'He's got some nasty impression of me he has': Listening to Children in the Secure Estate

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Abstract

In 2010, 260 children entered secure accommodation. Of these, 51 per cent were placed because they were on remand or sentenced for committing a serious offence. Thirty seven per cent were placed by social services for their own protection under a child welfare order and the remaining 12 per cent were placed under both categories concurrently. Secure accommodation is therefore used to simultaneously hold children sentenced for punishment with those who are 'saved' from tragedy by welfare professionals. This paper highlights findings from an ethnographic study conducted with girls in secure accommodation. The research used participant observations and in-depth interviews to explore girls' experiences of being secured and found that all thirteen of the girls admitted from local authority care felt that they were perceived as 'bad kids'—regardless of whether they had committed a crime or not. These feelings were exacerbated by the prominence of case files which followed children between care placements and were described as a source of anxiety and worry for young people. This paper hopes to inspire social work practice to be more inclusive of young people and to be aware of the impact of shrouding the information contained in case files.

Interventions for children

Interventions designed for children are largely based around conflicting but prominent views of innate childhood, one taking the view that children are 'innocent and naïve' (Rosier, 2011, p. 261) and therefore in need of protection, while the other, grounded in Puritan beliefs, that children are 'evil' or 'sinful creatures' who need to be tamed, disciplined and punished (Scott *et al.*, 1998; Valentine, 2000). Therefore, while 'vulnerable' children are directed to welfare services, those perceived as 'troublesome' are steered towards other, more punitive provisions. Childhood in both of these contexts represent 'risk' in policy terms and, while the vulnerable child is perceived to be 'at risk' of potential harm from those around them, the antisocial child poses 'a risk' to their community (Webb, 2006). So, whereas the 'at-risk' child is understood to be 'troubled' and in need of help, the 'risky' child is seen to be 'troublesome' and in need of discipline (Worrall, 1999).

Research in this area, though, shows that young people feel the 'troubled' and 'troublesome' divide in intervention less keenly and, although 'vulnerable' children are often looked after by the state in a welfare capacity, for those concerned, such intervention is often perceived as a punishment instead of a helpful intervention (Goldson, 2002). This is made increasingly problematic by the blurring of competency that is awarded to children depending on which side of the troubled or troublesome dichotomy they sit on. While 'children' as a category are generally assumed to have 'limited capacity' which restricts them from smoking, gambling, skipping school or partaking in consensual sexual activity (Muncie, 2006), children who offend are held accountable for their behaviour from the age of ten in England and Wales, and eight in Scotland. This tension means that children of the same age are granted different levels of 'capacity' at different times, so, whereas a ten-year-old assessed as 'neglected' or 'abused' may be taken unwillingly away from his family home, the same child is judged as competent if he steals something from his local shop (Worrall, 1999).

Although children are judged and 'worked with' differently, depending on classifications of 'risk', research and practice have frequently illustrated that 'children in trouble' share similar characteristics of social exclusion and poverty, often do poorly at school and have experienced abuse or neglect at home (O'Neill, 2001, p. 147; Muncie, 2006). Although children who break the law often simultaneously fit into the category of the 'troubled' child, in England and Wales, needs and justice services are apportioned to divide children between welfare or justice organisations. So, while it is agreed that children in the youth justice system generally have the same needs as those in welfare services, politically these children are characterised in very different ways (Muncie, 1999). This is clearly portrayed in policy where children's rights are protected through Department for Education (DFES) policies 'Every Child Matters' (2003) and 'Care Matters' (2006).

Once children offend, however, they become the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice and thus bound under policy which promotes its 'main purpose' as being to prevent reoffending, regardless of the circumstances in which children are entrenched (Smith, 2005).

