



Enabling Talk and Reframing Messages: Working Creatively with Care Experienced Young People to Represent their Educational Experiences

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Background Literature

The low educational attainment and future prospects of children and young people in care has become an issue of widespread international concern. Within the four UK nations we know that children in public care, on average, achieve poorer educationally compared to individuals not in care.

National data for Wales reports that in 2015, 18% of those in care achieved the Key Stage 4 threshold (five GCSEs Grade A*-C including English or Welsh first language and mathematics), compared to 58% of the total student population (Welsh Government, 2016). This gap then widens for those who transition into higher education (Stein, 2012).

Despite proliferation of research documenting the reasons for educational disadvantage amongst this population, there remains limited empirical consideration of the lived experiences of the educational system, as perceived by children and young people in the care system themselves.

As such, qualitative research was carried out with children and young people in care across Wales as part of a research project commissioned by Welsh Government (see Mannay et al. 2015).

The findings here relate to the qualitative aspects of that study (Mannay et al. 2017a).

ETHICS

Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee granted project approval and all foster carers were provided with forms as part of the process of negotiating informed consent.

Age-appropriate consent forms were also provided for the children and young people to give their informed consent. In terms of confidentiality, all participants selected pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

For the creative and participatory aspects of the research, all of the children and young people were given the option about whether to take part at the beginning of these activities, and at the start and throughout the interviews.

Methods

The mixed methods research, was primarily characterised by the use of qualitative participatory methods with 67 care-experienced children and young people in Wales. The following methods were employed in the course of this project:

- Statistical and literature review
- Systematic review (Evans et al. 2017)
- Creative methods and interviews (Mannay et al. 2017b)
- Peer researcher led focus groups
- Participatory methods

Results

Being different – Key points:

- *Not wanting to be different* – Issues of difference or an awareness of difference became more apparent as children progressed through school.
- *Being seen as different* – Visibility was problematic within school settings when children and young people were taken out of active classes or review meeting about care were held in rooms visible to other students
- *Being treated as different* – Preconceptions about ability and capability negatively impacted on young people.
- *Resource differences* – Arguments between agencies about payments cause unnecessary stress for young people.

Aspirations – Key points:

- Children and young people voiced clear aspirations for future careers and employment. These included ambitions to enter hairdressing, teaching, farming, acting, and policing – and a dolphin trainer.
- Aspirations were related to occupations children had some knowledge or experience of and some were motivated to make a positive contribution. These included helping in humanitarian crises, working with animals or working with young people in care.

"We don't want people to be 'looked after', you want to be a normal kid too you know because it's only one, its only label of you"

"I want to work with kids in care when I'm older because I know what it's like and I've been through it most of my life. So I can actually be one of those people who turn around and say 'I understand', and actually do understand"

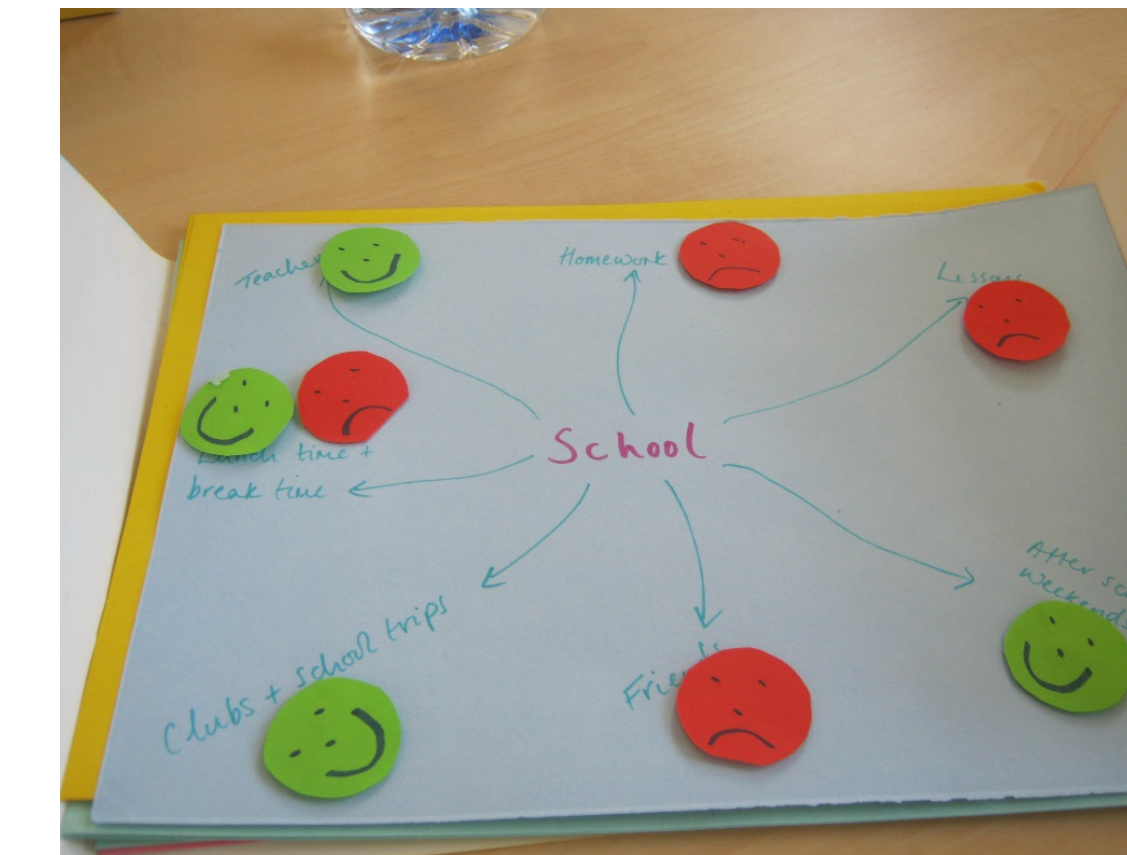


Figure 1. Emotion stickers activity about school experiences.



Figure 2. Sandboxing technique about life in the future .

Discussion

This research explored children and young people's lived experiences of education, in relation to their 'looked-after' status. The problematic nature of labeling and the unintended educational consequences of support systems that aim to 'look after' children and young people in care were key features in their accounts and recommendations.

Participants critiqued the high visibility of review meetings within school, which risks alienating young people and stigmatising them with the label of being 'looked-after', as well as detrimentally impacting their attainment when they are taken out of lessons.

Participants also identified key adults who had high expectations for them and supported them effectively in their educational journeys. For those who successfully transitioned into higher education, the social and cultural capital of their carers was crucial.

Conclusions

- There has been considerable previous research into the poor educational attainment of young people in care. In this project it has been possible to explore this from the perspective of children and young people, and it appears that numerous barriers continue to stifle their aspirations.
- Young people in care face multiple challenges in the course of their education. These challenges can become more obvious and acute as children get older. Practitioners need to be aware of the impact that their preconceived ideas and judgements can have on children who are in care.
- Multi-agency working continues to pose considerable challenges that can negatively impact on the wellbeing of these children. Many of these barriers can cause embarrassment and frustration to young people.
- Recommendations from this research have been incorporated into Welsh Government strategy, and feature in articles, films, art work and music videos. These resources and further information about the education of young people in care in Wales is now available at ExChange: Care and Education - <http://www.exchangewales.org/careandeducation>

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