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Enabling talk and reframing messages: working creatively with care experienced children and young people to recount and re-represent their everyday experiences

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ABSTRACT

The educational experiences and outcomes of care experienced children and young people is of longstanding concern. The pervasive inequalities they face suggest that current policies have been unable to respond fully to the complex causes of the problem. This paper reflects on a qualitative study into the educational experiences and aspirations of children and young people who are looked after in Wales. The project worked with care experienced peer researchers and drew on visual, creative and participatory techniques to explore 67 children's and young people's experiences of education and, importantly, their opinions on what could be done to improve it. This multimodal approach allowed space for participants to think through their subjective, mundane, but important, experiences that operate alongside, and interact with, more structural challenges. A range of films, magazines, artwork, and music outputs were developed to ensure that the project recommendations could reach wide and diverse audiences. This paper argues the voices of children and young people need to be given a platform to inform policy and practice. For this to happen researchers need to be creative in their approaches to both fieldwork and dissemination; harnessing the power of the arts to make positive changes in the everyday lives of children and young people.

KEYWORDS

Care; children; education; participatory research; visual methods; young people

Introduction

Childhood and youth are often presented as a state of becoming in which the task is to develop from a state of immaturity to the (adult) state of competence and knowing, a positioning that means children and young people are constrained by ignorance, passivity and powerlessness (O'Dell, 2008). This everyday construction of childhood negates the active role children and young people can play in research and policy, and engenders a climate where our practices often omit the subjective lived experiences of children and young people themselves (Mannay et al., 2017a).

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The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the new sociology of childhood, have argued for a shift where children and young people are viewed as the experts in their own lives (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; James & James, 2004). Yet, studies focused on children and young people in care are often weighted towards the words and ideas of researchers, professionals and policy makers; rather than those of the children and young people themselves (Winter, 2006; McLeod, 2007). Some researchers have attempted to centralise care experienced children's and young peoples' subjective accounts of their experiences (see Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010; National Fostering Framework, 2016; Ross, Renold, Holland, & Hillman, 2009), however, there remains a paucity of work that actively seeks the views of children and young people who are looked after.

Participatory research projects have worked hard to resolve the goal of "giving voice", but a "recurring issue for researchers is that of whose voice is being spoken and, simultaneously, whose voice is being heard, particularly when research participants are children" (Mannay, 2016, p. 6). There are both possibilities and limitations attached to initiatives aimed at "giving voice", and while some engender forms of meaningful participation, others are accused of simply "ticking boxes and missing the point" (Batsleer, 2008, p. 141). Importantly, even where research successfully engages and works collaboratively with children and young people there can be difficulties in translating their recommendations into policy and practice. Consequently, the implications of academic research often appear to have little impact on practice, policy or communities, limiting opportunities for change and improvement (Finfgeld, 2003; Troman, 2001). This disjuncture between listening (researchers) and hearing (wider audiences) can act to silence children's and young people's voices.

Consequently, raising the voice of children and young people in care is not simply about engaging them in research and documenting their views, but also about disseminating their messages in accessible ways that can engender changes in both policy and everyday practice. This is particularly important because care experienced children and young people are reported to perform less well than the general population across a range of outcomes, both in education and across the lifecourse (Jackson, 1994, 2010; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Luke, 2015; Sebba et al., 2015; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015; Stein, 2012; Welsh Government, 2016a).

The following sections focus on the methodological techniques and dissemination strategies in a qualitative research study that attempted to enable the perspectives of children and young people to be both listened too and acted upon. An outline of the study is offered to provide the reader with some background contextualisation. This is followed by a discussion of the specific techniques adopted to work with children and young people in the fieldwork process, leading to a reflection on the multimodal forms of dissemination produced to communicate the research findings. Lastly, the paper sets out the key limitations of, and recommendations from, the project.

