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Looked after young people at risk of offending: their views of a mixed-gender placement

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Changes to residential child care placements, from single-gender to mixed-gender, highlighted limitations in research and guidance on the use and management of such placements. To begin consideration of this topic, this study explored experiences of young people living in a mixed-gender residential placement. Thematic analysis, using an inductive approach, elicited themes from interviews with seven girls and boys residing in one residential placement. The analysis highlighted one global theme – *Gender should be considered, but is not a priority* – and four organising themes – *Mixed gender living is normal and beneficial; Living with other people is difficult, regardless of gender; Gender has its place* and *Other issues are more relevant*. The analysis highlighted the relevance of gender focused research and exploring service users experiences. Exploring young people's experiences provided a starting point to the question of 'single-gender versus mixed-gender placements', providing vital insight into areas that warrant further exploration and areas of development that may improve the management of mixed-gender residential placements.

Keywords: residential child care; young people; gender; girls and boys

Residential child care placements in Scotland aim to offer care and intervention to looked after and accommodated young people. Looked after and accommodated young people are 'looked after' by their local authority, and may be 'looked after' at home, or away from home in kinship, foster or residential care. Residential child care placements provide group-based living where 'children live with other children looked after by paid staff who work on a shift basis and live elsewhere' (Hill, 2009, p. 4). The needs of the young people are often complex, with high levels of neglect and trauma, and social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, including offending or substance misuse (Audit Scotland, 2010).

The role of gender in delivering effective residential child care has received limited comment in research (e.g. Abela, Dimech, Farrugia, & Role, 2005; Audit Scotland, 2010; Barth, 2002), and O'Neill (2008) identified a lack of gender analysis. Wider government frameworks similarly contain little gender-specific guidance (Every Child Matters, 2003; Scottish Government, 2012).

In Scotland, two national residential placements have moved from single-gender to mixed-gender populations [see Kibble Education and Care Centre (n.d.) and Good Shepherd Centre (n.d.)]. These changes are in contrast to some publications which note 'continuing need for access to single sex provision, especially for adolescent girls with highly complex and challenging needs' (Hill, 2009, p. 30). The concerns about mixed-gender placements include the possible impact of the opposite gender on offending behaviour (Smith & McAra, 2004; Smith & McVie, 2003); the different needs of girls and

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boys (Batchelor & Burman, 2004; Burman & Batchelor, 2009) and negative outcomes for girls (O'Neill, 2008). Benefits of mixed-gender environments, however, have also been noted. In forensic services for young people staff indicated mixed-gender environments provided a more developmentally appropriate environment, and had a calming effect on residents (Crutchley & O'Brien, 2012). Specific recommendations about the use of single-gender or mixed-gender placements, however, remain limited.

The use of single-gender or mixed-gender placements for accommodated young people clearly warrants further exploration; however, determining meaningful hypotheses is difficult with such limitations in previous research. Qualitative research methods are seen as useful when conducting initial explorations to develop theories and generate hypotheses (Auerbach & Silversten, 2003; Sofaer, 1999), and thematic analysis can be specially useful when considering an under-researched topic or when working with participants whose views are unknown (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consideration of the experiences of the service users themselves is an important starting point with a newly explored area (Auerbach & Silversten, 2003). Consultation with service users has been highlighted as lacking in some service reviews (Audit Scotland, 2010), and concerns have been raised about research representing clinician rather than service user views (Gilburd, Rose, & Slade, 2008; Hill, 1998). Research has often focused on adults due to concerns about young peoples' ability to express themselves (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999); however, later papers have found young people were able to articulate their experiences (Spratling, Coke, & Minick, 2010). Exploring service users' experiences may highlight areas that have not previously been considered, help to generate relevant hypothesis (Auerbach & Silversten, 2003) and increase service efficacy (Fielden, Sillence, & Little, 2011).