This paper draws on data collected during an ethnographic study in a secure children's home in England, using the home as a lens through which to explore this apparent contradiction in policy relating to children 'in trouble'. Secure accommodation serves an apt location for such an exploration, as it 'has a foot in both camps' (Goldson, 2002, p. 9) and is used to accommodate children together regardless of their descriptions as 'troubled' or 'troublesome'. This paper explores the finding that girls secured under the intention of 'welfare' perceived their placement to be one of punishment. Using data collected from participant observations and in-depth interviews, this paper will argue that case files and professional documenting of needs and risk contributed to the fact that thirteen of the fifteen girls placed felt that they were perceived as being 'bad kids' by those prominent in securing their placement.

Secure accommodation: an introduction

As well as being termed in the academic literature as secure accommodation (Goldson, 2002; O'Neill, 2001; Harris and Timms, 1993*a*), in local authority documentation, secure units have also been referred to as 'local authority secure children's homes'. Thus, whilst acting as a penal facility to house children guilty of committing grave offences, secure units also act as a home to those who have suffered serious abuse and are in need of protection. From a criminal justice perspective, young people can be placed in secure accommodation if they are on remand awaiting trial, if they have been sentenced to a Detention and Training Order (DTO) or if they are found guilty of committing a serious or 'grave' crime (O'Neill, 2001; Worrall, 2001; Harris and Timms, 1993*b*). The age of the child sentenced often determines whether they will be placed in a youth offenders institute, a secure training centre or a secure children's home, with the preference being to select the youngest and 'most vulnerable' to go to secure children's homes. Children placed in secure children's homes through child welfare routes are usually detained under section 25 of the 1989 Children and Young People Act. Under section 25, children can be secured if there are concerns about their safety, particularly if there are fears that the young person will abscond from an open setting and that there is a possibility of them being harmed if they abscond (Goldson, 2002, p. 12).

The mixing of vulnerable children with convicted offenders has sparked strong debates in both the public and political arenas but has been defended by claims that, despite their differing legal classifications, both groups of children enter the home with a similar set of needs, and therefore both the

offender and the welfare referral are in need of care and emotional support (Goldson, 2002; Harris and Timms, 1993*b*; O'Neill, 2001). Research shows that girls are more likely to be admitted to secure children's homes through a welfare route than their male counterparts (O'Neill, 2005, p. 114); therefore, this study has prioritised the voices of girls in secure accommodation. Although there is a body of research that looks at the experiences of children in youth custody generally (Elwood, 2013; Kennedy, 2013; Bosworth *et al.*, 2005), there are only a handful which consider the views of children in secure children's homes (O'Neill, 2001; Goldson, 2002; Harris and Timms, 1993*b*). These studies are notable in their contributions and effectively consider the policy and practice implications of providing this type of secure placement for children (Harris and Timms, 1993*b*; Goldson, 2002) and the effectiveness of secure care as intervention (O'Neill, 2001). While these studies were conducted over a decade ago, not much has changed in either policy or practice for the children sent to secure children's homes. This paper adds further insight into these discussions using an ethnographic approach to showcase an in-depth picture of the 'everyday' for the children living in a secure children's home.

The study

This paper draws on an ethnographic study conducted over one year in an English secure children's home, which will be known here as 'Hester Lodge'. Data were collected using a range of qualitative methods, including participant observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews, case note analysis and interviews with a sample of the unit's staff. Over 300 hours of participant observations were complimented by a series of in-depth interviews conducted with the fifteen girls who entered Hester Lodge in 2010. Each girl was invited to take part in three interviews, designed to collect their changing views and perspectives about life in secure care. To contextualise children's own views of their entry into the home, girls were asked for permission to release their case file for inclusion in the research. Twelve of the girls gave their consent and, subsequently, these twelve case files were analysed to explore how girls were perceived by professionals who worked with them prior to entry (Boswell, 1998). Asking girls for permission to access participant case files added an unexpected dimension to the research and revealed that girls often had preconceptions about the reliability and content of their notes. Due to these discussions, I was able to explore with participants their feelings about a 'case file' following them through different institutional settings and explore how they felt this affected them in subsequent placements.

Interviews were transcribed and entered into a qualitative data analysis programme alongside participant observation field notes and case file content analysis. All data were subject to thematic analysis using NVIVO.

