Research

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A comparison study looking
at the impact of staff personality
on recruitment and retention of staff
working with children with complex
disabilities and challenging behaviour,
in a social care setting and
an education setting

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Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

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This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

A comparison study looking at the impact of staff personality on recruitment and retention of staff working with children with complex disabilities and challenging behaviour, in a social care setting and an education setting

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Abstract

This research considers the impact of staff personality on recruitment and retention across two services: education and social care for children with severe learning disabilities.

Psychometric tests were used with staff to provide insight into how they behave at work. In total 11 members of staff across both education and social care teams agreed to complete the Thomas International Personal Profile Analysis and did so satisfactorily: seven from social care and four from the education setting.

A supplementary qualitative and quantitative questionnaire was also devised to gauge staff views about their current role, what attracted them to it, what support and training they find beneficial and what characteristics they feel are important to their role. Twelve people participated, four male and eight female with an age range between 21 and 58 years.

The findings from the study suggest that staff working in across both education and social care have similar personality characteristics, but tend to adapt and modify their natural characteristics at work – this was greater for those in social care. There was also evidence that the behaviour of staff in both teams changes significantly when they are under pressure and when experiencing high levels of emotional stress. This may be linked to the high levels of sickness-related absence from work.

Children were asked what characteristics they wanted in their staff and gave the following as being important to them: being kind; listening; liking what they liked; looking good; happy and healthy. The children who participated were currently being supported by the social care service, were willing to participate, and whose parents had given consent. Seven children contributed, two female and five male with an age range of six to seven years
.
The research highlights the need for a careful review of staff selection criteria and support; a more effective inclusion of the views of children and young people; and a more systematic use of psychometric testing for staff management and support.

Introduction

This is a comparison study between a social care setting, and an educational setting, which provide a similar type of service to a similar client group. The study reports on an analysis of the personality characteristics of staff working in both settings and then explores how staff personality impacts on the recruitment and retention of staff working with children who have severe learning disabilities (SLD), autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and challenging behaviour (CB). The study also investigates what the children want from their staff and what characteristics children themselves feel are important, so as to guide future recruitment and staff development.

Aims

Causal observations have led us to believe that there is a link between staff personality and successful recruitment and retention, and ultimately support for children and families. Some staff, it appears, have an innate ability, while others really struggle. We have also observed that a significant number of staff appear at times to have a variety of personal issues and stresses in their lives, which seem on occasions to impact negatively on their performance at work, sickness levels, and in due course on staff retention. Little research appears to have been conducted into the impact of staff personality on working with children with SLD, ASD and CB. This study aims to:

- shed light onto this area to improve our recruitment and retention difficulties
- enable us to learn and develop alongside our colleagues to enhance the support we provide.

Context

The domiciliary social care provider supports children aged 0–18 who have SLD, ASD and CB. It provides support 24 hours a day seven days a week via specialist behaviour support workers who work across the whole of our county. Behaviour support workers do not have to have any formal qualifications, however they do need to have some experience of working in this line of work. Support is provided within the children's homes, in the community and in special schools, and commonly involves: giving families a break from caring; supporting with behaviour management plans; communication; independence and inclusion programmes; providing early support and intervention; and supporting special schools where there is risk of or where there has been an exclusion.

The education service provides specialist support via learning mentors to children with ASD and other associated needs. The children range from aged

four to 19 and the support they provide is primarily in specialist resource bases, mainstream schools and occasionally in the community, all during school hours. The support is similar to that of learning support assistants in special schools, however, the learning mentors are more mobile and responsive, and work in an advisory capacity across a variety of education settings. Learning mentors are not required to have any formal qualifications, but some experience is essential. The social care and education teams often work together to provide consistency, particularly when there is a child who requires a bespoke package of support.