Current study

The limited understanding of this topic provides a broad starting point to the question of 'single-gender versus mixed-gender accommodation'. This study aims to begin consideration of this question by exploring young peoples' experiences of living in a mixed-gender residential placement. Thematic analysis will be used to elicit key themes within the data provided by the young people. These key themes will be discussed in relation to areas important to young people, areas that warrant further understanding and practical implications regarding the use and management of mixed-gender placements.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. Advertisement and promotion of the research project aimed to ensure that all young people living at the residential placement, within a mixed-gender unit, had opportunity to participate (total of 32 young people). A total of seven participants took part in a semi-structured interview, lasting between 8 and 30 min. The sample included four boys and three girls, who were aged 14–16. All the young people were residents in a residential care and education centre in the West of Scotland, which offers six mixed-gender units. The length of stay for the participants ranged from 1 month to 19 months, with an average stay of 10 months.

The care centre

The residential care and education centre has been operating for over 150 years. The centre offers accommodation and education to boys and girls aged 12–18, who have

experienced a range of behaviour difficulties which have led to, or are placing them at risk of offending behaviour. The centre aims to provide a 'stable, purposeful, safe and happy environment for young people in trouble' (Kibble Education and Care Centre, n.d.). The centre offers a regime encompassing education, work opportunities, treatment interventions and leisure activities that are aimed at ensuring young people 'develop their full potential in learning, changing and growing' (Kibble Education and Care Centre, n.d.).

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the internal ethics committee, and as a staff member, the researcher was approved to work individually with young people. As the researcher was a staff member, consideration was given to the power or coercion that could result from this professional position (The British Psychological Society, 2010). All young people who expressed an interest met with the researcher to discuss consent, confidentiality and what would be required. In order to ensure autonomy, the researcher was mindful that the young people were providing informed consent, that they were not concerned that non-participation would have negative consequences and that they fully understood the terms of confidentiality. In addition to the young people consenting to participation, allocated social workers were asked to consent, and parents and care givers were contacted via letter and given opportunity to raise any concerns about the young person's participation.

Once consent was provided by the young person and social worker, the interview was scheduled at the young person's convenience. Two participants asked to be interviewed together, the remainder were interviewed individually. All interviews were completed by one researcher to reduce confidentiality issues. All participants engaged in one interview which was recorded and then transcribed.

Promotion of the project continued until seven participants were interviewed; initial coding of data indicated repetition of themes and therefore no further participants were sought.

Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis procedures discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Attride-Stirling (2001). Analysis was completed by one researcher, and it is important to acknowledge the impact of the researcher's theoretical position and values. The researcher takes a contextualist position, described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as 'sitting between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism' (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 81), with the aim of focusing on the experiences described by the young people, while acknowledging the wider social context of such experiences and its possible impact on the meanings placed on them by the young people.

The researcher did not work within any of the residential units or directly with any of the young people. However, during interviews the researcher was mindful of their position as a staff member, how this may impact individual participation and how they understood and interpreted the information provided by the participants.

After the interviews were transcribed, the data were read carefully and an inductive, line by line coding approach was used to provide initial codes to all the data. The next stage of analysis involved grouping together data dealing with the same issues; some data were included in more than one category. These groupings of data were reviewed to determine organising and global themes, which were named and described. The final stage

of analysis was reviewing the data to ensure each organising and global theme was sufficiently supported by the data and direct quotes illustrating the theme were selected.

Results

The analysis elicited one global theme – Gender should be considered, but is not a priority – and four organising themes – Mixed gender living is normal and beneficial; Living with other people is difficult, regardless of gender; Gender has its place and Other issues are more relevant.

Gender should be considered, but is not a priority

The overarching message taken from the data provided by the young people was that mixed-gender living environments were normal and provided many benefits. The young people noted some gender-related issues that could be difficult when living with the opposite gender, but did not consider these unmanageable. They instead felt these factors needed to be considered in the day-to-day running and management of a mixed-gender living placement.