Ethical consent was granted by both the local authority and university ethics boards before fieldwork began. Further consent was given by each of the girls taking part in the study. I gained consent from each of the girls in separate stages, making sure they knew that participation was voluntary and not part of their placement. Participants were frequently reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without sharing their reasons. All of the data used in this paper have been anonymised to protect the identity of the girls and the secure children's home where the research took place. Although some girls appear in the following sections more than others, it is not the case that some views were given more weight than others, rather that some girls were able to vocalise their feelings more easily. For instance, while some girls expressed their frustration physically, others were able to articulate similar feelings into lengthy descriptions. So, while some of the girls sometimes appear as spokeswomen on behalf of others, it is not the case that the views of these girls were different.

Setting the scene: a 'nice' place to live

Hester Lodge is a purpose-built unit, designed and carefully planned to provide accommodation for vulnerable young people in a secure setting. The home is vastly different from other penal institutions designed for children and, rather than being encased within high fences and concrete walls, the building sits on a large plot of green land in the countryside, surrounded by trees and wildlife. The rooms inside are bright and airy, mostly painted in primary colours and hung with artwork. Although safety measures are carefully built in (such as strengthened and unbreakable windows), they remain a discrete feature and are largely unnoticeable. Despite differences in its appearance, the purpose of the unit means that many of its procedures are similar to those in other penal institutions; for instance, young people are never left alone together, all doors are kept locked to prevent residents walking freely between rooms and behaviour is constantly monitored and reported on. Residents are not permitted to leave the home unaccompanied under any circumstance and cutlery has to be counted at the beginning and end of every meal.

Hester Lodge staff wear their own clothes and are known by their first names. There are only ever eight residents at one time and therefore staff come to know each young person and their history individually. Unlike other penal facilities for children, the atmosphere at Hester Lodge is often jovial, punctuated by hugs and frequent bouts of laughter. The short snippet of data taken from research field notes describes a typical scene:

> Benny (staff), Ben, Oliver, Brittany and Callum are sitting on a three person sofa. Suddenly everyone jumps up screaming. Someone had 'broken wind'. Benny (staff) exclaims 'Oh My God' with a comedic expression on his face.

Oliver and Brittany laugh hysterically. 'I'm eating!' Benny exclaims, with exaggerated shock. 'Oh my god!' 'Who farted?' demands Callum, enjoying the drama. Benny (staff) points at Oliver. Oliver laughs and shakes his head, 'no! I would be proud and admit it!' 'Please don't say farted' interjects Benny (staff), seriously enough (but with the ever present twinkle in his eye) 'you should say, "broke wind"'. Everyone howls with laughter and looks around, 'did you fart?' Once again Benny (staff) pipes up 'broke wind people, broke wind'. Everyone continues to blame Oliver until Penny (staff) exclaims, 'Oliver would have lifted his leg up if it'd been him!' Oliver nods in agreement and all eyes shift to Ben, he laughs but doesn't deny it, the culprit has been found and everyone wafts the air around their noses.

Hester girls

From the fifteen girls who took part in the research, seven were placed in Hester Lodge on a child welfare order and eight were placed on criminal justice grounds by the Youth Justice Board. Five of the girls were aged thirteen or fourteen, and the other ten were fifteen or sixteen. Although they were placed under different orders, Hester girls found that they had much in common with one another, regardless of their legal status. Six of the seven girls secured under a welfare order had committed a crime and all of the criminally sentenced girls were known to social services. Thirteen were already subjected to a local authority care order before they entered Hester Lodge and all thirteen of these girls had experienced high instances of professional intervention, with many appearing on the child protection register before birth. As other research highlights, all of the girls reported a high turnover of professionals intervening in their lives (Coy, 2009), with many stating that they had moved children's homes at least twenty times since entering the care system. Nine girls were currently out of the mainstream education system and were attending schools for children with special educational needs. It was these similarities which led the girls to consider that they were viewed in the same ways, and that information was reported about them and shared in the same ways, too. Hence, as I will go on to show, girls secured for welfare reasons felt that they were seen by professionals as being 'naughty' and on a par with those sentenced for criminal justice reasons. Despite its 'child-friendly' appearance, a placement in Hester Lodge did little to reassure the girls that they were not being punished.

