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Title: It's our lives: Children and Young People in Care Designing Research.

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Abstract: Is there really a preparedness to invite children and young people to have a say? Can they be consulted to inform the system? Can they be called upon to assist in the development of tools and resources so their participation is appropriate and effective? Do adults and professionals rather presume to know what is best? This paper outlines a research project seeking the views of children and young people about what makes a 'good' foster carer. What is different about this project is that children and young people have been involved in the research design. As a result twelve children and young people across a range of ages who have lived in foster care have developed a sense of ownership of the project. The research question and methodology has been strengthened through a process of action/reflection arising from individual and group conversations and activities. This presentation will outline the unique aspects of the project, what was done, what was learned and the implications for the next stage of the research. It is clear that children and young people do have a vast amount of experience to draw upon. They have important things to say to case managers, practitioners, policy makers and researchers. They can benefit from adults who present creative opportunities to ensure their experience is validated and affirmed. They not only want their voices heard, they want to see the knowledge gained turned into action to make change happen.

"It is important that we can make a difference." (Tae-female,16)

A group of eight young people recently discovered through a process of connecting with each other that together they had experienced fifty six different foster care placements. They have been child refugees within their own country.

Introduction

“Children and young people in care should have their voices heard because it’s their life.” (Darl – female,16)

Hello my name is Wayne Daly and I am a Senior Resource Officer with the Department of Communities (formally Families) Queensland. I am also a PhD student with James Cook University, Townsville, North Queensland. The research I am undertaking involves children and young people identifying from their perspective “What makes a good foster carer?”. This research is part of a larger study being conducted about foster care and foster carers by a partnership between James Cook University, and the rural region where I come from (Mackay Whitsunday). In our region we are 100% reliant upon Foster Care as our alternative care option.

The project I am conducting is unique in that children and young people with a care experience are being asked not only to take part in the research but to be involved in assisting to design it.

This presentation is intended to give a snapshot of the participation of children and young people in this design stage.

Why involve children and young people in research design?

Increasingly researchers and practitioners recognise the value of seeking children’s views and their capacity to participate (Johnson et al, 1995; Davie et al, 1996; Hill et al, 1996; Christensen and James, 2000; O’Kane, 2000; Thomas and O’Kane, 2000). Children and young people have regularly been the subjects of research, however other than a few notable exceptions (Mason & Urguhart, 2001) there is little evidence that they are being invited to play a significant role in research design.

Involving children and young people in the research design has:

- Provided input into the way the actual research should be conducted, its content and process.
- Provided opportunities to test assumptions, build rapport, and explore the use of language, questions, tools and methods.

- Ensured participation in how the project unfolds. All thirteen participants in the case of this project indicated an enthusiastic desire to continue their involvement to the next stage.
- Developed a partnership that begins to break down the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the children and young people themselves.
- Connected Children and young people to the project and to each other at the earliest stage. As a result they talk about the research between themselves, with their carers and with their case workers.
- Developed an awareness of participant's perception and understanding of the purpose of the research and research question.

How has the research design stage been set up?

A key part of the methodology has been the conducting of preparatory interviews with the case workers of participants to ensure I had an appropriate awareness of each individual's issues and needs and of each individual's capacity to be involved in the design stage of the research.

A small reference group made up of a family service officer, a foster carer and a young person ex-care has been established to help guide this stage of the research.

A young person ex-care agreed to act as a peer facilitator playing an on-going role in contributing to the overall research project from her experience of the care system and assisting the project to connect with, and remain focused on children and young people.

A total of thirteen children and young people with a care experience ranging in ages from eight to twenty one and across a range of gender and cultural backgrounds agreed to take part in the design stage through individual conversations and small focus groups.

It was decided from the start of the project to look upon the design stage engagement with children and young people as a form of evolving exploratory conversations. (The word 'conversation' was used by a twelve year old co-designer of the information and consent forms.) Each conversation has been built upon previous conversations through a process of action/reflection.

What did the children and young people say?

Participants' contributions have been examined through a process of mapping key concepts and by clustering themes associated under each key concept. Four key concepts have been identified:

- Supporting Principles,
- Underlying Assumptions,
- Research Process and
- Research Content.

Across these four key concept areas a total of twenty seven themes have been identified.

It is not possible within the context of this presentation to cover fully all the input made across all themes. It is important however to illustrate how within each of the four cluster areas children and young peoples' contributions have impacted upon the design of the research. **(Direct quotes are taken from the design stage and the slide background is taken from a mural painted by young people)**

Supporting Principles

Three key principles underlying participation of children and young people emerged:

- Recognition of Expertise;
- The Right to Have a Voice;
- The Right to be Listened to.

