

'Nobody does the job cause it's easy'. The factors which empower and inhibit the role of the child and youth care worker

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Abstract

For children and young people living in residential and secure care, there are links between the relationships they have with Child and Youth Care Workers and positive outcomes. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of Child and Youth Care Workers in order to ascertain the factors which enhance and inhibit their ability to have an impact upon the children and young people they support. Six Child and Youth Care Workers from a residential and secure care establishment were interviewed and thematic analysis was used to elicit key themes in the data. The study highlighted three themes: Empowering Factors, Inhibiting Factors and Supportive Practice. The themes suggest that Child and Youth Care Workers have qualities which they feel help them to impact positively upon young people, however there are also many challenges which inhibit this. They also highlight possible areas of development. This data may help residential and secure care establishments to understand the importance of the Child and Youth Care Workers' qualities and the challenges and demands of the role, and to highlight the additional support required.

Keywords

Child and youth care workers, children and young people, residential and secure care

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Residential and secure care

Residential and secure care offers young children a safe place to live with other children away from home. It is often the decision of the Children's Hearing System that dictates which environment a young person will be moved to, depending on their level of risk and need. On 31st July 2020, 14,458 children in Scotland were looked after, with 329 within a residential school and 59 in secure accommodation (Scottish Government, 2021).

Children and young people enter into residential and secure care for a number of reasons and under significantly difficult circumstances (Kendrick, 2013). Many young people display challenging behaviour and have experienced a number of placement breakdowns prior to moving into care. A high percentage have also experienced adversity, including abuse and neglect (Stein et al., 2009). Children and young people have different perspectives on their experience of moving into residential and secure care (Morgan, 2009). Some young people perceive the experience as negative, as moving can be a time of significant loss; given that they move from home or placements where relationships and routines have been established (Biehal & Wade, 2000). Many other young people find that residential care meets their needs, as it can provide elements of stability and support (Kendrick, 2013). However, this stability and support can only be achieved through the positive relationships they develop with Child and Youth Care Workers (Bouffard & Little, 2002; Skinner, 1992).

The importance of the child and youth care worker

Several studies have reviewed the effectiveness of residential care in helping young people achieve positive outcomes. Such studies have found that this environment can improve outcomes for children (Knorth et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2011). Knorth et al. (2008) concluded from their meta-analysis that children and young people, after a period of residential care, on average, improve in their psychosocial functioning. Lee et al. (2011) also concluded that some group care environments are effective, however they used a small sample which produced results of varying quality. Although studies discuss the positive results

associated with residential care, they are not yet clear in identifying the specific factors which contribute to such positive outcomes.

Evidence suggests that Child and Youth Care Workers play a significant role in helping young people to manage their difficulties and to live their lives differently by influencing positive behavioural change (Bastiaanssen et al., 2014; Petrie et al., 2006; Ward, 2004). They are said to be an essential component in creating environments which encourage positive development and are viewed as the most important members of staff in a in a young person's life (Bastiaanssen et al., 2012; Knorth et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2000; Smith et al., 2013). Their role is seen as a responsive form of caring, focusing on the moment in which a behaviour occurs, and they use their knowledge and skills to help the young person learn, experience and practice new thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Gannon, 2014). However, although they are considered important in influencing behavioural development, their role has been neglected in research. Knorth et al. (2010) argued for a greater emphasis in research and practice on the status and personal characteristics of Child and Youth Care Workers. A main issue in exploring the effectiveness of the Child and Youth Care Worker role in residential care is the diversity of care within the residential field, which includes group residential care, daily living groups, education, and family units (Bastiaanssen et al., 2012).