'It's still a prison'

Local authority documentation and Hester Lodge policy documents both clearly stated that the purpose of Hester Lodge was to provide therapeutic care for young people in a 'secure setting'. This was reinforced by the 'child-friendly' appearance of the unit. Even so, there was a feeling amongst girls that they had been placed because of their past behaviour, on the strength

of accounts in their case files, with almost all respondents claiming that they were seen as being 'naughty' by those working with them. As a result, both welfare and criminal justice residents perceived their placement as a punishment and regarded Hester Lodge as a prison for young people:

> 'It's a prison . . . because you're locked in, you can't smoke, you can't do anything . . . you can't willingly leave. The staff might be nice and it might be for kids, but it's still a prison' (Hayley).

The girls were aware of the routes that other residents had taken into the home and, although they were formally forbidden from discussing their entry circumstances, they often risked disciplinary measures to share their experiences with other residents. Sharing stories meant that girls drew further parallels between each other and their reasons for entry and finding that half of the residents had been sentenced by a court for a criminal offence confirmed their view that they were perceived as being 'naughty'. Some of the girls reflected that their past actions could have placed them in Hester Lodge if they had been caught by the police instead of investigated by their social worker: 'Actually I've committed loads of crimes—I've just not been caught for them . . . I've been put here on welfare grounds, but it could be seen from either side' (Lola).

Lola described the types of crimes that she had committed previously and, although she rightly asserts that she had broken the law 'loads' of time, she had committed minor infringements and certainly not serious or usually violent crimes that criminal justice young people had been sentenced for. Since there were close parallels between the lives of young people, this meant that staff often did not question the conflicting purpose of the home (O'Neill, 2005, p. 121). Furthermore, members of staff differed in their opinions about the purpose of the home and, whilst most staff insisted that Hester Lodge was a secure children's home, a minority of staff believed that the home was a penal facility first and foremost: 'I always say "It's quite simple, don't moan to me . . . your actions made you get locked up. If you want a toilet seat, don't get locked up, go to The Ritz"' (Staff: Terri).

Although these views were shared by only a minority of staff, they had a profound effect on young people's views of themselves and their circumstances, and indeed the trust they invested in the professionals who had placed them in Hester Lodge:

> *Abbie*: I don't want to stay in, I want to go outside.
>
> *Oliver*: Well don't get locked up and you can go out when you want.
>
> *Abbie*: We're in a Secure Children's Home Oliver.
>
> *Oliver*: Where are we Holly (staff)?
>
> *Holly (staff)*: In a secure unit.
>
> *Oliver*: See! I told you.
>
> *Abbie*: but it is called a Secure Children's Home!
>
> *Holly (staff)*: We call it that but officially it is a secure unit.

These contradictory messages about the purpose of Hester Lodge meant that welfare girls felt deceived by professionals who had told them that their placement was to keep them safe and not to punish them (Goldson, 2002, p. 103):

> [She said] 'everyone who comes in here is bad, they don't lock good kids up'…
> I was thinking about it last night when I was in bed, and I was thinking, 'I'm a good kid' I don't get myself into no bother, I smoke the odd spliff but I don't drink, I don't go out and start fights, I don't cause no trouble, I come in when I'm told. That doesn't make me a bad kid' (Lauren).

Of the thirteen girls coming from local authority care, all felt that they had been labelled as 'naughty' or 'bad' since they were young children. Furthermore, the thirteen girls who had been in care described their relationship with their social worker as a troubling one: 'She's just causing trouble all the time. She just causes trouble for me, she's a nuisance, she's a pain in the bum' (Robyn).

