

Hard to teach, hard to reach, hard to justify: the challenge of participatory research with vulnerable young people

Catherine Lamond
University of Wolverhampton
email: C.Lamond@wlv.ac.uk
phone: 01902 322891

Abstract

The poor outcomes for looked after children (LAC) are well-documented: for example, a young person from a care background is 10 times more likely to be given a statement of special education need (SEN) than their peers (DCSF, 2009). Concern to address this inequity led to the New Labour government, charities and Research Institutes commissioning a range of large-scale studies (e.g. Harker et al 2003, 2004) to try to provide solutions, and these studies led to changes in policy and practice such as the introduction of Virtual Schools for LAC (Berridge, 2009). Large-scale studies which assume generalizations can be made about childhood or about categories of children have been criticised for failing to recognize the unique nature of children's experiences (e.g. in Christensen and James, 2008). Over the course of the last two decades, there has also been a range of smaller-scale studies aiming to give young people from a care background a voice by engaging them in participatory research (e.g Dearden, 2004). This article presents the challenges of participatory research with young people who may not be motivated to cooperate. It suggests some possible responses to the difficulty of giving a voice to those who are most marginalized, and addresses ethical issues raised.

Keywords: looked after children, participatory research, research with children, resilience

Introduction

This article's research issue is the poor outcomes for looked after children (LAC). Children who have been in care for twelve months or more are ten times more likely than their peers to have a statement of special educational needs (SEN), and five times more likely to be permanently excluded (DCSF, 2009). The gap in attainment between looked after children and their peers is wide from the beginning but widens as age increases. 'In school year 11, 66 per cent of children looked after continuously for at least 12 months obtained at least one GCSE or GNVQ compared with 99 per cent of all school children who gained any qualification' (DCSF, 2009). 45% of children in care are identified as having a mental health disorder, as compared to 10% of the general population (DfES, 2007, p. 6).

Research in this field addresses the issue of poor outcomes in a variety of ways. There have been many large-scale studies which aim to be representative of children in care in general and to crystallise key points in order to improve their life chances (e.g. Berridge, 2007; Harker et al 2003, 2004; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, 2003): these are often critical of groups, such as foster carers or social workers, and call for systemic change. They have been influential in bringing about changes in school policies, for example implementing a requirement for schools to give LAC priority in admissions; introducing personal education allowances; and supporting one-to-one tuition (Who Cares Trist, 2011). In spite of such initiatives, improvements in outcomes have been stubbornly elusive (DCSF, 2009). Some studies aim for deep understanding of difficulties from the perspective of LAC or care-leavers themselves (e.g. Dearden, 2004; Mallon, 2005). Other studies such as Gilligan (2007), Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005) and Schofield and Beek (2009) adopt a positive approach and focus on what factors have enabled some young people from care to succeed in the face of adversity.

Mallon (2005) identifies a disturbingly long list of risk factors encountered by children in care: these were listed by eighteen people from a care background. As well as pre-care and post-care risk factors which have an impact on general well-being as well as education, participants listed the following in-care risk factors:

- No personal investment in the child
- Didn't feel special to anyone
- Lack of love and affection
- Timing of placement(s) on education
- Lack of encouragement with education
- No help with or interest shown in child's homework by care staff
- Never received praise
- Felt let down by parents during time in care
- No sense of belonging
- Lack of continuity: staff and other children
- Low self-esteem
- Felt you were on your own
- Physical abuse
- Rejection
- Stigma (Mallon, 2005, p. 93)

While Mallon (2005) is particularly scathing about the role of social workers in the lives of children in care, locating the blame for these risk factors with them, the conclusion from his research can be drawn that it is not surprising that LAC fail.

Gilligan (2007) stresses the importance of motivation for young people in care, suggesting that a range of strategies such as out-of-school clubs and mentoring should be employed to encourage their success in any area, from baking to looking after pets. Moran (2007, p.35) suggests that 'schools have

an important role to play in fostering resilience and motivation in looked after children'. Newman (2004, in Moran, 2007, p. 36) proposes six resilience domains which schools should aim to provide for all children, but which can be particularly beneficial to children in care: these are 'a sense of belonging, education, friendships, self-esteem, empathy and self-efficacy'.

