Exploring factors contributing to the outcomes of Looked After Children

Ross Morrison
Robert Gordon University
Fraserburgh Children's Home

Mike Shepherd
Senior Lecturer
School of Applied Social Studies
Robert Gordon University
m.shepherd@rgu.ac.uk

Abstract

The need to improve outcomes for looked after children has been a long standing concern within Scotland. Looked after and accommodated children are some of the most vulnerable members within society. Recent literature and media highlight that often these children have poor outcomes in comparison to children within the general population.

This paper explores and analyses the outcomes for children and young people who have been accommodated by the local authority. The main outcome areas which have been explored are: mental health, education, teenage pregnancy and offending. The literature suggests that looked after children and young people face difficulties and inequalities within and across all these areas. The paper provides analysis of each outcome area and offers insight into the contributing factors causing these difficulties. Some commonalities emerged. Young people's experiences highlight concerns in relation to placement stability, relationships with others, involvement in decision making, and lack of support for care leavers. The assimilated literature and experiences of young people helped to form a greater understanding of how to assist in improving the outcomes for this disadvantaged group.

Introduction

In 2014 there were a total of 15,580 children being looked after by local authorities within Scotland (National Statistics 2015). The predominant focus within this study is on the children who are looked after and accommodated by the local authority. These children contribute to 9.4% (1,470) of the total looked after population (National Statistics 2015). These children may be accommodated in settings such as: residential homes, residential schools, secure units, and foster care. The children and young people accommodated away from home are often recognised as being amongst the most vulnerable within society (Golding et al. 2006).

Children can become accommodated for various reasons. However, these often arise through experience of trauma and/or maltreatment; which are also contributing factors to their increased vulnerability (CELCIS 2015a, Scottish Government 2015, Appelstein 1998).

It is widely acknowledged that the poor outcomes of children looked after by local authorities within Scotland have been a long standing area of concern (Happer, McCreadie and Aldgate 2006; Scottish Government 2008a; Dixon and Stein 2002). These poor outcomes are manifested in areas such as: offending,

mental health, education, and teenage pregnancy (Who Cares? Scotland 2015; Simkiss 2012; Smith 2009; Knight, Chase and Aggleton 2006). These areas correlate with and exert influence on each other. The general consensus within literature is that children who are looked after and accommodated fare worse in the above areas in comparison to their peers in the general population.

The deficient outcomes associated with children and young people in care have often led to criticisms regarding the effectiveness of residential care services (Forrester et al. 2009; Smith 2009). However, in the literature reviewed by Forrester et al. they were unable to find any evidence suggesting that public care actually had a negative impact upon a child's welfare. Instead they identified that it often had a positive effect which was undone by aftercare services which were not tailored to meet the needs of the service user group. Research on former residents of therapeutic children's homes also found that positive outcomes could be achieved in terms of emotional and behavioural wellbeing, physical health, accommodation, education and absence of offending (Gallagher and Green 2013). There is also consistent research which found that social work support with looked after children can help to ensure more positive outcomes (Pritchard and Williams 2009).

It has also been recommended that consideration should be given to the influencing factors that occur prior to a child entering residential accommodation (Forrester et al. 2009; Coman and Devaney 2011). Pre-care experience factors such as attachment, maltreatment and trauma can contribute to less favourable outcomes (Coman and Devaney 2011). Stein (2005) has acknowledged that "...for some young people care has provided them with a turning point, by removing them from a damaging family background and giving them an opportunity to develop their potential in new families, communities, and at school" (Cited in Brotherton and Cronin 2013 p. 99).

Is the Care System being used as a Scapegoat?

The public care system for children is not perfect and it definitely has its flaws. However, within some of the literature examined there were evident undertones of blame towards the care system – particularly residential homes – as being a significant factor contributing to negative outcomes (Blades et al. 2011; Barnardos 2006). As Grant and Kinman (2014) note there is still very much a blame culture within – and towards – social work services which has been promulgated by the media. The wider literature has acknowledged that the reality is a network of factors contributing to these poorer outcomes of looked after children (Forrester et al. 2009; Coman and Devaney 2011). These factors include areas such as: early experiences, poverty, and inequality - all of which have been targeted by the Scottish Government through the collaboration of the Early Years Framework, Achieving Our Potential and Equally Well policies (Scottish Government 2008b; Scottish Government 2008c; Scottish Government 2008d).

