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# Digital therapy or digital liberation?

## The development of digital tools to improve the achievement of looked-after children and young people

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# Project aims

- The aims of this paper are:
  - To discuss the results of a research project that investigated the potential of technology to play a potentially transformational part in raising the achievements of looked after young people through the use and application of ubiquitous learning and communication tools
  - To examine how changes in teachers' awareness and knowledge of looked after young people aided the development of more responsive teaching and learning strategies which in turn affected their relationships with young people
  - The original contribution of the research explicated in this paper is such as to juxtapose curriculum design and collaborative working with young people on pre-service teacher thought and development through the shaping lens of technological communication and community-building tools.
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# Project motivations

- This project is motivated by a strong local and national need to do three things:
    1. Assist large numbers of young looked after and ex-looked after students in their educational progress through community building and mutual and vicarious learning
    2. Better prepare and support pre-service and in-service teachers for the diverse demands of the classrooms in which they find themselves, and in particular, young looked after people
    3. Support these students to use diverse technologies in and beyond the classroom for personalised learning and socially situated learning purposes
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# Context of study

- In spite of well-identified concerns about educational and socio-economic indicators for Looked-After Children within the UK, such children still underachieve when compared to the general population. The most recent UK government statistics (DfES, 2005) indicate that: “9% of Looked-After Children obtained at least 5 GCSEs compared with 54% of all other children.” (p.2)
  - Further, the fact that they demonstrate unprecedented levels of non-participation in education at age 16 and post-16 means that they have significantly curtailed life chances (Debate Project, 2005; Jackson et al, 2005).
  - Recent policy initiatives have stressed the need for joined-up-ness and better planning as to the input of all key professionals (Adonis, 2006, Green Paper, 2006).
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# Theoretical constructs

## (1).....concerning young people

- Jacklin et al (2006) observed that the underachieving discourse has focused on structural barriers to educational opportunities and the failings of social care networks but little attention has been paid to understanding the social and cultural capital that some Looked-After Children, in common with other individuals, possess and which help them to persist and succeed in education and society (Bourne, 2005).
  - Looked-After Children (in common with all children) have stories and memories and personal artifacts which are both critical to their autobiographical narratives which can serve to foster what is known as 'protective resilience' (Walker et al, 2006) by virtue of giving them some thread of continuity and order and reminding them that they can have positive experiences irrespective of the context (Dearden, 2004).
  - Many Looked-After Children endure fractured and dislocated educational and social experiences by virtue of frequent geographical moves (Dearden, 2004). Digital technology would both assist these young people in keeping in touch with their social networks and facilitate communication with significant adults and key professionals, and using technological tools facilitates problem solving and knowledge building which the children are transferring to formal learning settings.
  - As a learning construct, Situated Learning is most often used in adult settings; it is rarely used to explain children's participation in socially-based learning, and certainly rarely used to understand vicarious or participative learning.
  - Young people's problems are often compounded by the inability of adults to understand what children are feeling and attempting to communicate. The "communication gap" is made wider by most adults' insistence that children adopt the means of expression commonly used by adults, using almost exclusively verbal means (Leblanc & Ritchie, 2001). Any possibility of a range of communication tools and times would be advantageous.
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# Theoretical constructs

## (2).....concerning teachers

- A recent survey (TDA, 2005) into teacher preparedness for teaching within diverse settings has identified, nationally, a need for better awareness of all social, cultural and emotional contexts from which children/young people might operate. This encompasses everything from behaviour management issues, through to practical things such as not giving detentions when taxis are waiting outside to take children home.
  - In fact, lack of communication between key professionals has been identified in research as a major factor in maintenance of accurate and current personal education plans for Looked-After Children (Jacklin et al, 2006; Coulling, 2000). Research indicates that where Looked-After Children have been successful in education it is largely due to the support of significant adult role models who place a high priority on education and give unconditional counsel and advice (Jackson et al, 2005; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). Although teachers and social workers can provide all of these, various researchers (Walker et al, 2006; Miller & Parker, 2005; Miller & Moran, 2005; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001) suggest that both groups of professionals frequently misunderstand young people's emotional health, mistakenly attribute behaviours and attitudes for socio-cultural reasons and underestimate both their abilities to achieve educationally and emotionally and the difficulties in doing so.
  - Small scale projects involving looked after young people and pre-service teachers are difficult because of ethical issues, child protection, privacy, data protection, exploitation and the sheer problems of liaison with a variety of agencies. Projects that have used PDAs (Dudley, Barking and Dagenham, Kent; have worked with younger looked after children and found gains in literacy at lower levels than average for literacy. Our project is not primarily about this: it examines curricula ideas and interaction paradigms (Mandryk et al, 2006).
  - Nevertheless, where work has been done, the potential for awareness raising and cultural change inside the classroom, and pastorally, is immense (Gordon's work, and Phillion's work for example).
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# Our study