Chase, Simon and Jackson (2006, p.1) bring together research with children in care from a range of professional perspectives: social care, education, economics, health promotion, pedagogy, psychology and statistics. The underlying premise which unites the contributors is their belief in a positive approach to improving outcomes for looked after children, with a focus on a strengths perspective, building resilience, and the importance of experiencing success (Chase, Simon and Jackson, 2006, p.8). 'By presenting young people in and leaving care solely as victims of systems that fail them, we risk ignoring and undermining the role they themselves play in determining their own futures, and the resilience and resourcefulness that many possess' (Chase, Simon and Jackson, 2006, p.2). Each research project stresses the importance of giving young people a voice.

Every chapter is written from a different professional perspective, each of which suggests that it is that particular field (eg social care, health, or psychology) which is the key to achieving positive outcomes for children in care: this is not unexpected. It can still be argued that education could and should be one of the positive influences in young people in care's lives. Even if these young people can be encouraged and enabled to achieve in school, there are many questions left unanswered. The current rigid definition of achievement by which young people are judged may seem completely irrelevant to children in care. 'Young people who lose interest in education, often because it offers them no chance of success, can become caught up in a vicious cycle of cumulative disadvantage' (Jackson and Simon (2006) in Chase, Simon and Jackson, 2006, p.47).

Schofield and Beek (2009) write from a social work perspective aimed at improving understanding and practice in the field of social work with children in care. They report findings from the third and final phase of a longitudinal study (1997-2006) of the experiences of 52 children looked after by 8 local authorities. Their work 'aims to increase our understanding of the transformational power of foster family relationships over time and particularly in adolescence' (Schofield and Beek, 2009, p. 255). The authors underpin their argument with psychological theory, specifically attachment theory; the importance of resilience and social capital; and the secure base model of caregiving. This last model, which includes the 5 dimensions of availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation, and family membership, is used throughout the analysis of interviews with young people (20) and foster carers (32). Examples are given in the young people and foster carers' own words, of how difficult events have been managed by foster carers being available, sensitive, accepting, etc. The authors conclude that social workers can support long-term placements by using the secure base model.

Schofield and Beek (2009) seem to suggest that foster carers should be heroic and self-sacrificing to support the children they look after through adolescence and into adulthood. It cannot be claimed that all responsibility lies with them. Fostering is not well-paid, and there is an urgent shortage of foster placements (the Fostering Network estimated 10,000 in 2009), so local authorities do not often have the luxury of selecting from a range of excellent placements: this problem is ignored by the authors. The authors make little mention of school, which disregards the important role which education could and should play in providing stability and positive opportunities in the lives of young people in care (Cameron and Maginn, 2009). Other studies (eg Broad, 2008) have shown that changes in social worker can have a detrimental effect on children in care, and it is a fact that there is a shortage of social workers, but this problem is not addressed.

Cameron (2007) in a study of care-leavers trying to gain further educational qualifications, expands on the frequent theme of resilience to suggest that care-leavers adopt self-reliance. This is a combination of resilience and a belief and aptitude in their own agency in overcoming obstacles. 'In many cases, the key to success was reliance on their own resources, taking the initiative, rather than relying on any external sources of formal support, regardless of availability' (Cameron, 2007, p.47). Interestingly, she points out that this self-reliance can be seen as being 'difficult' by services to support the care-leaver, when in fact it is an appropriate response to previous experiences of being let down.

In a review of research in the field of young people leaving care, Stein (2006) suggests that using resilience as a framework allows the identification of three classes of outcomes for care-leavers. These are 'Moving on' – young people who can succeed in putting their difficult experiences behind them; 'Survivors' – those who feel that they have struggled to overcome difficult circumstances but can do so with appropriate support; and 'Victims' – who feel that they have little chance of success and who need intensive support. It could be suggested that some young people are justified in feeling victimised and that their needs must be addressed, not by pathologising individuals but by looking at systemic problems.