Clough, Bullock and Ward (2006) encapsulate the scapegoating of residential care and the importance of understanding early experiences:

> "Residential provision has to be evaluated in the context of the total lives of children. Too often staff in residential establishments have been castigated for failing to remedy long-standing problems. Of course it is reasonable to ask what can be expected from the period of

intervention, taking account of the child's history and home environment" (Clough, Bullock and Ward (2006 p. 2).

Smith (2009) questions the focus of outcomes for looked after and accommodated children. He recognises that although outcomes are important, poor outcomes can often lead to assumptions that care staff are not doing their jobs properly. Taylor's (2003 p. 248) research conclusion stressed the need to acknowledge that children enter care with "a baggage of disadvantage". It is therefore important to try and tackle the wider social and structural issues in place to try and prevent children being so disadvantaged through early intervention (Forrester et al. 2009).

Although some of the evidence suggests improvements can be made to the care system, in large it appears that in most cases the care system mitigates and repairs some of the early childhood traumas experienced prior to care. Forrester et al's review of research on the impact of public care on children's welfare found that there was very little evidence to suggest that the care system did impact upon children's welfare in a negative way; in almost all cases it actually improved (Forrester et al 2009).

However, this is not to say the care system resolved the early issues faced by maltreated children; but it acted as a buffer to improve their welfare. This is consistent with research which aimed to determine if social work made a difference in the lives of looked after children (Pritchard and Williams 2009). The research found that looked after children who received Social Work support had significantly better outcomes than the comparison group. However, it is not specified in the article if the children were looked after and accommodated or just supervised at home. Nevertheless, the research evidences that Social Work input can have a positive impact on outcomes for looked after children. Given that Social Workers can secure employment within residential settings, the research is applicable to the study of Social Work in residential settings. Gallagher and Green (2013) explored the outcomes of young adults who were within a therapeutic residential unit as children and revealed positive results in relation to their emotional and behaviour wellbeing, physical health, and accommodation.

Placement Instability

"I was lucky, I didn't move that much. It's the moving that messes kids up." (Jodie 19) – Holmes cited in (Gaskell 2010).

Placement instability was recognised throughout all of the themes explored as being a major influencing factor on outcomes of looked after children. Ward (2009) has highlighted the issue of instability in care within the English system; the same problems are acknowledged within Scotland with 30% of looked after children in Scotland experiencing 3 or more placement moves in 2004 (Happer, McCreadie and Aldgate 2006). Frequent changes of placement were attributed to the increased likelihood of negative outcomes for children and young people. Partly this was due to issues around the disruption of the rights and services that children may be accessing, such as mental health and education. However, placement instability was also recognised to attribute to a great deal of emotional disruption.

Theories relating to loss and change are pertinent to the concept of placement instability. Marris claimed that all change – positive or negative – involves elements of loss which contribute to a process of grieving (Marris 1986). Every

time a placement changes for a child there can be considered to be loss. Loss may be in the form of their identity; as they lose the familiarity of what is around them (Giddens 2009). It is easy to understand that a young person may be upset in a placement breakdown if they had invested time and formed relationships with carers. It may be more difficult for individuals to understand that even with children who appear to invest very little in their placement there is still loss and a need for grieving. In fact, children who regularly suffer from placement breakdowns can be at significant risk of their grief being disenfranchised; or undervalued (Doka 2002).

The themes of mistrust, loneliness and rejection were highlighted by looked after children in aforementioned research (Knight, Chase and Aggleton 2006). It is important to consider that placement breakdowns potentially reinforce these feelings; thus encouraging young people to invest less and less in subsequent placements. There is also the possibility that the young people are still going through the grieving process of previous placements. Parkes (1986) presented his model of the grieving process. He posited that young people may be stuck within a context of anger and guilt due to placement breakdowns. The reinforcement of these negative feelings could contribute to poor internal working models, afford low self-worth in young people, attributing to unsatisfactory outcomes (Bowlby 1969; Barn and Tan 2012).

The importance of children experiencing stability in their placement is well recognised (Happer, McCreadie and Aldgate 2006; Scottish Government 2008a). In order to achieve this it has been identified that better planning should be carried out to ensure that children are placed in environments that will best meet their needs (Scottish Government 2008a). Additionally this process should take place within the Scottish policy contexts of the Early Years Framework and Getting it Right for Every Child; in order to ensure that the needs of the child are met as early as possible (Scottish Government 2008b; Scottish Government 2012). Unfortunately, the planning required to ensure where a child is best placed is often beset by challenges. Lack of funding, the need for emergency placements, lack of time, and high caseloads are common examples of the barriers to best matching placements for children and young people.

