QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

EDUCATING CHILDREN IN SECURE ACCOMMODATION SETTINGS: STAFF PERSPECTIVES

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Foreword

Every year our Year 2 trainees complete an Equality and Diversity Placement. The aim of this placement is three-fold: first, to raise awareness of a minority or disadvantaged group within Northern Irish society; second, to experience working together as a research group within the field; and third, to prepare a document which can be used as part of an ongoing programme of continued professional development within the Educational Psychology Service in the Education Authority.

This study sought to use an appreciative enquiry framework to explore the issues inherent in educating some of the most vulnerable children and young people within our society, children who are looked-after and educated within secure settings.

The research group was led by Anthea Percy (Course Tutor), Mandy Yung (Educational Psychologist) provided advisory support, and the trainees involved in the project were as follows (*in alphabetical order*):

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Abstract

Limited research has been conducted into what is effective in educating and supporting looked after children (LAC) who reside in secure accommodation. This study aimed to explore the unique perspective of staff working to educate LAC living in a secure accommodation centre located within the United Kingdom (UK). The study adopted an appreciative inquiry framework (Liebling et al., 1999). Semi-structured, individual interviews with six education staff were conducted. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (TA). The findings show that LAC in secure settings present with a range of educational needs, the most fundamental being a history of developmental trauma which has resulted in poor experience of and engagement with education. Value was placed on understanding the complex interplay between the young person's history of adversity, diagnosis (if any), their engagement and experiences in education and their special educational needs, all of which necessitate the development of bespoke learning plans and a therapeutic environment, with feelings of safety, relationship building, and emotional well-being being prioritised. Collaborating across disciplines, increasing trauma awareness throughout society, advocating for the young people, and gradually empowering them to advocate for themselves were perceived to be important in supporting their needs and their futures. Implications for practice are considered, along with recommendations for staff working with LAC in mainstream schools.

Keywords: Secure accommodation; looked after children; staff perspective; trauma.

Introduction

Secure residential settings provide short-term placements for looked after children[1] (LAC) and young people who, for multiple complex reasons, are considered to be at such risk of either experiencing or inflicting harm on themselves or others as to warrant a deprivation of their liberty (Haydon, 2016). This report follows Warner et al.'s (2018) definition of 'secure' as "any setting that deprives a young person of their liberty with a level of physical security above and beyond that available in open residential, educational or mental health units, such that the young person cannot leave if they choose".

Although residents rarely enter voluntarily, secure settings are not a form of punishment and have been upheld by children's rights advocates as the best response model in a last-resort scenario (Byrne, 2019; Harder et al., 2014). In the UK, secure settings in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are governed by devolved legislative frameworks. Whilst this underpins regional variation across service delivery and oversight, the three entry pathways – criminal justice, mental health and welfare – hold nationally, with strict criteria governing access to each[2] (Hales et al., 2018).

Education in a Secure Setting

Education is a known vehicle for change, carrying potentially life-changing import in the context of secure care (Smith & Mack, 2019). Enshrined within international guidelines as a vital part of secure provision (Haydon, 2016), education is widely recognised as a route to improved outcomes regarding future employment, well-being, relationships, identity, and resilience (Byrne, 2019). However, research to date offers little indication that such ideals are being achieved in practice. Less than half of all LAC attain the standard target of five GCSE passes, whilst those leaving care are 15 times more likely than their non-LAC peers to have no qualifications at all (Haydon, 2016). In a meta-analysis of LAC's educational experiences, Scherr (2016) argues that the sector has for too long been viewed as low priority compared to immediate crisis-containment issues and urgently needs to establish itself at the heart of secure care planning. (For an historical perspective on this issue see Lanskey, 2019).

There is little disagreement about the extent of the challenges facing education staff in secure care settings. The prevalence of Special Educational Needs (SEN) is five times higher amongst LAC compared to non-LAC (Haydon, 2016), and within the secure care population specifically, rates of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and learning difficulties are three times higher (Hales et al., 2019). In addition to the short-term nature of placements,

[1] A looked after child is defined by the Children (NI) Order (1995) as "one who is in the care of the Trust or who is provided with accommodation by a Trust for a continuous period of more than 24 hours".

[2] ***To** protect participants' anonymit**y, these criteria have** not **been** stipulated*

which in England average 4.9 months, LAC aged between 10 and 18 years typically present with wide-ranging and significant physical, social, emotional, and/or behavioural needs that can require intensive intervention before they can even attend school (Warner et al., 2019).

Common presentations include attachment disorders, emotional dysregulation, underdeveloped emotional and social functioning, self-harm, suicidal ideation, difficulties with boundaries, and verbal communication difficulties (Haydon, 2016; Pates et al., 2019). Compounding these problems, prior educational experiences are typically negative, with significantly higher rates of exclusions, referrals, and expulsions reported amongst LAC (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). Learning gaps and placement changes are common, whilst LAC's academic motivation, self-esteem, and identity can falter as externalising behaviours are wrongly categorised and inappropriately sanctioned (Byrne, 2019; Harder et al., 2014). Poor attendance is a further issue, with less than half of those entering secure settings having attended mainstream education in the two years prior to placement (Haydon, 2016). Moreover, many LAC internalise their experiences as negative core beliefs and present on arrival to secure care as disillusioned and at rock bottom (Prince et al., 2019).

