Hearing the voice of looked after children : challenging current assumptions and knowledge about pathways into offending

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to assess the early findings of research which aims to hear the voice of looked after children about their pathways into offending and subsequent entry into the youth justice system, and the implications that this may have for policy and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – 1 to 1 semi-structured interviews have taken place with 19 looked after children, who are also subject to youth justice supervision. The interviews have been analysed to identify emerging themes, using broadly grounded approaches.

Findings – Three important findings arise from the interviews with the participants. Firstly, children in care are being labelled and removed from the mainstream due to problematic behaviours, rather than searching for the underlying cause of the behaviour. Secondly, significant anger and frustration is expressed towards residential care staff and the child's social worker; due to several reasons relating to the institutional environment within residential care, and a lack of trust for those professionals with whom control over the child's life rests. Finally, the children describe feeling powerless whilst in care, and within this context the peer group plays a crucial role within the lives of the children interviewed.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are based on the subjective views of 19 interviewees. The sample is not representative, and has not been compared with other forms of data. Rather, it provides the reader with the perspectives of some of the most challenging and vulnerable children in the youth justice system, and places their voice at centre stage.

Practical implications – This paper points to several challenges within current youth justice and social work practice which led to the interviewees feeling disempowered and ambivalent about their future. A number of recommendations for policy and practice are made in the concluding sections of the paper which may assist those in policy and practice.

Originality/value – The voice of the looked after child who is also subject to youth justice has not been given centre stage within research to date. The findings are based on this voice, and offers a different perspective about a looked after child's pathways into offending. A number of potential implications for policy and practice, which could be considered and implemented to deal with this problem are then discussed.

Key words

Youth justice

Youth offending

Looked after children

Criminalisation

Labelling

Crime

Children in care

Power

Introduction

On 31st March 2015, there were 69,540 children in care in England and Wales (DfE, 2015), reflecting an increase of 6% since 2011, and at its highest point since 1985. 5.6% of all looked after children (looked after for 12 months or more) in England and Wales had been convicted or subject to a reprimand or final warning during 2013 - 2014. This is compared with 1.2% of all children, making a looked after child 5 times more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than their peers (DfE 2014). This has increased over the past 11 years, with reoffending rates in 2002 suggesting that a looked after child would be 3 times more likely than all children to receive a conviction or caution (DH 2003).

This paper will explore why this gap is widening, focusing on the perceptions of looked after children who are in trouble with the law. This is of relevance when one considers that the general rate of first time entrants into the youth justice system has dropped by 82% since 2007 (YJB, 2015). Therefore, although the number of looked after children in the justice system has fallen, it has not fallen as rapidly as the non-looked after population, explaining why the gap is widening. To date, there has not been a research project which has given the voice of the looked after child centre stage whilst they are still in care, and subject to youth justice supervision. This paper will argue that looked after children are voicing several important issues which are effectively being ignored by practitioners and policy makers.

The research project aims to add to the growing literature on viewing children as credible social actors, in which the meaning given to a looked after child's world will be uncovered, and shared with the reader (James and Prout, 1997). Children are therefore considered to be articulate informants about their own experiences. Placing the voice of the child at centre stage allows them the opportunity to discuss what they feel is relevant to the crucial question of *why* they commenced offending, without being constrained by risk assessment 'tools' to question children in youth justice, and thus reduce their views to a series of 'risk factors', which is currently the case within practice.

Existing Research and Policy Context

A number of features have dominated UK child welfare and youth justice policy development since The 1989 Children Act. Firstly, despite the UK adopting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991; children's rights have been secondary to other powerful influences in England and Wales. The Children Act 1989 intended to separate justice from welfare, to ensure that criminal justice agencies would only take the necessary minimum intervention when a child had offended. The Act therefore abolished the criminal care order, which allowed local authorities to incarcerate children on welfare grounds who had offended , and initially led to a reduction in the criminalisation of children. However, the impact of the murder of James Bulger by two ten year old boys in 1993 shocked the public and led to an increasingly negative portrayal of children who commit offences both within the media and the legislation that followed (Jenks, 1996). The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act followed, which introduced a number of key measures that effectively widened the net of criminality to younger children. By abolishing doli incapax, producing a multiplicity of criminal orders to manage both children and their parents, and introducing the notion of the pre-criminal via the Anti-Social Behaviour Order; children were firmly established within legislation as a threat to social order. Muncie and Hughes (2002)

note that this led to the 'adulteration' of youth justice, which significantly undermined the principle of child and youth welfare in favour of responsibilisation of the child.

