



Children in Care: A Study of Virtual School Heads' Support for Children on the Autism Spectrum

Executive Summary

Jennifer Pickles —Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsych),
University of Southampton
Supervised by: **Dr Hanna Kovshoff & Professor Sarah Parsons**

Background

In 2014 it became a statutory requirement for all local authorities (LAs) in England to employ a Virtual School Head (VSH) (Children and Families Act 2014). A VSH's role is to monitor and assess educational progress for all children in LA care and oversee the provision of appropriate educational support (Department for Education, 2018). To do this effectively they require an in-depth knowledge of the educational disadvantages that children in care face and are charged with a mandate to improve their educational outcomes. The implications of an autism diagnosis on educational success will vary across students, and research that has evaluated the impact of effective educational interventions has highlighted the importance of collaboration between staff, caregivers, and professionals to support individualised planning for the pupil (Bond, Symes, Hebron, Humphrey & Morewood, 2016).

However, a recent review of Freedom of Information requests based on responses from 147 LAs in England highlighted inconsistencies in the sharing of information about an autism diagnosis and revealed that the majority of LAs do not routinely report on the diagnostic status of autistic looked-after children at a strategic level (Parsons, McCullen, Emery & Kovshoff, 2018). This suggests that at the most strategic planning levels for autism support, the opportunities for collaboration may be restricted, further disadvantaging pupils. This study sought to gain insight into how VSHs perceive their role when supporting autistic children in care, and explores their understanding of how an autism diagnosis may impact academic progression. Their views about their role in relation to other key stakeholders and corporate parents (e.g. designated teachers, foster carers, residential care workers, and members of other LA services) were also explored.

Research questions

- What are the experiences of Virtual School Heads in providing autism related support for children in care within their LA?
- How is information relating to an autism diagnosis and support planning shared with schools?
- What can be learned about best practice and possible barriers in supporting autistic children in care?

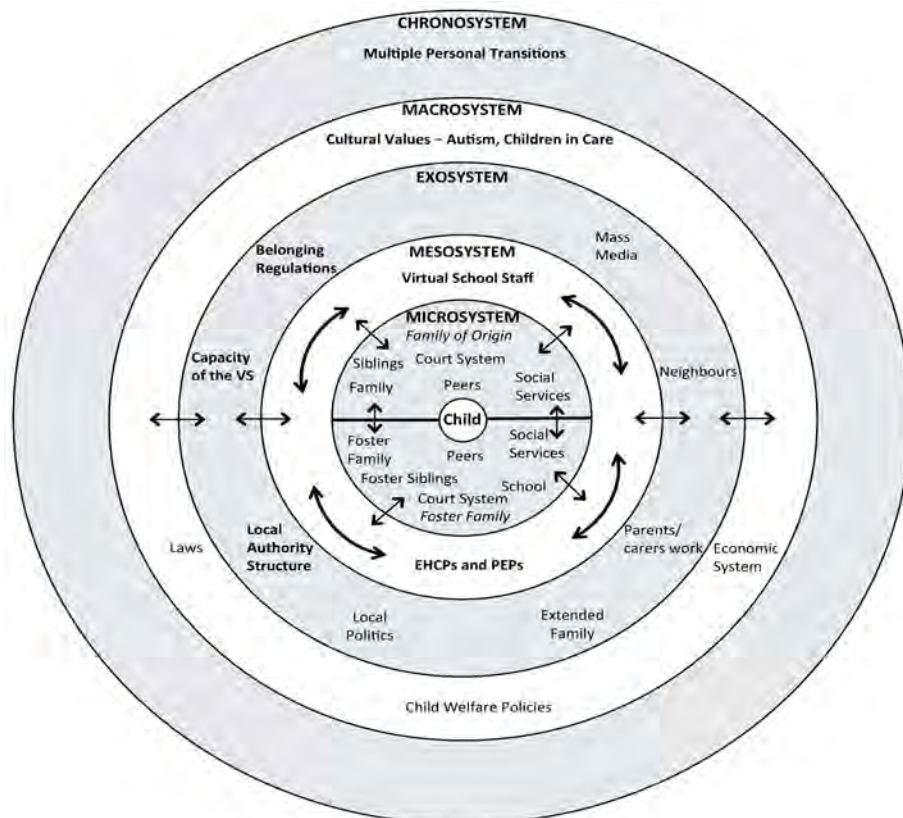
Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants (females = 5, males = 4) across eight different LAs in England. Eight out of nine of the participants were VSHs and the ninth participant was an Occupational Therapist employed by one of the Virtual Schools who joined the VSH during the interview in order to provide specialist knowledge regarding autism support. Interview transcripts were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2019).

Key findings

- Three main themes were identified: **(1) specialist knowledge of autism and attachment, (2) impact of structure and systems, and (3) strategies to provide support for children in care.**
- There was also an overarching theme of '**Responsibilities**' as well as a core underpinning concept of '**Relationships**'.
- VSHs described how their role was best seen as facilitating relationships, given that they are required to liaise with their team members, specialist external agencies, school staff, caregivers, and with different LAs.
- Barriers to best practice included limited resources and some elements of the legislative context.

- From these findings, a proposed Ecological Model for Autistic Children in Care was developed, which seeks to incorporate and address the core concepts of responsibilities and relationships that emerged.
- This model was developed from Richardson, Grogan & Richardson (2018), which highlighted the expanded Microsystem that children in care experience.
- Within this model Virtual School Staff are conceptualised as existing within that space where relationships between individuals in the Microsystem grow and develop. Virtual School Heads were described variously as a “bridge” or a “broker” between social care, health, education, caregivers, school staff and the child at the centre and their placement within the Mesosystem emphasises this.
- Barriers relating to resources, legislation, and cultural values, both in terms of children in care, and autism diagnoses are also further described within the Exo-, Macro-, and Chronosystem.



Implications and conclusions

- Virtual School Heads require access to specialist knowledge, and a clear delineation of role responsibilities should be sought and established.
- The proposed adaptation to Richardson, Grogan, Richardson & Small’s (2018) ecological systems model provides a conceptual framework for thinking and talking about the experiences of autistic children in care.
- Ensuring that statutory documentation, such as EHCs and PEPs, are high quality enables shared understanding across LA teams, and across the country, thus increasing the quality of support that young autistic children in care can access.

References

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