The 'government' report *Aiming High for Disabled Children* (DfES 2007) recognizes and prioritizes the needs of disabled children and their families and sets out plans to transform the quality of services that support them. It would seem that limited consideration is given to the personality of the people providing the support and how this affects service provision. Over recent years we in our social care setting, have hypothesized that staff personality is a major contributor to the success of our service provision. We find that we initially struggle to find the 'right' people for the job and then when we do, we discover that some staff, no matter how much support and training they receive, are unable to put their training into practice. We have also observed high levels of sickness which staff often report are related to personal problems, not issues with work, and this affects our service provision.

An individual's personality is the totality of their attitudes, interests, behaviour, characteristics and emotional responses. These uniquely influence an individual's cognitions, motivations and behaviours in various settings (Ryckman 2004). There is substantial research concerned with the skills and characteristics of children with SLD, ASD and CB and how this impacts on their learning and development (see for example Seach, Lloyd and Preston 2002; Jones 2002) but relatively little in comparison about the skills and characteristics of those who support them. Jordan (1999) suggests the difficulties children with disabilities face are often attributed to the child having or being the problem, rather than to those supporting them. But staff play a crucial role in supporting these children, and it seems reasonable to enquire into the impact of their skills and personal characteristics on service users.

Jordan (1999) describes all those who work with children with an ASD, whatever their profession, as 'teachers' engaged in 'education', wherever they work. They need to be highly skilled (DCSF 2007) and have many skills and attributes in terms of professional and personal qualities. Moyles and Robinson (2002) suggest that the components which make up a 'good teacher' include things such as organization, flexibility, professionalism, respect, positive outlook, being approachable and humour.

More specifically, Peeters and Jordan (1999: 86–89) suggest that there are 11 personal characteristics that are crucial for staff to have when working with children with an ASD; these are:

- To be attracted by differences
- To have a vivid imagination
- To be able to give without getting an (ordinary) thank you

- To be willing to adapt one's natural styles of communication and social interaction
- Have the courage to 'work alone in the desert'
- Never be satisfied with how much one knows
- To accept that each bit of progress brings a new problem
- Have extraordinary pedagogical and analytical capabilities
- Be prepared to work in a team
- Be humble
- Be professional.

Staff are also required to have qualities such as being able to listen, be confident, diplomatic and empathetic to facilitate a productive and successful working relationship (Dale 1996) and it is equally important for staff to be able to apply these skills when working with the families they support. Other studies linked to this research suggest:

- some people, despite their best efforts and the best efforts of others, are unable to connect and work successfully with children who have disabilities (Nind and Hewett 1994)
- people working with children with disabilities need to be 'qualitatively different' (Peeters and Gillberg, 1999)
- there is currently a national crisis in the recruitment and retention of front-line staff working in social care (Gupta and Blewett 2007)
- due to the varied nature of the work and the potential workforce, recruitment and retention of suitable staff can be difficult (CWDC 2008)
- this crisis must be addressed as it is crucial to the growth and quality of children's disability services (Hewitt and Larson 2007)
- careful consideration needs to be given to recruiting front-line staff with the 'right' personal characteristics, because extraordinary children need extraordinary staff (Peeters and Gillberg, 1999).

These studies appear to reflect our organization's recent difficulties in relation to recruiting staff and confirm our original observations that staff do need particular personal characteristics to work successfully. Some characteristics can be learnt but others are intrinsic and instinctive to an individual.

Staff training and support, if relevant and provided in an appropriate manner, are crucial as they can increase an individual's knowledge and confidence; however, the challenge for staff is how they then translate their newly acquired knowledge into practice (Carpenter 2007). Any support, intervention or approach that is chosen and any training or support which is given to staff, is likely to be only as good as the staff providing or delivering it and the staff using or applying it (Brooks 2001). Therefore, thought needs to be given to the individual characteristics of professionals working in this area. Staff personality is at least, if not as important, as skills and knowledge (Jordan, MacLeod and Brunton 1999) and it can affect the way staff behave, positively or negatively (Grey, Hastings and McClean 2007). Without the appropriate personality and skills, many of the previous components of support and training may be ineffective.