Study methodology

The research reflected on in this paper was generated as part of a Welsh Government-commissioned study to explore the educational experiences, attainment and aspirations of care experienced children and young people in Wales (Mannay et al., 2015, 2017a). The study was conducted through the collaboration of the Children's Social Care Research

and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University, The Fostering Network¹ Voices from Care Cymru² and Spice Innovate.³ The 67 participants include 22 in primary school (aged 6–11); 17 in secondary school (aged 11–16); 26 who had completed compulsory education with mixed engagement with further education (aged 16–27); and two in higher education. As of 31 March 2015 there were 5,615 children in public care in Wales: 2595 girls (46.3%) and 3020 boys (53.7%) (Welsh Government, 2016a); and the sample was closely aligned with this distribution as 27 (40%) were female and 40 (60%) were male. All participants had attended mainstream schools and experienced a range of care placements; and they were purposively recruited through the networks of the research partners and other external agencies.

Research activities included visual and creative activities, focus groups and individual interviews. Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim and analysed concurrently throughout data production, allowing codes, categories and themes to emerge from the empirical data produced with children and young people. Data were analysed using an inductive and deductive approach, creating overarching thematic categories and analytical themes arising from coding and categories across the data sets. The visual materials, which were photographed at the point of data production, acted as tools of elicitation, rather than objects of analysis per se. However, they were considered in the analysis to clarify and extend the associated interview transcripts. Ethical approval for this study was provided by Cardiff University.

Raising the voice of children and young people in care—data production

There has been an increased use of participatory visual methods with children and young people, employing an array of multimodal techniques, which are posited as ways to enable researchers to work alongside participants and offer more nuanced understandings of their lives (Brady & Brown, 2013; Cahill, 2007; Lomax, 2015). These approaches are often undertaken in relation to a commitment to children and young people's participation in research about them, and an attempt to foster that participation (O'Kane, 2008; Kim, 2015). They also align with the Welsh Government's formal commitment to children's rights, which has strengthened the national basis for children's and young people's direct participation in research studies (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004). Whilst they are not a guarantee of full and active participation, creative methods have the potential for more collaborative data production (Mannay, 2013).

Drawing on this body of work the study drew on a range of visual and creative techniques and our approach attempted to enable participants to take part in the research in a meaningful way. A further rationale for introducing a multimodal approach was to resist the recreation of the social work question and answer style interview. The formal social care and legal processes involved in placing a child or young person into public care mean all of the participants would have experienced some form of social work encounter, which may have informed fundamental decisions about their lives, including removal from their birth families. Therefore, it was important to frame the researcher encounter differently both in terms of participation being a choice and differentiating the forms of communication and interaction.

The work with primary school (aged 6–11) and secondary school (aged 11–16) children and young people was situated in all day events arranged in conjunction with The Fostering

Network. They included activities such as clay modelling; wall climbing, sport based games; and jewellery, t-shirt and bag making, where participants could take home the items they created. Within these activity based days children and young people who wanted to be included in the research element told us they wanted to join in or put their name on a card and pegged it on a string to let us know they were happy to take part. This approach provided opportunities to get to know the children and young people and kept the activities open to everyone, whether or not they wanted to take part in the study.

The research fieldwork included semi-structured interviews, emotion sticker activities and sandboxing incorporating an elicitation interview. Children and young people could select whichever activity they preferred in the recognition that some approaches are not necessarily appropriate to use with some participants (Thomson, 2007; Johnson, Pfister, & Vindrola-Padros, 2012). Children and young people were provided with card, paper, coloured pencils and pens, and emotion stickers representing happiness and sadness, to create a mind-map of salient aspects of their school life. Emotion stickers have been used successfully in other studies with children and young people (Gabb & Fink, 2015) and these activities offered an opportunity for participants to indicate how they felt about different aspects of their everyday schooled lives.

