cards and materials, and the contemporary 'pop-quiz' tone of the toolkit. Some recommendations were given by advisors for improvements to the materials: it was felt that they could be better organised, and suggestions were made for additional cards which may be appropriate for looked-after children and care leavers. These included using public transport, parenting and living alone; although it was acknowledged that the mind-map alternative could be used to accommodate these activities.

Advisors could come from any profession involved with the care of the young person, and this was seen as an advantage:

'Any worker who is in contact with young people would be able to use it to help support them.'

Several of the advisors commented that they plan to use the toolkit again, and everybody confirmed that the profiling would be useful for looked-after children, especially with respect to self-esteem issues:

‘As professionals, we often come across (young people) with low self-esteem, and we spend a lot of time trying to say, “Yes, you can do this.” But we don’t know how to build up their self-esteem...I think that this is probably a good way of doing it.’

‘Trying to encourage a young person’s self-esteem is not easy, so it’s a useful tool to try to do that, with a particular focus on education and learning.’

It was suggested at the last training day that the toolkit could work well in a group setting, but this was met with mixed responses from advisors. One advisor was already planning a group profiling activity, but another worried that the young people would not be comfortable talking about their skills in a group setting.

The toolkit was seen as an excellent tool to engage with looked-after children. It was seen as a good introduction tool, to put both advisors and young people at ease, and one advisor made the suggestion that the tool could be used to compare a before and after skill level for a young person who was about to build on previous experience, for example while engaging in an activity agreement.

Three advisors suggested that the tool could be used effectively at transition stages, for preparing job applications and CVs:

‘This is something that we could put on an application form, or we could talk about in interviews when (he’s) at careers...I wanted this to be part of his transition from school.’

‘The clients we work with, they’re always going to be young people who are going to need that type of support and confidence building at this transition phase.’

One advisor talked enthusiastically at the final advisor support session about how she had used the toolkit to build a CV with a young person. The advisor had previously worked on CV building with the young person, but they had been frustrated by the process, and had laid it aside. The advisor claimed that using the toolkit made a big difference when they attempted it for the second time.

## Ability of Advisors to Adapt to the Role

Advisors were recruited from a diverse range of professional backgrounds. Teachers, social workers, ‘More Choices More Chances’ keyworkers, a community learning and development worker, and a youth justice worker were represented.

Most of the advisors had experience of mentoring and supporting the education of looked after children in some capacity, but only one had prior experience of RPL.

The advisors placed high value on the training day and support sessions, as an arena to obtain information and bounce ideas off each other:

‘Finding out how other people had used it, and if there were bits that you weren’t too sure about, they could reassure you...or point out ways.’

They also enjoyed the multi-agency environment, where it was possible to network with professionals from other backgrounds:

‘It was nice to be there with social workers, with support workers. We were talking quite a lot on our tables about lots of things, and I found that very, very helpful.’

The advisors in this study did not all know the young people well, but it was suggested that this should not necessarily be seen as a barrier; indeed, the profiling toolkit could be used as an icebreaker, which could enhance the introduction process.

Advisors reported that the toolkit was intimidating at first, mainly due to the volume of paperwork. Aside from discussion with the trainers and colleagues at the training day, advisors maintained that preparation was important:

‘I had taken some time to look through the pack’.

‘I photocopied then rearranged the pack to a way it suited me to go through it.’

At the second support day, a mock SCQF benchmarking exercise was completed by advisors. Advisors paired up and adopted the roles of young person and advisor. The ‘young person’ presented a set of skills that he/ she possessed for a given activity, and the ‘young person’ and advisor worked together to benchmark the skills against the SCQF. All of the groups were given the same materials, and it was interesting to note that the chosen skill levels were almost identical across all the groups. This indicated that the advisors understood and were able to apply the benchmarking process, and that results were consistent.

It was clear from the interviews and discussion at the support days that advisors were able to adapt to their role with relatively little training, while coming from a variety of backgrounds.



## Young Person Data

The young people who took part in the research evaluation completed a questionnaire before and after the RPL profiling, and underwent an interview at the end of the process. The initial questionnaire set the scene for the young person, asking them about their hobbies and interests, as well as asking some questions about achievements, ambition and what they hoped to get out of the project. The final questionnaire focussed much more on the outcomes of the RPL profiling. The interview echoed the questions of the second questionnaire.