My study has a particular focus on the educational experiences of young people who have been excluded from mainstream schooling. It adds to research in this field which proposes that education could and should have an important role to play in promoting positive outcomes for LAC (Cameron and Magnn, 2009). Young people who have been experiencing difficulties in school are arguably best placed to give insight into where education is failing to meet the complex needs of vulnerable young people. This research project is in line with the body of research which focuses on the perspectives of young people themselves, aiming to adopt a positive approach.

The underpinning position adopted for this study is based on social constructionism (Burr, 2003) with an awareness that 'social constructionists

argue that research methods construct social realities as much as they might describe or 'discover' them' (Cousin, 2009, p. 11). Christensen and James (2008) argue that research *with* children stands as its own methodology. An underpinning belief in the possibility of educational research to bring about positive change (Basit, 2010, p. 5) can be linked to a sociocultural perspective which 'sees disadvantage as something produced within particular social, cultural and historical contexts ...Recognizing the constructed nature of disadvantage is an important point for any innovative study since it admits the possibility of challenging particular categories of disadvantage and their material consequences' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, in Hall, Murphy and Soler, 2008, p. 167).

My study does not aim to be representative of the experiences of LAC in general: we must avoid 'assuming that what is known about a group fits all individuals in that group' (Hall and Murphy, 2008, in Hall, Murphy and Soler, 2008, p.x). This study instead aims to focus closely on a small number of pupils in a particular situation with the aim of discovering possible reasons for what is happening (Connolly, 2004). The drive to give young people a voice is in line with policy in the area of children's services since the introduction of the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003).

Working within the interpretive paradigm, this study adopts a qualitative methodology and strives to achieve participatory and emancipatory goals. There is a fine balance to be struck here when addressing 'the question of researching marginality where the challenge for researchers is to be sensitive to the experiences of disadvantage while resisting an overdetermined view of those who bear its brunt' (Cousin, 2009, p.14). Presuming to suggest that I can research inequality and therefore possibly effect change seems to suggest I am assuming some sort of power and privilege, but the challenge for participatory research is to trouble the power imbalance inherent in research.

Denzin and Lincoln state that qualitative research is always value-laden and is 'emic, idiographic, case-based' (1998, p. 10). What is required is an ongoing commitment to researcher reflexivity (Greenbank, 2003). The ethical framework for this study was built around the aims to benefit the pupils, generate new understandings, and treat the participants and staff with respect. These aims are not unproblematic: for example, I could not be sure that the project would benefit the participants.

'Understanding the world from the perspective of children and young people involves researchers recognising that it is their respondents who are the 'experts'. (Pattman and Kehily, 2004, in Fraser et al., 2004, p. 134). On the other hand, Robinson and Kellett (2004, in Fraser et al., 2004) caution that we must never lose sight of the power relationships between adults and children: can pupils in school truly exercise choice? Some research with children 'can be seen to be contributing to the professional gaze on private aspects of the everyday lives of young people in care, and even to a categorisation of them

as pathologised 'other'.(Holland, 2009, p.231). I was determined to avoid this trap but rather to act as an advocate for the young people, not as an outsider expert but as someone taking the time to explore, with them, their understandings.

Case study has the potential to engage participants in the research process. This is both a political and epistemological point. It signals a potential shift in the power base of who controls knowledge and recognizes the importance of co-constructing perceived reality through the relationships and joint understandings we create in the field. It also provides an opportunity for researchers to take a self-reflexive approach to understanding the case and themselves. (Simons, 2009, p.23)

'In contrast to research about children's assumed deficits and failings, participatory research in its topics, methods and practical involvement with children and young people aims to show their competencies' (Alderson, 2004, in Fraser et al., 2004, p. 103). O'Kane explains and justifies the use of participatory techniques in research with children: 'The successful use of participatory techniques lies in the process, rather than simply the techniques used. This, a commitment to ongoing processes of information-sharing, dialogue, reflection and action greatly facilitate the genuine use of participatory techniques.' (O'Kane, 2008, in Christensen and James, 2008, p.129) O'Kane links the use of participatory techniques to a social constructionist view, where children and researchers work together to construct their own understandings, and the voices of young people are heard and valued. It must be acknowledged, however, that it is really the researcher's voice which has most dominance, in selecting the topic and interpreting the findings (Greenbank, 2003).