Children and young people who have had a care experience can be considered to have authoritative knowledge to draw upon. They are 'active experts on their own lived reality' (Gibbs, 2001, p29)

"We are the experts in our lives." (Cheal-female,21)

*"...experts mightn't even know...it helps being in the situation itself."
(Jangeo-male,12)*

Eight young people meeting together recently, identified that together they had experienced fifty six different foster care placements. Three of them had at least fourteen each. One 13 year old had 18 placements in 9

years. Some expressed that they had exited care never having had a foster care placement that worked for them. However some had experiences of placements that they believed achieved positive outcomes.

Children and young people have the lived experience that gives them authority to speak. They also believe they have the right to express their views.

“It’s important that children and young people have a view (about foster carers), ‘cos they’re the ones who are staying with them. They’re the ones that need ‘em I guess.” (Jangeo-male,12)

They also believe that adults should listen to what they have to say.

“It’s important to listen to children and young people in care so they can voice how they’re feeling and change what they don’t like.” (Tae-female,16)

Gilligan, in a chapter of a UK edited work (Kelly and Gilligan 2000) explores the importance of listening to the child in foster care.

“If adult carers and social services are to have any hope of meeting the needs of children in foster care then they must, among other things, listen very closely to the lived experience of children in foster care, through the medium of research and the participation of young people in policy and decision-making fora. For systems of foster care in every country the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets a demanding but essential standard in this regard” (Kelly and Gilligan, 2000:56).

Underlying Assumptions

The design stage presented the opportunity to verify a number of underlying assumptions relevant to participation.

The first assumption is that children and young people do have opinions about foster care and foster carers. A number of participants demonstrated that they had reflected upon their own experience and were eager to express their views about foster care.

“To be a good foster carer they need to be loving towards the children even though they are not theirs, to show an interest in their lives and to be there for the kids when they need them.” (Tae-female,16)

“They just accepted me as a normal child.. sort of.. I was like.. I was one of their children and I wasn’t treated differently like you’re the foster kid sort of thing and it made me get along quite well with them.....”
(Kenny – female,15)

“A caring giver that looks after you” (Neil-female,10)

“Yeah.....you need to know you’re secure ...” (Jangeo-male,12)

Participants demonstrated that they had a perception of the needs of children and young people and how this might relate to their involvement in the research.

“How many placements they’ve had maybe. That might affect the problems they have had with foster carers...” (Kenny-female,15)

“And if they’ve just had like an argument with a foster carer, their opinion might be biased...” (Spec-male,15)

Participants confirmed the assumption that children and young people have awareness about the concept of change and have an opinion about it within the context of their own experience of being in care. Young participants suggested that change is needed and they had an opinion about the specifics. At times the change suggested was radical.

“The one thing that I would change about the system is the whole thing because it’s crap!” (Tae-female,16)

Confirmation was made that young people particularly believe they can make a difference. It is important when inviting children and young people to be involved in research that they have a sense that what they contribute can lead to some benefit.

“I think I can make a difference by listening to other children in care and expressing those thoughts from the child to the Department and it is important that we can make a difference.” (Tae-female,16)

Research Process

Participants demonstrated an outstanding ability to think about and express their ideas regarding what would assist to make the research successful. Their input confirmed that issues such as a pleasant and neutral venue, convenient time, transport to the venue and the availability of food during research activities were important.

In relation to group size and composition it was suggested that different people would have different preferences and that options should be made available to best suit participants. There was agreement that groups should be no bigger than four. A number of participants suggested careful attention should be paid to the mix of people in the group.

One-on-one contact should be offered as an option to all participants because for some that would be the preferred option.

“If I have a one-on-one interview I can give more ideas, because I’m not getting interrupted by everyone else and you’re not worried that someone’s gonna laugh at you.” (Darl-female,16)

It was seen as essential for the research facilitator to have enough background knowledge of participants so that the process could be adjusted to best involve them according to their preference and need. This supported the decision to undertake pre-research engagement with case workers, carers and the participants themselves.

However a balance is required between the need for ‘expert’ advice on the suitability or otherwise of potential participants and the need for children and young people themselves to have the opportunity to participate if they so desire, unimpeded by adults acting as ‘gate keepers’ to their involvement. As one young participant pointed out it may not be in the interest of a carer to encourage the involvement of the person in their care.

“..but you see, some foster carers may...with kids that are really capable of answering the questions, they may say no because they don’t want that kid to go and say stuff that’s happened....” (Darl-female,16)

An example of where a ‘gate-keeping’ watch was required was in the case of a thirteen year old boy called Sas. It was suggested by a case worker that Sas would most likely not be capable of an involvement in the design stage because of an acquired brain injury. The case worker was new at the time and had not met Sas. The carer when contacted for an opinion also suggested that the young person would not participate, but for a different reason. The carer suggested that Sas would not want to be involved because of previous ‘less than positive’ experiences with the Department. However, when the young person himself received information about the nature of the research, he communicated through

his carer that he would like to be involved because he had a 'lot to say' about his experiences of 'good' and 'not so good' carers. Fortunately Sas's experience with his current care provider was very positive and his subsequent involvement was supported.