Children are also increasingly being asked about the services they receive and about the people who support them; nevertheless children with SLD, ASD, and CB can become excluded from this process. Williams and Hanke (2007: 57–58) asked children with ASD how they would describe their ideal member of staff. The following personal characteristics were rated highly by the children:

- knowledge about the subject
- being prepared
- dressed in clean, smart clothes and wearing shoes
- knowing each pupil
- enjoying being with the pupils and willing to play games with them
- Smiling, happy and really friendly.

These characteristics are unpretentious and practical; they mirror some of the professional research ideas, but also reflect and highlight some of the basic personal characteristics, which are often overlooked. As Grandin (1988 cited in Brooks 2001: 250) argues:

> 'all teaching methods and techniques were of secondary importance compared to the personal qualities of individual staff.'

Methodology

nformation was gathered from education and social care managers in relation to their recruitment and retention data from September 2007 to September 2008. Details requested included: number of times advertised, response rates, success rates, turnover, sickness levels and details of the role, and the type of support staff received. This was mainly to provide context to the findings about personality. All staff from both teams were asked to participate. They were all given basic information about the study and were told about what would be required of them. Staff were then given the option of participating in the study or not, and assured that all the information gathered would be kept confidential and anonymous. Not all staff wanted to participate, so the subsequent samples are subsets of each team.

In total 11 members of staff (50 per cent of all staff) across both teams agreed to complete the Thomas International Personal Profile Analysis (PPA) and did so satisfactorily: seven (54 per cent) from social care and four (45 per cent) from the education setting. All staff were told they could either complete the PPA anonymously or they could put their name on it, and thereby receive feedback. Those who wanted feedback were told that all the information gathered would be kept confidential and anonymous and that it would not be used or acted upon in anyway, so it would not affect their employment. PPAs were chosen due to their accuracy and validity, their cost, their quick administration and because they provide an understanding of how a person prefers to behave and the characteristics they will demonstrate, which was appropriate to this research.

The PPA is a psychometric test which analyses people's behaviour at work. It assesses an individual's working strengths and fears, and describes their motivators and the values they bring to a role. PPA profiles illustrate a candidate's behavioural characteristics in three different scenarios: (a) at their current work (which changes, depending on the setting/scenario), (b) when they are under pressure (which can also change, depending on the circumstances) and (c) their general self-image (which remains relatively consistent). The results of the PPA describe people's behaviour using one of four core characteristics, which are: Dominance; Influence; Steadiness and Compliance (Thomas International 2004). In this study we will use the results from each of the three scenarios to gain insight into the personality of staff working in this field. PPA also indicates whether people are experiencing difficulties in their work or personal life and also suggests training and development opportunities and management techniques.

A supplementary qualitative and quantitative questionnaire was also devised to gauge staff views about their current role, what attracted them to it, what support and training they find beneficial and what characteristics they feel are important in their role. Staff were again given the option to participate, of which 12 (54.5 per cent) of staff from both teams did, of whom four were male and eight female, the age range being between 21 and 58. I analysed the results by manually. Staff were not asked for their names and all information that was collected was treated confidentially and anonymously.

The children who participated were currently being supported by the social care service, were willing to participate, and whose parents had given consent. Seven children contributed, two female and five male, which was 27 per cent of the total number of children being supported, with an age range of seven to 16. The children were asked to describe their 'ideal member of staff'. Each child was supported in their participation in the activity by staff well known to them so as to develop trust and confidence and facilitate communication. Staff were told that the results would have no effect on their role and that it was merely an opportunity for the children to express their wishes. The children could choose how they wanted to present/share their views, however the majority drew pictures or dictated to staff. The activity occurred when the children were happy to participate, in environments they were used to being in. I analysed the pictures and comments along with a colleague. We used a very simple coding system to analyse the information. Some information needed additional interpretation and this was done, as was the summarizing of information, with care so as not to lose the creativity, emphasis and honesty of the children's views.

