

Shaftesbury Young People



Shaftesbury, Young People's Involvement Worker, Benni-Jo Tyler speaks at the HSBC conference on Education – February 2008

The Challenge for the Looked After Child

Hello, my name is Benni-jo Tyler. I am the Young People's Involvement Worker for Shaftesbury Young People. I am also seconded to 'A National Voice' for one day a week as part of my post at Shaftesbury Young People. My role in A National Voice is Senior Youth Involvement Manager.

For the purpose of this talk I plan to lay out the challenges that over the last 11 years that I have worked in this field, young people have told me they face, in relation to their education, and then to look at the work that we at Shaftesbury Young People are undertaking to ensure that our young people get much better opportunities than some young people who are looked after.

I think its quite widely known that looked after young people do indeed face many challenges in relation to their education, often these challenges result in the young person feeling unable to focus at school, and many young people either drop out of formal education or go on to underachieve. This is very disappointing when we consider that these young people are as bright and able as their peers; it remains even more disappointing when we look further into the issues that have so often prevented young people from doing well and realise that actually these issues are very solvable with the right amount of support and investment.

I think that support and investment really are the key themes to my recommendations, not just investment in terms of cash investment either, although that does help. Young people really do need key people in their lives to invest time, practical support and encouragement into their education. They need someone to really care about how they are getting on at school in order to really do well.

The other key theme for my recommendations is something that we at Shaftesbury are always expected to ask ourselves whenever we are working

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with young people: Would this be good enough for my child? If it isn't then it isn't good enough for our 'looked after' children either, and if it isn't then we shouldn't do it! I wish everyone working with looked after young people took this stand too.

So with those points hopefully firmly embedded in your minds I will proceed:

Young people for many years now have told decision makers that they do not think that people who are involved in their lives expect them to do well at school. Some young people even felt that there was no expectation for them to even attend school let alone get good grades, and so in some cases the support that they need to firstly attend school, and secondly to do well historically hasn't been readily available.

In the past when I have made this statement some people have disputed these facts and so to clarify I will expand on that:

Young people have said that they feel that the fact that reviews are often held in school hours prove that their education is not a priority. We all know that parents are actively encouraged to make doctor and dental appointments outside school hours so that their children do not have to miss school, and so I'm sure that it is not unreasonable for looked after young people to want their reviews to be held at a time when they do not have to miss school too. This may not always be easy to arrange but it really should be achievable. Some young people I have worked with over the years have even explained that their review meetings have at times been held on school premises and that their social worker has called them out of class to go into the meeting. Most young people who have raised this with me have expressed how much they hate this practice especially as they have then been left to answer uncomfortable questions from their classmates. These types of practices have left young people feeling embarrassed in front of their classmates, and on more than one occasion young people have told me that they felt so angry or upset because of things that were discussed in their review that they walked out of school either at the end of or during the review meeting (and so therefore during school hours). None of these practices show young people that their education is important to the adults who are responsible for their care, and so we really need to think about the impact that this has on the young person's view of their education.

Constant placement and subsequent school moves are also a huge issue for young people who are 'in care'. I know that the proposed 'Children and Young People's Bill' suggests some very welcome changes to address this issue, and I hope that it does make a huge difference to young people's experiences. However we cannot forget the huge impact that this has had on

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the lives of young people to date and so I feel that we must continue to address this issue.

It can be so difficult for young people to cope with constantly having to move homes and schools and rebuild friendship networks time and time again. This of course is coupled with the fact that school changes do often mean that a young person may be out of school for a period of time. This can be a few weeks, months or in a few cases much longer. Even if the child or young person is lucky enough to get a school place quickly they may still find their new school is working at a different pace or part of the curriculum and so again this makes the young person's task of catching up and settling in harder. A good supportive teacher can make all the difference at a time like this, but it's much better to keep young people in stable placements and stable schools in the first place.

