The Looking After Children materials
A critical analysis of their use in practice

Margaret Bell discusses some key issues in the use of the Looking After Children materials which arose from their use by social work students and practitioners at the University of York. Overall, the practitioners were positive about the materials, reporting their value for the child in recording a detailed history, and in providing a structure for care planning which incorporated the views of all parties. Equally, concerns were raised that the Assessment and Action Records were not necessarily the most effective or child-centred way of collecting information; that the questioning could be intrusive and that the forms risked placing some artificial boundaries around some key professional decisions. The discussion explores the extent to which an external agenda for practice has the benefits the promoters suggest, and considers whether an essentially bureaucratic system for recording complex and individualistic judgements can double up as a sensitive practice tool.

Margaret Bell is Lecturer in Social Work at the University of York

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The materials
The Looking After Children (LAC) materials were published in 1995 by the Department of Health following an intensive research and development programme initiated by Parker et al (1991) to improve parenting experiences and outcomes for looked after children. They provide a means of assessing child welfare provision and interventions by the health and welfare agencies responsible for their care. In the view of the protagonists (Parker, 1991; Ward, 1995; Jackson and Kilroe, 1996) the materials provide user-friendly tools for engaging with looked after children and young people and those responsible for their care. They also create a system for collecting essential information about individual placements, care plans and progress. The aim of the materials is to set an agenda for good parental care, to promote partnership planning and to introduce ideas about child care outcomes into everyday social work practice. A further aim, and one currently being developed by Ward (1997), is to create a system by which the information on individual children can be aggregated and used strategically as management information to assess outcomes.

The materials comprise a comprehensive system of information gathering, planning and review documents. The most controversial are the six age-related Assessment and Action Records (AARs) within which the care and review plans are placed. These measure the experience and progress of all looked after children from birth to adulthood across seven dimensions: health; education; identity; family and social relationships; social presentation; emotional and behavioural development; and self-care skills. They set out a number of aims that a 'reasonable parent might be expected to hold for any child' (DoH, 1996), and require those responsible for children’s care – parents, social workers and their substitute carers – to consider all aspects of the children’s lives, to plan rigorously and systematically and, wherever possible, to eliminate the disruption revealed by previous research (Millham et al, 1986; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987).

The framework and form which the materials take followed wide consultation with experts from child health, education, the legal profession and local authority representatives. Additionally, a study of 379 families with children who were not in contact with social services was carried out to ensure that the records reflected the concerns of ordinary parents in the community. In the Reader accompanying the materials, Quinton (1996) writes that the emotional and behavioural development dimensions have been validated by a substantial amount of research and provide an internationally accepted grouping for common problems.
Further, the approach to assessment used in the records follows well-established questionnaires, in particular the Rutter scales for parents and teachers. The materials have attracted international interest and are now being used in Australia, Canada, Russia and Europe (Jackson, 1998).

**Research background**

The research findings and concerns which led to the development of the materials are now broadly known: that children and young people looked after away from home miss out on many aspects of their personal and social development. Children from economically disadvantaged sections of the community and children of mixed heritage are over-represented in the public care system (Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Deprivation is a common factor among all types of children who enter care and there is evidence that these disadvantages are perpetuated (Biehal et al., 1995). While being looked after, children and young people miss out educationally (Blyth and Milner, 1994) and their level of educational achievement on leaving care is abysmally low (Fletcher-Campbell, 1997). Leaving care surveys (Biehal et al., 1995; Stein, 1997) suggest that over three-quarters of care leavers have no educational qualifications at all. They are likely to lose contact with friends and family (Masson, 1997) and suffer a greater degree of instability than peers living with their parents (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987). Their basic health care needs are often unmet. Butler and Payne (1997) report that only a quarter of the looked after children in the authority they studied attended statutory medical examinations, and that the quality of these medical contacts was questionable. A number of areas were not adequately dealt with, such as the child’s family history, developmental history and growth centile.

The need to find a comprehensive system to address the problem is not in dispute. What is a matter for debate is whether this system provides the most effective solution to the problems, what difficulties the system raises and the degree to which it is workable. The materials raise key issues about social work theory and practice and about the relationship between the management and use of information collected from service users for policy development. Further, the validity of the system and its reliability have yet to be put to the test. Knight and Caveney (1998), and Jackson (1998) in her response to their article, have aired some preliminary questions about the basis on which the system is constructed. Knight and Caveney question the normative view of parenting and family life which they believe underpins the materials, and fear that the checklist approach will enhance the bureaucratic nature of public care. Jackson (p 46) dismisses their criticisms, but allows that:

...the field trials encountered some resistance from social workers, mostly on the practical grounds that the Assessment and Action Records were too time consuming.

