"Out with the old and in with the new": The need for social work practice to be informed by the sociology of childhood

Conference Item

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“Out with the old and in with the new” The need for sociology of childhood informed social work practice

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Background

The challenges facing fostering social work

● Young people in foster care being unsettled and their placements being undermined by manipulative behaviour of birth parents (Stephenson, 2009)

● Young people in care being victims of cyber-bullying (Fursland, 2011)

● Young people in care are vulnerable to sexual exploitation either by an individual or via a gang. The majority of victims are female (Sen, 2015)

● Limited or lack of access to different social networking platforms which are frequently used by the majority of young people (Fursland, 2011)

● Significant divergence of opinions held by social work practitioners as to how best to respond to concerns raised by foster carers and other professionals (Fursland, 2011)

● The possible risks and threats stemming from mobile devices and the Internet are external to the home environment (Fursland, 2011)
Background

The challenges facing fostering social work

- Risks associated with smartphones that include: inappropriate tagging of photographs, geolocation and complex gifting, for example sharing of music and photographs that might be of a pornographic nature (sexting) (Carrick-Davies, 2011)

- Many of the risks faced by young people come from outside the home and are situated in peer groups and neighbourhoods. Parents and practitioners are struggling to effectively manage these risks as the existing child protection system has been designed to deal with risk emanating from the familial environment (Lenhart et al., 2011 and Firmin, 2013).

- Child protection processes that are used for young people are likely to be inappropriate as their immediate circumstances include multi-faceted problems that are difficult and require a different response. This is because of the expansive range of risks identified as external to the home combined with existing risk-taking behaviours exhibited by the young people themselves (Gorin and Jobe, 2013)
Background

The challenges facing fostering social work

ADCS POSITION STATEMENT
WHAT IS CARE FOR: ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF CARE FOR ADOLESCENTS
(April 2013)

1. About ADCS and this statement

1.1 The Association of Directors of Children’s Services Ltd (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children’s services appointed under the provisions of the Children Act 2004 and for other children’s services professionals in leadership roles.

1.2 This position statement is the second in a short series that articulates ADCS members’ collective aspirations for the care system. In particular, this statement reviews the key messages from evidence relating to models of adolescent care provision, examines whether there might be alternative models better suited to the needs of adolescents, looks at the balance of parenting responsibility between the state and a young person’s family, offers some possibilities for debate, and makes some recommendations as to how we might move forward. The paper builds on the premise that “adolescence” is a construct that does not respect boundaries and asks whether we need to challenge the conceptual underpinning of our current range of services designed to meet the needs of young people.

1.3 Care is never an end in itself. It is always just one stage of a child’s journey into adulthood: the true outcome measure for care must be related to the quality of what life the young person achieves. The key driver for the focus of this paper is the consistently poor tracked record of state intervention in effectively meeting the needs of those young people who first enter care in adolescence, particularly those who spend some time in care before they reach 18. Some young people in care at 18 are, indeed, described as “graduates” who enter the care system under the age of 16 and remain in care during their adolescence.

Children’s Services Innovation Programme

What do we mean by “rethinking support for adolescents in care or on the edge of care”?

Some ideas to get you started.

We need to change the way we care for troubled adolescents and their families.

The Association of Directors of Children’s Services published a position statement and research paper in 2013 which makes a very strong case for rethinking how we respond to the complex needs of adolescents.

Some young people enter care in a crisis, following a long history of low-level contact with the care system, some experience many unstable and short-lived foster placements, some are ultimately placed in residential care as a last resort. Some young people have all three of these experiences. As ADCS rightly says, we need to find ways to do better.

Children in residential care have high levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties. A recent research study found that 35% of children living in children’s homes had a statement of special educational needs, 52% had clinically significant mental health difficulties, 74% had been violent or aggressive in the past 6 months. Children who live in children’s homes achieve lower attainment levels in Key Stage examinations. In 2011-12, Looked After Children in England spent £2.58 billion in total on looked after children, of which £1.15 billion was spent on residential care.
The risks experienced by young people in general are:

- **Content**: type of material that is available to download, view and generate e.g. pornographic, suicide and self-harm websites

- **Contact**: this may involve an individual who is online encouraging a young person to take part in an interaction either online or offline which leads to risky behaviours

- **Conduct**: this may include the young person being both a victim and also a perpetrator e.g. cyberbullying (May-Chahal et al., 2014)
Key developmental tasks

Benefits of the Internet and social networking for young people

● There is a wish to maintain communication not only with friends but also a wider circle of people (Livingstone, 2011 and boyd and Marwick, 2011)

● Meeting a fundamental need of adolescent development by satisfying some requirement for attachment through a variety of relationships.

● Performance on the social media ‘stage’ draws the attention of peers but also enhances personal worth and standing amongst them and serves as a means to obtain social capital

Key adolescent development tasks are being achieved: identity, autonomy and sexuality (Hill, 1983 as cited by Subahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008)
Summary

Vulnerability vs. Risk

- The case between vulnerability and risk is not entirely straightforward (McLeod, 2007; Livingstone and Brake, 2010; Livingstone, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2012)

- Carrick-Davies (2011 p.15) has commented that the ‘significance of the mobile phone in the often complicated inter-relationships of young people characterises their lives and perception of risk’

- Research undertaken by Livingstone et al., (2012) suggests that young people’s use of the Internet when it was managed by monitoring software, tended not only to impair online skills, but also digital skills and opportunities that would provide them with the opportunity to maintain their safety.

“the exact relationship between online and offline vulnerability still needs to be better understood and the evidence does not support an assumption that young people with care experience are per se, at greater risk online” (Sen 2015)
Models of social work

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<tr>
<th>Psychologically Informed Social Work</th>
<th>Sociology of Childhood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Draws on theoretical approaches that include systems, ecological and attachment theories</td>
<td>Emphasises that children are able to contribute and co-construct our adult understanding of childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manifetsed in securing the individual safety of the young person in care and protecting childhood</td>
<td>Acknowledges that children and young people have agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pathologises the behaviours of the young person in care</td>
<td>Can embrace a citizenship based approach which readily acknowledges that children and young people have rights</td>
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<td>Supports the normative assumptions about children and young people that have been principally informed by Paiget (1953) regarding their cognitive development</td>
<td>Offers the opportunity for social workers to understand the young person in care’s experiences of risk through their own narrative account and then go on to analyse the contextual phenomena (Carrick-Davis, 2011)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Supports the dominant narrative that relates to children and young people being governed by basic wishes, fantasies and fears</td>
<td>Enables the wishes and feelings of the young person in care to be taken into account and given respect</td>
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<td>Ultimately leads to practitioners like social workers failing to critically reflect and question the dominating narratives</td>
<td>Promotes safeguarding that is much more child-centred</td>
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<td>Does not easily allow for the experiences of young people in care to be recognised or accepted</td>
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Why the need for change?

- Risk as it understood presently is outside of the family home

- May be necessary for social work practitioners to realise that young people can and are experts of their lives, and are able to “engage in feasible opportunities to learn and train, to help others, or to participate in decisions that affect them” (Hanson and Holmes, 2014 p.22)

- Provides a framework within which social work practitioners and young people in care are capable of sharing common goals in relation to safeguarding

- There may be certain risks that are meeting the development needs of a young person in care in the here and now (Hanson and Holmes, 2014)

- Munro’s (2011 p.105) recommendation that social work organisations need to give credence to the views and experiences of both children and the social work practitioners that work alongside them.
Questions ?


References


