Reaching back earlier for care experienced learners: An evaluation of the Learning Explorers pilot

In partnership with

Executive Summary

Education is an empowering force, it creates knowledge, builds confidence, and breaks down barriers to opportunities. We know that our schools, colleges, and universities are much stronger if each and every learner has what they need to thrive. Scotland has a world class education system, and we have a moral, social and economic duty to ensure that access to and participation in education is equal for all.

The Commission on Widening Access (COWA) published "A Blueprint for Fairness"[1] which presented a system wide plan to achieve equal access to higher education for those from the most deprived communities in Scotland. The Commission paid particular attention to the needs of care experienced learners and in the final report noted:

> **"The Commission is conscious that the particular challenges faced by those with a care experience, both by their nature and magnitude, set this group of learners apart. Scotland must therefore be much bolder in its ambition for, and commitment to, those with care experience if we are to deliver fairness for this group of learners".**

Recommendations 15 and 16 in the Blueprint for Fairness highlight the importance of reaching the most disadvantaged learners at an earlier stage in their education journey:

> **"We are acutely aware of the potential impact of early years and school attainment on access, and there is a role for universities and colleges to play in supporting disadvantaged learners in the earlier stages of their learning"**

The Learner Explorers pilot was developed in response to these recommendations and following research with care experienced students, prior to the establishment of the Hub for Success in 2018. It is a widening access programme aimed at Primary 7 students, designed and delivered as a result of a strong collaboration between the Hub for Success partners and care experienced student ambassadors. The project aims to raise awareness, contextualise, and normalise care-experience within the classroom setting

[1] COWA (2016) Blueprint for Fairness: Final report of the Commission on Widening Access, Scottish Government

alongside introducing and exploring further and higher education as an opportunity open to all.

This evaluation report clearly evidences the positive outcomes the Learning Explorers pilot had in terms of raising awareness of care experience among the P7 participants, increased knowledge of further and higher education and raising aspiration levels.

The report concludes that Learning Explorers, or an adapted version, is embedded as part of transitions work to secondary schools across all primary schools. Key recommendations include the need to start talking about post school education opportunities earlier than traditional widening access programmes currently do; a whole class approach, using the language of care and a range of learning styles; the added value of working in close partnership with the local authority and widening access colleagues and ensuring care-experienced student ambassadors are at the centre of the design and delivery. We believe these recommendations will mean widening access programmes are more likely to reach people with care experience and will keep the door open to further and higher education opportunities for more care experienced children and young people once they leave school.

Introduction

> **“Not only has Learning Explorers opened conversations with many children who want to consider what they will do after school, but I believe it has also inspired them to believe in themselves and think about their skills, talents and interests and consider how they can turn that into a career!**
> **This has been an incredible opportunity not just for the P7s but also for the student ambassadors. This project has had a profound impact on me and being able to provide a positive example to P7s is an honour!”**

Quote from Pip who was involved in the design and delivery of Learning Explorers. Pip is studying Sociology and Politics at University of Edinburgh.

Learning Explorers

Learning Explorers was funded by the British Foreign Schools Society (BFSS) and delivered by the Hub for Success (Hub) and its partners. The project delivered a four-session programme, to 295 P7 children (aged 11-12) across the city of Edinburgh. Its aims were to:

- Raise awareness of care-experience
- Normalise and contextualise care-experience within the classroom
- Raise aspirations of care-experienced primary pupils

Hub for Success

The Hub for Success is a collaborative project focused on improving post school educational outcomes for people, of all ages, with experience of care in the South-East region of Scotland. Its ethos is embedded with the ambitions of The Promise Scotland. The Promise Scotland is responsible for driving the work of change demanded by the findings of the Independent Care Review.

The core project partners include Edinburgh City Council, Edinburgh College, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, Heriot Watt University, Queen Margaret

University, the Open University in Scotland, Newbattle Abbey College and West Lothian College.

The Hub Student Ambassadors, all from the partner colleges and universities, were central to the design, delivery and evaluation of this work

Understanding Care-Experience

The term 'care-experienced' refers to anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, no matter how short, including adopted children who were previously looked-after. This care may have been provided in one of many different settings such as in residential care, foster care, kinship care, or through being looked after at home with a supervision requirement. The reason this report uses this term as opposed to the statutory term 'Looked After Child' is in recognition that this programme was aimed at care-experienced children and young people and as well as those formally looked after. There are approximately 13,255 looked after children in Scotland [2] and if we were to include those with care-experience this number would be significantly higher.

Educational Landscape

The Commission on Widening Access (COWA), A Blueprint for Fairness[3] report highlights that the educational outcomes for people who have spent a period being looked after are stark compared with their non-looked after peers. Figures show that young people in Scotland, who spend a period in care, are more likely to leave secondary school at a younger age and with fewer qualifications; 73% leave at the minimum age, compared with 27% of all school leavers. This figure is compounded with statistics which report that only 5% of care leavers go directly from school into higher education compared with 40% of their non-care experienced peers.

There is much evidence to highlight the reasons for the low numbers of care-experienced people moving onto college and university such as lack of information/support and low expectations/lack of aspirations for these pupils. There have been many excellent

[2] Scottish Government (2022) Children's Social Work Statistics, Scotland 2020-21
[3] COWA (2016)

initiatives to raise the profile – and the aspirations – of care experienced individuals in the last few years, however, there is still much work to be done to improve the post educational outcomes for this group.

Widening access activities are generally aimed at children and young people in a later stage in their education journey. This is often too late for those with care experience. It has been suggested that widening access activity does not reach those with care experience for several reasons, such as leaving school age, higher numbers of school exclusions linked to this group.

The Blueprint for Fairness report emphasises the need to prioritise raising expectations and aspirations for those with care-experience:

> *'We are acutely aware of the potential impact of early years and school attainment in access, and there is a role for universities and colleges to play in supporting disadvantaged learners in the earlier stages of their learning'*.[4]

Learning Explorers was developed in response to recommendation 15 of A Blueprint for Fairness:

> *'Universities and colleges should increase engagement with our youngest children and their families as part of the provision of a coordinated package of support for those in our most deprived communities…'*.[5]

Why focus on a younger age group?

The Hub student ambassadors emphasise the importance of 'levelling up', for care-experienced school pupils, to ensure that there is equity of information and access to information around post school opportunities. Individual, and collective experiences, highlight professionals having low expectations of academic capabilities and the impact that this has on self-belief in terms of educational aspirations. Reflecting on experience, and research, early interventions should capitalise on the child's developmental stage to 'level up' and create a robust sense of improved expectations for our care-experienced

[4] COWA (2016) p10
[5] COWA (2016) p44

learners.