Increasing Trauma Awareness

Despite the diversity observed across pupils' presenting behaviours, research is increasingly recognising the ubiquity and significance of trauma throughout their histories (Byrne, 2019; Macdonald & Millen, 2012). Commonly, these can include prolonged physical and emotional abuse, neglect, multiple placements, family dysfunction and breakdown, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and/or criminal activity (Haydon, 2016; Pates et al., 2019). Mounting evidence indicates that such experiences, combined with a lack of learning opportunities, can underpin difficulties with social interactions, concentration, and emotional regulation such as outlined above and should be formally diagnosed as developmental trauma (D'Andrea et al., 2012).

Byrne (2019) argues that early trauma experiences can inhibit children's ability to cope in a mainstream education environment, where systems are built upon implicit assumptions of healthy development and domestic stability that automatically exclude LAC. However, Gallard et al. (2019) argue that increased trauma awareness within modern thinking is helping education within secure settings to both improve outcomes for LAC and re-assert itself as a higher priority, whilst a complementary research strand is emerging to highlight how this is being done. For instance, reporting on staff practices and perspectives within five UK secure settings, Prince et al. (2019) identify high expectations, specific goals, flexible delivery, and a holistic approach as successful educational strategies across the different contexts. Mehay and Champion's (2019) exploration of good practice within a secure justice setting reports similar themes whilst also highlighting the positive effects of humour and 'banter'

between staff and pupils, as bringing a human quality to key helping relationships. In addition, Smith and Mack's (2019) review of joint working between psychological services and education makes a powerful case for increased psychological input in secure care settings, particularly through staff training and group formulation. These studies offer fresh insights into the contemporary context of education in UK secure care and provide a theoretical basis for the current work.

Rationale and Research Questions

This study seeks to build on existing knowledge by exploring the perspectives of one specialist team of education staff working in a secure care setting. Specifically, it aims to learn from the everyday experience of teaching some of the most marginalised young people in society, to consider both the range of educational needs requiring support and the strategies deemed helpful in doing so. As well as contributing to the contemporary literature, it is hoped that the findings will have practical application for colleagues supporting vulnerable children in mainstream education settings.

To address these aims, this study will explore the perspectives of six specialist staff members of one education team working in one secure care setting in the UK, seeking to address the following three research questions:

i) What kind of educational needs are commonly experienced?

ii) Which strategies are considered effective in supporting pupils' educational needs?

iii) What advice could be given to other colleagues supporting LAC in mainstream education?

Method

Design

The current study adopts a critical realist ontology. Critical realism acknowledges the existence of an objective reality. However, this reality cannot be fully known due to human limitations. That is, the researcher's perceptions and interpretations of reality are impacted by previous experiences, knowledge, values, and hypotheses. It acknowledges that researchers are working from an external viewpoint, and interpretations provide only partial access to the world of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Given this ontological underpinning, the research adopted a qualitative methodology and in keeping with the critical realist stance, researchers were not fully separate from the phenomena investigated as they were involved in study design, data collection, and analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of six staff working with vulnerable young people in a secure accommodation setting. Staff members were interviewed individually by one of a group of six Trainee Educational Psychologists (TEPs). The study adopted an appreciative inquiry framework (Liebling et al., 1999). Appreciative inquiry encourages the researcher to adopt a positive outlook on the setting. That is, this framework focuses on the strengths and positive aspects, while recognising that settings are not perfect. Appreciative inquiry was selected to reassure staff that the research would not identify shortcomings, which in turn may foster greater openness to discuss day-to-day practice (Ellis, 2012).

Participants

Staff members of an education team at one secure care setting were initially approached via the school principal. Permissions and access were arranged by the Chief Investigator on behalf of the research team, who then obtained written informed consent from individual participants prior to interview. Participants had distinct roles within the education team and operated at different levels of the school ecology. That is, participants included a principal, a senior teacher, an educational psychologist (EP), a class teacher, a classroom assistant, and a youth worker. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was received from the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. An interview schedule was designed by the researchers in advance of the one-to-one interviews.

Interviews took place over the course of two days. That is, five participants were interviewed on one day, with the remaining participant being interviewed one week later.

Interviews took place in separate rooms in the education wing of the secure accommodation setting, prior to morning classes. The duration of interviews ranged from 34 to 53 minutes. All interviews were recorded on digital voice recorders. Interviews were then transcribed. The researchers agreed to transcribe all interviews following the Braun and Clarke (2006) guide for transcription.

Thematic analysis provided a flexible approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was deemed by the researchers as suitable to address the qualitative research questions of the study. Analysis was inductive (data driven), semantic (explicit interpretations) and critical realist (accepting of an assumed reality). The analytic process consisted of six iterative phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These phases comprised data familiarisation, development of initial coding to capture the semantic meaning of the data, generating themes as patterns of shared meaning united by a central organising concept, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing results. The analytic process was dynamic in nature, with phases being revisited on multiple occasions.