The term “sandboxing” is used to distinguish our distinct development of the therapeutic approaches of “sand play” and the “world technique” (Lowenfeld, 1979; Hutton, 2004) to a tool for qualitative research inquiry (Mannay, Staples, & Edwards, 2017b). The sandboxing activity involved plastic, portable trays, filled with sand and a range of miniature figures including people, houses, trees, fences, animals, transport and street signs, which are consistent with contemporary applications of the technique (Sangganavanich & Magnuson, 2011). Children and young people created miniature worlds with the equipment that either reflected on their educational experiences or their aspirations for the future. The creative activities were all followed with individual elicitation interviews.

These approaches have some participatory elements, however, they can only be considered as partially participatory as children and young people were not involved in the design of the project (Mannay, 2016). Consequently, finding ways to involve participants in all elements of the research process is an important consideration for future projects (see Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2017). Additionally, despite the introduction of participatory techniques, some of the interviews reverted to a researcher led question and answer format, which inadvertently closed down opportunities for participants to express their own ideas and experiences. This could be attributed to a range of factors, including the differential experience in working with both creative methods and children and young people within the research team; the participants’ varied levels of reticence or openness; the suitability of the activity in relation to participants distinct preferences (see also Johnson et al., 2012); or the pressure to produce data within a set time frame (see Mannay & Morgan, 2015). These examples illustrated the tensions between how best to centralise the voices of children and young people, whilst at the same time addressing the requirements of researchers and funding bodies (Lomax, 2015).

Nevertheless, the sandboxing allowed for some participants to creatively and imaginatively build worlds that have meaning and relevance for themselves and lead the conversation in the elicitation interviews. The sticker activity also enabled some participants to discuss their experiences on their own terms. Furthermore, the visual activities shifted the gaze to the creative product, which engendered a less intensive and invasive form of

conversation and communication that was “responsive to participants’ own meanings and associations” (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 547).

The focus groups with older young people and care leavers (aged 16–27) also incorporated visual activities such as a bombs and shields task where participants could consider what had acted as barriers and protectors in their educational journeys. Additionally, vignettes were introduced to explore common issues care experienced children and young people face in education settings. These issues, barriers and protectors featured a range of topics including relationships with carers, teachers and practitioners; stereotyping and expectations; placement and school moves; and access to resources (see Mannay et al., 2015, 2017a).

The focus groups included care experienced peer researchers who had been trained in social research methods as part of CASCADE Voices⁴ (see Staples, Roberts, Lyttleton-Smith, & Hallett, 2019). This bespoke two day training programme included teaching and activities focussed on ethics, research techniques, confidentiality and safeguarding. Peer researchers are increasingly active in the research process and their role has the potential to reduce the power imbalance that can often exist between adult researcher and young participant (Stein & Verweijen-Slannescu, 2012; Lushey & Monroe, 2014).

Peer researchers were invited to work collaboratively in the research because their “insider knowledge” was seen as advantageous. Peer researchers conducted the focus groups with the support of the research team. They had a base interview schedule devised by the research team, however, they were able to draw on their own expertise and experience in the fieldwork. This sometimes involved their appraisal that the questions or activities were “not working” and this advice and the necessary adjustments were able to produce a rich and nuanced data set relating to young people’s experiences of education. Arguably, this capacity to direct changes in the fieldwork process, moved beyond a form of manipulative, or decorative or tokenistic involvement (Hart, 1992) and provided an opportunity for meaningful participation.

Children and young people shared their stories, emotions, experiences and suggestions for changes, which generated a series of recommendations (see Mannay et al., 2015). The narratives of participants’ educational experiences were imbued with feelings of being different from those who have not experienced care, and how the label of “looked-after” became an imposed central aspect of their identity. This difference and labelling was experienced overtly through meetings related to their care circumstances being held during school time, and in more subtle ways where they felt their care status influenced, and changed, teachers’ expectations around their academic potentialities and behaviour.