Child development theories suggest that P7 aged children are in an important stage of development and are open to taking on board new concepts and information. Erikson's 8 stages of Psychosocial Development indicates that these pupils are in the latter stages of the *'Industry versus inferiority'* task. A big part of this stage focuses on academics, competition, and social interactions. Children at this stage seek recognition from both adults and peers that they are capable and competent. Erikson surmises that the child who is encouraged and assisted in their learning, and ambition, will start to feel conscientious and positive in their capacity and goals. He identifies teachers, and therefore the school environment, as having a heightened role in the child's development at this age and that the brains capacity to think and plan is at its optimum. For the child to capitalise on their learning, following the transition to secondary education, it is important that they have a solid foundation in terms of what the benefits are from the next stage of their educational journey.

As the young person makes the transition into teenage years, they are faced with the task of navigating their identity and the confusions around their role in the world (aged12-18). The adolescent is predominantly focused on exploring their independence and sense of self; ideally this would be from the secure base of family relationships which provide a 'sounding board' and safe space to come back to. The young person that is unsure of their values or beliefs and desires, by this developmental stage, is more likely to be apprehensive and puzzled about their futures. For our CE pupils the complexity of this developmental task is made more challenging given the negative outcomes assumed for those with CE as well as the potentially unreliable support networks. If ambition has not been encouraged the young person is likely to feel inferior, doubt their abilities and may not reach their full potential (Heffner, 2001).[6] This is likely to make it more difficult for a young person to accept the opportunities that may be available to them as they progress through this developmental stage/secondary school; for example, they may not see themselves as a 'candidate' or 'capable' of engaging in widening access opportunities.

[6] Heffner, C.L. (2001), Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

It is widely accepted that those with care experience have lived with trauma and loss in their lives. These are often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). ACES significantly impact on a child's development and often the sense of a foreshortened future is reported as one of those trauma responses which can impact on a child, or young persons, learning journey. We know many of those with care experience live with mental health issues throughout their lifetimes largely linked to the impact of ACES. Intervening at an earlier age and stage where the brain has optimum plasticity opens opportunity to influence narratives, in terms of prospects.

Of the 13,000+ looked after children and young people in Scotland, a third are aged between 5 to 11 years.[7] We know that if we consider the broader definition of care experience the number in this age group would be even higher. Despite these numbers there are few widening access projects aimed at this age group. In partnership with Local Authority the Hub agreed to develop a programme focusing on this younger age group, and in schools with higher numbers of care-experienced children.

[7] Scottish Government (2022)

Programme Design

Learning Explorers was designed in partnership with Hub staff, the care-experienced Student Ambassadors and the widening access colleagues and partners. This allowed for knowledge and experiences to be shared to ensure the detail was informed by both educational and trauma practice and lived experience. For example, the project was changed from 'Learning Investigators or Detectives' to 'Learning Explorers' after student ambassadors noted that the original name may trigger thoughts of child protection and police processes for some children.

> ***'We need to be careful with the language that we use as it can increase stigma and feelings of shame. I remember hating certain words that my social worker used to use – like LAAC or vulnerable – it is the language of adults'***
>
> **Student Ambassador**

Recent neurobiological, epigenetics, and psychological studies have shown that traumatic experiences in childhood can impact on concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities children need to succeed in school.[8] It was important, therefore, to ensure that the content of the programme reflected the understanding that care experience was likely to be impacting on current learning, behaviour, and relationships at school for those pupils we were trying to reach.

There was a consensus that the programme should be delivered in an interactive way to support different learning styles. For example, the three, two-hour classroom sessions included the four core learning styles: visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinaesthetic. Incorporating activities around movement were designed to stimulate areas of the brain which improve neuron connections and support students to maintain concentration and attention,[9] regulate energy levels[10] and expand their toolkit of self-regulation strategies.[11]

[8] See www.traumasensitiveschools.org

[9] Hoza B., Smith A. L., Shoulberg E. K., Linnea K. S., Dorsch T. E., Blazo J. A., McCabe G. P. (2015), A randomized trial examining the effects of aerobic physical activity on attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms in young children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 43(4), 655–667

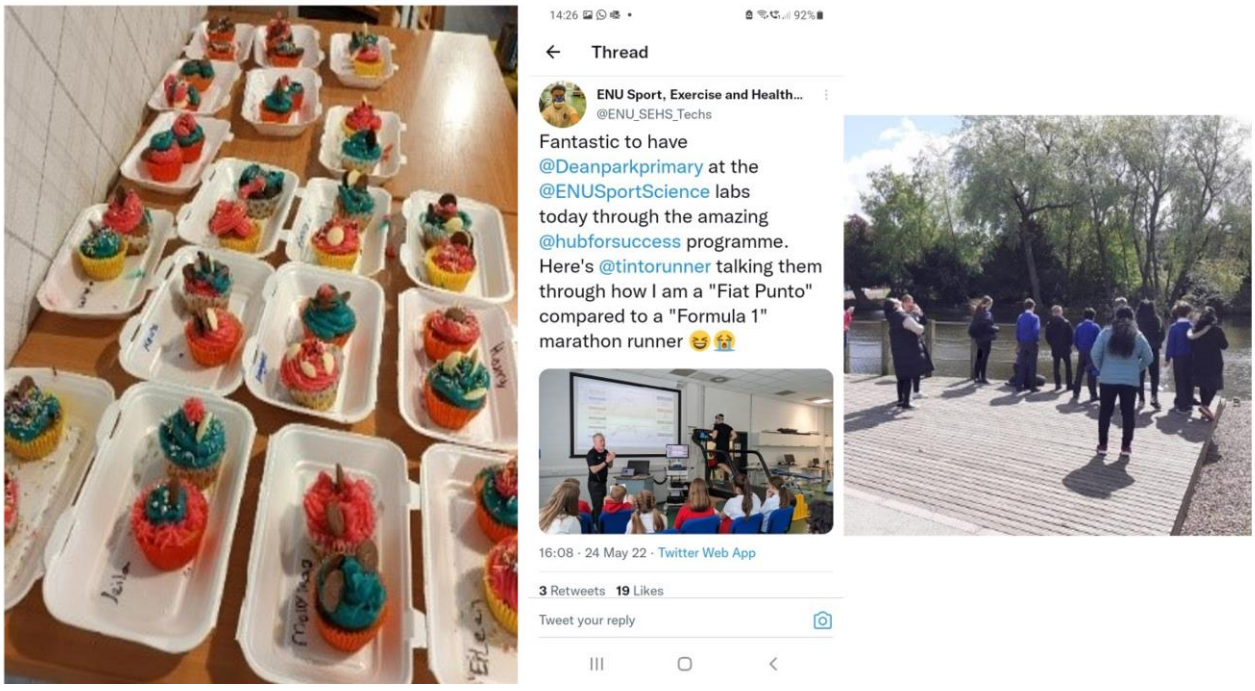
[10] MacCobb, S., Fitzgerald, B. & Lanigan O'Keeffe, C. (2014), The alert program for self management of behaviour in second level schools: results of phase 1 of a pilot study. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 19(4), 410-425

[11] Shanker (2013) Self-Reg: How to help your child (and you) break the stress cycle and successfully engage with life.