In 2004, Garfat identified characteristics which define the approach of the Child and Youth Care Worker. Although this research was conducted in 2004, it remains relevant as it is the main study exploring Child and Youth Care Workers' characteristics. Garfat (2004) suggested that there were twenty-five key characteristics in this role and 'the use of daily life events' was central. Stuart (2013, p. 295) defines this as the moments which are 'open for therapeutic use when the practitioner and young person engage in exploring its meaning together and learning from each other'. The remaining characteristics, which are categorised into 'being, interpreting and doing', are focused upon the Child and Youth Care Workers' ways of being with and responding to children and young people, how Child and Youth Care Workers interpret the experiences they share with the children and young people, and what they do to help support them. This

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approach is viewed as an essential way of working with young people in order to achieve positive outcomes. Other researchers defined some of the important characteristics and skills as including being able to enter into a relationship with the child that involves attachment and belonging (Brendtro et al., 2002; Maier, 1993), to understand the meaning and dynamics of relational practice (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012), and to understand how relationships create the life-space (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2013).

Although studies have identified the importance of the Child and Youth Care Worker and some of the desired characteristics, the specific factors which enable them to have such a positive impact have not been widely explored (Bastiaanssen et al., 2012). Research within Scotland's population of Looked After and Accommodated Children (LAAC) is also particularly limited, and therefore one aim of this study is to explore the factors which enable them to have an impact upon young people in Scottish residential care.

Challenges for the child and youth care worker

Whilst recognising the positive attributes of the care worker, the difficulties of this role must also be considered, particularly as the field of Child and Youth Care has been considered one of the most difficult and emotionally exhausting careers in the human service industry (Krueger, 2002). The factors which appear to contribute to the difficulties of this role include, the diverse range of skills and knowledge the Child and Youth Care Worker is expected to possess, the lack of support from residential organisations and feeling of being 'trapped' in paperwork (Brown et al., 2018; Krueger, 2007). A combination of these factors, along with the challenges of working with young people who present with complex behaviours and needs, can create a highly stressful environment which can lead to Child and Youth Care Workers experiencing exhaustion, burnout, and a sense of hopelessness (McCarter, 2007; Savicki, 2002). Savicki (2002) explained that burnout is common amongst Child and Youth Care Workers and that this may be linked to an exaggerated sense of idealism, that may lead to frustration and disappointment when the difficult reality of the role is experienced.

In addition to these challenges, the Child and Youth Care Work profession has been exposed to stigma and negativity as a result of previous reports of ill practice and abuse within the care system. In 2009, the Ryan report, which investigated the abuse of young people who resided within Irish care facilities, was published. Although this report was focussed upon institutions within the Republic of Ireland, it appears that a culture of fear manifested within the wider care system. Brown et al. (2018) discuss how, despite the care system being reformed, Child and Youth Care Worker practice is now influenced by a 'fearful state of mind', which is exacerbated by organisational policies and procedures (Furedi, 2006; Furedi & Bristow, 2008; Smith, 2009).

As the care system moves towards relationship-based practice, the relationships that Child and Youth Care Workers develop with young people and the way in which they practice has been said to have been negatively impacted upon by the fear of making mistakes (MacDonald et al., 2012; Smith, 2009; Whittaker et al., 2015). It appears that the policies and procedures which were once developed and implemented to keep young people safe, are now having a negative impact upon them and upon the Child and Youth Care Worker role. The second aim of this study is to explore the factors which inhibit the Child and Youth Care Worker, particularly because the research relating to Scotland's population of LAAC is limited.

Research question

What factors empower and inhibit Child and Youth Care Workers to have an impact upon the young people they support?

Methodology

Ethical protocol

After submitting an application for ethical approval, which included a literature review and documentation related to consent and the interview process, the study received full ethical approval. All participants were fully briefed on what was involved in the study and how their data would be used, and advised that

their names would be replaced with a speaker number. They were instructed before the interview that they could decline to engage and/or choose to not respond to any of the questions asked throughout the interview. They were also given an opportunity to take a break when required. All participants provided informed consent to engage in recorded interviews and for their data to be transcribed, anonymised, and used within the research report.