Whilst the increasingly punitive approach to youth justice has taken place, legislation and policy within the social care sector has sought to promote the welfare of looked after children (eg The Children Act 1989, Quality Protects, The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters). This has been a dichotomous feature of policy development within England and Wales since 1989 (Taylor, 2006) which has had particularly negative consequences for looked after children who are subject to youth justice supervision:

'In brief, once a child has committed a criminal offence, the rights afforded to him or her under welfare based frameworks may be superseded by criminal justice legislation.' (Taylor, 2006: 49)

This confused and contradictory landscape impacts on children who are looked after, but also subject to youth justice supervision in a number of ways. The above legislation presumes that two distinct groups exist: child offenders in need of punishment who should be feared, and looked after children in need of care and protection. In reality this is not the case, and the 'crossover youths' (Bilchik and Nash 2008) continue to be the victims of these two competing value systems.

To date, the perceptions of looked after children about their pathways into offending has not been captured within research. Where those perceptions have been captured, it has generally been of older children approaching adulthood, who are transitioning out of care (Schofield et al 2012; Hart et al 2011). Where other studies have sought to interview looked after children, they have sought to interview children who have been looked after continuously for a period of 12 months or more (eg Darker et al, 2008). The current Department for Education data (DfE, 2015) also only counts children who have been looked after for this period. There are a number of potential challenges in relying on data from this group of children. Many of the 'crossover kids' (Bilchik and Nash, 2008) tend to experience frequent placement breakdown, meaning that they will not be looked after continuously for 12 months or more (HMIP 2012). It is therefore possible, to date, that the voices of a core group of looked after children who experience significant placement instability have not been heard.

 A key study by Schofield et al in 2012 sought to focus on identifying the risk and resilience factors of looked after children who offend. The study found that the majority of children in care come from backgrounds of abuse, neglect, deprivation and poor parenting, and that these factors can create the *'risk for a range of emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, including anti-social and offending behaviour'* (Schofield et al, 2012:1). Although these adverse pre-care experiences may make a looked after child more likely to offend than their non-care counterparts; it is unlikely that limiting the focus to a child's risk and resilience factors, as identified by professionals, would give a full picture of what leads to a child commencing and ceasing offending whilst in care. Many (eg Goldson and Muncie, 2006 and Haines and Case, 2015) have strongly criticised the risk paradigm within youth justice; stating that it takes a very narrow and individualised view of offending, placing the main responsibility on the 'offender' rather than considering wider, systemic causes. A number of other studies have sought to cite individual traits within children as the reason why they are offending (eg Bullock et al,2012 and Hart et al, 2011). There has not been a great deal of focus on whether systemic failures contribute to a child commencing/ increasing their

offending. In March 2016 The Howard League published a report 'Children's Homes and Criminalising Children' which suggested that there are systemic failures within residential care which criminalise children, and lead to the police being called, often for minor incidents or offences.

Other studies have found that residential care is in itself a criminogenic environment (Taylor, 2006; Hayden, 2010), and that the culture and ethos of a home can in itself lead to offending behaviour (Shaw, 2014). In 2015, The Prison Reform Trust led a year long inquiry into the criminalisation of children in care, the results of which were published in 2016. 'In Care Out of Trouble' spoke with a number of children in care and also professionals and policy makers in the field. They made a number of recommendations, which included: strong and determined central leadership to tackle this ongoing challenge; consistent early support for children in care and *'good parenting by the state'* (PRT, 2016:3); an investigation into how to address the needs of children who are from black or minority ethnic groups; improved joint working between the child, family and other agencies involved in their lives; and that all looked after children are vulnerable and deserve consistent support. The Prison Reform Trust Review, with Lord Laming at its helm had an opportunity to seek out potential solutions to the over-representation of children in care, and hold 'the system' to account. However, the Review did not highlight any specific systemic failures, and resorted to generalized recommendations, coated in the language of 'we would like to see'. Although well intentioned, the Laming Review represents a missed opportunity to bring about the meaningful and dynamic change required to begin to address the disproportionate criminalisation of children in care.

