Key working to support schools and families

Gareth D Morewood, Cath O'Neill and Dianne Hand offer different perspectives on providing key worker support for a student at Priestnall School, Stockport

At a glance

Key workers are identified as having an important role to play in the green paper. This article explores how such a role may benefit young people with complex needs who attend mainstream schools.

It explores unique perspectives from school, key worker, and parent, showcasing how key workers can make a significant difference to the lives of vulnerable young people.

About the school

Priestnall School is a large 11-16 Secondary School in Stockport, which recently became the first secondary school in Stockport to be judged as ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted June 2011. The report states: ‘Outstanding support is provided for those whose circumstances make them vulnerable; as well as for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school’s inclusive ethos is reflected in the outstanding promotion of equality of opportunity.’

The recent SEN green paper, Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability, stated that an important way to reduce the wide-ranging shake-up of provision in 10 years. Throughout there is a theme of independently commissioned key workers supporting parents and carers as they negotiate and support provision. MA Social Care students undertake 10 day placements at Priestnall School each year in developing advocacy skills and supporting a wider remit than just ‘in-school issues’. They provide an invaluable bridge between school and home, and further enhance the personalised nature of provision: a key worker in every sense.

This article is a case study where a key worker supported the mother of a student with autism at Priestnall School, also recently diagnosed with a depressive illness.

The staff at Priestnall are used to seeing me in tears! I’ve been that way pretty much since George arrived at Priestnall! (Home circumstances...nothing to do with school!)

Around choosing GCSE options, a process that could be added pressure in light of George’s recent diagnosis. I was able to ensure Mrs HAND understood the information available so that she was empowered to make decisions with George.

My role also involved liaison with external services, ensuring that the nature of George’s visual impairment I was involved in working with the Stockport Sensory Support Service to ensure that the school had a clear policy to allow George to succeed in the classroom and at home. I was responsible for providing guidelines to support staff working with George to ensure that the appropriate help was given. I aimed at all times to keep Mrs HAND up-to-date with progress at school and informed of all issues regarding her son, in addition to keeping her in the ‘picture’ at home. This served to both inspire parental confidence in herself, myself, and the school.

Reflecting further on the value of having a key worker like Miss O’Neill to work with her, George, and Mrs HAND identified a number of factors that contributed to making her feel just how well the solution was working, it was clear that George’s support at school was working well; however, support at home was needed, especially in light of consistently dealing with a complex issue.

It was reassuring to know there was someone in school who was keeping a special eye on George. By monitoring his progress and ensuring the key worker would be more likely to be in a good position to make observations which might have otherwise been missed. These observations would lead to recommendations and strategies being put in place.

I was kept informed about how George was doing generally, or if someone had been in to see him.

Cath researched the right classes for George to join, to ensure that his training was consistent, and that George was allowed to progress. There were no barriers for Mr Morewood, who worked calmly and reassuringly. George was as always came up with ways to cope with what lies ahead. The progress that has been made this year, with all of us working together, gives me confidence that George and we are being very well looked after at Priestnall. Mr Morewood is calm and reassuring and no doubt he will continue to make sure that George has the support he needs.

References

- DfE (2011) Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability – Consultation

About the authors

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Sensitivity to George’s needs was met through informing and caring and then addressing things as they arose.

In December 2010 I felt an all-time low. When I was told that George had retracted pigmented and Bardet-Biedl syndrome (yes, box, below) my world was devastated beyond belief, I was so lost and afraid and I definitely needed help to find the strength I was going to need to support George through this.

Diane Hand is mother to George. Her feelings are likely to be replicated across schools across the UK and beyond; vulnerable parents struggle to help them knowing they are not alone can be at times like this; for us it was essential to provide both outstanding direct support in school but also outstanding support in the home. Whilst specialist services delivered differing levels of medical and emotional support, it was crucial that we worked with George and his mother at this crucial time.

An important part of developing processes in provision at Priestnall School had been the open and transparent nature of communication with parents and carers. Early face-to-face dialogue is essential, in addition to being able to move swiftly with regard to provision (Morewood, 2009, 2011); parents and carers want to feel listened to and be given time to explain their feelings (Lamb, 2009). As Mrs HAND puts it: Mr Morewood was very quick to organise a meeting with me and had, impressively, already been reading up on the condition.

This meant he was aware of what BBS entailed. He was going to keep what he had found in mind, but his priority was treating George as an individual and not as a ‘BBS child’, and the approach was going to be to make sure that George’s new needs would be met through informed preparation

Bardet-Biedl syndrome

This syndrome is a rare inherited condition which is variable in the way it presents. Characteristics may include: rod/cone dystrophy, profound extra-fingers and/or toes; mild to severe learning difficulties; and kidney malformations and renal failure.

More Information can be found at www.imbbs.org.uk

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Enhanced role for key workers

Having identified through previous research that families value the practical and emotional support that they can provide, the DfE intends to expand the role of key workers. This will involve ‘bolstering’, as part of the pathway that projects that are now underway, key workers’ families in the single assessment process and Education and Health Care Plan. The DfE is also planning to fund the training of key workers from a range of backgrounds in collaboration with the voluntary and community sector.

I’m still doing the crying… but nowadays, it’s more to do with gratitude than despair. I am so grateful for all the emotional and educational support that we have received from Mr Morewood, Miss O’Neill and Cath. This has been absolutely amazing and I am so grateful.

Mr Morewood summarised the help provided by the key workers as follows: ‘Cath O’Neill came over as having a lot of empathy and gave the impression that she genuinely cared. Her role gave her the time to make a difference, both in the home and in the school. We all did the best we could, and I know that George and I are so fortunate to have had the opportunity to have the support of such an effective key worker.

Often schools struggle in giving time to parents and carers, despite best intentions. This is not acceptable, especially when regard to being cost-effective (Morewood, 2011) and maintaining high quality personal support, and is going to be an increasing challenge. This is something that the school has worked hard to develop and sustain and it was pleasing to see O’Neill recognised this in a recent inspection.

To conclude, the role of the key worker, however it is envisaged in the future, will become increasingly important and probably essential — as systems and processes change; George’s mum puts this into words better than any of us can...

‘George’s future is uncertain but I trust Priestnall will continue to nurture and prepare him as best they can to equip him with life skills, social skills and a good education so that he can cope with what lies ahead. The progress that has been made this year, with all of us working together, gives me confidence that George and we are being very well looked after at Priestnall. Mr Morewood is calm and reassuring and no doubt he will continue to make sure that George has the support he needs.’

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