

‘Life As We Know It’: the value of the arts as a tool for reflection, story telling and affecting policy

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Abstract: The Independent Care Review’s ‘The Promise’, published in February 2020, sets out an ambition for Scotland ‘to be the best place in the world to grow up’ so that children are ‘loved, safe, and respected and realise their full potential’. A key foundation of this work is the inclusion of the voices of young people so they are involved in decision making. This article reports on the project ‘Life As We Know It’, which has involved a small group of young adults from across Scotland with experience of care being involved in participatory evaluations, and in turn reflecting on issues of voice in relation to when they were younger.

The project, which was conducted throughout the pandemic, used participatory video methods, creative writing, music, and the creation of Zines, which are self-published booklets of original or appropriated texts and images, as effective evaluative tools for personal reflection and research. The learning has highlighted the benefits of using the arts to help young people shape and mould the stories they want to tell. This project has shown the importance of support, the value of having an ethics of care and reflective stance, and the need to emphasise the progress made but also in turn help young people find their voice about where improvements in policy and practice are needed. This article argues that there is a need to carefully consider the ways in which young people’s voices are heard, and that the arts offers a unique opportunity for this process to be enjoyable as well as meaningful.

Keywords: Young people, care experienced, arts, rights, participation.

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Introduction and overview

This article reports on reflections from young adults trained as Peer Researchers looking back on their time in care as children, captured as part of the ‘Life As We Know It’ project. This research was commissioned by the Life Changes Trust, and carried out between February 2020 and August 2021. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as noted by Archard (2020) has really two parts, the first being that every child capable of forming their own views has the right to express those views, and secondly that these views be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Archard (2020) focuses on the latter part of these rights, which of course is important and as observed complex, and these will be reflected on in due course. However, it is contended here that the first part, that is the very expression of views in itself, needs to be more carefully considered, because if this proves problematic for individuals then the question of how these are then weighted does not even arise.

The latest figures show that, at 31 July 2020, 16,530 children in Scotland were looked after or were on the child protection register (Scottish Government 2021). The Peer Researchers felt that when in care they were rarely asked their views, let alone had these weighted or listened to. They recognised also the challenges they had with regards to expressing what they thought, particularly because of anxiety, and the arts emerged as a useful tool for them to make sense of and relate what they thought, to capture their lived experience and to subsequently be heard. The use of the arts can also shift power dynamics between the child and adult and how views are weighted. At ‘worst’ the art produced will have helped the child express themselves and make them more visible to those around them. At best, it can become a dialogical tool to deepen understanding of how they really feel, and so it could be said that there are no real good reasons not to do this.

Adults are required to promote children’s best interests under Article 3 of the UNCRC and therefore it is incumbent on adults to seriously consider the way in which children’s views are elicited. This paper encourages professionals working at all levels to be creative and move away from traditional pressurised forums such as youth courts or children’s hearings systems where children are expected to speak and be heard, and which in effect can be exclusionary.

This article will set out an overview of the Project, the policy context in Scotland, some of the key findings from the research based on the Peer Researchers’ reflections, before turning to the discussion and conclusion. Ultimately, it will be argued that the arts, although not a panacea, could provide a mechanism for children who are unable to articulate their views verbally to communicate these through different mediums, and thus have their views recorded and considered, going some way to addressing

Article 12. This practice would however also require professionals to have an open mind to accept these different forms of communication. This article had originally been written with pseudonyms but since this time the Peer Researchers feel proud of what they have achieved and want to be known. Their real names are therefore used. Their work can be viewed in an online gallery.¹

The 'Life As We Know It' project

The 'Life As We Know It' project was delivered by the organisation Media Education and independent researcher Briegre Nugent. Media Education use participatory film, podcasts and the arts to enable people to tell their story, ideally with the view to have an impact on services and/or policy. Four 'Peer' Researchers aged between 18 and 26 years old were recruited through trusted networks, and they had a range of care experiences: one from foster, one secure, one kinship care, and one had been overlooked by the care system entirely. The project had two elements: firstly the Peer Researchers' reflections on their *own* journey throughout the project (primarily through 'in house' arts-based opportunities), and secondly participatory evaluation of support for young people currently in care, commissioned by the Trust. This article will focus only on the first element.

This research was underpinned by an ethics of care (Gilligan 1982), which means in practice that the team considered the barriers and enablers for engagement at each stage and promoted inclusivity, exercising empathy and sensitivity. Clear lines of communication were established with the Peer Researcher's key worker, and any issues that arose were dealt with quickly. The Peer Researchers received a living wage, and can use their video content to be awarded certification which can be an access point for students experiencing barriers to further education.