Importantly the activities were linked to teaching in further and higher education models, a format that is often more accessible for those with care experience who report that traditional classroom environments can be challenging.

Resources included videos by our student ambassadors sharing their learning journey and that they were care experienced and a video.

The programme concluded with a campus visit to support kinaesthetic learning; this was key as research indicates that, particularly for children and young people whose development has been disrupted, this type of teaching supports the child to process and embed the learning. Offering an experiential element to the programme was strongly advocated by our student ambassadors who noted that many care experienced students may not have been in a university or college. Research also highlights that internal reflection, from experiential learning, can prepare a student for making related life choices and address their emotional concerns.[12]



Campus visits: using a range of learning styles

[12] Kolb D. K. (2015) Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of Learning and Development

School selection

Edinburgh City Council's Virtual Headteacher worked with the Hub in identifying the pilot schools who had care experienced pupils and no widening access activity. All 11 schools that were invited to attend an information session expressed an interest to be part of the pilot illustrating the interest in the programme.

The six selected schools comprised of ten P7 classes, 295 pupils in total. The classes varied in the number of care experience pupils and in their socio demographic. Each teacher had an initial meeting with one of the facilitators who would be delivering the sessions in the school. This was an opportunity to share more information regarding the aims of the project, answer any questions and gather as much information as possible about the class and any particular learning support needs.

An introduction letter from a student ambassador was sent to all parents and carers and we shared a short video with the children to introduce ourselves and the project in advance of going into class.[13]

As part of the discussions with teaching staff, we asked them to have brief discussions with any pupils with care experience. This was prompted following discussions with our student ambassadors who were keen that pupils were not 'triggered' in any way by the introduction of care experience in the sessions.

Learning Explorer Key Messages

It was agreed that raising aspirations for care experienced children, and for all children in the class, could be rooted in activities designed to answer the following key questions about college and university, students and pathways:

What is college and university? Activities were designed to help pupils understand what you can study at each institute. For example, student ambassadors explained what courses they are doing/have done, at what institution and what qualifications they would finish with or already have. This learning was compounded by co delivering with members of the college and university widening participation teams.

[13] See Appendix for an example of the introduction letter

Pupils learned about the vast number of different courses available and were introduced to relevant further and higher education vocabulary, such as lecture and matriculation. This was designed to help students understand the language associated with college and university and was embedded throughout the sessions to enable pupils to become comfortable with the unknown and increase their confidence in thinking about their own choices.

Pupils were encouraged to ask questions of students and staff about what a student does at college and university. For example, one of our student ambassadors is studying to be a nurse and was able to share her experiences of learning in the 'purpose-built university wards', in the classroom and on placement. We were able to link this to discussions throughout the programme around different types of learning, i.e., hands on versus 'academic'.

> ***'It was great to have care experienced students in to speak about their own experience. Also, great that each of the people in to help run the session all took different paths and were happy to share them.'***
>
> **Teacher, Kirkliston Primary School**

An observation from evaluation discussions noted that in classes where the teaching staff were actively involved in the programme appeared to be more engaged in the learning. This was noted even during campus visits where pupils were less distracted and more curious in their environment when teaching staff were joining in the workshops, asking questions, and seemingly interested in what was being presented. Linking back to Erikson's premise of the importance of teachers in a child's development, it would seem pertinent that any future work with Learner Explorers would seek to engage and capitalise on teachers influence.

Where can you study? Pupils were encouraged to learn more about where their local, and national, further, and higher education institutes are. Activities were designed to include visual images and maps to support classes to recognise places and understand that a wide number are reachable within their own locality. Sessions were adapted to each school to allow pupils to relate in real time.

'***The children worked well in their groups, and they included things the children knew but made them think about them in a different way, e.g., the mapping of the campuses was very good.'***

Teacher

Learning Explorer classroom resources

Who can go to college and university? The overriding message from Learning Explorers was to convey the message that college and university are for everyone. Activities were designed to challenge pupils to think about who can become a student. We used well known children's characters, such as Paddington Bear and Hermione Grainger, to encourage the pupils to think creatively about individual skills, qualities and experiences that can be useful in a higher or further education setting. Paddington would fit under the criteria for care experienced and so this was an opportunity to encourage pupils to explore the strengths that came from this life experience. The focus was on identifying the positives rather than challenges that an individual may face.

'***That the most valuable message from the programme was that pupils learned the idea that Uni is for everyone!'***

Teacher, Kirkliston Primary School

Student Ambassadors were keen to explore myths around who can access further and higher education, reflecting that there is a general culture of belief that coming from a less advantaged background is a significant barrier. Using a physical 'decision line' pupils were asked to place themselves, Agree/unsure/disagree, in response to statements; for example, *'you have to be rich to go to university'*. This opened robust discussions and allowed the facilitators to share information regarding financial and other supports for students, particularly for those with care experience.

> ***'Surprised at some of the myths/beliefs that were held by the pupils which I had assumed no longer existed'***
>
> **Teacher, Ratho Primary School**

Why go to college or university? The discussions around why attend college or university were threaded through the entirety of the programme. All pupils, across schools, had a sound understanding of the increased employment opportunities that stem from a robust education; the concept of earning a good amount of money was highly noted. An activity exploring pupils' skills, talents and interests allowed them to make the link with how college or university can be an opportunity to learn more about something they enjoy or are particularly good at.

How to you get to college and university? Student Ambassadors each talked about their journeys into and through further and higher education, as did the facilitators and teachers. The Student Ambassadors were able to stress and share their experiences to show that the process of knowing what you want to study/do is not always straightforward. For example, one ambassador shared that she wanted to be a hairdresser, a tattoo artist, and a surgeon before settling on studying marine biology. Another shared that she initially studied hairdressing at college before changing to sociology.

This helped to highlight how different learning journeys can be for example whether someone went straight to university from school or worked before going to college, or used college as a stepping stone to university.

'It was wonderful for our Care Experienced children to have the opportunity to meet others with shared experience and to do this in a 'mainstream/whole class way, rather than as a separate group. It was great for everyone to understand that there are different routes into higher education, different things that you can learn when you are there, and that how you get on at school does not necessarily define where you go in the future'

Teacher, Dean Park Primary School

An activity exploring their upcoming transition to high school helped pupils to understand new learning, subject choices, exam qualifications and the entry points to college and university. Facilitators observed that many pupils did not have a lot of information about this and found it hard to talk about subjects at secondary school, exam names, age of school leaving, or qualifications needed to progress to next stage. This would suggest a learning need for all pupils, regardless of background.