Positive Relationships with Carers

The importance of positive and supportive relationships between looked after children and their carers was well documented within all areas of the reviewed literature. Therapeutic relationships have been highlighted as being "critical to achieving successful outcomes" within the Changing Lives report (Scottish Government 2006 p. 27). The therapeutic relationship has often been identified as the most important factor in curative work with service users; rather that specific intervention techniques (Lambert and Barley 2001).

As mentioned in the introduction, children who come in to the care of the local authority are amongst the most vulnerable within society (Golding et al. 2006). Part of this can be attributed to their early childhood experiences as some may have experienced maltreatment and trauma. This may have contributed to the formation of insecure attachment styles identified through the work of Ainsworth and Bell (1970). Children and young people with insecure attachments will likely have negative internal working models of self and others (Shaffer 2009; Bowlby 1969). These negative internal working

models may, as already described, lead to difficulties in forming relationships with others and low self-worth. James (1994) suggests:

> "a protective and supportive environment will allow children to commit to relationships within which they can heal from past hurts and say goodbye to lost relationships" (cited in Golding 2008 p. 81).

The work of Bion (1962) on containment is useful in understanding how carers can help and support to children and young people who have experienced trauma or maltreatment. Containment has been defined as the:

> "...mother bearing the uncontainable affects of her baby, and through her reverie, she detoxifies and transforms the affects into a form that allows the infant to tolerate them" (Gabbard and Wilkinson 2000 p. 75).

Although the above definition of containment is regarding the mother and baby relationship this is can also be simulated between the child and care giver. The care giver becomes the 'positive container' for the feelings projected by the child or young person when they are distressed and upset. Through the worker's efforts to calm and comfort the child, trust and security are developed in the relationship. As highlighted previously, children who are looked after can experience great instability; the work by the carer helps to demonstrate an emotionally reliable presence to offer stability and allow the child to develop their internal working model in a positive way (Usher 2008). Additionally, one must cite the influential work of Rogers (1957) and his core conditions that must be present to establish a therapeutic relationship for change. These core conditions are: congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard.

Within each of the four themes explored, the views of children highlighted that positive relationships were greatly valued to them. These relationships were found to be of particular importance to educational outcomes for children; as they needed an adult who encouraged their aspirations (Gaskell 2010; Barnardos 2006). In Happer, McCreadie and Aldgate's (2006) review into successful outcomes for looked after children; positive relationships with adults that provided encouragement and support were identified as being critical. These positive relationships may help to improve not only outcomes but placement stability for looked after children. The building of therapeutic relationships with service users is also consistent with the principles of the Scottish Social Services Council's ("SSSC") Codes of Practice as they help to promote independence in the long term through improving children's ability to form and manage relationships with others (SSSC 2009).

Involvement in Decision Making

A theme that emerged from the literature was that children often feel uninvolved in decisions being made regarding their welfare (Stanley 2007; McAuley and Davis 2009; Barnardos 2006). The importance of children's views and participation in their welfare has been an area of increased recognition within current legislative and policy contexts (Servaes 2013). The need to consider children's views is enshrined within legislation and policy such as the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 and the Getting it Right for Every Child policy (Scottish Government 2012).

For children to be involved in a meaningful way it is important that they have developed a good working relationship with the worker and have sufficient self-esteem (Tassoni 2003). Tassoni (2003) indicated that boosting self-esteem can help children feel comfortable enough to exert appropriate assertiveness and ensure they get their views across. Lack of self-esteem has been acknowledged as a characteristic which prevents young people from participating fully (Franklin and Sloper 2005). Children who have experienced maltreatment are likely to have a poor sense of self-worth which may significantly reduce their ability to get involved in decisions about their welfare. If children experience repeated placement instability it may also be more difficult for them to establish appropriate developmental relationships with carers and others as they do not see value in that investment.

Children who have had negative life experiences are already at a disadvantage with regards to decision-making. Research by Weller and Fisher (2013) found that the decision-making processes of children who have been maltreated were slower than those of children who had not been. When children believe that they are not being listened to it can often lead them to feeling belittled, powerless and undervalued (Davey, Burke and Shaw 2010; Leeson 2007). These feelings may only serve to reinforce their negative perceptions of self and cause further harm. Supporting looked after children and establishing a positive working relationship with them will enhance self-esteem and promote involvement in decision making processes.