Participants

All (375) Child and Youth Care Workers who worked with young people aged between 11 and 18 years within the residential and secure establishments were offered the opportunity to engage in this study. The invite was sent through an organisation-wide email which included information relating to the study. Eight participants volunteered; however, two participants ceased contact with the researcher prior to the interview taking place and thus, six participants engaged in total. The participants who engaged worked within the residential and secure settings and within houses which accommodated six to eight young people; three of which were mixed gender and two of which were gender-specific. Participants included three male and three female staff. Their ages ranged between 28 and 55 years, with an average age of 39 years, and they had between 1.5 and 11 years' experience with an average of 4.5 years' experience.

Interview schedule

Interviews were carried out at the participant's place of work on a day and at a time suitable for them. The interviews varied in length from 12 to 32 minutes, with an average duration of 23 minutes. A single semi-structured interview schedule, based on the research question, was developed and the central question was 'what factors empower and inhibit you to impact upon the young people you support?' Throughout the interview the participants were prompted to consider the factors which empowered and inhibited the impact they had upon the lives of the young people they cared for. The interview data was then transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were stored securely on a password

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protected computer. All participants' names were removed and they were labelled as speakers one to six.

Approach to data collection

This study utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process to investigate Child and Youth Care Worker perceptions of the factors which empower and inhibit them to have an impact upon the young people they support. All Child and Youth Care Workers within the organisation were invited to participate, and six of those who volunteered went on to engage in the study.

Data analysis

The transcripts were analysed using a contextualist approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial analysis involved repeated reading of and listening to each interview in order to allow the researcher to become familiar with the data. During this process the researcher noted her initial reflections and then generated codes using an inductive coding approach. She then searched, reviewed, defined, and named themes to ensure that they answered the research question and represented the participant's true experience. Although the codes and themes emerged through the participants' data, the researcher's own perspectives, values and theoretical position may have influenced the analysis. In order to mitigate the influence and potential bias of the researcher, the findings were reviewed by the researcher's supervisor.

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Results

Three themes and ten subthemes were identified through the analysis.

Themes	Subthemes
Empowering Factors	Passion and belief Consistency Adaptability Teaching what is 'normal'
Inhibiting Factors	Managing high demands Paperwork Fear of doing wrong Maintaining relationships
Supportive Practice	Support with paperwork Helping to maintain relationships

Empowering factors

This theme reflects the participants' perceptions of the qualities which help enable them to have a positive impact on the lives of the young people they support. Participants spoke passionately about their role and discussed how factors such as believing they can make a difference and being consistent, adaptable, and teaching about what is normal are key to their role. It is clear from discussions that feeling passionate about the role helps motivate them to continue to attend work and build connections with young people. It is these connections which then instil the belief in them that they can make a difference. Participants also discussed consistency, which they felt was demonstrated through meaning 'what they say' and following through on promises. Engaging with each young person individually was also viewed as important, as well as being able to meet their needs by adapting their role, such as to 'parent' or 'brother'. Other roles included modelling and teaching young people about 'normal life'. The aim of this appeared to be to demonstrate pro-social behaviour and help to instil learning to promote change.

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Passion and belief

Participants' passion was conveyed through positive statements, including 'I absolutely love my job' (Speaker 1), and 'everyday am, am looking forward to coming to work' (Speaker 2). As well as 'looking forward' to his work, Speaker 2 discussed the connection he has with the young people and how this gives him the belief that he can make a difference:

Every single child in [the establishment] that I've met, I've got a connection ... I'm not saying I'm the only one, there's loads of staff that are great with aw (all) the kids as well but that geez (gives) me the belief, it really does, cause I believe that I can connect with every one of them. So, every day I'll know if there's an issue, I'll find a way round that issue then, lets fix it.

Consistency

Participants discussed the importance of consistency when working with young people. Speaker 1 acknowledged that,

If you say you're going to do something make sure you do it and even if it's in your own time you just make sure that you're going to do that because they've had adults let them down at every turn so, if you say it, do it.

Adaptability

Participants also discussed the importance of being able to work with each young person individually and acknowledged that they are often changing roles in order to meet their needs. Speaker 6 explained that, 'over the years you learn that you're probably using a different hat for six young people'. Speaker 5 discussed some of these different 'hats', which include, 'the big brother and the wee brother ... the parent, the child ... the doctor'.