I know that some local authorities offer young people lifts in taxis to get to school when they have moved to a placement out of borough but have wanted to remain that their previous school. This is better than having to leave the school I agree, but having to do your homework in the back of a car is far from ideal and the much better option would be to keep young people in secure, settled placements so far as is possible, and certainly don't disrupt a young person's education by moving their placement in order to save money. Young People also express that getting permission to attend school trips, or other significant events can be a difficult task and so often they miss out – and they are 'bovered' by this. They are also very 'bovered' when no one attends their parents evening because the carer thinks it's the social workers job and the social worker thinks that it's the carers job to attend and Mum or Dad aren't allowed to attend – so no one does.

There are also huge issues relating to exclusions and permanent exclusions that are very difficult for schools and young people to deal with, but if better support for schools and better emotional support and managed moves for young people were in place, then these situations would be much less likely to arise.

If anyone would like to look further into the views of young people in relation to their education I would recommend that you read A National Voice's report on education – called 'Please Sir! Can I have some more?' For this report we surveyed 208 young people and looked at a whole variety of issues relating to their educations. The report is available on our website www.anationalvoice.org

After all that doom and gloom I should stress that things are getting better for many 'looked after' young people and that is something we must celebrate and learn from. It is as important to learn from our successes as well as our

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mistakes. We now have more care experienced young people going onto higher education and university than we ever have had before; we still have a long way to go to push to drive those numbers up, but it should not be forgotten.

However in some instances I have to be honest and say that from my experiences of working with young people in previous roles, and from the experiences of past colleagues, it seems that some of those young people who do go on to do well in their education, often seem to do so in spite of their circumstances and sadly not often enough because they have been given enough support. It can be a constant battle for some of those young people and sadly for a few it can become too much and in some cases the young people with very little support do eventually give up trying. This is not in my opinion a case of the young person failing – this is a system failure - a failure for which young people will have to pay the cost. That would not be good enough for my child.

At Shaftesbury we are working very hard to ensure that our young people get the best out of their education. We have an excellent Education Team who offer 'wrap around support' to our young people living in our residential units, and to their schools. Our education workers are trained teachers and so are best placed to offer the best support possible for our young people.

The support is widely varied as it is tailored to meet young people's individual needs, but includes things such as homework support. This means that as well as staff and key workers being expected to help and support their young people with their homework our education workers also visit young people and assist them too. They can also set homework for young people if they haven't got any or would like to have some extra work – you may look on in disbelief but I have seen it with my own eyes! A young person actually asking for homework!

Our education team also run course work groups and revision groups for young people who have been preparing to sit their GCSEs.

Another thing that our education team do is to get young people back into education. Often young people come into our care having been out of school for a period of time and our education team will tutor the young person, as well as working with the young person's social worker to help the young person find a school placement. They will meet with the school and will also help to ease the young person back in by attending lessons with them and providing one on one support for the young person in the classroom if this is what it takes. This of course means that the teacher is supported too. They will also offer a school and young person this type of support if one of our young people is at risk of exclusion.

This work has been a huge success with our education team preventing the need for many of our young people to be excluded permanently or otherwise

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and feedback from the schools and from our young people has been excellent.

Our young people have been really enthusiastic about the support that is offered to them. They are also able to let their classmates think they have a posh private tutor without having to declare any personal information about their circumstances too which apparently is an added bonus.

The other thing about this support that is so good is that it is ongoing. Sadly some young people are moved on from our care while they are preparing for their GCSEs, but our education team will continue to work with those young people no matter where they have moved on to. They still offer support with homework, they still invite young people to coursework and revision sessions and even pick them up and drive them home again afterwards, and best of all when they know a young person has moved into supported housing they will 'alarm call' the young person to ensure they are up on time for exams and even have been known to hammer on the young persons door to get them up and actually drive them into school to make sure they sit their exams – just like we would for our own child!

We also run a Leaving Care Team in Islington and young people who are part of this service and who are not in education, employment or training are given opportunities to take part in training. Young people achieve enhanced skills, qualifications, motivation and confidence by participating in a short (7 day) course customised to their individual needs. Again this has been hugely successful and many young people have gone on to further education and employment as a result of seeing that they can achieve something really positive which of course has been a huge confidence boost.

So you see, once we start with an ethos of believing that young people deserve the same life chances that our own children deserve, invest some belief in them, some time and of course resources, we can start to tackle the challenges that young people face head on and really truly turn the outcomes around.

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