**Are the forms being used?**

The available audit for year one (Moyers, 1997) of the extent to which the forms were being used reports a patchy response, with standards of completion varying even in one authority across different offices and teams. While only ten of the 757 cases examined contained no completed forms, the rate for completion of the Essential Information Record, for example, varied from 39 per cent to 91 per cent. This form was less likely to be filled in if the child was already in public care. Turning to the AARs, out of 197 studied five or more dimensions had been completed in 62 per cent of the cases.

Training and leadership seemed to be key factors in promoting the use of the materials. Moyers (1997) found that ‘winning the hearts and minds of key people’ was essential for consistent implementation to be achieved. That forms are completed at all, of course, may indicate more about their management and auditing in local authorities than about the quality of social work practice. Certainly, the extent to which all the questions were answered, the quality of
the responses, the process by which they were collected and the experiences of the professionals and service users are not commented upon. However, the value, reliability and validity of the materials to individual service users and to policy planners clearly depend as much on the quality of the completion as on the rate. The audit concludes that concerns about timing explain, in part, the low rate of completion of the AARs. One of the main reasons given for non-completion was that the social worker was trying to find an adoptive placement, or was waiting until a recently placed child had settled. In some cases social workers regarded them as inappropriate when children were placed with parents or other relatives, or in a stable long-term placement. The audit does acknowledge that there are circumstances ‘when a decision may properly be made not to complete an AAR’. However, it does not suggest what these circumstances are.

Thus far, there has been little written about the experience of using the materials, although they are now being used in 92 per cent of the local authorities in England and Wales, and are being piloted in Scotland. There is agreement that they are time consuming and resource intensive, and require some adaptations. Some questions, such as those relating to HIV status, have been dropped and there have been revisions, especially for use with children with disabilities. In Scotland the forms have been adapted to reflect the Scottish legal and organisational context. Nevertheless, the information currently available about the use local authorities are making of the materials does suggest that the reasons behind rates and quality of completion need to be further explored. This paper therefore aims to identify and explore some of the practice issues by describing the experiences of a group of practice teachers, service users and students at the University of York involved in a project to use the materials.

The project
As part of the Department of Health dissemination programme, the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers (CCETSW) funded a project to evaluate the use of the materials as learning tools in four Diploma in Social Work programmes in 1995–96. At York we also evaluated the participants’ experience of using the materials. Forty-five postgraduate students and some service users used the materials in class with practitioners and managers from a local authority who had implemented the materials. On placement, 11 students and their practice teachers from five local authorities used them in their direct work with clients. The views of the participants were collected by means of questionnaires and focus group discussions.

Some experiences to date
There is evidence that service users, especially foster carers and young people, have welcomed their use. A CCETSW Report (1997) on the project described above reports the foster carers and young people involved as saying that the materials helped them in the development of relationships, in the sharing of sensitive information and in working together. One young person stated that planning was critical so we are not forgotten . . . knowing how to fill out a form, get hold of a birth certificate. These records represent my life in care and we are dependent on the quality of information provided in these forms.

The LAC system was welcomed as providing opportunities to address lack of care planning, gaps in information and lost opportunities in reviews, which characterised experiences of the care system before it was introduced. A young woman, Sharon Leatham, said:

I have spent most of my life in care, but left prior to the implementation of the Looking After Children materials. It is a shame I never had the privilege of using such material. The reasons being, not only were the files kept illegible but the content in most cases was subjective, using flippant comments based on
isolated incidents. The one impression I could glean from the sparse, scruffy bits of paper was that it was felt I was of tidy appearance.