The data in the findings has been generalized to ensure individual staff and children cannot be identified. This has been done to protect individuals, especially due to the small sample size and the closeness and continuing working relationships of the teams and colleagues.

Findings

Data were collated from both services about recruitment and retention within the specified period of time, both services having tried to recruit staff with varying success rates. The main reasons for not recruiting had been that there were too few candidates and those who had applied were not sufficiently experienced. Recruitment to the social care setting was, however, less successful than to the education service.

Staff

Figure 1 show the average self-image PPA profiles for both teams. The self-image profile presents an individual's preferred state and working style. The two profiles suggest that staff in both settings are dependable, deliberate, amiable, persistent, good listeners and kind (High Steadiness);, however, staff in the social care setting are equally influential, persuasive, friendly, verbal, communicative, and positive (High Influence). Both profiles indicate that staff in both areas are also accommodating, non-demanding, low decision needed, mild mannered and hesitant (Low Dominance).

Graph 1 - Average Self Image PPA Profiles
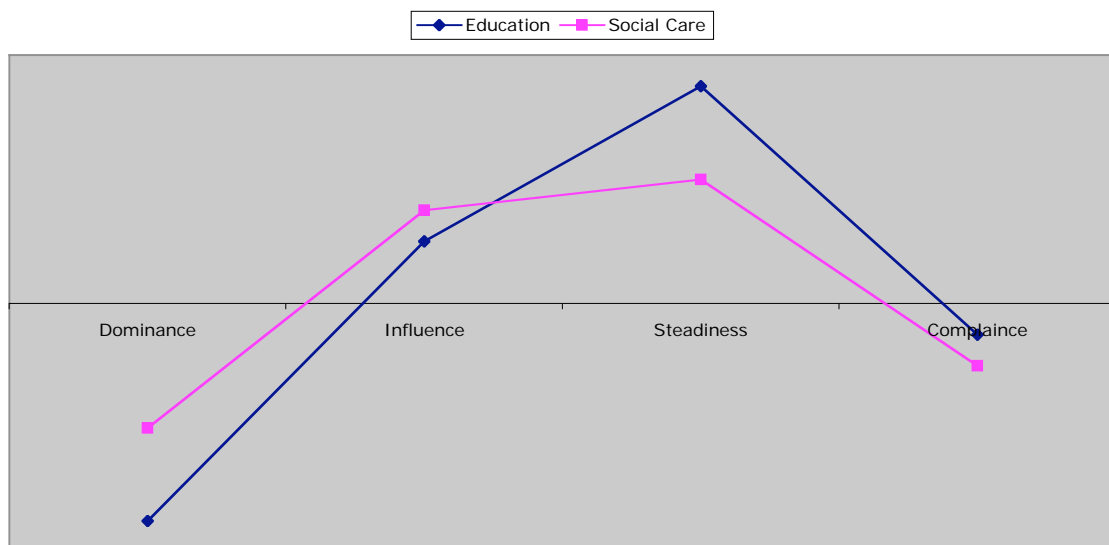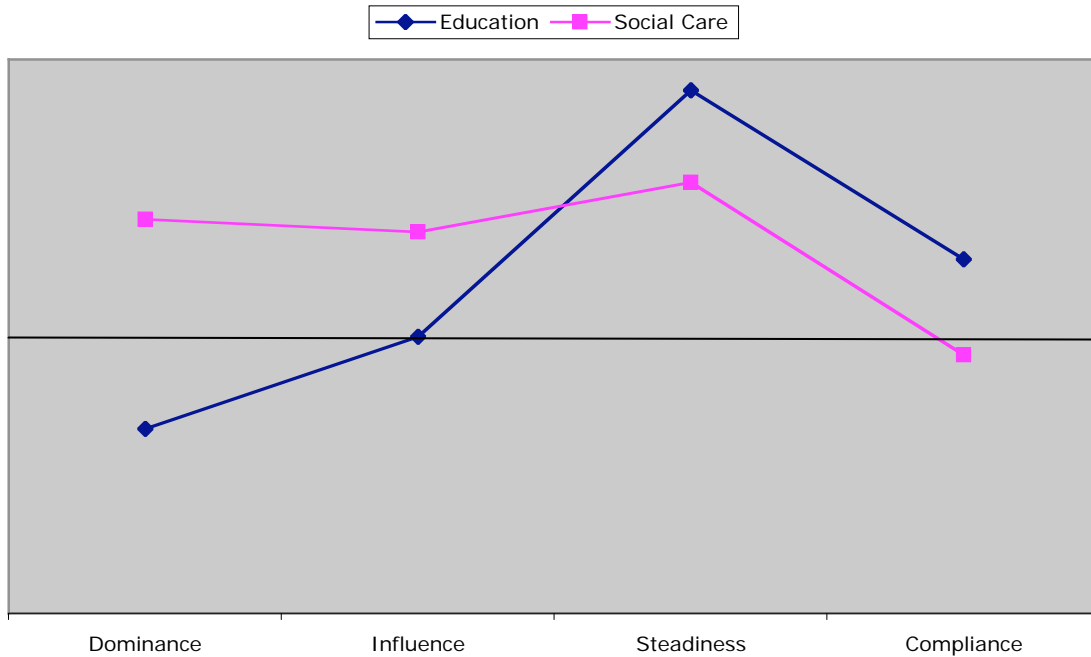
Graph 2 - Average PPA Work Mask Profiles