A further activity, using fictional applicants to college and university, encouraged the pupils to consider information about the applicants' interests, talents experiences and exam results to link them to a choice of courses/careers. This generated lots of discussions amongst pupils as there was no 'correct' answer; pupils were encouraged to present their thoughts to the rest of the class. This activity was designed to promote critical thinking, a skill that is essential for secondary, further, and higher education and offered pupils the opportunity to enact their decision making.

The final activity of the sessions helped the pupils to consider the people around them who would be able to support their journey to further and higher education. From the perspective of CE, this was an important task to help pupils identify wider corporate parenting adults (such as social workers and teachers) as having a responsibility to promote positive outcomes.

'Our CE pupil enjoyed the in-class sessions most, particularly speaking with [student ambassador] and getting to know about others with CE. They are quite open about their care experience in the classroom. I am unsure if they have many conversations about their futures at home'.

Teacher, St Cuthbert's Primary School

Campus visits: workshops using state of the art equipment

Campus visits: group work to create posters about college and university

Evaluation findings

Feedback from teachers

All the teachers were asked for feedback in an evaluation form at the end of the sessions. The findings are shown in chart 1.

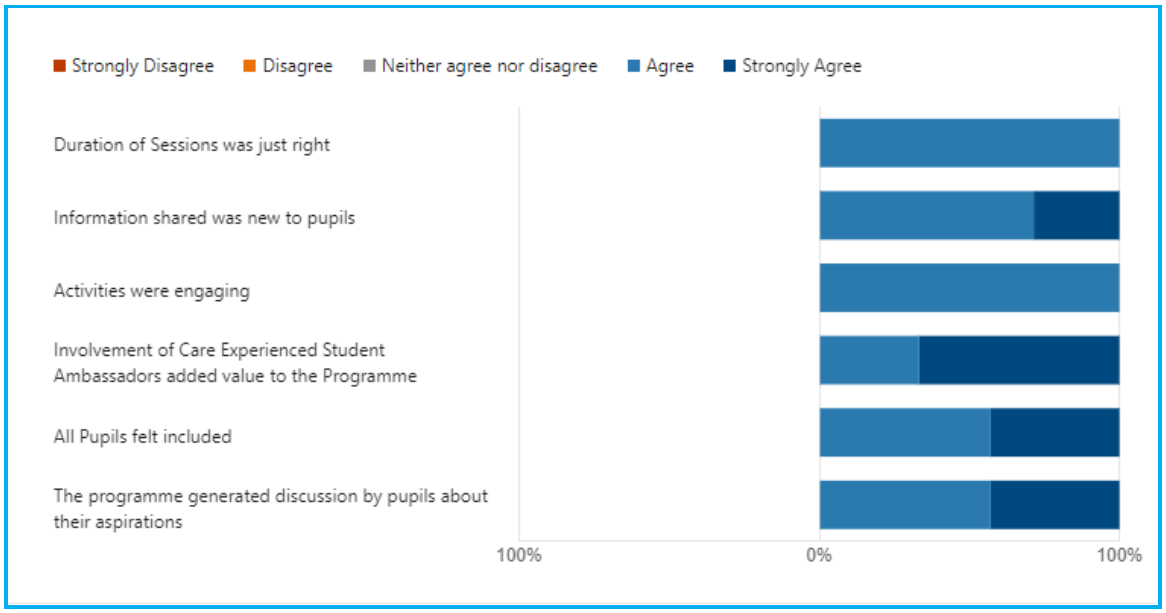


Chart 1: Teacher evaluation findings

A high number agreed that the involvement of Student Ambassadors had a positive impact and added value, which fits well with the aims of the project. When considering expanding the pilot project, this would be a key characteristic we would wish to see protected by way of raising awareness of care experience. For the majority of children their most important role models are parents and families which is not always the case for those from a care experienced background. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy notes the importance of role models in shaping how they behave in school, relationships and when making difficult decisions. Given the many stigmatising perceptions of care experience our Student Ambassadors are a meaningful tool for raising aspirations.

As a team we would have hoped to see a more robust score for '*the programme generated discussion by pupils about their aspirations'.* There was a workbook provided alongside the classroom sessions, however on reflection, there needed to be more focus

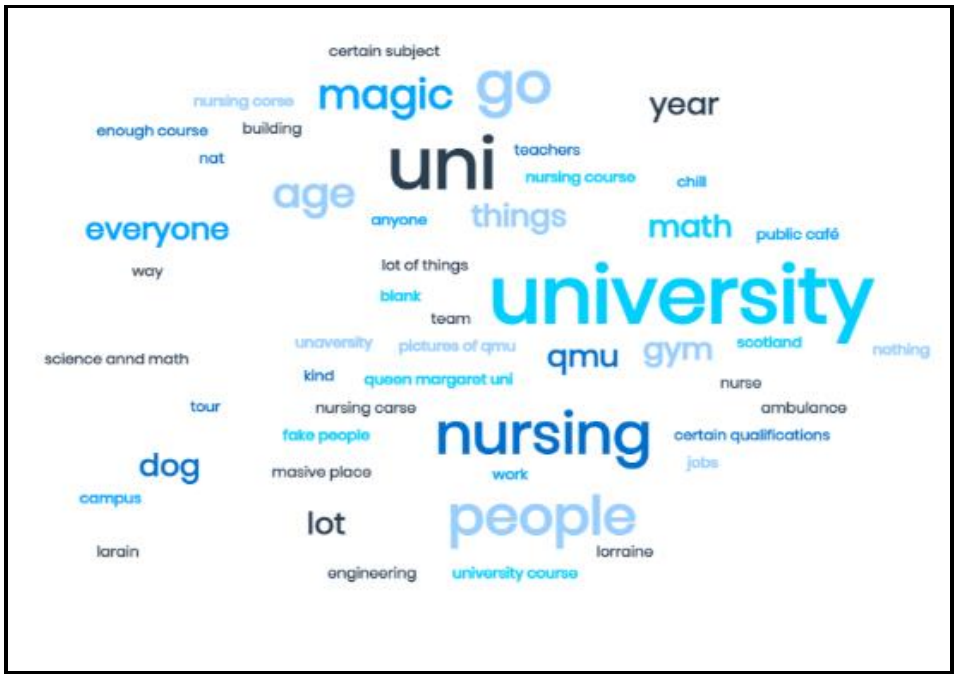
on promoting this resource as a tool for teachers to use to compound learning and encourage discussions between the sessions.