Because of the pandemic, at the beginning of the project all communication moved to being digital. Media Education responded quickly, mediating the effects in terms of the outputs for this project, by sourcing Chrome Books, internet access and supporting the Peer Researchers to set up their laptops and use digital platforms. The Peer Researchers were given an advance in payment, as it became quickly apparent that the impact of poverty had worsened as a result of COVID-19. Training was delivered online individually to stress the importance of boundaries and looking after oneself and the 'building blocks' of ethical research. Kvale (1996) describes research using a 'traveller metaphor', a journey whereby knowledge is constructed and negotiated between parties and co-produced so all contributions were treated as being of equal value.

¹ <https://artspace.kunstmatrix.com/en/node/7634697>

The project was developed in the light of Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), Scotland's approach to improving outcomes and to supporting the well-being of children and young people. It promotes eight factors often referred to as 'SHANARRI', so that every child should be Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included, at home, in school and in the wider community.

Policy context

The Childhood Policy Programme of the British Academy draws attention to the 'fragmented, inconsistent, and uneven policies that produce wildly different outcomes' across the UK (Berkley & Lister 2020: 2). Scotland is recognised as having a distinctive welfare-based approach in relation to youth justice, with the Kilbrandon Report in 1961 heralding the setting up of the Children's Hearings System (Donnelly 2020). As a devolved nation it has control of child protection policy and, for example, unlike the Westminster Government has retained targets to reduce child poverty and has taken action to mitigate the bedroom tax imposed by the UK Government (Scottish Government 2017).

In 2017 the First Minister in Scotland commissioned the Independent Care Review (ICR). This involved hearing from 5,500 individuals, with over half being children, young people and adults who had lived in care, and the rest the paid and unpaid care workforce. The Review brought to the fore that children and families do not feel listened to. In some cases they felt they had wanted to stay with their family and the loss of family love hurt them, but for others the opposite was true and they wished they had been removed. Young people, echoing the Peer Researchers' accounts, also revealed separation and limited contact with brothers and sisters.

Following this comprehensive review, the ICR published 'The Promise' in February 2020. This policy sets out an ambition for Scotland 'to be the best place in the world to grow up' so that children are 'loved, safe, and respected and realise their full potential' (ICR 2020: 4).² A key foundation of this work is the inclusion of the voices of young people and a compassionate, caring, decision-making culture focused on children and those they trust (ICR 2020: 9). The ten-year plan promotes the co-design of services and an oversight body that is 50 per cent made up of those with lived experience of care.

²To read more about the ICR please refer to <https://www.carereview.scot>

Barriers to young people being heard

Among the barriers to young people in care being heard are the following.

Poverty

The main challenge to young people being truly heard, which is acknowledged by the ICR, is poverty. Poverty has a pervading negative impact on all aspects of children's lives, their physical health, social, emotional and cognitive development, behaviour, educational outcomes, nutrition, and mental health (NHS Scotland 2018). Infant mortality rates in the most deprived areas in Scotland are over 50 per cent higher than those in the least deprived areas (ibid). An independent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) shows that those in low paid and precarious work, Black and Minority and Ethnic (BME) households, lone parents, private renters and those in areas of high unemployment and poverty, which were already struggling, have borne the brunt of the economic and health impacts of COVID-19. Furthermore, the indications are that when government support related to COVID, such as the drop in £20 received by those on Universal Credit is removed, coupled with the uncertainty that comes with Brexit, unemployment rates are set to rise (ibid). People living in poverty can feel treated as invisible by services (Lister 2015; Negus 2021), othered and shamed by the media and/or wider society, and frankly exhausted by the realities of getting by (Lister 2015; Walker 2014), so that making one's voice heard appears to be not a right or even a priority, but rather an unattainable luxury.

The lack of commitment to children being heard under Article 12

The ICR described the UNCRC as the 'bedrock' for all future legislation to ensure that the voices of children with care experience are respected and upheld. At the time of writing, Scotland has not yet fully incorporated the UNCRC into law, having faced opposition from the Westminster Government to do so, and it was held outwith the Scottish Parliament's powers by the Supreme Court. Therefore, across the UK the child's voice in policymaking remains absent (Berkley & Lister 2020).