Although the setting of Hester Lodge was felt to be prison-like, being placed was only part of the reason that girls felt that they were perceived as 'naughty'. In fact, girls felt that case files were prominent in colouring the view that professionals held of them and that these files presented and reasserted the view of them as being troublesome.

Documenting troublesome behaviour: case files

Discussions with the girls revealed that most thought they were described as being troublesome in their case files and that negative comments made by professionals and previous care staff had been instrumental in placing them in secure care. The girls felt that case files carried more weight than their individual interactions with professionals and that professionals made up their mind about young people often before they had even met them. These feelings were quite justified. Research by Taylor and White (2006) shows that practitioners construct case materials and report events as factual happenings, even though their tellings are bound by subjective interpretation (Taylor and White, 2006, p. 937):

> 'He's got some nasty impression of me he has. I don't like being judged my file and he did blatantly judge me by my file. I hate being judged by my file because my file's not even right' (Chantelle).

It was this discussion with Chantelle that highlighted the strength of young people's feelings about their case files. Following this discussion, and with Chantelle's consent, I analysed Chantelle's file to explore how her circumstances were reported by welfare professionals responsible for documenting 'significant events'. Chantelle had discussed her fears about a particular incident which involved an altercation with a member of staff in a local authority children's home. She was nervous about how it had been reported and felt that she was regarded as being volatile and aggressive. Reading her file showed that Chantelle's social worker had reported the event far more

sympathetically than Chantelle feared and that Chantelle's side of the story was put forward as the dominant and 'accurate' one showing the care worker to be in the wrong. The fact that young people were not permitted to read their files meant that they never discovered that professionals they felt had a 'bad impression' of them often advocated strongly to protect their interests and to argue on their behalf. However, although social work professionals were usually impartial in their reporting of particular incidents, reports following children from previous placements showed that the girls were right to be suspicious about some of the information recorded about them as negative reports frequently followed the girls from previous care placements. The following example, taken from Chantelle's file, showed that she had reason to be concerned about some of the information within it:

> Chantelle is a very controlling child and it is down to the patience and commit-
> ment of the staff that she has had this period of stability within the home. She
> does not engage with anybody whom she perceives as having any authority
> over her, therefore anybody who says no to her is subjected to a barrage of
> verbal abuse, including the use of very threatening language. She does not
> calm down quickly and can subject staff to offensive behaviour for hours on
> end (Case file extract from a previous care placement).

Additional entries made by Hester staff were almost unanimously positive, focusing on improvements in behaviour and specific concerns about events and circumstances that young people might need help to deal with. For example, Chantelle's first file entry post entry to Hester begins 'Chantelle presents as a likeable and pleasant member of the group. There are no current concerns regarding her risk to staff or peers' (Case file extract from Hester Lodge staff). Hester staff remained aware of young people's concerns over case files and took positive steps to remove the uncertainty and worry around them by requesting that staff asked residents to read and sign off accounts of their session work. This did not necessarily solve the problems that young people experienced with regard to file notes but it was nevertheless an important attempt in removing the mystery and uncertainty around them.

Children's voice in case files

Recording accurate information about children is core to social work practice, as it makes the basis for recording and evidencing intervention (Askeland and Payne, 1999). While case files often come across as objective accounts, Taylor and White (2006) suggest that, instead, information reported represents only the author's understanding of events and therefore only one truth. Although social workers aim to be objective in their reporting of cases, social workers in research by O'Rourke (2010) reluctantly admitted exacerbating negative factors to ensure that particular clients are allocated funding when resources are stretched (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 11). The 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) asserts