The young people were, on the whole, much less talkative than the advisors, and were much less likely to expand on their answers, although some young people did enjoy discussing their experiences. Two research methods were adopted with the young people, in order to give them the option of completing one or both of the questionnaires and interview. Questionnaire data was used to gain a snapshot of the views of the young people, while comments of those young people who did expand on the points are included in order to add to the picture. It was found that the answers given by the young people in the questionnaires did not always agree with the interview responses. This part of the results, therefore, must be treated with some caution. Where a young person expanded on an answer in the interview setting, this answer was considered to be valid. Responses which agreed with each other were also included in the analysis.

Data was analysed in the same way as for the advisors. In this case, the themes being examined were:

- outcomes of profiling;
- career/ opportunity awareness;
- suitability of materials for looked-after children.

Young people were asked what they hoped to get out of RPL profiling. Responses included increased self-confidence, recognition of their skills and help for the future.

## Young Person Engagement

We asked the young people in the interviews how involved they had felt in the process. Of the eight young people who completed the research evaluation, two young people did not share an opinion on how involved they felt, one 'couldn't be bothered', and felt it took too long, and the remaining five said they had felt involved in the RPL profiling:

'...after doing the first one, it made me think "aye, I want to do another one.'

One of the young people indicated that, although she had felt involved, she had found the materials rather confusing, and felt that the skill area revealed in the 'Who Do You Think You Are?' section did not represent her strengths accurately.

As indicated by the advisors, the young people engaged much more with the SCQF compared with the Curriculum for Excellence benchmarking; in fact, when asked, none of them seemed to know what the researcher meant by Curriculum for Excellence:

‘[SCQF benchmarking is] very [important] because it helped you to work out what level you are, so that you’re not going too easy or too hard.’

‘...it could really help you motivate yourself, because people think to themselves, “I’m not too good at this; I’m not too good at that”, but whereas, if they have a look at this and then they find out they are actually good at that, it helps them think, “Oh, I could be anything.”’

## Self-Esteem

We asked the young people in the second questionnaire whether they felt that their self-confidence had been increased as a result of going through the process.

In the interviews, some of the young people elaborated on their responses, while others gave a contradictory answer compared with the questionnaire. Four of the young people confirmed their questionnaire response or discussed their views.

One of the young people who had ticked ‘neither agree nor disagree’ talked at length about how much more confident he felt.

Of the two young people who reported no confidence increase in the questionnaire, both maintained this stance during interview. The first affirmed that she had never been confident, and that RPL had not helped. During the advisor interviews, the young person’s advisor felt strongly that an increase in confidence had indeed taken place. The second young person did not feel that her already good self-confidence had been affected; however, she thought that other young people from a looked-after background could benefit from RPL profiling, in terms of their self-esteem.

One young person indicated in the questionnaire that she had experienced an increase in self-confidence. She discussed their thoughts at interview:

‘It’s probably encouraged me, made me a bit more confident...seeing that in that area I was a higher level than I would have thought.’

The other young person who had ticked ‘neither agree nor disagree’ denied any increase in confidence during interview. This young person contradicted her initial response, and did not elaborate at interview; however, it is being mentioned here because her advisor reported an increase in confidence, but said that she expected that the young person would probably not notice it.

## Awareness of Skills

The young people were asked in the second questionnaire whether going through RPL profiling had made them more aware of their skills. Five young people supported the positive answer they had given in the questionnaire:

‘I think it helps you think of the skills that you actually do have.’

‘I’ve learned that I’m better at things than I thought I was...when I added it up I was a higher level than I thought...’

One young person commented in their questionnaire that realising skills was the most useful part of the profiling.

## Getting Recognition

The young people were asked in the questionnaire about the value of the RPL profile. Seven of the young people confirmed their questionnaire responses at interview or discussed their views. Two young people had given no opinion on the questionnaire. These young people talked in interview about the value of the SCQF benchmarking. One felt that it was useful to know what level they were working at, and what to work towards. The other talked about its usefulness in job searching:

‘You are going to need it when you go out to get a job, or when you basically move on in life. I think it helps you think of the skills that you actually do have.’

Five young people had indicated in the questionnaire that it was useful, and three elaborated further in interview:

‘Even though it doesn’t give you a qualification, it’ll be able to tell you what level your skills are at, so that you can work to get higher than what your actual level is.’

The second young person thought it would be a valuable addition to a CV, while the third felt frustration that it was not formally recognised, but felt that it had value in helping with career choices.

## Motivation

One young person talked about her perception of the benefits of RPL profiling:

‘If you find out you’re good at things, it’s almost like when you get an exam at school. If you get a good grade at school, you feel really good, you feel happy, you’re more motivated. But if you get a bad exam, you’re obviously not going to pursue that subject anymore.’