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Teaching what is 'normal'

Participants also felt that an important aspect of their role was to teach the young people about 'normal' life. They discussed how they would do this through sharing their own experiences. Speaker 2 stated that 'my experience of growing up is different from the kids in here so you try eh, try to explain to them what I, what we would call normal upbringing in life is'. Speaker 3 also acknowledged the importance of this, whilst reflecting that there is a need to help them learn how life is without making them 'feel bad'. They explained this by stating:

I wis (was) kina (kind of) worried, worrying about (about) aw how much information do you give the kids like, cause a, you don't want to make them feel bad about the fact that you're going out, for dinner with your friends and, and you know but you're like no they need to know like this is normality.

Inhibiting factors

This theme reflects the participants' perceptions of the limitations of their role. They spoke in depth about the challenges they encounter on a daily basis and the impact this has on their ability to support the young people in their care. Participants described their role as including many demands which did not cease when their workday ended. This included working a lot of hours and carrying out work related tasks in their 'own time'. Other demands on individuals included paperwork, which was viewed as crucial, but it was noted that developments were needed to change the structure of this to prevent it from hindering them from being a 'good carer'. Participants also discussed the demanding nature of their role and how this included applying lifesaving practice such as removing ligatures from young people. It appeared that participants felt that life saving techniques were overshadowed by the scrutiny of others. Despite participants noting the high intensity and demanding nature of their role, they continued to be motivated to build and maintain positive relationships with the young people. However, they did appear to feel frustrated that they were unable to do this consistently.

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Managing high demands

All participants acknowledged that they go 'over and above' their job role. This includes working over their contracted hours and buying young people their favourite items outwith their working day. Although they acknowledged the benefits of this, they also acknowledged the consequences such as working 'too many hours' and the risk of carrying out extra roles becoming an 'expectation', rather than a 'favour'. Speaker 1 discussed an example of going 'over and above', stating, 'when you're in the shop you're going oh so in so really liked that I'm going to pick that up and take that in ... it's just that going that extra mile again and holding them in mind'. Speaker 3 also discussed examples of doing more than is expected, however they reflected upon the consequences of this: 'a used to go in, in my own time ... but then that's just again feeding into doing too many hours and ... then yesterday's favour becomes tomorrow's expectation'. Participants stated that to manage the demands they could utilise self-care strategies, but they acknowledged that due to the intensity of the role this was not always possible.

Paperwork

The participants spoke about the impact having to complete paperwork has had upon their ability to care for the young people. Speaker 2 stated 'casefile management hinders the care worker from being a good carer to a child'. Other participants discussed their frustrations regarding the relevance of this paperwork and reflected that there are more innovative ways to record data, that would be less demanding upon their role. Speaker 5 explored this, stating,

I'm no saying like we don't need to do paperwork cause we do but see the amount of it that we need to do, it's totally unnecessary like am I no better like taking photos of positive experiences and putting them in a file than writing reems and reems of paperwork?

Fear of doing wrong

The participants discussed that as well as working within a demanding environment there is also fear of scrutiny. There was a sense that efforts from staff, particularly those that result in potentially lifesaving behaviours, go unnoticed and/or are scrutinised. Speaker 3 explained this, stating, 'well like ... ligature incidents ... you end up getting pulled up for something not being done properly'.

Maintaining relationships

Participants spoke about the difficulties of maintaining relationships with all the young people within their care. This is particularly difficult as it appears that when positive relationships have formed between staff and young people those staff members are then expected to manage any difficult behaviours they present with. It is acknowledged that staff are not resentful of this, however they do find that it happens to the detriment of other young people. Speaker 3 stated,

It's well known that I have a really good connection with a couple of people in particular, if they're struggling it's 'you need to go in and deal with that' and then you end up man marking (The term 'man marking' has been used colloquially to describe high levels of observations/supportive practice. Man marking in the literal sense, would not be an example of child-centred practice) somebody for a long time ... I wouldn't change it, but other young people kina (kind of) miss out.