Findings

Analysis was guided by three research questions. Three overarching latent themes emerged, which provided structure and organisation to the analysis. The overarching themes were ‘Know My Story’, ‘Safe Therapeutic Spaces’, and ‘Changing Narratives’. Each of these overarching themes contained between two and four sub-themes.

Theme 1: Know My Story

This theme includes sub-themes of understanding individual histories including trauma histories and developing bespoke learning plans. The sub-themes capture the value of getting to know each young person's 'story' and their individual need to develop learning activities which can best support them. The importance of understanding and responding to the impact of trauma is also recognised.

Understanding of individual histories

A diverse range of complex and intense special educational needs was described. These included learning difficulties, developmental disorders including Autism Spectrum Disorders, Attention Deficit Disorders and Developmental Co-ordination Disorders, medical needs, social, behavioural, emotional and well-being difficulties, substance misuse, and mental health difficulties. “Kim” summarised it nicely: “The range of special educational needs is huge and they’re really complex and they’re unique to each young person who comes in.” “Marie” was one of several participants who also noted that drug misuse and mental health difficulties, seen as increasingly prevalent, are considered complex and harder to address: “Drug use, suicide (.) and that really is the main two.”

Participants were often less concerned with diagnostic understandings than with communicating a holistic view of trauma-experienced children who had been repeatedly failed by multiple systems prior to placement. This ‘trauma lens’ was common to all participants, with many of the young people identified as having had a history of experiencing trauma including abuse and neglect. Marie reflected that “their stories are horrendous … absolutely horrendous (…) so much loss … so much trauma … what else can you do? How else are you meant to survive … than to be like that?”

As a result, anxiety levels were described as high. “David” spoke at length about the consequences of developmental trauma. Noting that “they’re always hyper-vigilant. Their anxiety baseline is very different from our baseline”, he went on to describe low self-worth and a history of toxic shame (“they have grown up in a home environment where they are constantly shamed”); as well as tendencies to reject others before they themselves were rejected, to be slow to trust, and to carry the emotional baggage of shame into school (“so, in the school environment … they bring it in”). “Mark” noted that “a lot of them had a very negative previous experience of education” and as a

consequence, it was noted y Mark that young people in the setting had often been out of school for long periods of time: “They might not have been in school for a year. The children have not been in school … or have been expelled or there are rolling suspensions from school.” There was an evident perception that this pairing of childhood adversities and reduced time at school may have created additional needs in young people, including poorly developed life skills and a tendency to use behaviour as communication. David noted that trauma-experienced young people in the setting “have learned through role modelling that the way to get what you want is to be angry”. Emphasis was therefore placed on how trauma can influence arousal levels, concentration, motivation, and comprehension, and thus access to the curriculum:

> Our main one [SEN] would be young people who are dealing with some sort of developmental delay due to trauma. So, the majority of our young people have some sort of trauma background and what you’ll find is that that can impact them in a really wide range of ways. (“Frank”)

Participants placed great import on getting to know each individual and their needs, as opposed to trying to understand them based on their diagnosis or any other label. Indeed, a few participants questioned the validity of relying on diagnoses placed or not placed on the young person before entering secure care:

> You have young people coming here who have had the profile, like made, and you can read it. And we’ve had young people in here where you’re clearly seeing that they need that. They need that … all to be looked at, but it hasn’t been … or they just fell through the system. (Kim)

Getting to know young people as individuals and understanding each young person’s history and needs enabled staff to reconceptualise their needs in terms of how early life experiences may have impacted current presentation and difficulties. Marie summarised this as follows:

> It’s very complex but also quite simple, really … once you get to the crux of it … it all still goes back to the trauma … it is just numbing the pain of a trauma … that they don’t know … how to deal with.

Bespoke learning plans

Early traumatic experience was universally identified by participants as leading to cycles of maladaptive behaviour which in turn led to exclusion from mainstream education and ultimately societal rejection. In contrast, the secure school favoured an empathic and positive approach to the behaviour of the young people, one of unconditional positive regard with the goal of promoting confidence, inclusion, and well-being. The principles of nurture were applied to meet adolescents’ basic needs before settling to learn (“it’s all about creating a nurturing environment for them”), with

key adults assigned to support individual young people. This approach was informed by training staff received on adopting trauma-informed models of practice and dealing effectively during a crisis. Kim talked about two forms of training she had completed that she relied on, on a day-to-day basis: The Sanctuary Model and Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI): “So, both [trauma-informed and crisis training] are probably paramount to our practise here, and we’re using it every day.”

The stated aim of all participants was that each individual young person’s experience, interests, and preferred learning style be incorporated into an individualised education plan, unique to them. For example, Frank stated that “We very much work here, in that, it’s very, very bespoke so every single young person that comes to us, you know, the strategies that we put in place are particular to that young person”.