The current policy context has focused primarily on support for careleavers (eg Staying Put Initiative), the challenges faced by children in residential care(eg The Narey Report 2016), and improving support and training for social workers. Further legislative changes are proposed, such as the Children and Social Work Bill which currently proposes to allow local authorities to apply for leave to not have to implement certain duties under social care law for up to 6 years. Although limitations have been placed upon which this leave can be applied for, this is currently attracting a significant amount of debate, with many stating that it could allow local authorities to surrender the rights of children in favour of reducing the burden of bureaucracy on social workers (Community Care 2016).

Policy development within England and Wales in the last 25 years has done very little to ensure that the needs and rights of looked after children within youth justice are appropriately protected. Subsequent Government policies focusing on individual responsibility and a desire to be tough on crime have shifted the focus of youth justice onto the criminal act, and the youth as a rational decision maker, uninfluenced by family and wider society. This has absolved the corporate parent, wider community and care system of any contributory role to the resulting criminal act. Even though the state has chosen to responsibilise the child for their behaviour, at no point have they sought to hear their voice about why they commence offending. This has all led to the 'crossover kids' (Bilchik and Nash, 2008) suffering increasing levels of criminalisation within the youth justice system in which their voices are silent. Although there have been several research studies which have sought to hear the voice of the looked after child, the focus has tended to be on older children, who have been looked after for 12 months or more, and many of the findings have sought to identify individual traits within the child, rather than focusing on the wider systemic failures. Where these systemic failures have been considered, to date, the focus has been almost exclusively on residential care.

Methods and Methodology

Rowlands (2005: 82) argues that the nature of the research problem, what we want to learn, and the stage of knowledge of a phenomenon should dictate the choice of methodological approach. We have already established that the nature of the research problem is that we have not heard the voices of the looked after child about their pathways to offending and subsequent entry into the youth justice system. It is important that we capture their lived experiences, and that this forms the basis of the research study. The reason for adopting this stance is to ensure that the voice of the child is prioritised throughout and given centre stage. The use of contemporary sociological approaches to understanding childhood can enable us to make sense of a child's world, and thus implications for practice. Therefore, a subjective, grounded and interpretive approach allows for the views of the children to be forthcoming. Drawing on interpretivism allows the study to focus on how the children interpreted and described their experiences. I have therefore drawn on Charmaz's constructivist approach to grounded theory, which allows for researchers to use grounded approaches in an individual way (Charmaz, 2000).

The findings are based on in depth interviews with 19 looked after children attending various Youth Offending Teams from the North West of England. The demographic breakdown of the children interviewed is:

Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Out of area	Nature of placement
Male	Black British	16	Yes	Private residential care
Male	Mixed Black British and White British	17	No	Private residential care
Male	White British	17	Yes	Private residential care
Male	White British	17	Yes	Private residential care
Male	Black British	16	No	Local Authority residential care
Female	White British	17	Yes	Private residential care
Male	White British	15	Yes	Private residential care
Male	Mixed Asian and White British	16	Yes	Private residential care
Female	White British	17	Yes	Private residential care
Male	White British	16	No	Local Authority residential care
Female	White British	15	No	Extended family
Male	White British	15	No	Secure Children's Home
Male	Mixed Black British and White British	14	Yes	Private residential care
Male	Mixed Black British and White British	17	No	Foster care
Male	White British	17	No	Semi independent
Male	White British	17	No	Own tenancy
Male	Mixed Black British and White British	15	Yes	Private residential care

Female	White British	17	Yes	Private residential care
Male	White British	13	Yes	Private residential care

It has been discussed above that the focus in recent years has been on older children (aged 16 – 18), and that the voice of younger children (aged 10 – 15) has been limited in most research reports. It is therefore encouraging that 6 children from the sample are aged 13 – 15, and will ensure their voice is heard. It is also of note that at the time of interview 14 out of 19 were in residential care, with a further 4 having lived in a residential placement immediately prior to their current placement.