Figure 2 shows the average 'mask' people assume when they are at work. It demonstrates whether or not staff have to modify their preferred working style at work. The profiles suggest that both staff teams are modifying their behaviour at work from their preferred way of behaving. The profiles also suggest that staff in both settings are trying to be all things to all people and forcing themselves to be something they are not.

Figure 3 illustrates how each team behaves under pressure. The profiles show that the behaviour of staff changes considerably when they are placed under extreme pressure. The natural behaviour of staff in both settings inverts and becomes: driving, competitive, forceful, inquisitive, direct, self-starting and assertive (High Dominance). Alongside this, staff in the education setting become demonstrative, restless, active, alert and mobile (Low Steadiness) and staff in the social care setting become serious, probing, self-conscious, suspicious, reflective and reserved (Low Influence). These results contain important implications in that they indicate potential consequences for service provision in the event of staff behaviour changing so significantly.

Graph 3 - Average PPA Behaviour Under Pressure Profiles
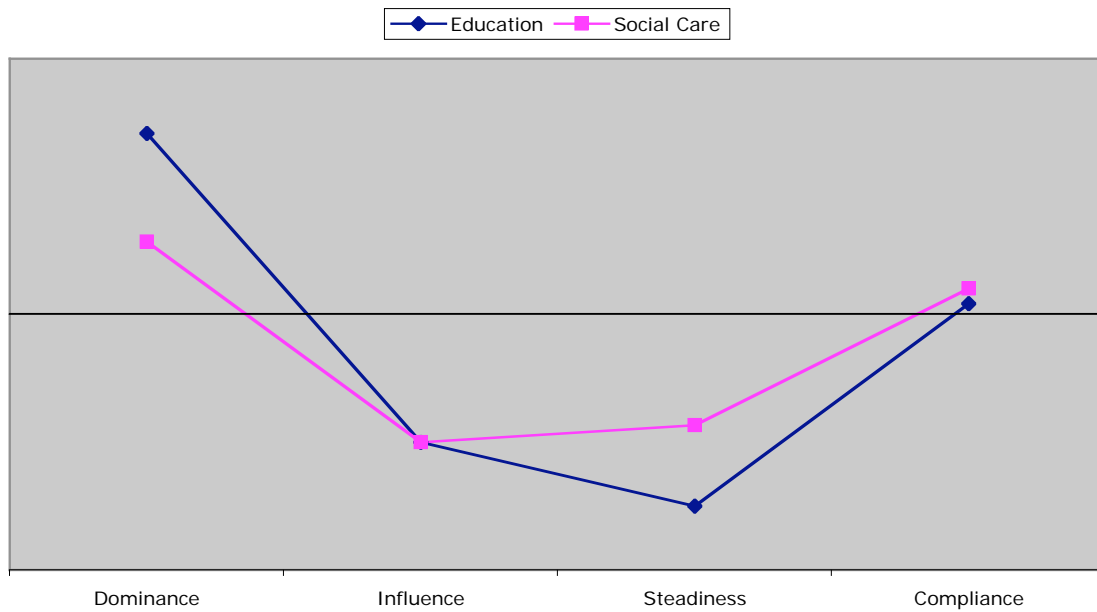