The Need for Continued Support

As we have established, children within the care system are amongst the most vulnerable in society. Their experiences of maltreatment, trauma and other difficulties cannot all be fixed solely by being accommodated and collectively take a great deal of time to overcome. In Pritchard and William's (2009) research the extent to which this vulnerability continued in to adulthood was identified. Men who had been looked after were significantly more often victims of sex and violent crimes; and were 176 times more likely to be murdered in comparison to peers within the general population (Pritchard and Williams 2009). Duncalf (2010) undertook a study of the problem areas which were experienced by care leavers who were now adults. Table 1 below highlights the range of common difficulties identified in that study:

Type of Issue	Number of Participants	% of Participants
Lack of Support (In General)	55	26.6
Accommodation Issues	45	21.7
Feeling of Social Isolation/Vulnerability	36	17.4
Financial Issues	35	16.9
Lack of Employment Opportunities or Advice	35	16.9

Table 1: Issues experienced by care leavers as adults

Forrester et al. (2009) claimed that the system for care leavers did not work well for most children and actually caused harm to the positive work that had been carried out. Although the figures do not necessarily reflect a majority here; they are still highly significant with over a quarter of care leavers expressing a lack of support (Duncalf 2010). Also concerning is the perception of social isolation and vulnerability felt by participants.

Axford (2008) has highlighted that social exclusion is often an unintended consequence of the care experience. It is possible that care leavers are stigmatised by the rest of society in not conforming to cultural norms and are labelled with negative stereotypes (Goffman 1961). Adley and Kina (2014) found that care leavers often had a very small network of support around them; yet 83% of young people rated having an emotional support as 10/10 for importance. The study highlighted the need for social workers to regularly and persistently reach out and provide emotional support to care leavers. As one participant powerfully stated:

"We need a social worker or someone to take on that motherly role to check up on us, to check they're living 'cos most of them aren't" (Adley and Kina 2014 p. 8).

One hopes that the implementation of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 will open doors to providing the additional support necessary for care leavers. The Act aims to increase the age that young people can remain in care to 21 for specific placements, provide clear responsibilities on role of corporate parents, and give young people access to through care services up to the age of 26. While the Act has only recently come in to full effect in April 2015 it remains somewhat uncertain as to how transformative it will be. However, it is certainly a step in the right direction.

Concluding remarks

This paper reviewed a significant number of studies which collated the views of children and young people who are – or were – accommodated by the local authority. It provides useful insights in to their experiences. Scottish Social Services Council Codes of Practice stipulate the views of service users should always be taken in to consideration (SSSC 2009).

This research should reverberate for social service workers who act as corporate parents for looked after children and young people. Enshrined within legislation is that social workers have duties to safeguard and protect the welfare of looked after children. It is therefore important for them to be aware of the difficulties and issues facing this service user group. Social Work practice is built upon the concepts of empowerment, equality and social justice (Thompson 2009). It is, therefore, vital for practitioners to understand those values as oppositional to structural inequalities and disadvantage. The research also provides insight in to what is effective at promoting positive outcomes for looked after children.

There are a number of areas which were highlighted through the study as being important for future research:

1. The introduction of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 has made a significant number of changes in to the provision of after

care for looked after children. The act has only recently come in to full force as of April 2015. Future studies should assess the effect that the Act has had in relation to improving outcomes for looked after young people.

2. Further research should be undertaken in relation to the areas of concern identified by looked after children and young people themselves as it appears that there are some enduring, but unnecessary, difficulties in making the care system work. This may help to promote future policy and legislation to tackle the issues.

3. Research highlighted that Scotland still ranks relatively highly in teenage pregnancy. Despite this, it appears as though there is a lack of research within the Scottish context of pregnancies within the looked after young persons group. Most of the research used was conducted in other areas within the United Kingdom.

4. Research also recognised a deficient evidence base in relation to looked after children's views on their own mental health.

Despite finding that the children's care system overall had a largely positive effect on improving outcomes for children and young people, this paper has highlighted that the system is not without its flaws. The experiences of young people and emerging themes provided useful areas for discussion around how to best support and further improve outcomes for looked after children and young people. The correlation between placement stability and positive relationships with care givers was highlighted as vital for positive outcomes; as both are necessary to give these vulnerable children the therapeutic environment to address the trauma and maltreatment that they may have experienced. Due to the continued vulnerability of young people leaving care the need for continued effective throughcare support was also highlighted. Listening to the views of these children and young people and involving them in decision making processes was also highlighted as being vital. Addressing concerns such as these will help to make them feel valued and willing to invest in their futures.

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