Power imbalances

Securing views of young people with care experience is challenging because of the inherent power imbalances between the researcher / professional and young person. For example, most young people (57 per cent) who were surveyed about their experience in a study by Dixon *et al.* (2019) said they would prefer to be interviewed

by someone with care experience. Although not a focus of this report, giving young people themselves a more leading role in capturing other young people's voices through, for example, peer research could be one way of overcoming this (Lushey & Munro 2015).

Not saying or being able to say what they really think

Young people from marginalised communities, facing poverty and multiple barriers and who have experienced many interventions in their lives, are well versed in the language used to define and describe their situation (Media Education *et al.* 2020). It might even be true to say that they are 'rehearsed' in their answers. It takes a creative approach, time and trust to reach beyond prepared answers and to find out what they *really* think. At present, legally only due weight is given to children who are mature (and it could be added, confident) enough to give their opinion (Archard 2020). However, our study found that those who found it difficult to articulate their thoughts verbally, by using different mediums, such as creative writing, Zines, or music, were able to take time to reflect on their thought and communicate what they wanted to say. The arts therefore could be especially useful to those who are younger or verbally challenged. Archard (2020) notes that in Norway it is accepted that it is at the age of 8 that children can form a view and this is evidence based, but the evidence is not outlined or easy to find. It may well be that as yet, in Norway as in the UK, there has been the same underutilisation of 'all the tools in the box' to support children to be heard, and therefore a restriction of evidence. As already suggested, at the very least, children using the arts to attempt to express their views could help them to become more visible to professionals, and seems at any rate the right and ethical thing to do.

Findings: reflection on 'voice' when they were younger

Sense of justice (and injustice), and wanting to be heard

The main motivation for all of the Peer Researchers to get involved in this project was that in the past they had not been asked their views or had their views heard, echoing findings from other young people in care (ICR 2020). This experience was an opportunity to right that wrong, and for them in turn to help others to be heard too. This highlighted their sense of justice, past feelings of injustice, and passion to make a difference. Jordan had become involved in the criminal justice system and felt this was because he had acted out his frustrations as a result of not being heard, and this was now affecting his life chances.

They (social workers) told me I was going on a roadtrip, but I was actually being taken into secure (care)... I want people to feel listened to and not go down the bad route I went down. There are other ways of dealing with things.

All the Peer Researchers recognised themselves as having 'insider knowledge', or having 'been there', and welcomed the opportunity to meet others 'like them'. They understood the power of their narratives and wanted to bring a message ultimately of hope.

I want young people to feel heard, because I know I haven't felt that in the past. (Roxsanne)

I can say I have been through that, I understand that, I know how you are feeling and the fear you have, and you can get through it. (Chloe)

Feeling empowered

Roxsanne and Liam completed their self-portrait films early in the process, and having a tangible 'product' seemed to affirm the value of the experience. Liam described this as being 'empowering' and it made him realise:

I can do anything when I put my mind to it.

Liam was proud of his film and keen to show it to his foster parents. One of his main motivations for participation was to bring to the fore that being in care was a positive experience, and for him, life changing. He wants to distribute his Zine, which is a self-published booklet of original material, to potential foster carers, and encourage them to take up this role.

Reflecting on progress made but also how they had 'missed out'

All the Peer Researchers viewed their participation in this project as evidence of progress being made within the care system. Liam and Roxsanne had completed observations of interviews with professionals and even asked them their own questions. Both were impressed by the professionals' enthusiasm for working with young people, and they reflected that they had not always in the past had positive engagement in their lives with paid staff.

I feel like if I had got help sooner I would be further than I am now. It is only now that I am realising at 26 that I am as good as anyone else. (Roxsanne)

Power and recognition

For Liam, taking part in this project was transformative. He had begun to open up in the reflective and creative sessions about his childhood and reasons for coming into care, and this encouraged him to seek specialised support to deal with past trauma. Through the experience he felt he had gained a greater understanding of himself and also self-acceptance, and was taking ownership of his identity.

When I took up this work I saw it as a great opportunity to be busy and to understand more about people in care and delve into things ... people may have seen things, been through things. People think if you have been in care you are a troublemaker or a troubled child and that is not nice... I feel these experiences are making me aware that life is up to me and I am only going to do the things that I want.