This was noted to be time consuming but critical and the importance of flexibility was highlighted by a few participants. For example, David noted that, in his role, “You have to be very flexible in what you do. Even when I do programmes with the young people, it’s very flexible ‘cause sometimes depending on their mood”.

Staff were prepared for any eventuality and expected to adapt plans in response to the emotional state and desires of young people. Furthermore, it was recognised that the young people in the centre were often striving for a modicum of agency and power in circumstances of restricted liberty. Again, David recognised that “children who have been abused, have had a lot of trauma … you know, they have to control life because they can only control so much. They will try and control as much as they can”. Mark empathised with this, stating that “they’ve nothing, even when they want to leave a room y’know they’ve nothing, they’re not in control of anything”. David went on to suggest that youth may resist new learning opportunities and oppose adult instruction because they have developed a mind-set wherein a sense of safety is linked with not being perceived as vulnerable by others (“they don’t like the teacher telling them what to do because they think they know it all for their own safety”).

It was considered important that students be given some choice and control to promote their engagement and motivation. Frank noted that: “You always have, you know, a few plans in place for, ok, I have this young person, ok, they might not want to do that writing activity today, so maybe you could have the practical activity also ready.”

Theme 2: Safe Therapeutic Spaces

An overarching theme emerged around the importance of creating a safe therapeutic foundation or space for young people in the secure accommodation setting to promote learning and well-being. Subsequent themes were then generated around the need for this environment to focus on developing a sense of safety, relational repair, and emotional regulation.

Developing a sense of safety

Participants recognised that young people in the setting may, because of their individual trauma history, experience a reduced sense of both physical and psychological safety. Given this unmet need for safety, it was recognised that many young people in the setting had become hypersensitive to threat ("they need to pre-empt any danger that is going to come toward them") and had adopted violence and aggression as protective strategies. As David noted, "The skills they've learnt, and that would be aggression, violence, and intimidation, all these are protective skills for them; they keep them safe."

Furthermore, it was noted that if staff did not make young people feel safe, then young people would often use violence and aggression to make staff scared of them. Similarly, they would test the boundaries with staff and view capitulation as weakness. It was thus universally suggested that rather than prioritising engagement in classroom activities, these young people are primarily focused on surviving and having their basic needs met. As David stated: "Education is very low in their priority of things 'cause it's just surviving for them". Marie agreed: "It is about trying to meet their needs, and their needs aren't always coming in, sitting down, and getting their GCSE … that is not what we're looking at all the time … their need could be … a cuppa tea."

Participants noted that they work to create a positive and safe environment for young people from the outset. In recognition of the fact that it can feel daunting to enter the centre and that it can represent just one event in a long sequence of many events of loss and change ("it's quite daunting"), David talked about an induction period provided to the young people. Furthermore, participants talked at length about trauma-informed models adopted to enhance a sense of safety in the young people. Staff identified their role was to provide both a physical safe space to reduce young people's risk to themselves and an emotional safe space where young people might feel understood, respected, and valued. Across multiple examples, practices of showing respect, creating genuine connections, actively listening, and having fun were emphasised, as well as not saying no and the use of de-escalation strategies. Perhaps underestimating her skill set, Marie described a range of "wee silly wee strategies that you put in place".

Focussing on the present was noted to be important in promoting a sense of psychological safety. It was recognised that helping young people process trauma histories might take a considerable amount of time and thus was not feasible during their limited time in the placement. David was very aware of this, commenting that he had "to think along short-term and what can I do to help". Furthermore, David acknowledged, "I don't delve into the past because I am not there. If I open the box, I am not there to close it again." Mark underscored this point when he stated, "We can only do so much here."

Participants also cautioned against invasive attempts to deal with developmental trauma, with "Larry" highlighting the possibility that a child might be "*psychologically exhausted'* due to the multiplicity of support services involved in the course of the child's history. He went on to suggest that staff should not try to solve the problem all the time: "Sometimes they don't want to be … they feel sometimes constantly 'fixed'."

Relational repair

Participants emphasised the need to build positive relationships with young people in the setting. David stated that "from Day One, it's just relationship, relationship, relationship". Positive connection was seen by all participants as a priority, with staff assuming responsibility for building rapport and modelling a wider ethos of partnership and respect. It was recognised that relationships had the transformative power to repair the early developmental trauma and restore feelings of safety for children and adolescents and this was a priority. Mark stated that "they haven't made those attachments, those connections, they haven't been nurtured, haven't been supported", and David was very clear that "first of all, you gotta build the relationship and then they need to feel safe … there'll be no learning taking place unless they feel safe".

Several antecedents were identified for the development of more constructive interpersonal connections. For example, David cited as important, respect ("respect is a massive thing"), trust ("build the trust"), honesty ("you have to be honest"), and adopting a non-judgemental outlook ("not judging them. Not judging their family"). Participants also highlighted the need to work delicately around historical factors that might impact their access. For example, Larry noted that:

> You have to be very careful … especially like when I would do a lot of work around sex education, parenting styles, child development, all them kinda' things. You gotta be very delicate about, em, saying things like, you know, if like, smoking while pregnant, drinking while pregnant, and say for them like the information that they know is that their parents have done that. You can say, "Oh, you can't do that cos that's completely wrong," and they'll be like, "Well, why do you think that's wrong? Cause my mum did that to me, are you telling me my mum doesn't love me?" And that's a massive trigger.