In response, they asked for teachers and social workers to respect their privacy by not taking them out of active classes or having meetings in schools that were visible to other pupils. They also discussed the balance between transparency and knowledge and the detrimental impacts of hearing discussions and disagreements related to their funding. Additionally, children and young people shared their aspirations, which included gaining degrees and entering a range of professions (see Mannay et al., 2015), and argued practitioners often held low expectations for their educational outcomes. These low expectations situated them as “supported subjects”, who were “let off” from doing homework or actively participating in lessons, because of assumptions linked to their care status, which resulted in unintended negative consequences for their educational outcomes (see Mannay et al., 2017a).

This meaningful participation, both from peer researchers and participants not only generated important data but also put an onus on the researchers to act on that data. Participants had asked about what would happen to their messages and who would listen to their voice, and the answer could not simply be a report and the usual traditional journal articles and book chapters. In reviewing the literature and statistical patterns in the project, we were well aware that the concerns raised by children and young people in previous studies around labelling, low expectations, meetings held in school time, and a lack of resources, had not yet been addressed, and the gaps in educational attainment suggested pervasive inequalities. Therefore, it was important for the project to make an impact and forge opportunities to connect with diverse audiences who could contribute to enacting positive changes for care experienced children and young people. The following section documents the ways in which we worked with the creative industries to develop a multi-modal set of dissemination materials.

Raising the voice of children and young people in care—dissemination

As in other forms of social research, the initial project, completed in November 2015, generated the standard outputs of chapters and journal articles; but their audiencing is often restricted to academia (Timmins, 2015). The project report also informed government policy and had an impact at the national level with its recommendations being incorporated in the strategy document “Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales” and featuring in the guidance document, “Making a difference—a guide for the designated person for looked after children” (see Welsh Government, 2016b, 2017). However, these forms of outputs may be inaccessible, unattractive or too lengthy to promote engagement with foster carers, young people, teachers, social workers and other practitioners on the ground. Therefore, it was important to develop a range of diverse, engaging and accessible set of output materials⁵ and work in conjunction with the creative industries.⁶

These materials were generated from various funding sources,⁷ and included five films, six graphic art materials, four music videos, a magazine for young people, *Thrive*, a magazine for Foster Carers, *Greater Expectations*, and an education charter. These outputs incorporated the data from the initial project and further consultation work with young people. *Thrive* and *Greater Expectations* translated the finding and recommendations into a magazine format with problem pages, features and advice sections, which resonate with other popular print press publications and are more accessible for the target audiences of foster carers and young people. These outputs had a combined print run of 10,000 copies, which were posted out to children, young people and foster carers nationally.

The educational charter, #messagetoschools was designed with input from young people, and a film and three graphic art posters were created on the advice of young people, who said they wanted their charter to be more than “a list of points on a wall”. The films and songs were hosted on the institutional website, and these have been shared in face-to-face workshops where over 800 key stakeholders attended and learnt how to embed the innovative findings and techniques from the study into their everyday practice. These multimodal outputs have had over 3000 views on YouTube and the Welsh Government also commissioned an online community of practice ExChange: Care and Education,⁸ which offers a platform for the project outputs alongside a range of other free resources for

foster carers, young people and other key stakeholders. The artwork has also been widely disseminated with a mail-out of the charter and associated posters to 1600 schools, and individual practitioners using the poster and postcard versions in their workplace settings.

These activities have attempted to counter the criticism that research findings have little impact on communities outside of academia (Finfgeld, 2003; Troman, 2001), and feedback cards and surveys have illustrated the ways in which the research findings have enacted changes in both perspectives and everyday practice. For example, one practitioner commented on how the materials “reinforced the need to provide a voice for the child—give them choices. Listen actively, support, believe in them and push them to meet their potential”. Other responses from practitioners have included comments such as “implement this in my everyday work” and “ensure all appointments for young people take place outside of their education”, suggesting a potential for the research recommendations to translate into changes on the ground.