- Our study is a small scale study which involves a group of young people, a group of pre-service teachers, and a group of in-service teachers in several curriculum 'interventions';
- The making of digital videos as part of a module working with pre-service teachers to expose the young people to the structures and power of autobiographical narrative through mixed media, in order for students and young people to construct their own through digital video in which they told stories about their lives, significant educational experiences, and not least, advice to teachers and other educational professionals about what was important to know about being looked after. Both students and young people involved could watch these on their PDAs and post comments and questions to each other, sharing information and advice.
- Using pdas (O2 XDA) to contribute to a blog and server side scripted database in which questions relating to educational experience, general issues about being in care and leaving care were posed by students and answered by young people;
- A project with two local schools on teacher awareness and professional development, whereby existing teachers designed a curriculum centered around on-line and ubiquitous learning again using pdas (virtual classrooms, avatar design and virtual identity development) and a group of children who were in 'support' or 'exclusion' departments (for discontinuous attendance) took part, with the aim of monitoring attendance, behavioural modification and grade profile monitoring.
- There were therefore three key components of this study:
  - 1. how young people encountered the social, practical and technological aspects of the intervention and made links with each other;
  - 2. how the pre-service teachers changed in their perception of looked-after young people and how this was reflected in their teaching practices;
  - 3. how teachers in the schools viewed the efficacy and long-term sustainability of the projects in making change and achievement possible.

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# What happened: the young people in the project

- All the young people involved in the project enjoyed using the technology and working within an environment where their experiences and knowledge was valued and validated.
  - Some of the young people in the group were experiencing higher education for the first time, and had certainly never entered a university: for them, the world of education was characterised by marginalisation, ill-conceived sympathy, and lack of aspiration and expectation. The project was a learning experience that simply being told about would not have worked so successfully.
  - Some young people in the project were clearly not interested in aspects of the project such as collaborative and virtual identity activities; to them, being in contact and being able to share thoughts with other users was critical.
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# What happened: the in-service teachers in school

- Although the teachers concerned used the PDAs with small groups of pupils, there were two major impediments to use.
  - First, the educational benefits were/are not conclusive. Existing studies concentrate on literacy and collaborative working; more research needs to be done on the exact mechanisms by which these devices can seamlessly support teachers in the classroom. The teachers concerned did not have strategies to call upon and no pedagogy in which to synthesise any new paradigm that might emerge. Traditional classroom teaching has a whole folk pedagogy to call upon; there is currently no 'digital folk pedagogy'. In terms of achievement, there were improvements in children's attendance with the subject settings concerned, and some increase in attention from some carers and other education professionals, especially around information evenings when project details were disseminated
  - Second, the cost of this project is very great: we supplied these teachers with the PDAs and the data contract. Unless supported at a whole school level, such an intervention is largely impossible.
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# What happened: the pre-service teachers

- They found the input system difficult for the PDA - the combined hurdle of the stylus and the small screen made it less attractive the longer it was used
  - They expressed the problem of user participation at the same time as information dissemination. A split screen facility, whilst useful, was not possible due to the size of the screen of the PDA.
  - The advanced multimedia communication system that was used in the university for earlier participatory work - Ego7 (a Flash communication server-based system) will not work with the PDA based Flash player that is currently available). This would have facilitated multi-screen working.
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# More general outcomes

- The outcomes of the project are significant at several levels, spanning education, culture, diversity and technology. Working with young people who have been looked-after during even a long-term project is not the same as a formal field experience: some student teachers indeed indicated that they felt a great deal of sadness and regret that these students were not 'real' because they had developed a new level of awareness and compassion. Indeed, the student teachers' participation in the project was uniformly assessed by the young people as committed, caring and constant throughout. This also applied to the young people themselves however: attendance of the whole group was 91% over the entire module, much higher than the student teachers themselves had expected upon initial sessions where we had discussed cultural and social stereotypes as part of narrative. In fact, it emerged that the students had associated specific attributes to 'looked after people', irrespective of whom they were, how long they had been looked-after, or from what socio-cultural background they came from – such terms as 'unstable', 'unreliable', 'damaged' were commonly expressed. Some young people expressed that the project was therapeutic and that digital tools should become a part of communicating and relating to the many professionals who care for these young people at various points through their lives.
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# Final comments

- Our project demonstrates the potential to conduct a relatively straightforward technological innovation, which, although not unproblematic in terms of access, ethics and emotional impact, could be carefully facilitated elsewhere, and one in which everyone is simultaneously challenged and shown to benefit. Of course, there are also cost and time limitations: the technology is relatively expensive and the expenditure needed to renew is large by the standards of many teacher education departments. Further, the project is time-consuming within the constraints of a content and standards-heavy model of teacher education. Further, of course, these experiences are not replacements for a deep and enduring personal encounter with some of the most vulnerable young pupils that the student teachers may yet meet in their teaching careers: these are only the beginnings of educating and overturning some deeply held beliefs about why children may be in these circumstances and what their life chances may inevitably be.
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