In addition, they reported that maintaining relationships with young people after they have moved on from their care is difficult, and that not providing a continuous level of care goes against what they have been teaching young people, such as to trust them. Speaker 5 explained that,

you tell these kids the whole time you work with them 'trust me, trust me we have this great relationship, tell me everything', and then they're away

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and they're phoning and you're like 'sorry hold on something's happening I can't talk to you I need to put the phone down'.

Supportive practice

This theme reflects the participants' perceptions of the additional support they require to enable them to continue to support the young people effectively. Participants did not note significant changes which they felt were required but they did discuss that improvements were required, specifically in supporting them with paperwork and helping them to maintain relationships. It is clear from this theme that staff were eager to continue to maintain supportive relationships with young people and to apply the empowering factors which enable them to have an impact. It is interesting that despite the inhibiting factors, staff are still demonstrating passion for the role and an interest in going 'over and above' by continuing relationships with the young people who are no longer in their care.

Support with paperwork

Participants felt that more could be done in helping them to complete paperwork. Speaker 2 explained 'what would be brilliant is if you actually had people that were employed to do the paperwork. You know [laughs] and then you could just work with the kids, that would be great'.

Helping to maintain relationships

Participants noted that more could be done to help them maintain relationships with all young people. This includes spending 'protected time (one to one time allocated to spend with that particular young person) with other young people that you don't normally spend time, if even if it was a scheduled thing' (Speaker 3). Speaker 5 also discussed the benefits of having 'protected' time to maintain relationships with young people that have left the service, stating, 'if you did have a wee bit of protective time, you could maintain those relationships then it's not another let down and rejection'.

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Discussion

From the results of the study it is evident that Child and Youth Care Workers are passionate about working with children and young people, and that they believe they can have a positive impact upon them. This belief is encouraged through identifying progress and feeling connected to young people. They also value the importance of consistency and adaptability, recognise the need to respond to each young person using an individualised approach, and help to teach young people about life and relationships to try and change their maladaptive views of adults and the world.

Within this study there was value placed on relationships, and it appeared that the Child and Youth Care Workers' qualities helped them to maintain relationships with the young people in their care. Bullock et al. (2006) have suggested that meaningful relationships in the care environment are indicators of positive outcomes, and Garfat (2004) identified that 'being in a relationship' with a young person is important. Gannon (2008) described this as engaging with one another in a manner which impacts upon the carer and the young person. Brendtro and du Toit (2005) also discussed relationships as the foundation of Child and Youth Care Worker practice, with connection being the foundation of broader relationships. Participants identified the importance of this and discussed the positive connections they shared with young people. These appeared to not only benefit the young person but also helped instil belief in the Child and Youth Care Worker that they can have an impact. In addition, the participants expressed a 'love' for their job, which is said to be an important aspect of being a Child and Youth Care Worker (Smith, 2016). Whitfield (1989) described love as 'the most healing of our resources'. Thus, the importance of love has been discussed for some time and all participants appeared to have a genuine love for their role, despite facing many challenges.

When developing relationships, Garfat (2004) stated that Child and Youth Care Workers 'hang out' and 'hang in' with young people. He explains that 'hanging out' is a characteristic defined by the everyday interactions which a Child and Youth Care Worker shares with a young person, and although they may not seem significant, they are hugely influential in the young person's life. By

'hanging out' Garfat (1999) states that Child and Youth Care Workers and young people build relationships of trust, safety, and connectedness. Throughout this study participants discussed spending time with young people, and it was clear that they 'hold' them 'in mind' outside the workplace. The passion staff have for their role was evident, and although participants discussed experiencing many challenges and demands, it appears that they do not give up. Garfat (2004) states that 'hanging in' and not giving up on a young person when 'times are tough' is crucial. Gompf (2003) discusses how this demonstrates staff's commitment and care for the young person, and it is clear to see that participants were committed to the young people they support. When caring for the young people, participants acknowledged the importance of responding to the complexities of each, using an individualised approach, and adapting their role in order to meet their needs. Michael (2005) highlights that adaptability and flexibility are crucial, and that Child and Youth Care Workers' interactions must be tailored to fit with the individual needs of the young people in order to be effective.