Alicia, HUB Student Ambassador sharing her journey in a lecture hall and showing the class round a laboratory

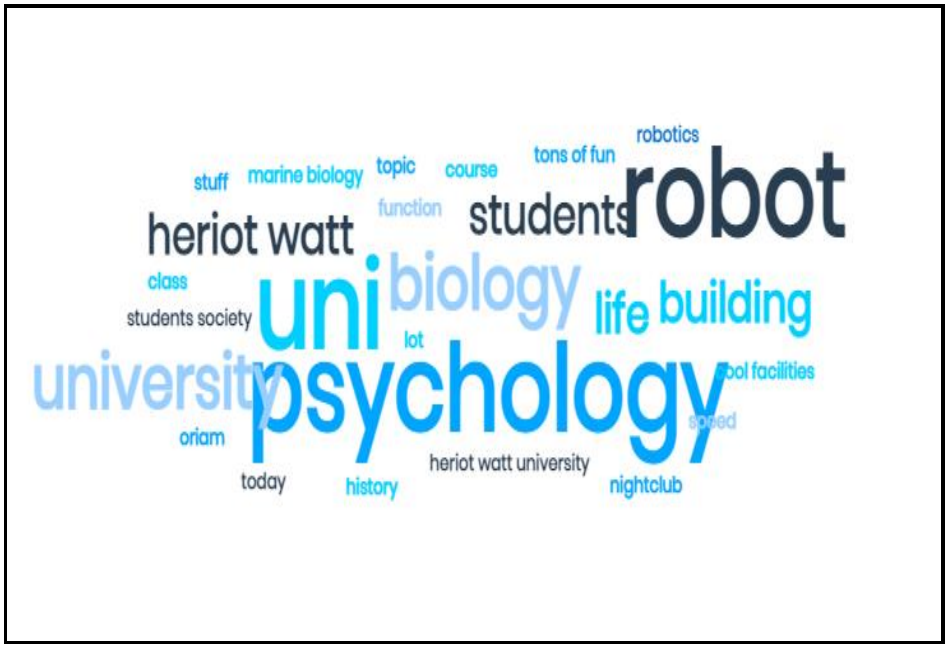
Campus Visits

Five of the six schools were able to attend a campus visit. One school had to cancel due to last minute staffing issues. Campus visits were held at Edinburgh College (Granton Campus), Heriot Watt, Napier University (Sighthill Campus) and Queen Margaret University. The visits were organised and facilitated by the widening participation teams and each of the visits were bespoke whilst encompassing some key elements, such as orientation, meeting current students and experiential learning. For example, some of the visits included an opportunity to do some learning in the Sports Science Department which the teacher noted as a highlight for the class.

The word clouds below captured from the pupils in response to a question about what they learnt from their visit on campus:



Kirkliston Primary Schools, QMU campus Visit - word cloud



St Cuthbert's Primary School, Heriot Watt Campus Visit - word cloud

Not all pupils that attended the campus visits were asked for feedback following the sessions, so it is not possible to comment on the impact of the experience across all those involved in the programme.

However, all teachers participated in the evaluation process and data collected does offer evidence to suggest that the experience was beneficial to pupils (see chart 2)

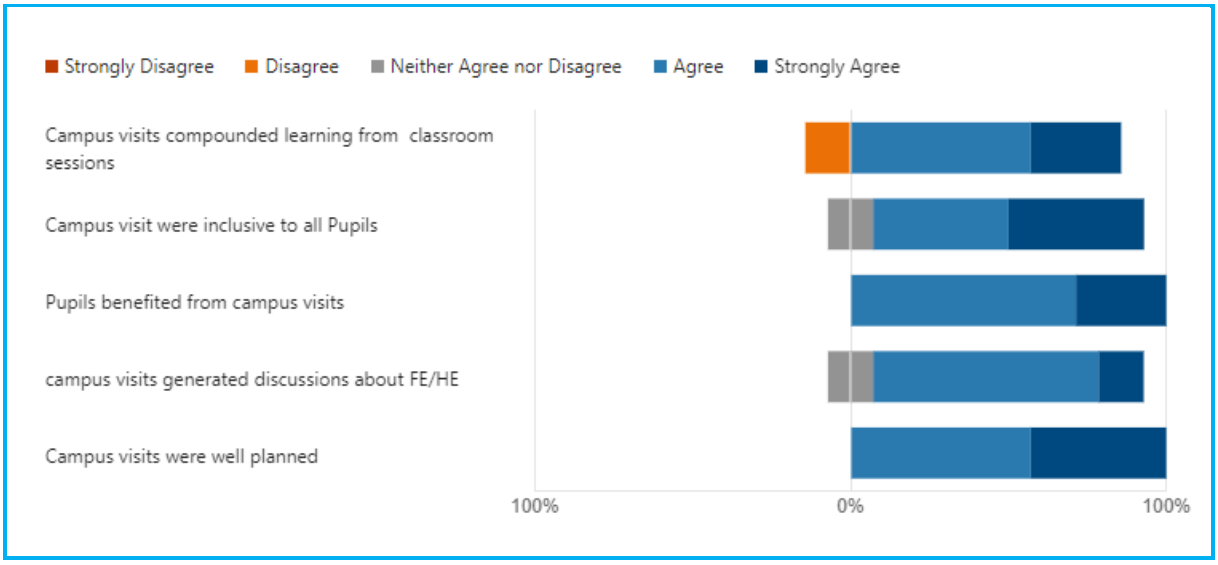


Chart 2: Campus visits – teacher evaluation findings

'I thought the visit was a fantastic experience for the kids.'
'They loved their visit to Heriot Watt!'
Teachers at Dean Park and St Cuthbert's Primary School

Due to Covid restrictions, forward planning for trips to campus were inhibited and plans were not confirmed until the last minute. Feedback suggested that, for example, periods of waiting around or not being able to access certain parts of the buildings, could have negatively impacted on the experience. This is also likely to have impacted on thoughts that the visit did not compound the classroom learning. Moving forward, any campus visit in the future should be designed with a longer lead in and more detailed schedules for classes.

Other learning from the staff team was to consider the early stages of the campus visit; for example, starting the visit in smaller, tutorial rooms as the lecture theatre was reportedly an overwhelming space for some of the pupils. Breaking out into small groups

was observed as a helpful tool, however, on one visit in particular, the class would have benefitted from being in smaller groups to enable greater participation in workshops. Staffing ratios, therefore, are extremely important to maximise opportunities for the pupils to have a meaningful experience.

The impact of Covid also meant we were not always able to regulate the time between sessions, with illness or restrictions resulting in dates having to be moved. The consensus was that, where possible, there should be no more than two weeks between sessions to maximise learning.