(The following is just one contribution from Sas)

"The positive to me would be the most important and all that, like if you want to go to a loving family that cares about you and want to take you... and like if you got sports on and they want to take you there and all that...and if they don't and there's stuff in their place like all disgusting stuff like the house has never been cleaned and cockroaches hanging around and all that..."

By far the largest contribution to the research process came within the themes of activities and tools. Participants asserted the importance for the research to be fun for children and young people and not just a series of questions. Participants had a positive response to using stories and drawing as methods more interesting to children and young people.

Research Content

Participants contributed to the content development of the research. The main theme examined was the question itself and its validity.

All participants thought the question 'What makes a good foster carer?' was an important question and that children and young people in care should have the opportunity to express their views about it.

"Definitely, I think it is a very relevant question." (Cheal-female,21)

"It's a good idea" & "they might have good ideas" (Lala-female,10 & Po-male,9)

"I think it is, yes!, because then children that are in care are actually having a say about where they will live and that sort of thing – the people that they'll live with and what good qualities that foster parents have, and that sort of thing... and foster parents are getting noted for the things they're doing right and wrong. (Kenny – female, 14)

“Cos like it wouldn’t be good if you put someone with foster carers that are not all that nice to ‘em, ‘n don’t get along with ‘em...’cos...like ...feels that [they’re] not loved...and could end up going bad...” (Jangeo-male,12)

Some thought it might be helpful to pay attention to less than positive experiences and weaknesses found in carers because this is a valid experience for many children and young people in care. Indeed for some, this might be the predominate experience and to not allow them to speak of this experience would disallow them a view on foster carer qualities and characteristics.

One young person who has transitioned from care and who has reflected on much of her own experience and the experiences of others makes the following valid points;

“If you listed weaknesses you would know then you wouldn’t want that. We are obviously speaking from experience. So when I say weaknesses I mean weaknesses we have noticed that didn’t work well for us that you wouldn’t want in a carer. When you say what makes a good foster carer, you also need to say what doesn’t.” (Cheal-female,21)

“Weaknesses can be a good thing. I think, speaking from experience, that some of the weaknesses my foster mother had kind of made our bond closer. It is hard to find an example but yeah it can be a good thing because it can be a learning curve for both of you. Because if you have a carer that knows everything. You can’t, but you get ones that think they do and that’s a weakness you can do without. But having someone who admits that they don’t know... we’ll work though it together” (Cheal-female,21)

Learnings/Reflection

Children and young people are not a homogenous group and should not be expected to conform to one set way of engagement. Options need to be presented for them to choose from. Like everyone else they have individual preferences which are equally valid. This needs to be respected and incorporated into the research design.

During the course of the design stage conversations there was a level of honesty and straightforwardness that is helpful in discovering what will and what will not work.

“No offence but coming into a room with a guy with a beard [the researcher] isn’t that exciting after you’ve been at school all day. By the afternoon it’s the last thing you want to do.” (Annie – Male, 17)

Sometimes we expect that children will have some grand suggestion about the process and this could be our assumption that they want or need something out of the ordinary. But there are times when they simply state that a way to get the information and ask the question is to simply ask the question.

“Just ask people what they think.” (Po-male,9)

Conclusion

As well as being ethically and methodologically important to involve children and young people who are the subjects of research in the design of that research, this project has confirmed that it is also of practical importance and benefit.

The project has affirmed that the voice of children and young people can be heard and should be heard. It has confirmed that they do have valuable opinions which should be taken into consideration. It has allowed for a number of important assumptions to be tested with participants.

Children and young people have much to offer researchers by giving their opinions and expressing their views. If given the opportunity they have the capacity to influence the design of any research which is seeking their views.

This process has assisted me and the peer facilitator to develop a rapport with a number of the children and young people who will have future contact with the research project. This has laid a strong foundation for the next two stages (Process Stage and Outcome Stage).

As a result of their involvement in the project, participants have formed and strengthened relationships. They continue to be supported and to develop a collective voice which is being used in a number of settings outside the research project itself.

As a result of their involvement the next stage of the research is being planned and conducted taking into account participants’ views and ideas. It will be interesting and relevant to them. It will recognize their personal

and collective expertise. It will give them an opportunity drawing on their own experiences to influence the way foster carers are recruited, trained and supported so that the best possible outcomes are achieved for the children and young people in their care.

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