Given young people's exposure to toxic shame, it was recognised that they may be particularly sensitive to the absence of respect, which may promote behaviour difficulties and negatively impact relationships with staff ("if you do not respect them … that will hit their trigger and then that's it, the relationship has gone"). To this end, the setting tended to adopt a more positive approach to managing behaviour, which involved encouraging young people to develop a perception of being held in positive regard by adults.

> Our behaviour system is all based on positivity, so that there's no sort of, I suppose, punishment within our system, so everything we do tries to find the good behaviour, or find the good things about a young person, and reward those things. (Frank)

Several participants highlighted the importance of staff modelling good relationships, and Marie indicated that the commitment to positive relationships and connections was visibly reinforced at team level within a wider ethos of partnership and respect.

> We are such a cohesive staff and I think then that reflects onto the young people and how ... your interactions with them in the classroom, no doubt … and when they see the banter between people and relationships … what actual working relationships can look like.

Emotional regulation

Staff in the setting were conscious that the emotional and well-being needs of the young people must first be effectively developed, supported, and cared for in order for them to access the learning on offer. One of the skills that was explicitly taught was that of recognising and articulating emotions:

> To be able to articulate how they may be feeling because it's a big rollercoaster of emotions there and a lot of emotions roll into one and they kind of feel the same for a lot of our young people. ... [T]hey don't know how to maybe strip them back or identify how that may feel or, you know, apply a word to how they feel. (Frank)

Staff identified a role in emotionally coaching a child by helping to regulate heightened affective states. Mark described this succinctly as trying to "calm them down, give them better coping strategies so the next time what are we gonna do differently". Importantly, staff suggested that it was vital to acknowledge, accept, and model awareness of their own emotions to expand young people's emotional regulation repertoire to deal effectively with difficulties:

> We get stressed, we get anxious, we get annoyed, we get angry, but it's a bit like with the kids, it's then acknowledging our own emotions and being aware and then saying that this is how I'm feeling now. (Mark)

Frank was one of several participants who referred to the use of conversation as an informal means of 'therapy'. He noted that often young people would come to school so dysregulated that the best approach was to simply chat to them as long as was necessary for them to be calm and alert. He went on to talk at length about a novel method used by the school which encouraged conversation and provided experience of nurture to the young people, the introduction of chickens into the school grounds:

> So we would have conversations about, you know, the development of chickens, and how they organise themselves socially, and how you properly care for them and things like that, and that had a massive impact on loads of our young people, they were really interested in the topic, it led to some really good, high quality, therapeutic, really conversations about, you know, what families are like, what love looks like, how you care for more vulnerable members of society, all that sort of thing. (Frank)

Participants noted that young people in the setting might take part in individual or group-based interventions which might use psychotherapies and psychoeducation to provide adolescents with skills to cope with difficulties. However, issues around delivering interventions were noted, including challenges around matching young people of similar cognitive ability and the challenge of changing group dynamics and attendance. Specifically, David recognised that “a group is very difficult because they have to get on”; to further complicate matters, as a consequence of ever-changing dynamics outside the educational context, he noted that “they could get on one week and not the other week”.

Finally, mentoring in public situations was identified as a means of practicing new social, emotional, and practical skills out in the community and a means of deepening connections and providing relational repair through fun activities. Larry noted:

> We take for granted that a lot of our young people have these kinds of experiences. A lot of them haven’t experienced being out for dinner. So just like practical things that we take for granted that may have done and a lot of them haven’t had all them experiences. And birthday parties?

Theme 3: Changing Narratives

This theme was developed considering perceived narratives constructed about pupils in secure placements and the transformative potential of empathy. The impact of family, educational, and societal rejection on individual identities and on future narratives was clearly recognised by many participants. Systemic indifference to the fate of these traumatised young people was understood as a general societal misunderstanding of their distressed behaviour:

> People see the behaviour, but they don’t actually see that the child doesn’t have the neural pathways, doesn’t have the coping strategy, doesn’t have the skills, the capabilities to do any other. (Mark)

The importance of working to change these narratives both at individual and systemic levels was highlighted by several participants and summarised nicely by David and Mark respectively: “You’re trying to change their mind-set. You’re trying to change their

mind"; If we can get people understanding that there are things that affect the development of a young person".

Three main sub-themes emerged: Empowerment, participation, and advocacy; raising trauma awareness; and collaboration for success.

Empowerment, participation, and advocacy

> "It's not being done to you; it's being done with you." (David)

For many participants, advocacy began with eliciting and communicating the voice of the young person by clearly understanding their individual motivations and goals. It was recognised that advocating for themselves could be difficult for some young people, and as a result, in high stress meetings, adults' negative appraisals of their journey to secure placement were often all too easily confirmed. Marie noted that:

> Because quite often you have young people sitting round [the setting]… "This young person is so violent they are absolutely ridiculous" … then the young person comes in, somebody [someone in authority] says something, they go crazy, wreck the place, stone copped and the person's sitting there going, "I told ya that's exactly…".