The young people were asked in the second questionnaires and interview whether RPL profiling had affected their motivation. Four of the young people confirmed their questionnaire responses at interview or discussed their views. One young person who disagreed in the questionnaire confirmed this in the interview, although she did not elaborate. Four young people did not give an opinion in the questionnaire, but talked in the interview about an increase in motivation:

‘Finding out about the skills has made me want to get out and get into college...I came out of school too early, and then stopped all education. When I started coming to this it started to push me on a bit.’

‘It’s helped motivate me more, because I know I can do more things, and it’s shown me that I have more skills than I thought I had.’

## Ambition

The young people were asked to think about their ‘hopes and dreams’ in the questionnaires. During interview, five young people confirmed their questionnaire responses or voiced their opinions on this. One confirmed that there had been no effect. Four of the young people had given no opinion in the questionnaire, but answered more positively in the interview, for example:

‘If anything I think it will help to push me in the right direction’

‘In terms of [my eventual hopes and dreams], I don’t think it’s affected them much. I think it has more affected the near future than the far future for me.’

‘A wee bit, aye. With finding out about the skills it’s made me want to get out and get into college, get a degree in mechanics so that when I’m older I can actually have my own garage.’

## Feeling Nurtured

All of the young people indicated in the questionnaires that they had felt supported and encouraged by their advisors. With the exception of one young person, who did not give

an opinion during interview, all of the young people talked about this aspect of the RPL profiling in a positive way:

‘Aye, she’s got my back really with everything.’

‘It was good to have someone because I was a bit confused with what I was doing...’

One young person had a strong feeling that it was important to know the advisor well prior to profiling:

‘...because if you’re not comfortable around someone, you’re not going to be yourself, and you’re not going to get involved in it properly either.’

That particular young person had been working with one of the two advisors who had felt this way, and they had known each other for some time.

## Awareness of Career Choices

Young people were asked in the second questionnaire and in their interview whether RPL profiling had made them more aware of career choices. Four young people confirmed their questionnaire responses or voiced their opinions on this. One young person indicated in the questionnaire that there had been no increase in awareness, but said during her interview that she was already clear what she would like to do for a career, and this had not changed. Three young people who had not shared an opinion in the questionnaire answered the question during interview. They explained that they already had an idea of what they would like to do as a career. Rather than give alternative careers, the young people felt that going through RPL had reinforced their choice:

‘I know that that’s what I wanted to do, but it makes me think more clearly about it.’

One acknowledged that the toolkit would be useful for young people who were unsure of a career:

‘It does give [people] a sense of direction, and it helps them know what they’re good at, and I think knowing what you’re good at, especially when you’re going to pick a career path, is really important.’

## Awareness of Opportunities

Young people were asked in the questionnaires how aware they were of opportunities available to them on leaving school. During interview, two discussed their views. One confirmed their questionnaire response, while the other appeared to contradict it:

‘I want to join the army in later life, and I need an English and a maths ‘O’ level...and I did not have a clue how to get it because I’d left school. Then when I started to come to this thing it made me think I could probably go to college for that.’

‘Not really, because before I did this, I had my heart set on going to college, and then hopefully to University. So that’s still the same.’

## Suitability of Materials for Looked After Children

All of the young people said during interview that they thought the toolkit would be good for using with young people from a looked-after background. They were asked why they felt this way:

‘Because people in looked after backgrounds aren’t very good at their education...some people don’t settle into schools easy, but something like this would probably help to push them on.’

‘When some people like me come into care their confidence kind of goes down a bit, and mostly when they’re in school, they’re not as confident as they were, but I think if they understand the skills, they might actually start having more confidence.’

On switching off the interview recording device, one young person opened up, and spoke animatedly about how she thought that the toolkit would be useful for looked after children. This young person had left school some time ago, and she felt that she could see the value of the profiling more than someone who had just left school. She said that she had not done any real school work in secondary school, and felt that many people from looked after backgrounds don’t settle in school, so a tool like this could be very useful for them.

## Most and Least Useful Aspects of RPL Profiling

The young people were asked in the second questionnaire what the most and least useful aspects of profiling were. The most useful aspects were: skill recognition; using the toolkit; and benchmarking with SCQF. Least useful aspects included: the length of time it took; benchmarking against Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes; and confusing materials.

