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# SUPPORTING CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN IN ENGLISH AT GCSE

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## GUIDANCE FOR DESIGNATED TEACHERS AND ENGLISH TEACHERS

### Key themes to consider

#### Underpinning skills and knowledge

Care-experienced children are likely to have experienced—or be experiencing—significant disruption to their education. Even if their school attendance has been consistent, their ability to learn may well have been compromised by the cognitive load of their adverse experiences at different points in their school life. Delays in reading development are relatively common among care-experienced children, as are delays in fine motor skills (and therefore handwriting) and development of language and communication.

Thoughtful diagnostic assessment should be used to unpick what, if any, gaps in learning from earlier in the student's school life remain and need to be addressed. These may be major, such as difficulty decoding text or writing in coherent sentences, or minor, such as knowing how to punctuate and lay out quotations. If the student struggles with something that might have been assumed to have been learned earlier, they need additional help to ensure that their underpinning skills and knowledge are secured now. This might mean intensive intervention using a carefully selected programme, or it might mean a 15-minute conversation sharing an example and explaining how it works. In either case, sensitivity is needed to make sure that the student does not perceive the additional support as criticism or a source of shame.

#### Developing oracy

Many care-experienced children have unidentified speech, language and communication needs, affecting both understanding and using language. Speech and language development and vocabulary knowledge is both core content and a mode of learning in English. English teachers have the opportunity to pay attention to care-experienced children's speaking and listening in order to ensure that if they are struggling with this, they are supported to access the help they need.

Struggles with communication can make many elements of lessons difficult; naming and managing emotions, self-awareness and self-control, concepts of time, working memory and retaining and processing information can all be affected, as can understanding instructions and working with others in discussion tasks. Adaptations to teaching, such as using visual supports in the classroom and careful consideration of how language is used to help the student access the learning, can be helpful.

## Executive functioning

Many care-experienced children struggle with elements of executive functioning and experience delayed development of these areas, so that they can appear to manage themselves at a level similar to a younger child. The elements of executive functioning are:

- flexible thinking
- working memory
- self-monitoring
- planning and prioritising
- task initiation
- organisation
- impulse control
- emotional control.

English lessons at KS4 often include long periods of concentration on a single task, eg extended writing in complex tasks such as essay responses to texts and questions. The demands that this makes on a student's executive functioning may be too great for the student to manage without support, but these types of activity are crucial to success in English and therefore they need to learn to cope in these situations.

Teachers can help by anticipating the small steps that tasks can be broken into and providing students with clear, repeated routines for each type of task. Task frames can be helpful, as can writing frames, mnemonics or numbered steps, repeated practice at sentence and paragraph level, graphic organisers for notes and plans, and oral rehearsal. Students who struggle with executive function may also need very clear ground-rules, plenty of monitoring and help with practicalities in lesson, such as recognising the passing of time and linking this to the amount of work that needs to be done.

Approaching key tasks with a view to metacognition (ie forethought before beginning a task, self-monitoring during performance of a task, and self-reflection and forward planning after a task) can be helpful in paying learning forward.

## Attendance

If attendance of lessons is an issue, as it can be for many care-experienced children, English as a subject can feel daunting to catch up on, particularly when frequent or lengthy absence is coupled with challenges around reading. If a student has missed lessons that mean they are behind in the text, they may need additional support and patience from their teacher to help them manage the gap and catch up on their learning. The expectation of catching up on missed work is key, though, to maintaining high expectations and helping the student to succeed.

## Relationships

The continuity of positive relationships is crucial for care-experienced children, so careful placement in English class is important. As every student in the school studies English, this is one of the subjects in which multiple classes run at the same time and movement between classes is possible; students often stay with the same English teacher for two years at KS4. Ideally, Heads of English should pay close attention to the placement of the most vulnerable students in the classes that are likely to provide them with the most positive, consistent experience. If there is disruption to teaching, for example due to teacher illness or maternity leave, this needs to be managed thoughtfully. Supporting students to repair damage to relationships with teachers and peers, following episodes of dysregulated behaviour, also needs careful management.