Stages of the pilot study

Following on from previous work with a West Midlands LA (Brown et al, 2009), and building on my interest in the area of the educational experiences of children in care, I was asked by the Access Manager at the LA to investigate the views of young people attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). This was of interest to the LA as these services, provided for children and young people who are permanently excluded from school, or who are at risk of such exclusion, had been undergoing significant restructuring over the last academic year, and managers were keen to include the views of young people in their evaluation of the changes. This research issue tied in with my own interests because, although not all the pupils at the PRU are in care, many are from troubled family backgrounds and may have been in and out of care. The young people can therefore be defined as from a care background, which covers a range of current circumstances.

Although the invitation to undertake this research removed potential barriers such as gatekeepers blocking access to researchers (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001), it could have posed ethical difficulties if I had discovered that the pupils held very negative views of the provision and of the staff working there: however, as this project took place at a time of flux, LA staff seemed focused on the importance of involving young people at a time of change rather than on protecting roles or egos. Managers introduced my project in a very positive light, but there could have been resistance to me from teaching and support staff, which I strived to avoid by ensuring that I joined in and worked hard with the young people rather than observing from the sidelines.

While management support eased my route into the setting, it did not ensure the engagement of participants. I knew that it would be challenging to work with these marginalised young people but optimistically (or perhaps naively), hoped that taking an interest in someone is usually a positive experience for that individual, especially if this is framed in a positive and emancipatory approach, such as mine (Christensen and James, 2008). The fundamental question remains, however: why *should* a pupil talk to an external researcher (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001)? This is particularly relevant for these young people who have been experiencing difficulties at school, probably in relationships with people in positions very similar to mine. School structures mean that those in authority wield the power (Robinson and Kellett, 2004, in Fraser et al., 2004), and sometimes the only way to exert any agency can seem to be to refuse to conform. These barriers can perhaps partly explain why research in this area often relies on whoever is willing to participate rather than identified marginalised groups (Holland, 2009). The ‘practical ease of access to some children rather than others may mean that the voices of certain categories are undervalued or overlooked’ (Hill, 2005, in Greene and Hogan, 2005, p.67) but this means it is even more important to overcome barriers to listen to those who are harder to reach.

The project ran the risk, therefore, of no pupil giving informed consent; or of those who did consent having this over-ridden by parents/carers who may be suspicious of being ‘investigated’. Fortunately, three pupils (all boys in Year 7) and their carers did give consent. The study could be criticised for being too small, not achieving triangulation, and not being generalizable. In its defence ‘the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization’ (Stake, 1995, In Cousin, 2009, p.135).

The project faced many practical challenges, which included the pupils being absent/ in isolation/ sent home; staff absence and timetable changes. The largest barrier, however, was in overcoming the resistance of the boys: why should they co-operate with me? I tried to think of engaging activities to provoke their interest, but these did not always proceed as I had intended. I gave out disposable cameras, which were enthusiastically received, but were missing by my next visit; we worked on graffiti art together, but the boys became rather stuck on writing their names and doing designs around them so we ran out of time; and overall, the boys resented feeling questioned. I did achieve some degree of success with an IT activity, which involved choosing images and commenting on them, but also relied on participant observation.