The research will use qualitative approaches, using a semi-structured interview to derive the children's perceptions about their pathways into offending. The main focus of this project is the child's care experience, and whether they feel it contributed to their involvement in the youth justice system. This technique will allow the participants to offer their perceptions on this question. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using broadly grounded approaches (Charmaz and Bryant, 2007) to allow the children to speak about their pathways into offending.

Emergent Findings

A number of general themes have emerged during early analysis of the interview data, and these include:

- Labelling of children in care.
- Anger and frustration towards residential care and the child's social worker.
- The importance of the peer group.

1. **The labelling of children in care**

Throughout the interviews with the children, they referred to themselves with several negative labels linked to their behaviour. When exploring these labels with the children, some concerning patterns emerged. A strong theme to emerge related to children being labelled before they were placed in care as naughty within education from an early age, and then removed from mainstream education. Many children made reference to displaying challenging behaviours; often exhibiting them at around the age of 9/10 whilst in primary school. On all occasions the children described eventually being excluded for this behaviour and moved to a Pupil Referral Unit:

> *"Interviewer: So what happened in school then?*
>
> *Simon: Erm. Just fighting and stuff. Not doing work in school. Kicking off with teachers.*
>
> *Interviewer: So what would they do to help you?*
>
> *Simon: Nothing really. Every time I kicked off, they just sent me home. And I ended up getting kicked out. And I went to a naughty kids' school."*

A year prior to this, Simon suffered a significant loss when his older brother was murdered. He believes that this caused his behaviour to deteriorate. Simon describes the school dealing with his behaviour by sending him home, and eventually excluding him. It is possible that with the right support his behaviour may have improved, leading to him staying in mainstream education. One can only speculate about how this may have impacted upon his behaviour in adolescence. His use of the term 'naughty school' is interesting, as many of the children who attended a Pupil Referral Unit referred to it in similar negative

terms, which reflected a negative self-perception of the child, in which they would describe themselves as naughty.

Upon being placed in a Pupil Referral Unit, some of the children described the school as inappropriately managing their challenging behaviours:

> *"Anthony: I got that bad that they got me in a room on me own, the teacher used to come in, pass me work, leave me in the room, put a drink of water there, and leave me in the room to do me work…..they were treating me like I was a dog or something. Treating me like some animal."*

It is a concern that a significant proportion of the children interviewed all described their difficult behaviours as commencing when they were approaching Years 4 – 6 in primary school before they were in care. None of the children described having their behaviour appropriately managed, or being provided with extra support. In some cases, domestic abuse was a feature within the family home, and the child was displaying violent behaviour within school. It is apparent that rather than search for an underlying cause of the behaviour, the child was responsibilised at an early age, and the resultant behaviour was addressed, leading to the child being singled out, removed, and labelled as naughty or problematic.

The children are describing being labelled for their behaviour, removed from the 'mainstream' and treated in an inappropriate way. By being labelled as deviant by education staff; labelling theory states that the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' can emerge, in which an individual can then internalise this label and become a 'criminal'. Lemert (1951) recognizes this stage of labelling as the primary deviance stage; ie that a child is labelled by those around them according to a 'bad' behaviour, and responded to on this basis. According to Lemert, it will only be a matter of time before secondary deviance takes place, in which the child will accept this label for themselves and then act in the manner expected of them. Therefore, if one can intervene before primary deviance takes place, it is possible that the child may not internalise this label and act according to the expected behaviour by which they have been defined.