Participants sought to empower young people and promote participation by anticipating potential misunderstandings in such high-stakes contexts through careful planning and preparation. Marie noted that in her practice she would often prepare the young person by "sit[ting] down with the young person, [and asking] what are the things that you want brought up at your LAC and we'll get them to write them down.

Additionally, participants noted that it was important that young people were offered the opportunity to set goals and make choices. Kim talked about her philosophy of teaching about the importance of making sure goals were relevant to the young person, "so my classes will always be built as I said, around their likes and dislikes, but also the things they see themselves doing in their future". Conversely, Larry noted that some young people 'enjoy' being at the centre as they do not have to make decisions for themselves. It was suggested, then, that when working with this population of young people, it was important not to pay lip service to empowerment and participation and to instead get to know the young person and give them choice to support a *growing* sense of empowerment.

> So basically, like, we enable the young people to develop with us, holistically … working with them to facilitate their personal and social and educational development. But it also enables them to develop their voice and their influence in their place in society to reach their full potential. … It's about empowerment and ownership. (Mark)

Many participants highlighted the issue of general societal misunderstandings of the young people and noted that systemic negativity might in part be addressed by using their potentially different experiences of pupils to advocate on their behalf. For example, Marie highlighted the importance of education staff attending LAC reviews:

> We've had young people … that have not been allowed in school … because their behaviour has been so bad … they come to school … excellent, some of the best young people we've had … that's why it is important that education staff go to LACs (…) because sometimes we are the only positive thing that is said in those meetings.

The importance of gaining an informed, contextualised understanding also underpinned the criticism some participants had regarding stakeholders and decisions made based on potentially negative societal judgements. Marie went on to talk about the importance of training for stakeholders involved in the decision-making process: "It's about experience; if you're gonna make a decision about someone you make sure that you know what you are talking about ... and I don't mean just from … little bits of paper." In addition, Larry commented on the importance of stakeholders understanding and empathising with how community has shaped the lives of the young people:

> I think you need to go through the process of working in the community at least, understand the community. Community development, community dynamics. Understand what it is like to grow up … and understand completely what it's like as an individual to live in them environments.

Raising trauma awareness

Participants highlighted the importance of raising trauma awareness but also of the need for resources such as training, time, information, and finances to support a trauma-informed model. Frank reflected on professional training and his previous roles in mainstream schools which had not necessarily provided him with the resources to support looked after children or children who experienced trauma:

> From having been in mainstream myself, I remember those young people, and I remember that as a classroom teacher, you didn't necessarily have the time and space or training to know, "Oh, this young person rips their homework up because of this, that or the other", you know, and, you don't really have the time to go into that kind of depth.

It was suggested that mainstream schools could realistically adopt more psychologically-informed practice, including information on trauma and attachment ("schools need to have an understanding of trauma and need to have an understanding of attachment"). Participants reflected that the development of trauma-

informed approaches within wider educational systems may provide both staff with greater empathy and young people with a greater insight into their difficulties. This may facilitate a change in individual narratives and create a sense of hope for the young people. Reflecting upon how others working in non-secure settings might seek to prevent potential secure placement, Marie stressed:

> GET INFORMED, get trauma informed, get attachment informed, get every bit of information that you can get and (.) put yourself (.) in the shoes of the young person. It's all about empathy.

A few participants reflected on the value of providing key adults to build relationships with young people in mainstream schools. David suggested that the key adult would ideally be non-judgemental ("not somebody who's gonna be judgemental") and an advocate for the young person within the school environment, as well as "a key person to be the link person with the home". Furthermore, it was suggested that the key adult could mphasise the young person's strengths, build their sense of self-worth and a positive outlook for the future.

Participants also highlighted the importance of ongoing self-reflection. Kim talked both about the importance of "being reflective and the next day coming with something new, so it's about trying new things all the time," but also about the benefits of reflecting on incidents and events with young people:

> that's where you would reflect on what happened, you know, this happened, this happened why, you know, why did it happen, how did it make you feel? Next time that happens, you know, how can we, what can we do better? (Kim)

Thus, it was recognised that an outcome of reflective practice was empathy and flexibility in approach to the young people and adapting your ways of working to meet future challenges. Larry noted that:

> Self-development is massive. And the reason being is that … you're asking young people to make changes in behaviours and habits. But as an adult … How difficult that is for ourselves? Plucking them out of their communities, everything that they valued or been around, you're asking them … just to dis-attach from it. And you're not allowed contact with this person, who could be your family members, or people that they love, or get on with. … If you're wanting young people to change and develop, then you need to change and develop yourself during that time. That journey never ends for anybody.