A further observation, and recommendation for any future roll out, is the importance of consistency of student ambassadors throughout the duration of the programme. For one child, who self-disclosed her CE, the campus visit was very challenging, and she was clear that this was in part because the student ambassador from classroom sessions was not able to attend. The pupil had engaged well with the student ambassador and there was a strong sense that had the student been at the campus visit, that relationship would have best supported her experience.

Raising awareness of care-experience and contextualising it within the classroom setting

The project set out to raise awareness of care experience and normalise and contextualise care experience within the classroom. These aims were threaded through the pilot. The Hub's involvement allowed for discussions of care experience to evolve naturally through the explanation of the service and the introduction of our student ambassadors. Student Ambassadors were willing, prepared and supported in terms of questions around their care experience with a particular focus on their learning journey in the face of adversity and barriers. Throughout the sessions references were made to care experience, drawing particular attention to supports available to learners through the different stages of education. Student Ambassadors led on the importance of being mindful of how 'home' and who children live with were spoken about throughout the sessions.

At the beginning and end of the pilot teachers were asked to score the level of awareness, amongst pupils, of care experience and what it means. The results, from across all schools, are indicative of an increased awareness amongst pupils (see chart 3).

Chart 3: Teacher's view on level of awareness of care-experience in P7 classes

Before the pilot started teachers reported that nearly 30% of the P7 classes had no awareness of care-experience and none of the classes were fully aware what it was. By the end of the pilot this had changed to all classes being either somewhat aware (71%) or fully aware (29%) of care experience. This illustrates the importance of threading care experience through a project and that the activities and discussions it prompted in the classroom have helped normalise the language of care. Our experience at the Hub tells us that many of those with care experience can feel that they are alone and are worried about the stigma of care.

'Many children will not know that they are care-experienced and so it is important that we talk about this in the classroom. I did not know I was care experienced until I was in my 20's'

Student Ambassador, The HUB

'It was not until years later that I realised that there were others who had similar experiences to me; it always felt like something I just shouldn't talk about at school'

Care-experienced student at college

Children's views on their future choices

Pupils, across all schools, were asked to complete a short evaluation form at the start and the end of the class sessions.[14] Children were asked the following questions in both forms:

1. What do you want to be when you grow up?
2. Mark how much you agree/disagree with the statement: 'I know what a college/university is and what you would do there'
3. Mark how much you agree/disagree with the statement 'I will go to college/university when I leave school'
4. How do you feel about your future choices in work/study?

For questions 2 and 3 children were asked to mark on a line about how much they agreed with each of the statements, for example: 1 (know a little/ strongly disagree) to 5 (know a lot/ strongly agree).

We were then able to compare the scores across the schools, and pre and post programme to gain an understanding of their baseline knowledge and understanding of college and university, levels of aspiration and any trends and changes to these following the sessions.[15] The main findings are outlined and discussed below.

Future plans

To determine where the pupils were in terms of aspirations for the future, we asked them to tell us 'What you would like to be when you grow up?'. Results indicated a high level of aspiration with pupils being able to identify a career that they were interested in. Although not possible to identify which responses were indicative to a pupil with care experience, observations from both the evaluation and discussions in the classrooms, noted that a significant number of pupils did not feel able to offer an answer to this question prior to participating in the Learning Explorers programme.

[14] See the appendix for an example of the evaluation form.

[15] The post programme form was done at the end of the classroom sessions. We don't know how answers would have differed had they been asked after the campus visit.

'What do you want to be when you grow up?' word cloud – pre-programme

'What do you want to be when you grow up?' word cloud – post-programme

The post programme word cloud highlights an increase in responses and a range of career choices. This could suggest that the information shared with the pupils allowed them to consider other options, perhaps linked to efforts made by Learning Explorers to

link educational pathways to current skills and qualities. The increased range of professions suggests that the children have been exposed to other potential careers.

'How do you feel about your future choices?' word cloud – Pre-Programme

'How do you feel about your future choices?' word cloud – Post Programme

Pupils were asked a question about how they felt about their future. Again, there was no way to identify the difference between how a care experienced student responded, compared to their non-care experienced peers, however, post programme data captures

a greater number of responses which could suggest that pupils, who were not previously, are giving consideration to their future destinations. This could be indicative of the benefits of the Learning Explorers Programme for all children, regardless of care experience.

Knowledge and aspiration

The most interesting trend noted was that generally, pupils were likely to agree *more* with the statement *'I will go to college / university when I leave school'* than with the statement *'I know what college/university is and what you would do there'*. This can be interpreted as indicating that their aspiration levels were higher than their knowledge of college and university (see table 3). By the end of the sessions the gap between aspiration and knowledge had closed across all the schools ie in general their knowledge levels about college and university were more aligned with their levels of aspiration, which is a positive outcome.

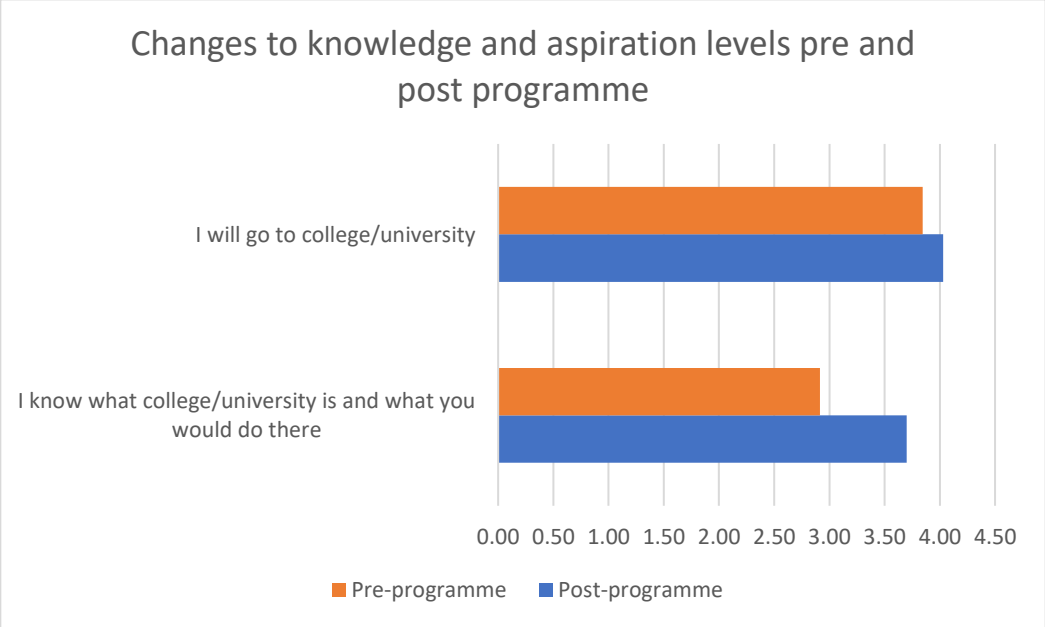


Table 3: Average scores pre and post programme

Knowledge levels

In all six schools we saw a rise in scores related to knowing what college and university is and what you do there. Pre-programme these ranged from 2.70 (Kirkliston) to 3.17

(Dean Park) and post programme ranged from 3.34 (Granton) to 3.98 (Dean Park). The biggest increase on the metric was seen at Kirkliston (2.70 to 3.78), closely followed by St Cuthbert's (2.94 to 3.46). These findings strongly suggest the programme increased knowledge of college and university options for the children which was one of our aims.