Although staff expressed passion for their role, they did identify challenges which increase the pressures of an already demanding job. These demands include working additional hours and going over and above their specified job role. They also acknowledged that their job can be more difficult due to the increasing demands of paperwork and fear of scrutiny. This is consistent with studies such as Brown et al.'s (2018), where it was identified that staff felt 'trapped' in paperwork, and Steckley's (2012), who discussed that the emphasis on safe practice has increased the focus on paperwork, which in turn has compromised relationship-based practice. Furedi (2006) and McPheat and Butler (2014) also found that Child and Youth Care Workers found it difficult to work in risk-enabling ways due to fear of blame or liability, which is similar to the experience which my participants described. Working with such demands may leave the Child and Youth Care Worker at risk of experiencing burnout, which Savicki (1993, 2002) has noted is prevalent within the Child and Youth Care Worker field. Child and Youth Care Workers may also be particularly vulnerable to this as there may not always be sufficient time for 'self-care' which would help to buffer some of the stressors associated with their role.

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In relation to the support which could help decrease the demands of the Child and Youth Care Worker role, participants identified that support with paperwork would have a significant impact on their role. Participants recognised that completing paperwork is crucial, however this could be adapted to make it easier for Child and Youth Care Workers to complete, and more accessible for young people, should they request copies of their files in the future. It was also suggested that having 'protected time' with young people would be beneficial, however it was recognised that this was not always possible to facilitate.

Further research

As the study was exploratory in nature the results produced were widely varied and covered three significant areas. Therefore, further research may benefit from having a more specific focus; particularly to explore what additional supports Child and Youth Care Workers require. The study identified that more support is required; however, it did not have the scope to explore this in depth. In addition, studying the views of young people would be interesting, to identify the factors which are important to them and what changes they feel are required. The aim of this study was to help identify the factors that help and inhibit Child and Youth Care Workers in supporting young people, and as such young people's views would be extremely beneficial. A future qualitative study could also be carried out to compare the views of staff and young people in relation to the factors which empower and inhibit practice.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the subjective nature of qualitative research and that the researcher's own values, preconceptions and expectations may have influenced the overall analysis. It was also a small-scale study and although the participants varied in gender, length of experience, and work environment (i.e. residential or secure), having a larger pool of participants or limiting the controls (such as, gender or work environment) may have produced different results. However, Grbrich (1998) notes that the size of a sample group in qualitative research is not determined by the need to ensure generalisability, but rather by

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a desire to investigate fully the chosen topic and provide information-rich data. In addition, although measures to ensure confidentiality were implemented, the researcher and participants were all employees of the same establishment and thus participants may have been reluctant to provide critical or sensitive information.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of Child and Youth Care Workers and to establish the factors which empower and inhibit them to have an impact on the young people they support. Overall, it identified that Child and Youth Care Workers have many positive qualities which help them impact upon the young people. However, it also identified that the demands and challenges of their role can inhibit them from feeling like they are 'being a good carer to a child'. In order to overcome such challenges, some suggestions were made to help support the Child and Youth Care Worker to continue to make an impact; however, further consideration is required as to what additional support would be most effective.

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About the author

Amanda Ferguson is a Chartered Psychologist and Registered Forensic Psychologist and DBT Therapist based at Kibble Education and Care Centre. She works directly with young people across all of Kibble's services, offering intervention, assessment and consultancy, in addition to other roles such as staff training. She has worked at Kibble since September 2017, however she was previously employed by the service, as a Child and Youth Care Worker, in 2012 and spent two years working within this role. She has experience working with an adult population within the Scottish Prison Service, where she worked as a Forensic Psychologist in Training for three years.