Foster carers, Jackie Ugoaia and Pam Page, endorsed this positive view of the materials:

*Used properly, the LAC forms should be a basis for passing on essential information on a young person in their care. They must not be seen as a pack of papers but a tool. With this system in place we should never have a repeat of situations in which young people leaving the care system have no information about their past, carers they have been with, illnesses they have had, schools they have attended, names of social workers. There should be an accessible full life history.*

As part of the project, CCETSW also conducted a brief telephone survey of social workers and identified a largely positive response. For example:

*I am using the forms at the moment with a 15-year-old boy. He is finding it quite helpful to talk about things like his education and his health needs. We have also used them for discussions about sexuality and sex education.*

The social work students using the materials endorsed these benefits and believed the system promoted children’s rights and increased professional accountability. They found the AARs set an agenda and laid out dimensions of welfare which are known to be key to a child’s development but are often neglected. Education and health, in particular, were dimensions of development that social work students felt were not necessarily their province – a finding established by other studies of social work practice (see Knapp et al, 1985; Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990). The highlighting of their central importance in child development prompted the students to ask specific questions, for example about attendance at a parents’ evening and about academic achievement. In one case the records had been used with a foster carer to consider developmental issues with regard to the child’s health. In another, they provided a checklist of the broader needs of a disabled child and a means of promoting inter-agency partnerships by suggesting the health visitor’s closer involvement. The records also ‘aided and promoted thought’ in areas which may otherwise have been avoided or neglected because they were sensitive, such as the questions about sexuality and contraception. As one social worker put it:

*The record enabled me to develop a better working relationship with my manager and the child’s foster mother and definitely enabled me to ask sensitive questions with the latter. I found that the document made us ‘work together’ and consider the overall situation which this 13-year-old girl faced.*

Finally, the sections on identity provided a framework for approaching areas of work where it was not always clear what questions to ask. Paying particular attention to the relationship between the detail of the child’s environment, such as familiar food and religious traditions, and their sense of identity (Boushel and Sharma, 1996), as the AAR requires, was experienced constructively.

The students’ experience was therefore that the forms provided a structure for care planning, both with service users and with other professionals, which addressed everyday matters, such as diet, and the longer-term goals relating to family contact and independent living. The care plans were found to be useful in providing a clear and agreed focus for the work, and in encouraging joint planning with children and their families. One of the foster mothers in the project described how she had used the AAR over a period of months with a 14-year-old girl in her care to discuss the girl’s feelings about contact with her birth mother and abuse by her birth father. These conversations had taken place at the girl’s request, often at bedtime or when she was in the bath, and had been recorded in a way with which she felt comfortable.
However, there was also evidence that the picture was not altogether rosy. While the forms were found to have use as practice tools for assessment purposes, concern was expressed about the scope of the assessment framework. It was feared that, in following the agenda of the AAR in making an assessment, other essential areas could be ignored or diluted. Another concern was that the forms were agency rather than client led and that the requirement to collect information made it difficult to work at the child’s pace and on the child’s immediate agenda. This meant it was not always clear whose view was recorded, that of the child or the professional:

*Sometimes filling in the forms with the children is left to the carers. Although sometimes the carer is the best person to do it, this is not always the case. Sometimes you don’t really know if you’ve got the child’s view on the forms or just the view of the carer.*

Additionally, there was concern that the tick box format was not an appropriate way of recording subtle professional judgements.

A major concern was that agencies had not addressed the huge time, management and organisational requirements of filling in complex and detailed forms. This raised issues for a number of practitioners about balance and priorities between, say, completing the forms, play therapy or work on family communication. Further, aspects of the materials were found to be ‘cumbersome’, ‘not user friendly’ and ‘intrusive’, and the relevance of some of the questions was not always obvious. One student found parts of the Essential Information Record difficult to complete because much information depended upon the 16-year-old boy remembering precise details about his history which he did not think relevant. Concern was also expressed at the potentially class-biased and Eurocentric concept of parenting on which the materials are based, and that the materials ignored the economic constraints of a number of families. The matter of ownership of the records, who they would be shared with, and who would have access to them, was also raised by practitioners involved in the project, who were equally unclear about the uses to which they would or could be put. Clearly this lack of clarity can affect how and whether the forms are filled in.

**Discussion**

There is consensus that the care of children who are looked after is not good enough and that the LAC materials represent a serious and progressive step forward. There is also agreement that, although an imperfect measure, research on outcomes rather than outputs, as in other policy areas, is necessary to assess corporate performance and to improve and monitor services. Therefore the difficulties experienced in the implementation of the system need to be addressed, and it is particularly important to analyse what the social workers responsible for completing the materials say about using them. The practice experiences reported here suggest that factors other than time and resource constraints impinge upon the effective completion of the forms by social workers. A prime concern is the extent to which an external agenda for practice is perceived to infringe professional autonomy. There are various components to this concerning the scope, location and timing of the work, decisions regarding the most appropriate methods of intervention and concern about possible conflicts between process and outcome. Social workers are trained to assess and evaluate a situation or family and then to choose the most appropriate methods of intervention. In using the materials, participants in the project found that they had the potential for enhancing professional decisions, but equally risked restricting and placing artificial boundaries around work that might otherwise have been chosen.