All the Peer Researchers felt there needed to be opportunities for people growing up in care to be really listened to, and crucially no matter what their age, at least given the opportunity to express how they feel. They felt the arts could be a way of doing this. In the latter stages of the project, online events were held with professionals from across Scotland, and the care sector invited to hear and view the work. At the time of writing, follow-up meetings with key representatives from the care sector are being organised. All of these processes have been welcomed by the Peer Researchers, who feel they have gained recognition and are being truly seen and heard. On a more basic level, they felt that throughout their time in care they could have been asked their views about decisions made, and the arts used as a tool for them to articulate what they wanted to say. By using different mediums such as music or creative writing, they explained that they have time and space to make sense of their own thoughts, and also that communicating how they feel through these mediums feels less painful than simply stating it verbally. Moreover, using these mediums can even make the process fun as well as being a chance to learn new skills and/or develop talents.

Sometimes kids don't have the words to say what they want... Using photographs and metaphors I find it easier to say what I want to say and it isn't as hard. (Liam)

I am writing down some lyrics and I put 'em to a beat, finally I am better I am back up on my feet. (Jordan Lee, 'What It Do')

Overcoming anxiety

All four dealt with anxiety and felt this was a particular issue for young people in care, potentially stemming from past trauma. Using the arts, they took the time they needed, worked at their own pace and used the medium they wanted, to shape the messages they wanted to make. Over time and with positive affirmation, their

confidence continued to grow. To be simply able to stand up and articulate your views, often to a group of adults, which is what is expected of children in care who are invited to professional meetings, is a tall order for anyone. If we are to take seriously our role as adults who promote best interests, recognising the anxiety that children have and supporting them to find other ways of being heard should be encouraged, if not demanded.

I like creative writing so getting it down on paper helps me. (Chloe)

It's fun

All felt that making the films, Zines, creative writing and music was fun, and it meant the process was as important and meaningful to them as the output. In the participative evaluations, all of the Peer Researchers reflected that interviews or focus groups should be as fun as possible. The key message was that although these are serious issues, professionals can't forget that this is young people they are engaging with, and 'having a laugh' is really important and will help young people to feel comfortable and to 'open up'.

Discussion and conclusion

This article brings to the fore how children in care are especially vulnerable to the impact of policy and being absent from engagement in the creation of those policies that affect them. Based on the reflections of the Peer Researchers of when they were younger, when considering children in care, Article 12 does not seem to have been fulfilled, with young people rarely even asked their views. The Peer Researchers described feeling a strong sense of injustice at not being asked what they thought at different stages of the care process, for example in relation to being separated from their brothers and sisters, and they stressed the need for this thoughtlessness to end. One Peer Researcher even felt that their involvement in crime was the result of them acting out their frustrations at not being considered, and this was now affecting their life chances.

'Life As We Know It' was not just a 'nice' arts project; it also supported Peer Researchers to discuss and confront serious issues. Therefore, ensuring that considered and reflective support was provided throughout was imperative. It was also important that 'the team' recognised their limitations and engaged with wider support networks. This project involved working with young adults who on the face of it are articulate and able to say what they want and mature enough so that their views are weighted

(Archard 2020). However, they reported that this was difficult, and that using films, Zines, writing and music enabled them more easily and less painfully to tell the story they wanted to tell, capturing the complexity, including reflecting on where change needs to happen. They often really enjoyed the process, and it was a chance for them to learn new skills and develop their talents. For the Peer Researchers it was also a mechanism for them to reflect on their own lives, gaining a deeper understanding of who they are, achieving more self-acceptance, and affirming a positive identity as an activist using their experiences to promote positive change.

It is not a new finding that the arts can help people to express themselves, that they have intrinsic as well as extrinsic benefits, and importantly can be adapted to different age groups and interests, and are fun too. Archard (2020) discusses the challenges around how views are weighted, but as it stands, for those who cannot say what they want to say, the very expression of these views is not able to happen at all. In terms of supporting children and young people to have a voice in policymaking or decision making that affects them, fulfilling Articles 3 and 12, the arts provide a useful mechanism for the voices of those with lived experience to be captured. It also opens up a different yet meaningful form of engagement with young people that is fun, and they can move from being passive recipients of policy or practice to active participants in design. In doing so this shifts the power imbalance between the professional and child to create more equality. This process would require professionals to be open-minded, participation to be facilitated by skilled practitioners who understand the barriers young people face, and working alongside agencies to ensure adequate support is in place throughout. These children and young people are not ‘hard to reach’, and systems are not impenetrable. ‘The Promise’ appears to be based on a genuine desire to make policy inclusive, and although not a panacea for overcoming all of the many issues children face, to have their voice heard as outlined, the arts undoubtedly offer some creative ways to make this possible.

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