## Expectations and aspirations

Targets set for care-experienced children based on prior attainment may be too low: if a child's home circumstances have been stabilised through a strong foster placement, this may provide the opportunity for them to flourish and make accelerated progress. Teachers need to maintain the highest expectations for care-experienced children, coupled with understanding of the challenges of their circumstances.

Helping students to recognise the connection between effort and success is key, as is recognising progress from starting points. Making sure that the student links their effort in English to a vision of the future is likely to be helpful—pointing them in the direction of future study, careers and enjoyable cultural experiences and identifying the ways that work now makes these possible.

Regular verbal feedback and pointers on how to improve work, even if whole-class feedback is being provided, followed up with the carefully-calibrated expectation of re-doing work or additional practice, explicitly linked to improvement targets, is useful to students.

## Individual help and explanation

Avoid making assumptions about what students can do and have understood. Teachers who tune into what students know and what they need additional help with are credited by care-experienced children as being particularly important to their success. Ensuring that tasks and texts are clearly understood, offering additional 1:1 talk-through of complex ideas, storylines and situations as well as step-by-step guidance on how to work through tasks is likely to be highly valuable. Additional support for literacy within the classroom (as well as ensuring appropriate interventions over and above GCSE study if needed) can be useful, as can sensitivity around situations that feel stressful to the student, such as reading aloud in front of the class.

## Homework and revision

All students need strong structures around homework and revision, particularly for English. Where these are not available at home, school needs to provide them; English teachers need to be vigilant for non-completion of tasks and delve into reasons for struggles with self-study. Many care-experienced children, along with many of their peers, need explicit teaching around how to revise. The widespread and unhelpful perception that it is not possible to revise for English Language means that students need explicit tasks set with clear deadlines and, where possible, practical help in getting into revision habits. Students are likely to need additional help in identifying the areas where they have to focus their revision and supervision in working on these.

Social aspects of revision, such as attending revision sessions and working with study-buddies, can be helpful in modelling positive learning behaviours and targeted support put in place to make participation more likely.

## Emotive topics

GCSE English Literature texts are packed with potentially troubling themes that may link to a care-experienced child's experiences in a range of ways. Teachers need sufficient information to be sensitive to potential issues and ELSA support can also be useful.

Bear in mind that English Language exams contain unpredictable material and topics that may also present challenges for a child who has experienced trauma and therefore coaching in preparation for exams that includes settling routines if any of the material in the exam is troubling is likely to be needed.

## Experiencing success

Students who experience success are more likely to make the link between effort and outcomes; this is particularly important for care-experienced children, who are likely to have experienced disappointment in their lives and worry about failure. English GCSE courses include multiple mock examinations and students may struggle to keep track of what is expected in each paper.

Planning ahead for the student to be as successful as possible in mock exams early in the course as well as the final examinations may include some or all of the following approaches:

- providing a clear outline of what will be included in each mock exam and in each paper in the final examinations, with dates
- providing experience of handling real papers and finding the correct questions
- planning the sequence in which the student will tackle the questions linked to their personal strengths
- plugging gaps in the learning (eg ensuring that the student has read the key texts for English literature and has caught up on any work missed in preparation for exams)
- building up their concentration span and their writing stamina over time
- building up their reading speed and fluency
- building up their knowledge of the world through set tasks and texts that help to link to experiences that might prove useful frames of reference for writing tasks
- providing writing/thinking frames for each question
- plenty of practice at sentence and paragraph level
- normalising asking for help
- 1:1 or small group preparation coaching
- providing revision materials and clear task setting for revision
- providing guidance around online revision materials and links to appropriate revision sites, quizzes, podcasts and videos
- mapping revision of topics and attendance at additional revision sessions back from each mock examination and monitoring revision progress
- teaching revision strategies and supporting creation of personalised revision resources (eg helping student to create their own flashcards or mind maps)
- brokering positive peer relationships and study support
- providing quiet space for study in school
- working with Foster Carers and/or Social Workers to ensure that the student has support for revision outside school, including quiet space and appropriate furniture
- assessing the student for access arrangements
- ensuring that the student practises prior to mock exams with their access arrangements, if any—this should be their normal way of working
- providing breakfast and/or a settling routine prior to exam papers
- providing 1:1 feedback, particularly if the student has not done well and needs further support.