For example, while it was suggested that the AARs did provide a useful framework for assessment, that framework could be artificially constricting. In particular, the records do not require an exploration of the dynamics of a child’s family, an area that
may be key to the maintenance of contact or return home. Jackson (1998), in her response to Knight and Caveney’s critique of the system, points out that the records should be used flexibly and alongside other interventions. However, such a response ignores the climate and conditions in which social workers in Social Service Departments operate, ie that priority is given to child protection work (Gibbons et al., 1995; Bell, 1997), and that additional time and resources have not been provided. In such a context there is a danger that for some children key aspects of their family situation may fall outside the scope of the framework for assessment and not be addressed.

Moving from assessments to interventions, the materials raise similar issues in relation to method and skills. With regard to method, the experiences described here suggest that the materials were appropriate tools for communicating with some children but not all, particularly very young children and children with disabilities. Additionally, the system does not allow for the use of other assessment instruments and ways of communicating with children, a concern reinforced by the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation study reporting social workers’ difficulty in communicating with children with disabilities (1998). Working non-directively with children, or using toys or drawing, may in some cases be the method of choice in assessment as well as in therapeutic work (Ryan and Wilson, 1996). Obvious practical and ethical questions are raised about how or whether work of this nature replaces, supports or can (or should ) be translated into a structured format. Equally, it could be argued that decisions about the most appropriate medium for working with looked after children should be an individual one. The extent to which a system for recording information can also be used as a practice tool therefore needs to be further tested. Distinctions may also need to be drawn between short and long-term needs as different approaches may be required to achieve both. An essentially paternalistic approach risks denying social workers their expertise and has professional implications which the system does not address.

Turning to the appropriate use of skills, it is accepted that there are identifiable skills in filling in forms with users in sensitive and non-intrusive ways. Form filling is now required in a range of social work settings, such as needs assessments in community care, so it is reasonable to argue that all social workers should be competent at this task. However, prescribing tasks also raises issues about expertise, professional judgement, professional autonomy and use of self. While there is opportunity within the LAC system for decisions about who, in the child’s care system, is best placed to fill in the forms, there remains a lack of clarity about accountability – about who fills in what and when. The directive on the record, ‘don’t panic if there are gaps’, hardly provides clear guidance. In fact, experience does seem to be suggesting that foster carers are frequently best placed to complete the detailed AARs.

There are other ways in which the system risks promoting a less than reflective response. A tick box approach to recording assessments of such a complex area as attachments does seem to be unhelpfully simplistic. This method may discourage the exploration of the emotional content of sensitive areas, meaning areas are ‘covered’ rather than addressed. Also distinctions between fact and opinion could be blurred. This is worrying since there is no way of testing what is established fact and what opinion, or of exploring the process by which this was reached. Similarly, while disagreements can be recorded what cannot be readily described in this format is the detail and substance of the disagreement or what has been done about it. The issue here is not that such records need to be kept – they do – but that promoting a bureaucratic system for recording complex and individualistic expert judgements may solve some problems only to create others.

In a number of ways form filling, as a method of practice, may be contradictory in principle to some basic tenets of social work practice, such as working on the client’s agenda and at the client’s pace.
There is opportunity within the system for the focus and pace of the work to be dictated by the child, as we have seen. However, the focus, location and timing of the work are all factors which may be beyond the child’s control. Although the forms are presented as being child centred, the practitioners’ experience was that the role of the adult in addressing and completing the forms was often centre stage. This raised questions about the potential for oppression that Knight and Caveney (1998) suggest are built into the system. If what gets recorded is the professional view, the power and paternalism inherent in the child–adult relationship will be reinforced. The issue here is one of process and the potential problems that can arise where completing the form becomes the goal of the intervention.