Young people were also pleased with the multimodal outputs and how they had represented their experiences with one event feedback card stating it was nice to hear someone speaking “the truth” about care experienced young people, and others documenting engagement with the materials made them feel more confident about achieving in educational settings. However, the extent to which children and young people will notice any difference in their educational journeys more widely in relation to this project, and the considerable related work undertaken by the Welsh Government, is an important consideration and question. In line with their current strategy document “Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales” (Welsh Government, 2016b), the Welsh Government have commissioned a series of consultations with children and young people. These consultations will ask this question, and potentially provide some indication of the continuities and changes in care and educational experiences for children and young people in Wales.

However, importantly, the creation of this multimodal set of outputs was not without issue and they must be seen as a re-representation and re-visualisation of children’s and young people’s accounts. The use of images and videos of children and young people raises many ethical questions for researchers (Allen, 2009); and having freely accessible materials online means that outputs cannot be taken back and are available in some form for “time immemorial” (Brady & Brown, 2013; Mannay, 2016). Furthermore, it was a condition of the ethical approval process for the study the confidentiality of participants would be protected. Consequently, it was important for the research team not to use the images or voices of participants, which can create a disjuncture in participatory approaches premised on “giving voice” to children and young people. Arguably though, simply being seen does not automatically mean that children’s and young people’s messages are heard, in this way our preference for confidentiality and anonymity also centralised other ways for these accounts to retain some form of authenticity.

We worked carefully with artists and young people outside of the research to create voice overs and translate the key research messages from interview transcripts into artwork, songs and films. This work had some tensions and it was often difficult to ensure the re-representations aligned with the initial interviews (see Mannay, Roberts, & Staples, 2019; Staples et al., 2019). For example, we worked with children and young people to provide voice overs in the films. These were not the original research participants, some were care experienced and others were not, and these voices were not always well matched. It is difficult to

recreate the tone, emphasis and depth of meaning from the original accounts, and this was not always achieved; nevertheless, the central messages of the accounts were retained. The artwork, magazine articles and songs were also not a direct representation, rather one edited in relation to the mode of media. However, overall, the researchers and the children and young people involved who have seen and commented on the outputs, feel they have kept an active sense of the stories shared, the experiences documented and, importantly, the key messages about what needs to change.

Reflections and recommendations

This paper has argued creativity can be useful in both generating data and disseminating messages from care experienced children and young people. Participatory approaches to research fieldwork have been challenged in relation to whose story is actually being told (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003), and here children and young people were not involved in the design of the project. Therefore, the participatory elements were restricted to the creative data production activities but they did allow some children and young people to have more control in the interview discussions, shifted the emphasis from a more intense researcher/researched frame to one where the visual data was centralised as the focus of attention, and enabled some distance from the formal question and answer style that characterises encounters with social workers and other professionals. As Ball and Smith (2001, p. 313) suggest “the greater use of visual methods is not a panacea for all ethnography’s ills nor is it the touchstone to startling ethnographic discoveries”, nevertheless, they can foster different forms of research encounter and be useful tools for working with, rather than researching on children and young people in care.

Creativity can also feature in the dissemination of research findings and recommendations. Traditional forms such as reports and academic outputs have value, but they do not always result in enough impact with diverse and wide audiences (Timmins, 2015). In response to participants’ interest in what we would do with the data we asked ourselves the question, “what impact does voice have if no one is listening?” (Alexandra, 2015, p. 43). The ethical issues around confidentiality and anonymity meant that the multimodal outputs were re-representations and re-visualisations of the original data, but efforts were made as far as possible to retain the authenticity of children’s and young people’s accounts.

Producing a range of multimodal outputs can extend both the reach and impact of research studies and go some way towards not only raising the voice of children and young people in care but ensuring there are opportunities for these voices to be heard, and acted upon. Importantly, both the initial research project and additional impact activities were supported by the Welsh Government, who shared our vision for impact and change. This underlines the benefits of researchers understanding their national policy context, building relationships and reputations over time, and working collaboratively with policy makers to achieve common goals (see Lenihan, 2018).