I planned to attend the PRU for an entire half-term up until the summer holidays, in an effort to minimise the impact of becoming yet another adult flitting in and out of the lives of these boys. The instability of relationships has often been highlighted as a key difficulty for young people in care (e.g. Dearden, 2004) and I was aware of adding to this by planning my short project. I finally needed many weeks of playing basketball or football, cooking, doing artwork and cleaning cars (as part of a business project) to establish friendly enough relations for the pupils to be at all open with me. Spending the time to build up relationships with the pupils increased the likelihood of 'reliable accounts' (Spradley, 1979, in Cousin, 2009, p.123) as the boys grew accustomed to me taking part in lessons, but did raise ethical questions for me: was I tricking the boys to pursue my own ends? After each session where I undertook participant observation I made field notes, but continued to feel uneasy about using ordinary conversations: did the boys really know when I was 'being a researcher'? In my move away from participatory research towards a more ethnographic approach I had to acknowledge that I had abandoned initial aims of giving power to the participants. No harm resulted, however, and I did aim to carry out an authentic study where I engaged with 'virtue ethics' (Macfarlane, 2010, in Savin-Baden and Major, 2010) by asking myself these questions throughout.

I wrote up my findings and gave a short report, including recommendations, to the Headteacher of the PRU before the summer holidays: we discussed the key points and I then sent the report to the LA Inclusion Manager who had invited me to carry out the project. The recommendations included providing more opportunities for friendships to develop, which is difficult in an environment where young people are closely supervised at all times; and ensuring that the curriculum enabled young people to take some responsibility for decisions. At the end of the summer term I gave a voucher to the three Year 7 boys with whom I had spent my time: they did not know about this reward and were pleasantly surprised. As I gave the vouchers on the last day when certificates were being distributed and gifts given to teachers, this did not seem to jar too much, but I must question if it was more of a salve to my conscience for using the boys for a few weeks than a reward to them.

Findings and analysis

These pupils have generally positive views of education. When looking through images to explain their previous educational experiences they made many positive comments about teachers, friends and activities. In this activity and in more general conversation it seems that there is often one individual at a previous school who pupils identify as the reason for all the difficulties they may have encountered. While this could be a simplifying strategy after the event, it is nonetheless positive that the pupils can separate out a negative relationship from their educational experience as a whole. The literature has suggested that pupils would hold more negative views of schooling (eg Connolly, 2004).

These young people have high aspirations which include wealth and owning expensive cars, but also lofty career ambitions – e.g. RAF pilot, vet. They do not, however, have a realistic sense of time and the steps needed to move from where they are now to where they want to be, but that is not unusual for young people of their age. This finding is in contrast with the identified problem of low aspirations (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). It can be seen therefore that the young people in the study demonstrated resilience: this resonates with the studies which have found that care-leavers who go on to be successful have developed resilience to help them recover from early difficulties (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). It contrasts with the many studies (e.g. Stein, 2006) which focus on the lack of resilience as a key problem for LAC: these young people did not seem to benefit from the strategies suggested as being important to promote resilience, but seemed to have developed this strength in spite of what was going on around them.

In particular, the pupils in this PRU did not benefit from continuity and stability which has been proposed as a key factor in developing resilience (Dearden, 2004). There were numerous adults passing through the centre. Despite my frequent visits there remained several people whose name and role I did not know, and this experience is replicated for the pupils. They did not seem to be concerned if members of staff were missing, or wonder if they would ever see them again – they are habituated to a state of flux. These young people did not have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with the adults who work with them, seen as so important in enabling positive outcomes (Who Cares Trust, 2011), but have developed the ability to rely on their own resources and not to appear troubled by constant change.

Boys moving into adolescence must work hard to build and maintain identity through interactions with others (Hall, 2008 in Hall, Murphy and Soler, 2008). This could be particularly difficult for the boys in this study because temporary attendance at a PRU does not encourage them to build strong relationships with other pupils, who may only be there for the day, or with the frequently changing staff team. In spite of these obstacles the boys were trying to establish friendships, and had particular bonds with certain members of staff. They also protected their identity by locating the blame for being excluded from previous schools with particular adults – ‘Mrs X was mad, she hated me’, rather than examining their own role. For these young people, previous experience at school had not been successful, and they externalised the causes of their difficulties. These attitudes suggest that the young people’s resilience could in fact be a cause of some of the negative outcomes, rather than a strategy for overcoming them: perhaps their lack of reliance on adults is seen as ‘challenging behaviour’ in certain circumstances, while to them it is a source of strength where adults cannot be relied upon (Cameron, 2007). The boys had an idealised picture of their future adult lives but did not seem to be on a trajectory heading in any direction: rather, there was a complete dislocation between their current and future lives. Their education is not a trajectory but rather a series of disjointed episodes, through which they negotiate their way with resilience.