Mixed gender living is normal and beneficial

The young people highlighted positive aspects of living with the opposite gender, such as girls and boys supporting each other and the negative aspects of living with people of the same gender, such as conflict. There was also a sense that a mixed-gender environment was ‘normal’, that it was more closely related to their home environment and to the environment they will return to after leaving residential care.

Cause you can make friends and just cause you’re stayin’ with boys doesn’t [does not] mean its all bad. A [I] mean the boys in here kinda [kind of] look after me so its like, its nice. (Girl, age 15)

The boys commented that they liked to go to girls for advice. Girls noted other girls would make time to support others and that boys would be there to support girls.

but its good as well cause like, if you’re having girl problems, then you can talk to a girl and see what, what their point of view [is], instead of talking to a guy, if you know what a [I] mean. (Boy, age 15)

Both genders noted problems living in a single-gender environment.

A hate livin’ way [with] girls, at’s [it’s] too fuckin’ bitchy. (Girl, age 14)

So you’re not sitting talkin’ to boys aw [all] the time, puttin’ aw [all] boys in the one unit would cause trouble cause they’re aw [all] fae [from] different schemes. (Boy, age 14)

Both boys and girls felt mixed-gender living was ‘normal’ and was more closely related to how they would live following their transition from looked after accommodation.

No it’s just normal to me to be honest way [with] you, we treat each other like brother and sisters, its no [not] nothin’ special or [pause] its fine. (Girl, age 15)

Living with other people is difficult, regardless of gender

The young people identified difficulties of living in a group-based environment. Their comments were often focused on specific individuals within their unit and what they did

that made them difficult to live with, rather than any specific issues related to their gender. Things included people being annoying, noisy, disruptive or awkward. In order to address these difficulties, the young people did make some suggestions related to mixing units based on age and having things in common, rather than gender.

Both the boy and girl participants noted things that other residents did that they found difficult.

A hate folk shoutin, like see like, folk shoutin at other folk, that just goes right though ma heed [my head] and it gets me angry. (Boy, age 15)

The young people noted that their preference would be to live with people with commonalities and people they got along with.

A hink [think] they should have just a unit wae [with] like fifteen year old, fifteen sixteen cause most a [of] them are mature . . . And you get on better with them, you can talk to them more, like adults. Instead a talking to them like wee barins [small children]. (Boy, age 15)

Gender has its place

Gender was not considered to be problematic or unmanageable, but there were some things related to gender that appeared important to the young people. They wanted opportunities to express themselves through their gender, have time to mix with people of the same gender and do gender-specific activities. The young people also felt that some of the organisation's responses to some gender-related issues were unnecessary, ill-considered or impacted on their lives unnecessarily. The young people wanted to feel that girls and boys were treated equally and that decisions were fair and flexible.

The girls wanted to express themselves through their environment and appearance and have unstructured time to socialise with other girls.

The rooms, the girls should get, and the boys obviously but there's noting [nothing] really for the boys. They should be able to get one wall of their room wall papered. (Girl, age 16)

The boys wanted time with other boys, and time centred on a common activity.

. . . still man it'd be better all the boys would want to get a game a fifa, a fifa tournament or something like that . . . (Boy, age 15).

Both boys and girls raised concerns about some rules and restrictions. They felt that there were different rules for different genders, and that some new rules that were made in response to gender concerns had resulted in unfair treatment of them individually.

. . . G1 and G2 stil get tae [to] sit in each others room and dae [do] fake tan and dae aw [do all] that shit right . . ." " . . . Naw [No] bit [but] see the hing [thing] the hing [thing] is anytime we [boys] wanty [want to] talk or there's something, they [staff] make me stand out side his room tae [to] listen tae [to] tunes wae um [with him]. (Boy, age 15)

A sense of fairness was raised by many of the young people. They noted that girls and boys may want different things, but that it was important that the money for this was shared evenly and that staff should try to ensure fairness.