This finding is in line with thinking around development theories discussed earlier, that highlight this age and stage as the optimum opportunity for corporate parenting to make a positive impact on the children's sense of identity and vision of the future.

Aspiration levels

In terms of looking at aspiration levels, we saw a rise in scores related to whether they would go to college or university, in five out of the six schools. There was a slight fall (0.15) for one class, but it was a small class and more pupils filled in the post programme evaluation form than did the pre-programme one, which may account for the difference.

Pre-programme scores ranged from 3.62 (St Cuthbert's) to 4.10 (at Ratho), and post programme ranged from 3.85 (St Cuthbert's) to 4.23 (Granton). The biggest increase was seen at Granton Primary which went from 3.85 to 4.23 on average. Overall, this suggests an increase in the aspiration levels post programme.

Although there was no way to identify which forms were completed by care experienced pupils, there are sufficiently high numbers, across the class, indicating a desire to go to college/university to suggest that there is parity across the class in terms of aspiration.

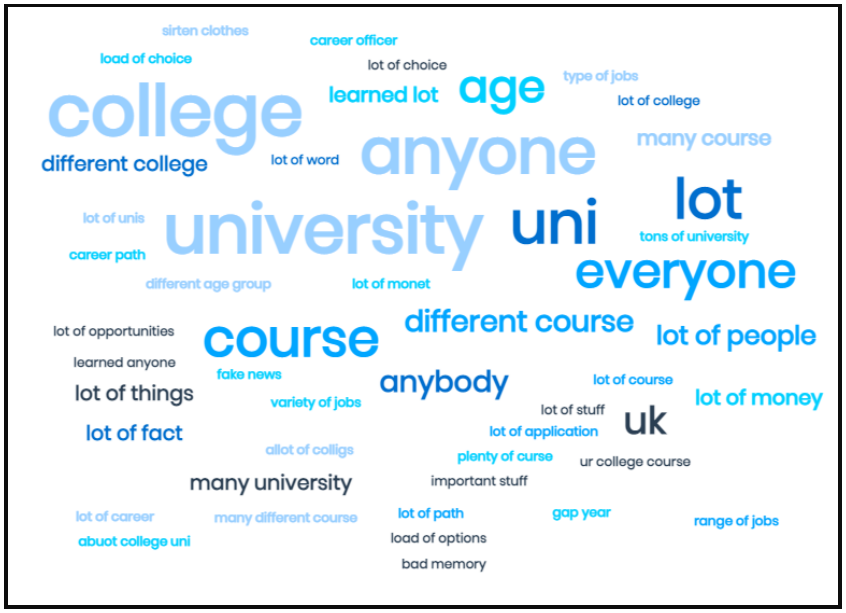
'The care experienced pupils in my class feel confident that HE is for them now'.

Teacher, Dean Park Primary School

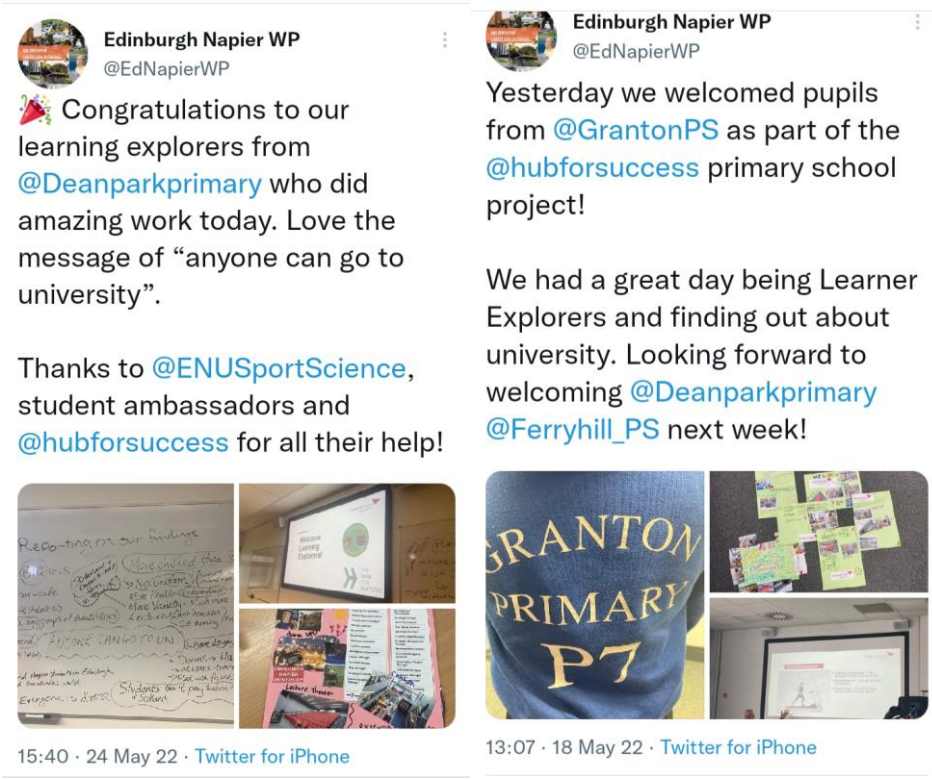
Learning

At the end of the programme the children were asked what they had learned from the Learning Explorer Programme. The word cloud overleaf highlights learning that is congruent with the intended learning of the Learning Explorers Project. The key words which stand out, for example *'anyone', 'everyone', 'university' 'college'* and *'lot'*, would suggest that pupils have gained a meaningful understanding that college and university

are for everyone. The choices available to potential students are substantial and the words they have used to represent their learning suggests they have understood there to be no barriers within their educational journey.



'What did you learn on the course?' word cloud – Post Programme



Tweets showing the close collaboration between partners

Conclusion

A teacher's description of Learning Explorers as *'planting the seed'* epitomises both the ethos and aims of the project. The evaluation findings clearly highlight the positive impact Learning Explorers has had, both in terms of raising awareness of care experience but also in terms of raising aspirations.