Reference to being treated like an animal reinforces the notion that a child is effectively feeling being treated in an inhuman manner. They have now been labelled according to behaviours, treated on this basis, and removed from the 'normal' children. Animals are generally locked away, are not perceived as capable of independent thought or able to form meaningful relationships. They are objectivised and classified by experts, owned by others, and good behaviour is achieved through training the animal to conform and accept the rules of the master. Further examples of this were given by the children which fitted this comparison. Jack describes being offered increased contact with his mother if he behaves or 'proves' himself:

> *"Jack: You shouldn't have to prove yourself to have contact with your own mum, and it's only 4 hours as well, it's not even like it's an overnight stay or anything. Just 4 hours contact per month. Pathetic."*

This sense that a child feels out of control and powerless over their lives was evident throughout the interviews and took a number of different forms. When discussing a child's interaction with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), references to 'labels' were again made. Many of the children felt that their level of anger was such that it 'must' be due to their emotional wellbeing – labelling themselves as 'insane' or 'mad':

> *"Lee: The only reason I can think of as why I'm in care is me behaviour cos I was not the best behaved.*

Interviewer: Go on, what do you mean by that?

Lee: I was a bit insane for a 9 year old.

Interviewer: A bit insane? Tell me what you mean by a bit insane.

Lee: I used to run about with knives and go about chasing people. I mean what 9 year old does that?'

Many of the children described feeling very angry, and being unable to regulate or control that anger when an event triggered it off. This led to them feeling that there must be something 'wrong' with them, or that their behaviour was abnormal in some way. When this thinking was challenged with some of the children, and they were asked whether they had understandable reasons to feel angry, they would disagree and continue to believe that there 'must' be something 'wrong' with them.

This feeling was further compounded by professionals who would refer the children for support with managing their anger to CAMHS. All children apart from one spoke about CAMHS in negative terms and felt that it had done very little to help them:

"Interviewer: Have you ever thought about why you get angry?

Sam: I've never really thought about it, I mean I used to go to CAMHS. CAMHS was ridiculous when I was younger, it was like every week I had to go on a Tuesday and a Friday.

Interviewer: And why were you there? Was it to do with your anger?

Sam: Apparently. I was never diagnosed with CAMHS, there was no present issues with CAMHS. They never really gave me any hope. Like every week, when I went there, it just felt like, it just felt. like routine, like get it out of the way."

According to Sam, when he did not engage in CAMHS, their case was closed and no further support was offered until they attended the Youth Offending Team (by which point the behaviours and anger are normally more embedded), and were offered an anger management course. This highlights a number of issues: firstly, many of the children had understandable reasons to feel very angry. Although the function of CAMHS is to offer support to children with heightened levels of anger and poor emotional regulation, these legitimate feelings cause the child to label themselves as 'insane' when they are referred to a service which is named the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. This is potentially stigmatising for the children, and may be a reason as to why they subsequently disengage from the service.

Labelling a child according to their behaviour, removing them from the mainstream 'normal' children, and stigmatising them for this is also a feature of the youth justice system as it stands. By focusing on identification of 'risk factors', heavily influenced by the managerialist agenda, youth justice under the Crime and Disorder Act:

"…responsibilised children for their offending behaviour and adulterized understandings of offending" (Haines and Case, 2015: 89).

2. **Negative feelings towards residential care and the Case Manager**

Another theme to emerge was the blame that the children placed on residential care for their possession of a criminal record:

> "Sam: If I hadn't been in care, I wouldn't be in the YOT now. If someone actually looks at my record, they'll notice that every offence I've done in the past 3 or 4 years has been linked to care homes."

The reasons for this are wider than is currently understood. Children talk about a feeling of the system giving up on them when they are placed in residential care:

> "Eric: If they don't give a fuck anymore, why should I?"

One child describes feeling 'put away', and labelled as a 'bad kid' when placed in residential care for the first time, and that this impacted on his behaviour, and subsequent decision to commence offending and abusing substances.

The impact of this feeling that the system is giving up on them is far-reaching – resultant behaviours described included commencing/ increasing substance misuse; self-harming; running away; commencing offending; and being sexually exploited.

