

The impact of the work of the Virtual School on a village primary school.

Context

2018-2019

The school is a small, friendly village Primary school in South Cambridgeshire with a strong staff team who support each other actively.

158 children on roll in 6 classes but in September 2020 reduced to five classes due to falling pupil numbers.

17% of pupils are eligible for Pupil Premium and 39% are from non-White backgrounds. 12% EAL across the school in some classes 30%. 16% of pupils have SEND currently (May 2021) 2 children have an EHCP.

The case study relates to a period of just over approximately 18 months when siblings joined the school in June 2018 living in their first, short-term placement as their care plan was for adoption. The school had limited experience of educating children in care when they joined the mixed Reception and Year 1 class. The format is a semi-structured interview.

Needs identified and outline support

What were the identified needs of the staff when the children joined?

Staff initially found **having the children sharing their feelings very upsetting**. As a staff **we recognised that we had little experience or understanding of the needs of children who had experienced trauma**. Initially both children were in our mixed Reception/Year 1 class. Staff found it hard to see such young children so distressed and were also concerned about the **impact on other children in the class**, especially when objects were thrown on occasions. SLT provided **opportunities to de-brief and discuss incidents** and we were very fortunate to have **fortnightly sessions from ME (NHS Well-Being Team)** who met with the staff working with the children to discuss approaches and listen to their concerns. This really helped staff as they **had time to discuss experiences and had lots of positive reinforcement**.

What did the school need to think about that was new to them?

Not all the learning about behaviour and approaches to learning was completely new to me (Head teacher) as **I had worked with highly dysregulated children before**. I found that what I had expected staff to be like did not transpire. They picked up that with XX and YY they were **making a difference to their lives**. Staff's successes kept them going. They are a **very reflective staff team**. Group sharing at lunchtime developed a **culture of reflection** and mutual support. We became aware of the need for a **constant changing of approaches** when they ceased to work and the need to be **constantly flexible**. Their overriding concern among all staff was for the child. This took over and the teamwork became more important. **All staff were involved**

What was the Virtual School role in supporting you and the staff?

The Virtual School was also **extremely supportive** in terms of **suggesting strategies**, explaining the PEP process and **contributing to meetings**. They **provided whole school INSET on Attachment and Trauma in April 2019** and were a **huge support when we had a parental concern** raised about possible sexualised behaviour by one of the children.

How did you meet the children's needs?

Both boys had **high levels of 1:1 support**, lots of praise, clear boundaries but **a very calm approach** and **a clear message that we would make a new start after incidents**. XX had a **lunchtime club** from November – March. Both children had **1:1 sessions to support emotional needs/self-esteem and access to calming activities**. This was a change from the usual social skills groups. These were timetabled and planned in regularly, they were story based and practical. We developed a **'team around the child'** but with specific people as first contact for the children. The Head Teacher had a regular lunch date with XX! **Adults never felt alone in their challenges**, and at the end of the day I would often find all the 4 TAs with teachers comparing notes usually in a positive way or **sharing issues with no judgement in it**, all about what could we do differently. **There were good and bad days**. All staff, even those who did not teach the boys, quickly grew fond of them and found it hard to see them so distressed but it was also lovely to **share their achievements and see the progress they made** e.g XX taking his part in the nativity play; progress in phonics. There were days when we had to **evacuate classrooms** and the learning of the other children was disrupted but **we did not get negative comments from children or parents**. The class TAs (in both cases) did amazing work with the children and gave them lots of time and emotional support. This **did have an impact on the intervention programmes for other children** in the class, as these did not always happen as planned. **We used PP+ funding for additional support**, and supplemented further support.

Evidence of Impact

How was the impact of the Virtual School support expressed?

There was **practical advice that led to change** e.g visual timetables, reducing demands of tasks to build success—we have a very experienced SENCo who is extremely supportive who worked with us on this too.

Having two CiC children at the same time helped, as **staff could support each other and compare notes and share ideas**. It was the first time in a very long time since we had needed to write PEPs so **we needed the Virtual School guidance around the PEPs** being online, Pupil Premium Plus etc. I involved my SENCO in target setting which wasn't difficult in these cases as their behaviours were so extreme.

When did school staff report positive changes in their practice and in the children?

Moving the children to separate classes at the beginning of November 2018 had a positive impact

Lunchtime club allowed XX to **build relationships with peers in a safe way** and let him develop **genuine friendships**

Spring term was generally more positive for both boys and **they made progress in their learning**

Situations out of school made a difference e.g when the children knew they were possibly going to move this had a negative impact especially on XX. We needed to **revise expectations** ie going back to regulating activities.

How did the staff use the information from the trauma and attachment INSET morning that the Virtual School delivered?

The trauma training delivered by the Virtual School had the biggest impact as all staff understood the changes in the way the brain responded and the **underlying reasons for the behaviours that we were seeing**. We had discussions about the fact **that all behaviour is communication** and tried to learn how to **“read” the children’s needs** and behaviour so we could **intervene before we reached crisis point**. E.g. having a **“safe space”** for each child, giving XX an **“I need help card”** to share with an adult so he did not escalate behaviour to get attention (It didn't always work but there were occasions when he used it really well) **talked about the training afterwards and did follow up meetings** and talked about **other children with possible traumatic experiences**, generally raised awareness about **all children**.

Impact on Child XX

Progress and Attainment. Extract from Spring Term 2019 PEP

“The number of complex phonemes he recognises has **increased from 6 in October to 13 in December**. In October XX **could read 20** of the first 100 High Frequency words and **in December he could read 61**. Spring term - XX has made progress this term. He is now **in class for the majority of the day**, learning alongside his peers. He is able to access the whole class teaching sessions... His recognition of high frequency words continues to improve **and by Easter he could read 80 of the first 100 HFW and spell 52 of them**... He is **becoming more fluent** at counting in 2s, 5s and 10s and is beginning to double and halve small numbers.”

Legacy

What is the legacy ie longer term impact on the school of working with XX and YY and the work of the Virtual School.

Quotes from staff

“It was eye-opening. I had never worked with CiC pupils before. It was challenging, draining, highly emotional but also very rewarding”

“Looked after children are not all the same- our current ones could not be more different!”

“They are children you will never forget. It was life changing and I still think about where they are and what they might be doing” (Reception TA)

“It (VS training and working with XX and YY) changed my approach to behaviour and I have used things I learnt with other children”

Staff talk about AA and BB and their situation and **the need to be mindful about what’s going on underneath**. They look out for the **small signs in the children** that things may not be as they seem.

There are no big changes in terms of rewriting policies but there has been **a bigger change in people’s mindsets and understanding reasons behind behaviour**. What is this behaviour showing me? What are the issues and what can we do as the adults to change that experience for the child when they are overwhelmed and can't cope?