Evidently teachers reported an increase in awareness of care experience and although there is still work to be done to compound and normalise this understanding, Learning Explorers has started the conversation. Moving forward, it would be important for teachers to continue these discussions, particularly given the evidence to suggest that they are influential in terms of developing attitudes and cultures amongst our children and young people.

Overall, data shows an increased knowledge of further and higher education, amongst pupils; observations from the team would also suggest that there has been learning for teachers as well. Whether care experienced or not, the learning has sparked pupils to think about their future at a time in their development when this is crucial to promote a positive set of beliefs about self. Although the target audience for the project was care experienced pupils, it is pertinent to consider this data within the context of 'levelling up'. As our student ambassadors advise, equity of choices is important for all to enable them to make the most of opportunities presented to them throughout their educational journey. In other words, this programme benefits all pupils and helps promote a level playing field for the next stages of learning.

The evaluation recommendations would be that the Learning Explorers Project be considered for roll out across all P7 classes. This could be done through the same format, or consideration could be given to adapting the programme content to be delivered in shorter sessions to P7 assemblies. This would allow for all P7 classes in schools to be targeted in one session, reducing resource requirement, however, would rely on teaching staff compounding the learning within class time. Given that P7 is a time of transitions to secondary school, if included in a transition timetable this could compliment preparation

for secondary school and ensure that all pupils, including those with care experience, have equitable information about future planning, pathways, and opportunities.

Given the experience, knowledge and skills of the university and college widening participation teams, our recommendation would be that the programme is embedded within these services and linked up with existing programmes in secondary schools. Research indicates that locally widening participation programmes tend to generate applications to local further and higher education institutions, therefore, these institutions are likely to benefit from the investment longer term. The primary recommendation, however, would be the involvement of care experience Student Ambassadors which could be recruited through the Hub.

Recommendations

Drawing on the evaluation and its findings this report makes the following recommendations:

1. Greater focus, by widening access programmes, on early intervention work aimed at raising aspirations for care experienced learners.
2. Commitment from local authority and further and higher education institutions to work collaboratively to expand Learning Explorers.
3. Embed Learning Explorers as part of P7 transitions work to secondary schools.
4. Delivery should use a ‘whole class approach’ and use a range of learning styles.
5. The inclusion of care experienced Student Ambassadors, in the design and delivery of the programme.
6. Delivery to be grounded in an understanding of care experience, trauma, and the language of care to ensure the programme is relevant to care experienced learners.
7. Campus visits to be an integral component of the programme and tailored to the needs of the individual schools and its pupils.
8. Consider external evaluation and methods to measure the longitudinal impact of the programme.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to BFSS for their funding support which allowed us to think about delivering widening access sessions to care experienced children and their peers in primary schools.

The Learning Explorers pilot was the result of a collaboration between an experienced and dedicated group of individuals, from a range of institutions, schools and organisations; many of whom have been involved since the inception of the project. In no particular order we would like to thank the following people: Alicia Allen, Catherine McCormack, Charles Fernando, Declan Patterson, Gayle Green, Gemma Burnside, Hayley Jones, Lorraine Moore, Mairi Taggart, Maria Keegan, Neil Speirs, Nicola Kennedy, Pip Wartnaby, Ryan Hughes, Sharon McGhee, Shona McIntosh, Suzanne Ewing, Tracey Kerr and Victoria Enwood.

A special thanks to University of Edinburgh for paving the way with the ‘My University Project’ in primary schools. Also, thanks to Edinburgh College, Edinburgh Napier University, Heriot Watt University and Queen Margaret University for hosting the P7 campus visits and to staff, including those at Open University Scotland, that delivered sessions in school and on campus.

We are grateful for the support from the headteachers and P7 teachers at Dean Park, Ferryhill, Granton, Kirkliston, Ratho and St Cuthbert’s RC Primary School. Finally, a huge thanks to the incredible P7 children who welcomed us into their classrooms with such enthusiasm. We hope to see you again in the future!

Appendix

Example of letter sent to parents and carers to introduce Learning Explorers

13 January 2022

Dear parents/carers,

My name is Pip and I'm a second-year student at Edinburgh University and a Student Ambassador for the Hub for Success. At the Hub for Success, we believe that everybody should be able to go to college and/or university, whatever their background, if they choose to do so. I come from a care-experienced background myself and because of this I am very enthusiastic about encouraging young people to go on to college and/or university because it has helped me greatly *

The Hub for Success in partnership with the council, local colleges and universities will be leading some activities with the P7 classes at Granton Primary to introduce them to the idea of going to college and/or university. The course has been designed to be inclusive of all children, particularly those who have experience of growing up in the care system.

We believe that all children deserve the same chances in life. Care-experienced children are more likely to face barriers in education, so it is essential that they, along with their classmates, understand that they can all go onto study after leaving school if they want to, and are aware of the help that they can receive along the way.

Helping to deliver this course are Student Ambassadors, like myself, who are college or university students and care-experienced. The Student Ambassadors will share their experiences and provide positive examples to the children.

The course will be made up of three informative and fun sessions, delivered between January and March 2022. It will cover the following:

1. What is college and university?
2. Why would you go to college and university?
3. Who can go to college and university?
4. How do you get to college and university?
5. Who can help you get there?

If you want to find out more or have any questions, please get in touch for a chat with Jessie, at the Hub for Success, on 07395 605 311 or j.crawford@napier.ac.uk or visit www.hubforsuccess.org

Yours faithfully,

Pip, Student Ambassador

* Care Experience could include being brought up in foster care, in a residential unit or children's home, in kinship care (grandparent, auntie/uncle, family friend) or looked after at home with a supervision order from a social work department. It could also include those who were adopted at any age.

Pre-programme pupil evaluation form

THE HUB FOR SUCCESS

Learning Explorers

Hi p7 pupils,

Before we get started on the Learning Explorers sessions, we'd like to find out a bit more about what you already know. This is not a test – there are no right or wrong answers!

You don't need to put your name on this sheet.

You can skip any questions you'd rather not answer (or just write 'not sure' if you prefer)

1. What do you want to be when you grow up?

2. How much do you agree with the following statements? (Mark a cross on the line to show where you think you are)

I know what a college/university is and what you would do there:

I know very little about this — I know a bit — I know lots about this

I will go to college / university when I leave school

Definitely disagree — Maybe/not sure — Definitely agree

3. How many people do you know who have been to college or university?

a) none/just one or two

b) Quite a few

c) Absolutely tons!

4. How do you feel about your future choices in work/study? (One-word answers are fine!)

For further information contact Gillian at g.maxwell@napier.ac.uk or Jessie at j.crawford@napier.ac.uk

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