The clear majority of the offences described by the children interviewed were assaults on staff; rather than minor criminal damage, which receives a lot of policy and media attention (Schofield et al 2012, The Howard League 2016, Narey 2016). A number of reasons were given for the multiple assaults on care home staff by the children. The main reasons related to being expected to follow unnecessary rules and procedures that would not occur in a regular family environment. For example, not being able to access a kitchen to prepare a snack, without having to ask permission from a member of staff to open up the kitchen. One young person described their attempts to get a packet of crisps from the kitchen:

> "Adam: I'm in here for one now innit, I've got an outstanding charge, right, I said to a woman yeah after I woke up at 10, can I have a packet of crisps. I've gone in (the kitchen) yeah, and this same guy, he's a prick yeah mate came out and I said will you move out the way so I can get me crisps please?....He's then locked the door yeah, so I shouted through the door yo! And he went 'what?'. I said 'are you getting me crisps', and he went 'nah'. I went 'what? So now you're behind the door and telling me I can't have any crisps?'. So he went 'nah you're not having any this time'.
>
> Interviewer: And if you were at home, what would you have done if you wanted a packet of crisps?
>
> Adam: I'd've gone and got em!
>
> Interviewer: So the fact that you have to go through such a rigmarole to get a packet of crisps….
>
> Adam: ….is very annoying."

The above incident led to Adam committing an offence of assault against the male member of staff described in the text.

A number of children also described a sense of powerlessness within the home, and felt that they were not listened to if they were unhappy with a placement. Therefore, they would assault a member of staff to force a move to another home, in the hope that this would be better:

> "Alex: I thought if I hit them, they'll be like, sweet we'll move him."

Alex is saying that he felt that he had to assault a member of staff to force a move to another residential home. Many of them spoke about using actions to communicate, as they felt that they were not listened to when attempting to speak about the challenging features of a placement. This was echoed by other children, who not only complained about the unreasonable rules, which reminded them that they were not in a family home; but also using contact with family, and obtaining 'free time' as a carrot by which the care staff will try and obtain good behaviour from the child. Generally, though, this appeared to make children feel that they were 'jumping through hoops' as a pet animal would be expected to do which further disempowered them:

> "Sam: …you can get what you want as long as you play the game.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, it's all about rules and incentives and stuff.
>
> Sam: When you're in foster care, it's more like, yeah as long as you do this, it's ok, whereas when you're in (residential) care it's like you have to hustle."

The feelings of disempowerment within residential care were quite marked, and a source of much frustration for the children. As many felt their power and control removed from them by the corporate parent, many sought to re-establish this within peer networks in the residential placement.

The children also described feeling frustrated with their social worker, and referred to poor communication as particularly annoying. This started with their descriptions of how they were placed in care, and how this was communicated to them:

> "Interviewer: Can you just tell me the story of how you ended up in residential care?
>
> Simon: I was waiting for me mum to come and pick me up from school, and she didn't come to pick me up but my social worker did. I said how come you're coming to pick me up, she said you're not going home, you're going to ********, that's going to be your home from now on."

Other children described being taken to a restaurant for lunch, and during the meal, would be told by their social worker that they were being taken into care. Several children did not know why they were in care:

> "Interviewer: Why were you taken into care if you don't mind me asking?
>
> David: Do you know I don't actually know the reason, I don't actually know the reason."

Such crucial interactions form the basis of a child's relationship with their social worker: important pieces of information and conversations such as that a child is being taken into care, or the reasons that they are in care appear to be handled poorly by the case manager, leading to an angry and frustrated group of children. This further contributes to their sense of powerlessness, mistrust and hostility towards those who supposedly are the child's corporate parent.

Some children still do not know what the long-term plan is, describing being kept dangling on a piece of string:

> "Arron: And I remember when I first went into care 5 years ago, and they said yeah, you're gonna be here 3 months. 3 months have gone. They say another 3 months. Then after 6 months they said,

er it's another 3 months, and you get moved to somewhere else for a further 6 months, and it's like I don't fucking know."

Again, these are further examples of how the children feel powerless over their own lives: to be told you were just going to be in care for 3 months, and then this keeps getting extended by similar short term periods; this would make it difficult for a child to plan for the future, feel secure in their care placement, or in control over their lives.