I also had to negotiate my way through the stages of the study, moving from the goal of participatory research towards an acceptance of adopting an ethnographic approach. O’Kane (2008, in Christensen and James, 2008) warns that ethnographic research with children can be invasive, suggesting that the benefit of a participatory approach lies in giving power to the young people themselves to set the agenda. This is questionable: it could be argued that the researcher has always set the agenda before even reaching the research domain. O’Kane (2008) discusses the risk when using participatory methods of children choosing to hide certain aspects, but, with whatever approach is adopted, participants must have this power, however inconvenient for the researcher. Throughout the course of this research project I had to question if I had obtained more data than the participants had wanted to give: but this may be common in interpretive, qualitative research.

Overall, this small study showed that the education system seems to be letting down these pupils by not allowing them to succeed in the mainstream system, or to experience any continuity (which has been deemed so important) in the alternative provision. I had to recognise that this is my perception, not at all that of the participants. They enjoyed being at the PRU, and did not seem undermined by the constant changes. This raises questions about the premises underlying research arising from a concern to address the poor outcomes for LAC – whose judgment decides that outcomes are ‘poor’? I had to re-examine carefully my starting-point of aiming for participatory research which would encourage co-construction of knowledge with the recognition that this may be impossible when the researcher and the participants have completely different views to begin with.

Conclusion

Reviewing this study, my initial position seems rather naive. In line with the movement of the ‘new sociology of childhood’ (Christensen and James, 2008) I approached the study from the viewpoint that participatory research with children and young people is in some way ‘better’ than research which does not aim to be participatory. Over the course of the study I came to accept that there ‘may indeed be a subtle tyranny to participatory research that requires careful examination and reflection’ (Iphofen, 2009, p. 130). The LA allowed me access to the PRU because it suited their purpose in showing they listen to the views of pupils; I pursued my own purpose of undertaking research with vulnerable young people; but the participants themselves gained little from the project. Being asked your opinion is potentially a positive experience, but perhaps not if it is misunderstood due to a mismatch in underlying values, and if your suggestions are not followed up in any way. I do not know if I understood what the young people were expressing, given my realisation that my view that being excluded from mainstream school was a negative ‘outcome’ was nothing more than that – my view. My presence at the PRU added to the flow of adults in and out of the pupils’ lives. I did give a report and some recommendations to the management team at the centre but they

were subject to re-structuring so, although, our discussion seemed positive at the time, the next team may have viewed my suggestions differently. In any case, the young people involved moved on to different education settings so any changes would not have affected them. Research must always measure costs against benefits (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) and, in balance, I did not do any harm that I know of. There is a benefit in adding to the understanding of the lives of vulnerable young people – if I really managed to do this.

The study has also drawn out many challenges to being an ethical researcher, which can be summarised in the need for ongoing reflexivity. Carrying out ethical research is challenging because ‘Ethicizing involves being ethically and morally present in each participatory moment of the research process’ (Duncan and Watson, 2010, p.50 in Savin-Baden and Major, 2010). A key difficulty faced in this study was the aim of achieving participatory research with young people who did not always cooperate in participating: I have attempted to show the reflexive steps taken to adapt the study away from the original goals in a justifiable manner. Throughout the course of the project I came to realise that my views were very different from the views and values of the participants, which could undermine the whole drive to be participatory. It seems that these challenges can only be uncovered in the research process: rather than giving up the goal of participatory research, especially with vulnerable participants, perhaps the best we can do is to be open about the challenges and conflicts which arise.

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