There are other problems regarding recording sensitive information, especially where this may be confidential to the child, and these are compounded by uncertainty about the ownership of the records, who has access to them and how they will be stored. Whether they can be subpoenaed for use in court proceedings remains to be tested. Knight and Caveney suggest that there are implications that they might be used for the selection of foster carers; others suggest they have potential for use in adoption proceedings, to replace the Schedule 2. While such possibilities may be fruitful, they also raise ethical issues about the possible misuse of a system which collects information for one purpose then uses it for others, including for aggregating data and policy planning. Here also, there is a potential for conflict between the goals of record keeping, therapy and, in some cases where information is confidential to the child, working in partnership with parents.

Finally, as Knight and Caveney argue, some of the questions appear to be based on middle-class assumptions about good parenting. For example, asking how many books a four- or five-year-old child owns, and whether they are taken to the library (AAR, p 19) could be seen to reflect a middle-class bias. Of course, it could equally be argued, from another perspective, that the decision not to ask certain questions would be based on a perception of difference that is itself class biased. To develop this argument further, not checking out that a three-year-old has access to books could be oppressive in the light of knowledge about the relationship between reading and literacy skills, employment and early educational opportunity (Heath et al, 1989). Nevertheless, there are difficulties in incorporating the diversity and difference of culture, race, class and ability in one model of parenting. The system does raise dilemmas about values, relativity and judgement. It is one thing to devise, as the researchers have done, a formula for good parenting based on what ‘normal’ families think is best for their children. It is another to use such a formula in situations of immense diversity and to allow for different judgements, not only about parenting but also about outcomes to be achieved. Parker agrees that uneasiness about outcomes is not misplaced. As the Reader (1996) suggests:

Different groups place different values on specific outcomes, depending on their perspective . . . and according to different criteria.

Conclusion

Children who are looked after desperately need better parenting than they have hitherto had. The LAC system represents a radical and progressive attempt to provide this by monitoring their developmental progress, defining who is responsible for carrying out the subsequent action plans, and by ensuring that a careful and negotiated care and review plan is progressed. The aggregation of information about individual outcomes means that services can be monitored locally and at a national level, and enables decisions about future service provision to be better informed. Of course, even if there are some overall and quantifiable improvements in outcomes for the children, it does not follow that there is a direct causal connection. Neither does it imply a relationship between individual and
aggregate outcomes. Parker (1997) accepts that there are a number of problems in estimating a child’s overall well-being on the basis of aggregating ‘scores’ on individual dimensions, and in determining when an outcome should be assessed, as well as issues of attribution, prediction and explanation. He also points out that, since so many children are now looked after in their own homes, there are questions about the categories of children for whom the outcomes are assessed. Nothing is straightforward.

Some of the uses to which the materials can be put with looked after children and their carers have been suggested in this paper. The value of the materials in providing a framework for assessing a child’s development, for making interagency decisions about the targets for action and who should take them, and for providing a detailed record of a child’s background and history, were the most positive features to emerge from the York project. The enthusiasm of the foster carers and young people was also significant. The need to understand the background to the development of the materials and the role of training in influencing attitudes was found to be critical, as was the commitment in agencies of key managerial staff.

The study also identified some practice and professional issues which deserve further debate, not least since they may influence the rate and quality of the completion of the forms, as well as their reliability and validity. For the reasons given in this article, ‘practical’ matters, such as the amount of paperwork to be filled in, the time it takes and issues regarding duplication and storage, are serious. The need for more resources in the form of sophisticated information technology, additional clerical help, training and protected time is clear. Further consideration should be given to streamlining the materials and to their use for double purposes. Clearer guidance about how and when to fill them in, who should do it and how the records may relate to or be substitutes for other instruments of assessment or therapy needs to be provided. Issues regarding confidentiality and access to and ownership of the records also deserve further attention within the agencies responsible for keeping them.

The ways in which they can be used or adapted for use with parents, and to assess family and attachment relationships, need to be carefully monitored. Finally, the extent to which the forms can be used as practice tools may more properly be considered to be a matter of professional judgement.

It is perhaps unfortunate that the LAC forms are presented as all embracing, and come across as standing alone in a sea of other aids for assessing and communicating with children, and other means of recording their lives and histories. There is a risk that the stark differences between children who are looked after by their birth parents and children who are removed from them will be reinforced, leading to further stigmatisation of the latter. There is also a need to line up this initiative alongside others which are currently being pursued, such as the residential child care training initiative, the task force and the new regulatory framework of inspection for all children in care recently proposed by Utting (1997). The LAC system is but one battle in the war to improve the care of looked after children.

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