One child who was in custody at the time of the interview felt very anxious and frustrated at the lack of communication from his social worker about his resettlement plans on release:

"Will: Nah he's not been to see me, well he's come to see me 3 times in 7 month. The thing is yeah, he's gone on leave now, and my meeting's in 1 week yeah, and he's gone on leave yeah, and he's not told me or me mam where I'm going when I get out of here. He dunt care, he actually dunt care, that's why I'm getting a new social worker."

The sense of anger, frustration and hostility directed towards a child's case manager was a strong theme to emerge. The child's social worker is probably the most important professional in the looked after child's life: they are seen as holding all of the power and making the decisions which ultimately impact on their lives. The poor communication and lack of longer term planning only served to further increase a child's anger and sense of powerlessness over their own existence.

3. The importance of the peer group

So far, the children interviewed have described a series of scenarios which have caused them to feel powerless and searching for their place and identity whilst in care. Therefore, the desire to gain status and an identity from amongst a peer group within the home was another strong theme to emerge. Many children described commencing offending within the immediate networks and peer group gained from the residential placement:

"Matthew: Yeah you do what everyone else does, you're part of that crowd now.

Interviewer: Is that why you started smoking and trying legal highs?

Matthew: Yeah.

Interviewer: What else did you get upto?

Matthew: Erm nothing really. I used to just smoke weed. We used to go back to this, we used to go out quite a bit, I used to run off there because I never got free time."

One child described getting into cars with older males and risking being sexually exploited so that she would fit in with her immediate peer group within the residential home:

*"Melissa: I knew it wasn't right, I knew it was bad I just didn't want to look like a weirdo in front of ******.*

Interviewer: What were they doing, giving you loads of drugs and alcohol and stuff?

> *Melissa: Yeah, I always had a head on me, like I knew if anything was going to happen, I knew what to do. Like I always knew, I knew they were groomers or something anyway, but I knew that I wouldn't ever do."*

All the children who were interviewed spoke about commencing sexually risky acts, absconding, taking harmful substances, and commencing offending upon being placed into residential care. The feeling of disempowerment and that the system had pushed them to one side or given up on them was expressed by the vast majority of the children interviewed. It was evident that the risks of commencing offending were similar to the risks of commencing the other behaviours described above. Therefore, one must question whether a child's pathway into offending should be viewed in isolation. One participant spoke about his offending, substance misuse and absconding whilst in care as doing what he wanted because no-one else cared about him:

> *"Eric: I wouldn't have been on drugs, I wouldn't have been robbing, I wouldn't have been going out late nights, I wouldn't have been stealing.*
>
> *Interviewer: Why do you think you wouldn't have been doing any of that stuff?*
>
> *Eric: Cos I wouldn't have been in care would I?*
>
> *Interviewer: You'd have been at home?*
>
> *Eric: Yeah.*
>
> *Interviewer: And how would that have been different?*
>
> *Eric: It's just better. When I'm in care, why should I give a shit if no-one else gives a shit? It's blatant, it's just like when you get put in care, it's like no-one wanted ya so what's the point in being fucking, being a good little boy?"*

He is discussing the identity of a 'good little boy' and asks the question 'what is the point'? No-one cares about me, no-one 'gives a shit'. Effectively, being 'good' has not aided him in anyway, but caused him harm. Therefore, he takes a conscious decision to offend, stay out late and take illegal substances, and in doing so create a new identity, different to that of a 'good little boy'. This allows him to retain control and gain some power over his situation.

Implications and Recommendations

One of the central aims of the research project is to ensure that the perceptions of the children are heard and form the basis of a number of key recommendations for those in policy and practice:

1. Early identification of support needs within primary education is crucial

Many of the children described being labelled and singled out according to difficult behaviours from an early age in primary school. On each occasion, the children described a clear underlying cause for their behaviour which was not identified within education. Such underlying causes included grief, or being victims of domestic abuse. The move to focus on managing a challenging behaviour within education, rather than search for more deep-rooted causes and then offer appropriate wrap-around emotional support, was apparent throughout the interviews. This would present a number of challenges for those in

education. For example, consideration needs to be given to how education staff could identify the deeper, underlying roots of a problematic behaviour. Support should be identified and offered to enable young people to remain in mainstream education with their peers to avoid them being isolated and labelled on the basis of their behavior. Much closer working and communication between staff in education, healthcare, social care and the family could ensure that early underlying needs are identified, and appropriate support is offered, which could potentially avert future family breakdown and the challenges that this would present the child.