The results from the PPA also revealed that across both teams 55 per cent of staff were experiencing personal problems, 18 per cent were experiencing problems which were work related, 9 per cent were experiencing problems within their personal life and work, and 18 per cent of staff were currently not experiencing any problems in either area. These results could correspond with the fact that staff regularly have to adapt their preferred behavioural characteristics or because they are regularly having to deal with CB. This could also give us a possible explanation for why within both services there are such high levels of sickness, as previous research has demonstrated (Rose and Walker 1997), and why we both have a high turnover of staff, which has also been found in other services supporting people with SLD (Hatton et al. 2001). These figures also coincide with the fact that 36 per cent of staff across both teams receive support from the local authority's free counselling service for council staff.

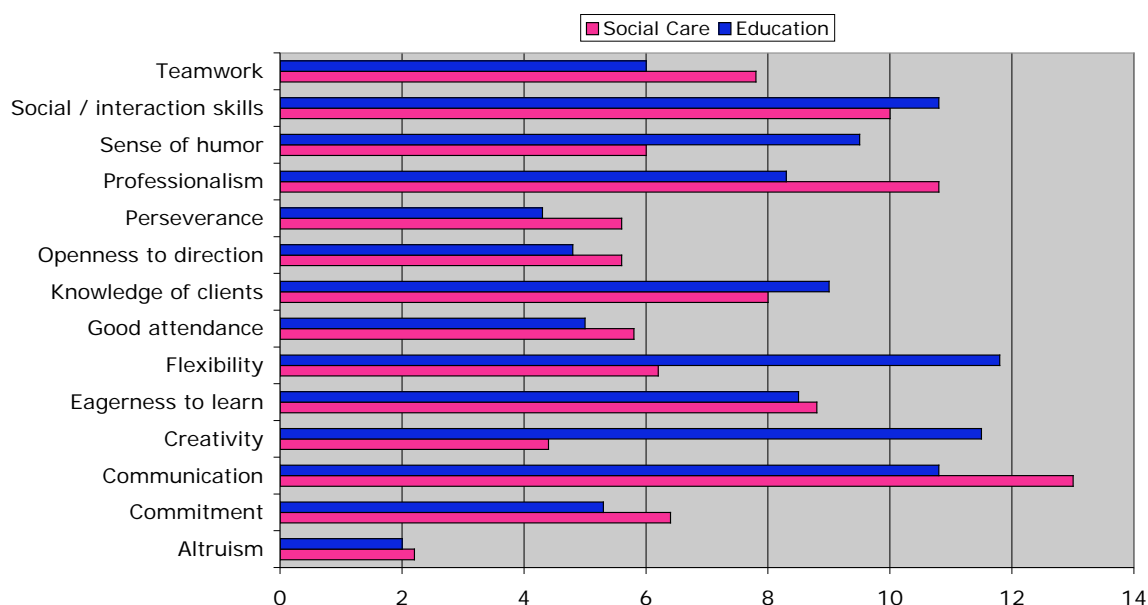**Graph 4 - Important Staff Characteristics (staff opinions)**

Figure 4 shows particular individual characteristics and the importance staff attach to each characteristic in terms of the roles of staff. In social care, the most important characteristics were deemed to be communication and professionalism with both altruism and creativity being least important. In education, respondents recorded that flexibility and creativity are more important characteristics, with altruism and perseverance as the least important. Interestingly, both teams rated good attendance as only being of medium importance, perhaps suggesting a link with high sickness levels.