Other issues are more relevant

Throughout the interviews, the young people talked about what was difficult and what was important to them whilst living in a residential placement. The two key issues that were discussed most often and most consistently related to rules, specifically the fairness and consistency of the rules and consequences in place, and the relationships they had with staff members and peers.

Often the young people felt rules were unnecessary, implemented differently by different staff members or that the consequences of some rules were ineffective.

... she came in, tried tae [to] turn ma[my] telly aff [off] n aw [all] that, n am [and I'm] like, here that's never been the rules, n [and] she's like, that's always been the rules that's what happens in every other unit. It doesny [doesn't] happen here. (Boy, age 15)

The young people valued being able to spend time with their peers, and being allowed contact with their peers.

... why don't we like just get a dinner hall or something if we go for our breaks and lunches n shit, spend time wae [with] people that we like tae [to] at school... Even if we got supervised, its like gawny [going to] just like give a [us] bit a lenience and let us on facebook. (Girl, age 14)

In addition to their relationships with their peers, the young people consistently commented on their relationships with staff members. The characteristics valued in staff included them listening, taking time, being respectful and flexible, and having a sense of humour.

... he's ma [my] key worker right, he does like extra shifts when he's no supposed tae [to] n [and] aw [all] that, he's no [not] one a [of] the ones that come in, dae [do] their work and go hame [home] at the end a [of] the night wae [with] no ever thinkin' about us... they actually dae [do] over time n [and] shit just so they know how we are that and its like wow your actual so nice... and like they widny [won't] judge ye [you]. (Girl, age 14)

The difficulties noted with staff members was a sense that they did not make enough effort.

Exactly they coulda [could of] just got more staff up, its no [not] that much hassle tae [to] go like that to a staff next door, would ye [you] mind coming in, or even just comin' in an oot [out] maybe an hour our [or] something just so we can (Boy, age 15)

Discussion

Using thematic analysis to explore young peoples' experiences of living in a mixed-gender residential placement provided vital insight into the use of mixed-gender placements. This included understanding areas that warrant further exploration in order to understand more about the use of single-gender and mixed-gender placements and areas of development that may improve the management of mixed-gender placements. The information provided by the young people highlighted that they would chose to live in a mixed-gender environment, but that within such placements gender does have a place and should be considered.

Both boys and girls in this study highlighted a desire to spend time with individuals of the same gender, with boys wanting time to engage in activities together and girls wanting time and a place to socialise together. This is consistent with previous literature noting differences in peer relationships. It is reported that boys are more focused on activity, competition, rule breaking, overt anger expression and socialising in larger groups compared with girls who tend to be more co-operative, with a focus on relationships, intimacy and disclosure, and prefer smaller groups (Carr, 1999; Maccoby, 1998). The young people in this study did not identify different needs for girls and boys in the manner that adult clinicians may do, but their preferences do suggest that differences are required in terms of how activities and time with peers are facilitated for boys and girls. It is important to acknowledge, however, the ongoing discussions about whether such gender preferences represent socially constructed views of gender identity or biological

differences (Amaro, Blake, Schwartz, & Flinchbaugh 2001; Carr 1999; Maccoby 1998). Further understanding of this may later alter recommendations about how to facilitate girls' and boys' activities and socialisation.

Relationships with peers of the same and opposite gender also featured as an important issue. The young people highlighted the importance of having other young people available who they could seek support and advice from, and indicated that living with people who had common interests or the same maturity level would be beneficial. The young people did not discuss any negative influence by their peers, such as peers influencing their challenging, risk taking or offending behaviours. The importance of peer relationships, both with the same and opposite gender, is clearly important to young people, and previous research has noted the benefits of peer relationships for development (Carr, 1999; Giordano, 1995). The current findings suggest that promoting and fostering positive peer relationships should be an important consideration within residential child care.