2. The anger of looked after children needs to be acknowledged and appropriately addressed by those in authority

A concerning early theme emerging from the interviews is that many looked after children are labelling themselves (or being labelled by professionals) as having mental health needs due to them being referred to CAMHS for their frequent and often violent displays of anger and frustration. However, many of the children had many justifiable reasons to feel angry due to very negative care experiences, and suffering earlier trauma, neglect or abuse within the family home. This presents a number of fundamental challenges to those in policy and practice. Many of the children had justifiable reasons to feel angry. They are also, by their very nature of being a child, going to struggle to regulate their emotions. The role of CAMHS can be to offer assistance to children with heightened levels of anger and difficulties regulating their emotions. However, the stigmatizing impact of being referred to a service which, by its title, suggests that one may have mental health difficulties, may be an obstacle to looked after children engaging with the service. Consideration should also be give to whether any negative effect will follow from referring the child to *another* professional, with whom they are expected to discuss intimate feelings and potentially traumatic experiences. Looked after children need a sense of control and power over their future

A number of steps have been taken within policy and practice to ensure that looked after children have a 'voice' within the care system. These steps have included asking children their viewpoint at various stages of the care process and ensuring that this is reflected in official multi-agency meetings. The addition of the guardian and independent reviewer has also sought to ensure that the interests of the child are protected. However, what is currently missing is *meaningful* engagement with the child. Current efforts to seek a child's viewpoint are tokenistic and in reality do not lead to a child feeling empowered or in control of their care experience. It is therefore important that policy makers and social care staff consider what meaningful engagement with a looked after child means. Many of the children interviewed had a clear preference about their accommodation placement and felt that it would greatly reduce the chances of them offending. In addition to this, many children wanted to know that there was a clear plan whilst they were in care, and that this would be adhered to regardless of how the child may behave. Using contact with a parent or a move to independence as a carrot to attain good behavior appeared to place many children under pressure, and caused them to feel that they were jumping through hoops.

3. The future of residential care

Martin Narey's (2016) recent report considered the state of residential care in England and Wales and made a number of recommendations based on his findings. When considering the link between residential care and offending, the report focused on the criminalisation of children for minor offences within a home,

and failed to consider the wider impact of residential care on a child's behaviour. He concluded that the steps taken to address this issue were sufficient. This narrow focus and lack of consideration of the wider impact of residential care on offending led to Narey's findings being very different to the findings outlined within this paper. The strongest themes from the interviews relate to the perceived problems within residential care that the children state are contributing to their offending. For a Government-commissioned report to be significantly at odds with this research is concerning, and would suggest that current policy and practice is out of step with this group of children. Consideration has got to be given to how to meet the needs of a core group of children who are offending and almost always in residential care (HMIP 2012), whose offending either commences or significantly escalates when they are in this placement-type.

Conclusion

The children describe being labelled as naughty from an early age, responsibilised, singled out, and labelled as problematic. Where they display heightened levels of anger, some of the children state that they 'must' be 'insane' or 'mental'. The overwhelming sense of powerlessness that looked after children feel within residential care and in their relationship with their social worker is concerning. In response to this, it is apparent that children are attempting to forge an identity for themselves and retain a sense of power and control by associating with likeminded peers, offending, misusing substances, absconding, and engaging in sexually risky behaviours. This paper has argued that placing the perspective of the child at centre stage offers alternative perspectives and implications for policy and practice that have not previously been considered within the wider academic or policy discourse. The early findings present a number of challenges which are not currently being considered within the wider academic and policy discourse, and thus seek to make a number of recommendations on this basis.

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