Children

The characteristics described by the children were generally more concrete and tangible, such as: 'likes going on the roundabout' (Figure 5), and simple concepts such as 'kind' and 'listens' (Figure 6). Feedback from the staff supporting the children indicated that some children really enjoyed the research task, although some children found it hard to understand and put their view across. They expressed their views using activities which they enjoyed doing with their members of staff rather than relating to staff personal characteristics. Figure 7 shows the combined results from the children. The most important factor for children was having staff who like doing the same activities as them (71.4 per cent) and who were happy, smiley and funny (57.1 per cent).
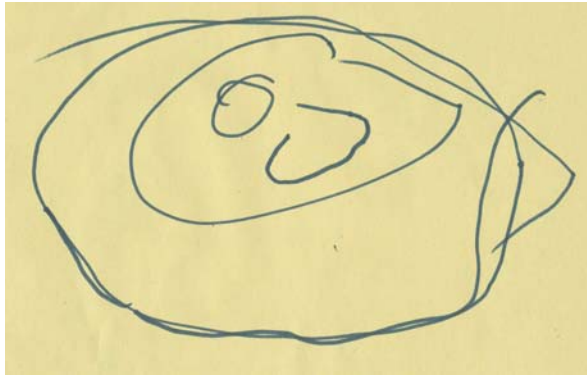
Figure 5 Fourteen year old boy's drawing of favourite activity: going on a roundabout
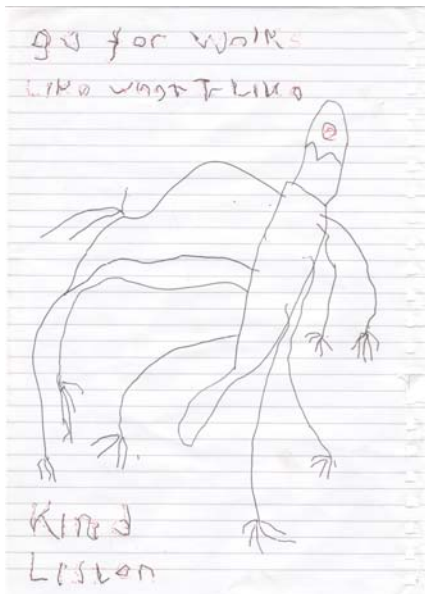

Figure 6 – Nine year old boy's drawing of ideal member of staff who 'likes to go for walks, likes what I like, is kind and listens'. The drawing has lots of arms so that the member of staff can do lots of fun things with him

Figure 7 Children's ideal staff characteristics

The views of children and young people with severe learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders and challenging behaviours on what characteristics they feel are important in ideal members of staff
Likes things/activities I like 71.4%
Happy, smiley, funny 57.1%
Attractive, dresses like a princess, handsome, a cool dude 42.8%
Kind, helpful, trustworthy 28.5%
Listens to me

14.2%
Eats and drinks healthy
14.2%

Implications for practice

The sample of this study is very small and service specific but still can make a useful contribution to practice and knowledge in this area. The PPA data suggest that although people have individual profiles, overall staff working in this area have a similar set of characteristics. The results of this study could be used for the following purposes.

1. To inform the initial selection criteria by adding desirable personal characteristics such as: being dependable, deliberate, amiable, persistent, good listeners and kind. All candidates could also be asked to complete a PPA or similar psychometric test during the recruitment process. The results of these tests could then be used to assist managers and supervisors in training and supporting individual staff, to help build on strengths and in coaching poorly performing individuals.