## Discussion

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Young person engagement was high, and advisors and the young people themselves reported that they were especially keen on benchmarking their skills with the SCQF. Engagement was seen by advisors as critical, supporting Gilligan's observation that resilience of children and young people may be enhanced by 'imaginative engagement' with mentors, partly due to engagement with the activity, and partly due to engagement with an attentive adult (Gilligan, 1999).

Neither the advisors nor the young people were engaged with the Curriculum for Excellence benchmarking. With the exception of two of the advisors, no-one carried out the benchmarking. The Curriculum for Excellence cards were tagged onto the end of the toolkit, and many participants did not appear to be aware of them when interviewed. Integration within the main body of the toolkit, as well as additional training, could increase the understanding of professionals in this area. In its final report from the *Inquiry into the Education of Looked After Children* (The Scottish Parliament, 2012), the Education and Culture Committee recommended that a method of monitoring and reporting wider achievement within Curriculum for Excellence should be developed. This part of the profiling may become more valid in the future, when professionals and young people are more aware of Curriculum for Excellence.

Many advisors indicated an increase in self-esteem for the young people. Most of the young people did not feel more confident in themselves; however, the professionals felt that they were. One commented that the effect was subtle, and that the young person was probably not even aware of the increase.

Concern was expressed that benefits could be short-lived. One advisor noted that the young person had experienced an initial boost in confidence, but was still out of work two weeks later, and so had come crashing down. This advisor's fears echo the sentiments of an earlier study (Newman & Blackburn, 2002), which warned that the building of self-esteem should come from the development of skills, rather than positive affirmation and praise. While RPL does offer skill recognition, it is therefore important that continued support is offered to the young people.

In '*Celebrating Success*' (Happer, McCreddie, & Aldgate, 2006), the authors reported that discovery of a talent for something could contribute to the later success of young people. Although RPL profiling is not about finding new talents, in our study, several advisors and young people maintained that they had become more aware of their existing skills.

Although this was not addressed in the interview or questionnaires, several advisors commented on an increased self-awareness by the young people. This led professionals to discuss the possibility of young people using the RPL profile as a tool to help complete an SQA Personal Development Unit on self-awareness.

Some advisors saw the process as an opportunity for the young person to gain recognition from friends and family, and also as something to use in job applications. A common theme at the training days and interviews was a desire for formal recognition of the process. One advisor pointed out that, without a tangible achievement, going through the process could actually reinforce the fact that the young person had no/ few qualifications.

Previous studies have addressed formal recognition (Boyd, 2007); (Scottish Government, 2010). It was acknowledged in these papers that accreditation could enhance the status of achievements, as well as increase the sense of achievement within the young people. On the other hand, the studies emphasised that reflection on and understanding of the achievement was more important than the recognition itself. End users (i.e. employers, training providers and colleges) felt that any portfolio or certificate of achievement would have little weight in itself; more important would be the ability of the young person to understand, explain and market the skills described on their certificate.

Keeping this in mind, it seems plausible that RPL profiling could provide the young person with these abilities. A large part of the profiling is recognition of and reflection on skills.

In addition to the possibility of combining RPL profiling with an SQA Personal Development Unit mentioned above, profiling could link into a Youth Achievement Award, or one of the other SQA-accredited awards detailed in *Amazing Things: A Guide to the Youth Awards in Scotland* (Youth Scotland, 2012). Advisors were provided with a web-link to the guide during the pilot. One advisor suggested using profiling as a measure of progression before and after engaging in an activity agreement. Using the SCQF as a comparison tool was previously identified as a benefit of RPL (Inspire Scotland, 2008), and would be a good application of the toolkit.

Having aspirations and being motivated are known to foster resilience, and we asked advisors and young people whether there had been any changes for the young people in this area. All of the advisors felt that the young people were motivated to progress what they had learned about themselves on some level. Effects appeared to be quite subtle, but one young person did enquire about going to college, and the toolkit was thought to be a good way of increasing the aspirations of young people.

In *Celebrating Success* (Happer, McCreadie, & Aldgate, 2006), it was pointed out that 'sometimes, the key to promoting a child's talents was an observant and interested adult, who recognised the child's abilities.' RPL profiling has the potential to fulfil these criteria, as long as the advisor is well trained, and engages with the process. The advisors in this study all confirmed that the young people felt nurtured, and the majority of the young people said that they felt encouraged and supported by their advisor. As previously mentioned, advisors knew the young people to varying degrees prior to RPL profiling, and opinions were split on how important this was. It was suggested that the toolkit could even be used as a 'getting to know you' tool. Gilligan



(Gilligan, 1999) has previously suggested that a prior relationship between mentor and mentee is ideal; however, he acknowledged that it is not always possible.