Collaboration for success

> It really is that transfer of care and making that as precise,…, because you don't want a child starting from scratch every time, you know. (Kim)

One of the clearest messages that emerged from the data was the sense that pupils are constantly moving, in a state of flux, in different settings and schools and with different staff, resulting in an ongoing cycle of 'loss and change'. Many statements reflected this state of transience, with frequent mention of young people's past and new starts. Frank, for example, noted that, "for a lot of them, they're bouncing around between all these different places" and this point was underscored by Mark, who reflected that "…there's probably maybe 30/40/50 kids that would bounce between ourselves, juvenile justice and CAMHS".

Many participants identified multi-agency collaboration in the handover process or lack of consistency in key workers when children left the setting as potential barriers to support. It was noted that when children moved across academic or health and social care settings, there was the tendency for their information, and therefore progress, to be lost.

> It would be nice if there was something that was a continuous thread for them…, and they didn't feel like once they left one place, everything that they did there was lost. (Frank)

It was recognised that the often short-term nature of the placements impacted on the young people's motivation to connect and engage with the learning opportunities on offer. Frank highlighted this as a significant barrier to learning: "We get a lot of young people who come to us, who be like, Aww, there's no point in doing anything, 'cause I'll be back there in two weeks."

Participants highlighted steps that had been taken to promote more continuity and to try to smooth the transition process for the pupils. For example, Frank noted that the school had recently opted to offer OCN qualifications because other settings were offering the same: "That's why we picked OCN, because we were aware that all these other agencies were starting to move to OCN so if we move to it as well it does give them more consistency."

Many participants expressed a desire to be able to communicate with other professionals more collaboratively during the transition processes:

> That's something I really want to happen is that we should be able to follow that process through. Like to follow through [where they have the right]… The same people – the same social worker, the same … all them different people. It's like. Nothing … efforts followed through. (Frank)

Participants highlighted how collaboration provided an opportunity to construct a 'rich picture' of the child's life story; to summarise and interpret specialist information (e.g., statements of Special Educational Needs and scores of cognitive assessments); to better understand the young person's difficulties; and to produce more tailored

interventions. David highlighted the importance of " trying to chart their whole life history of how they came to here and look at what are their therapeutic needs … and what needs to be worked on and trying to coordinate who's doing what".

It was recognised that a potential barrier to multi-agency collaboration was the multiplicity of agencies involved. This included various sectors of health and social care such as social work, youth work, clinical psychology, educational psychology and drug and alcohol services. There was also input from the voluntary sector such as charities working with offenders and LAC. The staff also noted that the child's guardians may not be their actual parents and therefore there may be different parties who represent the person with parental responsibility. Participants acknowledged the challenge of bringing all these agencies and individuals together and the importance of a 'link' individual:

> There has to be something to link us all. So, what is it that makes us come together? …That is something I've noticed, like when you're in different organisations even, voluntary sector is completely different from statutory sector. Their ethoses are different. … Their needs should be something that brings us together as one. And it has to be the child's needs. It has to be child-centred. (David)

Opportunities for joint training events with other disciplines to upskill and build the capacity of staff for work with this vulnerable population were valued ("we did a joint initiative with clinical psychology"). Participants also highlighted that an effective collaborative relationship had been established with local employability services, and Frank was not alone in expressing hope that further steps would be taken in the future to promote collaboration and continuity in education: "It would be nice if there was something that was a continuous thread for them …, and they didn't feel like once they left one place, everything that they did there was lost."

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the perspectives of specialist professional staff on the educational needs of LAC in a secure accommodation setting in the UK using an appreciative enquiry approach (Liebling et al., 1999). The study was framed within three research questions aiming to understand the diverse range of special educational needs experienced by children and young people within the setting, and strategies considered effective in meeting these needs.

Findings are captured within three main themes that situate the possibilities for meaningful contribution to pupils as contingent upon knowing the young person's individual history, and using this knowledge to create bespoke learning plans and safe therapeutic spaces and to change individual and societal narratives associated with these marginalised young people.

Firstly, consistent with limited previous research, findings indicate that young people residing in this secure setting more commonly present with special educational needs (Haydon, 2016). In common with Ellis (2012), Harder et al. (2014), and Smeets (2014), the range of needs was broad and multifaceted. As suggested by Hales et al. (2019), ADHD, ASD and learning difficulties were prevalent, and in line with Haydon (2016) and Pates et al. (2019), mental health difficulties, attachment difficulties, substance misuse, self-harm, and suicidal ideation were considered common. They were also considered by these participants to be most complex and most difficult to address.

Whilst individual diagnoses were considered important and helpful in developing bespoke learning plans for individual pupils, it appeared that they could be 'hit and miss'. It was noted that in line with the findings of Parsons et al. (2019), many children had appeared to fall through the net, or may have been mis-diagnosed prior to entry to the setting. In common with Byrne (2019) and Macdonald and Millen (2012), considered more significant was an appreciation of the individual trauma history of the young person. Also consistent with previous research, participants indicated that in their experience the adversity experienced by the young people had impacted their sense of self, their arousal levels, attention and concentration and motivation (Harder et al., 2014; McConnell et al., 2019; Smeets, 2014; Smith & Mack, 2019).