   The addition of personal characteristics in the selection criteria would have to be carefully managed to ensure equal opportunities. In addition, the introduction of psychometric tests would undoubtedly have huge cost and time implications, so the benefits of using psychometric tests would need to be carefully assessed.

2. To ensure that clear information and guidance is given about the role, what it involves and what is required from our staff before they start work.

   Providing people with an understanding of what is required from staff will enable them to make informed decisions about whether or not the particular area of work is right for them and whether or not they are willing and able to adapt their preferred working style. This requires a level of personal maturity and a capacity for self-reflection, which would need to be thought about.

3. To provide support for staff to manage the extreme changes which can occur in their preferred behaviours when they are under pressure and the ongoing effects this could have on staff in relation to burn-out and stress (Mitchell and Hastings 2000) and the people they support.

   Staff are often motivated to carry on working with children with CB despite the difficulties they face (Cheung Chung, Corbett and Cumella 1996), which suggests that burn-out is associated with personal management issues rather than the CB itself. Further research needs to explore whether staff are changing their behaviour consciously to manage CB or whether it is an unconscious response to the pressure, also whether or not these characteristics are linked to the successful or unsuccessful management of CB.

4. To ensure staff receive appropriate support, in view of the significant levels of personal and work related problems that are encountered, so as to reduce sickness levels and to minimize the impact on the individual and their work. This should be through supervision, training, counselling services and possibly psychometric tests.

   The effectiveness of counselling services should be investigated further to establish whether, and how, they might assist staff regarding their performance/wellbeing and whether staff should be encouraged to make use of such services. Further research should also consider whether work is causing people personal problems, or if personal problems are causing problems at work. This could be extended to see if an individual's profile makes them more susceptible to personal and emotional difficulties, or possible resulting disciplinary procedures, particularly if the later has a PPA profile which deviates from the norm. It was not feasible to examine this during the study as the sample size was so small, and the need to maintain confidentiality and anonymity would have made it impossible.

5. Taking account of the views and opinions of the children to inform and assist the development of recruitment procedures. The selection criteria should include criteria such as being kind; listening; liking what the children like; looking good; being happy and healthy. In addition, children should be part of the interview process. Children's views should also be incorporated into the ethos of a service and they should form the basis for and be included in training and service design.

   I would ideally like to use the information gathered to try to adapt our selection criteria and interview procedures to include, as adult services increasingly do, some of the children we support and/or to create a time when we can observe interaction between the candidate and the children (Nind and Hewett 1994). Involving children in this process not only brings benefits, such as developing confidence and skills to the children, but to the service as well with regard to being able to see how candidates interact with the children and to give a clear message that the service respects the views and opinions of children (Barn 2008). This obviously brings with it extra work, support and safeguarding issues. However, I feel that this procedure is essential, to ensure we employ and train staff with the right characteristics for the children and families we support.

Conclusion

This study has helped to confirm and to clarify the supposition that staff characteristics play an important role regarding the recruitment and retention of staff in the social care and education service sectors who work directly with children who have disabilities and their families. The social care profiles suggest that staff in this area are being asked to modify their behaviour quite significantly for their role, more so than in the education service. This I feel is particularly due to roles in social care being ambiguous, causing staff to feel ambivalent and to behave in an ambivalent manner. These factors, coupled with the fact that staff within social care settings work longer contracted hours, have low status, a lack of staff support and are involved in lone working, result in staff trying to be all things to all people.

By having an understanding of some of the core characteristics which the children identified and which are required to successfully work in this area, and by working closely with colleagues from different settings such as HR, staff counselling services, training departments, senior managers, social workers and teachers, we can begin to think about ways of improving our recruitment and retention and, most importantly, by selecting and supporting staff more effectively, provide the best possible support to children with disabilities and their families

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The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

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