Conclusion

As discussed at the outset of this paper, research evidence suggests within Wales, the UK and internationally, children and young people in care achieve poorer educational outcomes compared to individuals not in care (Brady & Gilligan, 2018; Jackson, 1994,

2010; O’Higgins et al., 2015; Sebba et al., 2015; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Berger et al., 2015; Stein, 2012; Welsh Government, 2016a). Our experiences of working with children and young people in care has engendered both an admiration for the individuals we have encountered, and at the same time, a disappointment that despite social research and policy interventions, they are faced with pervasive educational and social inequalities which can have consequences for their transitions to the workplace and their sense of security, self and ongoing stability. Consequently, we have argued it is important to both enable talk and reframe messages. This process of generating new conversations, which centralise children’s and young peoples’ experiences, ideas and recommendations, can be aided by engaging with a range of creative research techniques. In re-representing these everyday experiences and calls for change, creativity, art, film and music can also play a valuable role. Accordingly, this paper contributes to calls to raise the volume of the voices of care experienced children and young people, and to develop mechanisms which can inform, and potentially improve, public services in the fields of social care and education.

Notes

1. The Fostering Network is a fostering charity, providing support and campaigning to improve foster care.
2. Voices from Care Cymru is a charity led and inspired by looked-after children and care leavers.
3. Spice Innovations provides a system for organisations and individuals to exchange their skills and resources.
4. CASCADE Voices a collaboration between Voices from Care Cymru and the Children’s Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE). Members of the group have been involved in a range of research related activities.
5. The multimodal outputs from this project are hosted at <http://www.exchangewales.org/laceproject> and <http://www.exchangewales.org/messagestoschools>
6. The multimodal outputs were produced in association with a number of organisations including The Fostering Network, Voices from Care Cymru, the Care Forum Wales Looked After Children Network, Hummingbird Audio Landscaping, Cat & Mouse, Ministry of Life, Like an Egg, and the artists DroneBoy Laundry and Nathan Bond; and a number of young people.
7. The initial project was commissioned by the Welsh Government which included funding for the production of the initial four films and the Thrive magazine. Further funding for the multimodal outputs was sourced from the Cardiff University Engagement Team funding, and the Economic and Social Research Council’s Impact and Acceleration Account fund, administered by Cardiff University.
8. ExChange: Care and Education—<http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade/looked-after-children-andeducation/>

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Account fund, administered by Cardiff University. It is also important to note the role of collaborating organisations in the impact and engagement activities facilitated by the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), namely Ministry of Life, Like an Egg, Hummingbird Audio Landscaping, Cat & Mouse, Voices from Care Cymru, The Fostering Network, Drone-Boy Laundry, Nathan Bond, and the Care Forum Wales - Looked After Children Network. A number of doctoral students, peer researchers and administrative staff at Cardiff University also played a central role in the design and delivery of the research and dissemination process. We also acknowledge the role of Professor Sally Holland in developing the proposal for the initial research, and Louisa Roberts, Jennifer Lyttleton-Smith, Phil Smith and Cindy Corliss for their work in the dissemination activities.

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Eleanor Staples is a Senior Research Associate at the University of Bristol, School for Policy Studies. Her PhD critically examined Sure Start, the New Labour flagship early years programme in England. Her research interests include children and families involved with children's social care, gender, social justice, and critical social policy analysis. She has been involved in research with children and young people 'in care' and 'in need', women in prison and their children, and mothers in marginalised communities. Eleanor is interested in producing data in creative, participatory ways with children, young people and their families, and in thinking through power, emotion and participation in research with vulnerable groups.

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Darren Andrews completed his doctoral research at the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. His PhD study titled 'Meeting the duty: An explorative study of four local authorities' 'Looked-After Children Education' (LACE) teams in Wales and their models for promoting the educational achievement of young people with looked-after status' was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Darren was a member of the research team who conducted the project 'Looked after Children and Education: Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales'.

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