

Observations by teacher education students on placement

Below are two accounts written by teacher education students of their experiences while on placement in secondary schools. After reading the accounts, reflect on (or discuss with fellow-course participants) the differences in ethos portrayed and the possible ways in which this might act as barriers to the progress of looked after children.

Account 1

"I was placed in a school in an area that is regarded as very affluent where the general perception is that the young people who attend the school are 'middle class'. Although a significant proportion of the pupils attending the school could fit into this category, the school had around 25% of its pupils coming from outwith the catchment area through placing requests from areas that can be described as 'deprived'. As a consequence the school was rich in diversity.

"The school had a wide range of provisions in place to meet the needs of its pupils, with extensive support networks in the form of guidance, pastoral care, additional support teachers, school counsellors and home/school link workers. Additional classes, extra-curricular activities/clubs and study support were also available. But these services were available for everyone attending the school and it was evident that there was no additional provision or specific provision in place for children looked after by local authorities.

"During my experience, it was clear that the teachers, school managers and the pupils knew very little about the children looked after by local authorities in the school and about looked after children in general. When I met up with the person responsible for looked after children she said: 'I think we only have one.' When I spoke individually to teachers in the school, they were unaware of any pupils who were looked after children or what additional provision or support may need to be in place for them. Each department in the school was provided with information about the needs of pupils attending the school when they transferred from primary to secondary school, but from looking at the records there was no information about children looked after by local authorities. These documents were rarely updated, therefore if a student's circumstance changed during their time in the school teachers would probably not be notified of these changes and as a consequence there was no evidence of provision in place for looked after children. This is not to imply that just because a pupil is looked after they will require additional support, but at least if teachers were aware of the individual's circumstance provision could be available if the pupil needed it.

"It was evident in discussion with staff in the school that there was a stigma attached to looked after children, and the perception that they must be 'bad' and that they were probably the 'trouble makers' in the school. This highlights the need for local authorities/schools to educate not only teachers, but also the pupils about what it means to be looked after to avoid stereotyping.

"It has been highlighted that the local authority that I was placed in has only in the last couple of months realised that it not only has responsibility for young people accommodated away from home but also people looked after at home. This exemplifies that the provisions in place for looked after children in this authority are not sufficient to meet their needs and this was further exemplified by the lack of knowledge or provision in place for looked after children in the school. If schools and local authorities are to have a positive impact on the lives of looked after children then more information and education needs to be provided to teachers."

Account 2

“Whilst at my placement school, I was fortunate enough to have a brief meeting with a member of the senior management team, who was the school’s child protection co-ordinator and was responsible for looked after children. He explained the different cases of looked after children attending the school, i.e. whether they were looked after at home or whether they were in alternative accommodation. He also explained how some children were looked after for issues other than child protection reasons, for example, children of asylum-seeking families who are housed in temporary accommodation. The school has 10 looked after children living with parents or other members of family, and one child who is provided with alternative accommodation. He explained the process of involving parents and how parents are encouraged to attend meetings which allow them to be involved with social work services. He was also able to give a brief explanation of the local authority’s policy and procedures. The authority also provides the school with a specialist ‘looked after and accommodated team’ whose members work with school staff.

“The local authority was given an HMI inspection in 1999-2000. The inspectors found evidence that looked after children were suffering from an educational disadvantage and were at risk of being excluded. HMI gave recommendations for action, which the council took very seriously and over the following four years they met these recommendations. The school, and other schools in this local authority, were given help to ensure that looked after children were included in school life and that their attainment levels were high.”