RPL profiling gave some young people the opportunity to consider different career choices, and reinforced the choices of others. Overall, there was more emphasis on increased awareness of career options than about how the young person would start their career. This may be because giving detailed career advice is outwith the experience of many of the professionals involved in the study. A section in career-guidance could be included in the training day, and the *Amazing Things* booklet provided to advisors at the start of profiling.

The SSSC evaluation of RPL, detailed in the Background Section of this report, emphasised that advisors must receive time, training and support before and during profiling. The advisors in this study came from a variety of backgrounds, and all reported that the training and support had been both enjoyable and informative. Preparation was thought to be crucial in the development of their confidence with the toolkit.

A benchmarking exercise at the first support session showed that advisors understood and were able to apply the benchmarking process.

Many of the positive indicators of resilient and successful individuals given in the literature were fulfilled by profiling. It therefore seems likely that the toolkit would be good for use with looked-after children. This thought was echoed by advisors and young people, who enjoyed the bright, tactile folder. It was felt that the flexibility of the tool may suit the client group. It was seen as a good introduction tool, which could offer an alternative approach to the traditional one-to-one interactions between professionals and young people. It was suggested that the tool could be used effectively at transition stages, for preparing job applications and CVs. A previous study on recognising wider achievement within the context of Curriculum for Excellence encouraged the participation of professionals other than class teachers in supporting young people in their reflection (Boyd, 2007), and advisors saw the multi-agency accessibility of the project as an advantage. It was felt that the process was especially useful in increasing self-esteem. The RPL toolkit has previously been piloted with small groups, with successful results. It was suggested at the training days that this could be a possibility for looked-after children, although this was met with a mixed response from advisors.

A previous study on recognising wider achievement emphasised the important principle that any approach to recognise achievements should reduce, and not widen, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged young people (Boyd, 2007). This concern comes about because it is often the case that traditional opportunities for extra-curricular activity, such as ballet lessons or sport, are encouraged within a nurturing family environment. The RPL profiling toolkit provides an alternative interest base, derived from day-to-day activities. Young people from a looked-after background are therefore able to obtain recognition for skills obtained in everyday life.

## Conclusions

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In conclusion, this study on RPL profiling has shown that it could be used to recognise, in an informal way, the wider achievements of looked-after children. Benefits previously associated with RPL were demonstrated by the young people and advisors who took part in the pilot and evaluation. Many of these benefits represent resilience-building and success-promoting factors.

Young people were engaged with profiling, and particularly enjoyed benchmarking their skills against the SCQF level descriptors. Benchmarking against Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes was unsuccessful, with only two advisors completing this part of the process. Advisor training and integration of the cards within the main body of the toolkit could help to remedy this.

An increase in self-esteem of many of the young people was indicated by advisors. The young people were less positive about this area, but this was predicted by an advisor in one case.

Concern was expressed that the benefits could be short-lived. Offering continued support to the young people would be desirable.

Increased skills awareness and self-awareness were reported, leading to a discussion of the possibility of using the RPL profiling as a tool to help complete an SQA Personal Development Award on self-awareness.

This addressed a common concern of advisors: that the process did not lead to a formal qualification. In addition to the SQA Personal Development Award, the possibility of linking profiling to a Youth Achievement Award or an Activity Agreement was discussed.

The advisors and young people confirmed that the young people had felt supported and encouraged during the process. Advisors knew the young people to varying degrees prior to profiling, and opinions were split on how important this was. It was suggested that another potential use of the toolkit is as a 'getting to know you' tool.

Increased awareness of career options was reported more than increased awareness of opportunities. Additional training or literature could be shared with future potential advisors.

Coming from a variety of backgrounds, the advisors possessed varying levels of experience of RPL and mentoring. They were happy with the amount of training provided, and maintained that preparation was key to their confidence with the toolkit. The advisors were able to show at the training and support days, and during their interviews, that they were able to adapt to the role of RPL advisor with ease.

The profiling and toolkit were thought to be appropriate for use with looked-after children. Most of the potential benefits of the process have already been mentioned. It was thought that the flexibility of the toolkit was an attractive feature, and that it would be useful at transition stages. It could be used for CV preparation and at the S3 profiling stage detailed in *Building the Curriculum 5*. Advisors saw the multi-agency accessibility as a useful feature of the toolkit.

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## About CELCIS

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.

## For more information

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