The difficulties noted by the young people, about the other young people they lived with, related to how it impacted their living environment, rather than their own behaviours. They suggested that the difficulties presented by other young people were due to individual differences, rather than the individuals' gender. It is noted that the range of emotional and behavioural difficulties presented by the young people within such placements is likely to impact on the difficulties they present when living with others (Adahan, 1991). It would follow therefore that to reduce the impact of other young people within mixed-gender living environments it may be sufficient to acknowledge that such difficulties will occur and develop appropriate management strategies.

Relationships with staff were considered to be important. The young people, both boys and girls, highlighted the importance of staff giving them time, showing them respect and having a sense of humour. They raised issues with staff not demonstrating sufficient effort. This is consistent with social pedagogy approaches in child care which centre on the adult-child relationship (Petrie et al., 2009), and with previous research that has highlighted the importance of stable relationships with staff (Sinclair & Gibbs, 1998). This finding is also relevant to discussions about therapeutic alliance and its impact on client outcomes (Chu & Kendall, 2004; Kendall & Ollendick, 2004). The young people made no distinction between their relationships with male or female staff, noting any difficulties with staff were due to individual characteristics rather than gender. Of note is that when working with young people who present emotional and behavioural difficulties or who have committed offences staff members may experience difficulty establishing and maintaining a warm and consistent relationship or may feel more comfortable working with one gender compared with the other (Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2012; Lanctôt, Ayotte, Turcotte, & Besnard, 2012). Supporting staff, via training and supervision, to understand the importance of their relationships with young people, and the potential difficulties within these relationships may again improve young peoples' engagement with services and increase placement stability and outcomes.

In this study, the main area where gender had relevance was in relation to young people wanting to express themselves via their gender. This included the young people accessing gender-specific activities, and girls highlighting the importance of expressing their gender through their appearance and environment. As discussed above, this study cannot comment on why girls and boys have different preferences; however, this finding suggests it would be beneficial for further research to consider the identity development of boys and girls. Increased understanding may provide guidance about offering living arrangements, and access to activities and peers that best support healthy development for girls and boys.

The young people in this study highlighted that some rules and restrictions, both those relating to gender specifically and general rules across the placement, could be problematic. Abela, Dimech, Farrugia, and Role (2005) previously noted that 'rules and regulations were a symptom of institutions, created for reasons of efficiency, but which become rather inflexible and not child-focused' (p. 15). Within this study, there was a sense that some rules made in response to gender issues were ill-considered and did not offer the benefits they intended. Concerns have been raised that much decision-making in childcare services is done in the absence of consultation with young people (Audit Scotland, 2010; Hill, 1998). Social pedagogy offers a response to such concerns, promoting an approach where 'policy requires the voice of the child to be heard' (Petrie et al., 2009, p. 7). It is of note that the young people in this study understood the need for rules and regulations, and presented sensible, workable ideas about how some rules could be adapted. This suggests that consultation, and transparent communication, with young people may be beneficial. Services should also consider evaluating consultation with young people, and its impact on engagement and outcomes.

When interpreting the current findings, and making recommendations, it is important to note limitations. This study presents the views of seven young people living in one residential placement at one particular time. It may be beneficial to compare the views of young people across different placements, to consider whether the difficulties highlighted generalise across residential care placements. The analysis within this study was completed by one researcher who was a staff member, and therefore reflexivity must be considered.

In this study, young people felt that mixed-gender placements were preferable to single-gender placements. However, there still remains a body of research that has highlighted the negative impacts that boys and girls can have on each other's offending (Smith & McVie, 2003), behaviour difficulties (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999) and education (Riordan, 1998, 2002). The appropriate use of single-gender or mixed-gender placements and their ability to meet the individual needs of accommodated young people requires further consideration. Further research is required to understand the specific needs of girls and boys and the possible impacts of the same and opposite gender on accommodated young people's care, development and offending behaviour.

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Notes on contributors

Jennifer Copley is a forensic psychologist in training at Kibble Education and Care Centre.

Daniel Johnson is a chartered and a registered forensic psychologist at Kibble Education and Care Centre.

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