Fundamentally, and also in common with other research, the young people were believed to have engaged poorly with an inflexible education system (Ahmed, 2019), resulting in poor academic achievement, exclusion, and poor attendance and poorer life outcomes (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Haydon, 2016; Morales-Ocaña & Pérez-García, 2018). Given that engagement is considered key to learning and academic success and offers protective benefits with regard to delinquent behaviours, all participants placed great emphasis on teachers and school staff understanding the young person's 'story' and getting to know them as individuals as a priority.

The findings offer evidence to support work that demonstrates both the practical and theoretical usefulness of an explicitly trauma-informed approach within secure education settings (Gallard et al., 2009). In keeping with research that identified the use of specific goals, flexible delivery, and a holistic approach as successful educational strategies in similar settings (Prince et al., 2019), participants found that creating bespoke education plans that incorporate knowledge about the individual experience of the young person, their current interests and educational needs, their viewpoints and choice, helped to instil motivation, engagement, and a sense of hope. Bespoke plans focused on meeting both psychosocial and academic learning needs and were goal-oriented and designed as far as possible to be transferable to other settings.

Secondly, and in common with Hake et al. (2013), the findings highlight the importance of providing stability and comfort in otherwise changing and unpredictable lives, by establishing spaces for children and young people with the primary aim of offering a sense of safety, relational repair, and emotional regulation. In keeping with research suggesting that these young people may require intensive intervention to meet physical, social, emotional, and/or behavioural needs before engaging in formal education (Warner et al., 2019), the role of participants in the establishment of a good attachment which is seen to be fundamental to a student's socio-emotional well-being, school engagement, and academic achievement (Bergin and Bergin, 2009) was seen as significant. Participants also highlighted the importance of teaching explicit socio-cognitive skills and, given the time-constraints imposed on the placement, focusing on the present and future rather than the past.

Thus, in common with the findings of Mehay and Champion (2019), cultivating relational legacies through building positive relationships and genuine connections that contribute to repairing the effects of early developmental trauma and restoring feelings of safety for children and adolescents was considered essential, alongside developing emotional literacy skills, role modelling, and mentoring. Emotional well-being was considered a priority and young people were explicitly taught skills and strategies to soothe heightened emotional states before learning could take place. Novel approaches to addressing psychoeducation as well as well-being and regulation needs were discussed.

Thirdly, staff were consistent in their resolve to change the narratives that exist around the young people in their care. The importance of advocacy, empowerment, and meaningful participation in decision-making, whilst challenging, was emphasised, and was considered contingent on informed contextual understanding and empathy from all stakeholders. Moreover, consistent with Byrne (2019), strong emphasis was placed on collaboration between and within agencies, with a lack of co-operation between social services and education considered a major barrier to the facilitation of academic success (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Conclusions and Implications

A few recommendations were proposed to support the needs of LAC in schools. First and foremost, being trauma-aware and trauma-informed was considered vital to effectively and realistically formulate and conceptualise the complex needs of LAC. Participants recommended that it would be beneficial for mainstream schools to further develop their understanding of the effects and impact of the experience of trauma (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Participants noted that the clear association between trauma histories and poor and inconsistent educational experiences should be acknowledged and trauma-informed formulations should be explicit within multi-disciplinary and collaborative teams around the young person to support long-term planning (Smith & Mack, 2019).

Relationships between adults and children and young people are a vehicle for growth (Smith & Mack, 2019). Simply coming alongside the LAC, being present, offering unconditional positive regard, and ultimately building respect and trust were considered critical to relational repair. Also, modelling of safe and functional relationships, and an ongoing process of training and self-reflection, possibly as part of a formal supervision process, were considered to be as important as collaboration with the young person, empowering them by giving appropriate control and choice, a concept rarely experienced by this disempowered cohort.

More generally, it has been recognised that there is also a responsibility amongst staff to reduce negative labelling and exclusionary practices that stigmatise already marginalised children and young people (Byrne, 2019). Staff should aim to shift individual and societal narratives, promote flexibility, and keep children in mainstream where possible.

Lastly, professionals have a responsibility to collaborate with each other, attend key meetings where possible, and use this as an opportunity to advocate directly on behalf of the young person (Prince et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study makes a unique contribution to the limited body of literature on LAC in secure accommodation. The study has several strengths, including its focus on exploring how different multi-level factors intersect to impact the educational outcomes of these children rather than concentrating solely on one or two factors. That is, the study provides an ecologically valid perspective on the various systems interacting within secure accommodation. However, the findings should be considered in the light of the following limitations, which could be addressed in future research.

Firstly, the study focused on staff perspectives in one secure accommodation setting in the UK, which may limit the generalisability of results. Future research should replicate the study in other secure settings to build a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of vulnerable young people and highlight areas of good practice.

Secondly, it is likely that the development of themes was influenced by the appreciative inquiry framework, which focused on the positive aspects of the setting. It would be useful for future research to adopt an alternative theoretical lens to gain a more objective interpretation.

Thirdly, and most significantly, limitations around this research did not permit the team to give voice to the young people themselves. Future research should explore their thoughts and views about their educational experiences.

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