that children have a right to be heard when important decisions about their lives are being made; however, as others have noted (Coleman *et al.*, 2004; Gaskell, 2010; Goldson, 2002), girls in Hester Lodge felt that their views were often not taken seriously by welfare professionals working with them. In fact, case files often discussed residents in terms they did not agree with and, as well as being often being labelled as 'troublesome', staff views and case files also confirmed that all of the girls living in Hester Lodge were perceived as being 'vulnerable'. Despite the notion of vulnerability ascribed to them, all but one of the girls firmly rejected this description of themselves, insisting instead 'I can look after myself' (Lola, Hayley, Abbie, Gretchen, Lauren, Gabriella and Freya). In looking after themselves, the girls explained that they had two methods to choose from—'fight or flight' (Natalie)—and it was for these decisions that young people attracted the gaze of the professional. For instance, many of the girls chose 'flight' and ran away in an attempt to take control over difficult situations (Blades *et al.*, 2011). Once they had absconded, girls lived in a variety of settings, often staying with friends and family members, as well as boyfriends, or even strangers. This led professionals to believe that they had put themselves in danger and that they were therefore in need of professional protection (Coy, 2007). This flight for safety was often influential in professional decisions to apply for a welfare order:

> 'I lived everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere … with every-one. Anyone who would have me. Did prostitution' (Lola).

Girls' accounts of their placements in secure care highlighted the differences in opinion they had about their own lives compared to the views that professionals had about them. While case notes revealed that social workers felt secure accommodation offered a last resort for young people at risk of serious harm, for the girls, being taken forcibly and placed in a secure setting triggered an angry reaction and reinforced their feelings of being punished (Coy, 2007). Even those who were experiencing serious abuse at the time their placement felt that they could have cared for themselves if they had been left alone. Whilst offending girls felt that their own actions had landed them in secure accommodation, welfare girls found it difficult to accept the professional reasoning behind their incarceration. Furthermore, welfare girls did not understand professional concern over their daily activities and lacked awareness of the legal responsibilities of social workers. As a result, most of the girls felt negatively about professionals working with them, and saw their social worker as someone employed simply to make their lives difficult rather than someone charged with their care and culpable for blame if they were abused or killed:

> Social services like to make problems that aren't there (Hayley).
>
> My social worker is just a little cow! (Abbie)

Although young people felt that they were coping well in difficult circumstances, professionals working with them often reported events quite

differently. So, while Abbie explains 'I ran away from my children's home and I wouldn't go back because people in the home were threatening to burn me alive and beat the fuck out of me', her social worker describes Abbie's absconding as the main factor in ensuring her placement—'. . . she continues to put herself in risky positions and frequently absconds from her current placement' (Abbie's case file)—but, while she and other professionals felt that they had acted in the child's best interest in securing them, girls did not always agree. Abbie's social worker felt that absconding was riskier to Abbie than the bullying she reported in her children's home. Almost a year on, Abbie felt that she was right to run, and that the risks of her staying were far greater than the harm she endured by running away (O'Neill, 2005, p. 116). Abbie did come to harm as a result of absconding, and police reports suggested that she was been prostituted by older men in exchange for board and lodging. Even so, Abbie felt that she was choosing this alternative and, rather than feeling protected by professionals who certainly looked out for her best interests, she felt victimised by their decision to incarcerate her. This incidence was not unusual and almost all of the girls felt that they had chosen to manage their troubles by acting in ways that professionals branded as 'risky'.

A response to case files

The dual function of the unit complicated the purpose of Hester Lodge to staff and young people and made it difficult for welfare girls to separate their view of the home from its penal purpose. As a result, many of the girls secured under welfare orders also believed that they had been placed by social workers who saw them as a burden on their time and resources. The thirteen looked after girls felt that living in local authority care had taught them to negotiate by using 'difficult' behaviour, since professionals did not prioritise the needs of 'good kids'. As Daisy explains: 'I show that I'm being good and tell them that I'm being good but they're not bothered. When I'm naughty they're always on the phone and always coming, but when I'm being good, they're never really bothered.'

One of the main reasons that girls absconded before being placed into Hester Lodge was because they were unhappy in care. They felt that, when they reported this to their social worker, they were not listened to. It seemed to young people that a good child was easier to ignore and that professionals dealt with them and their concerns more urgently when they were 'being naughty'. Therefore, they described acting up physically when they felt ignored and otherwise powerless. As Carly explains:

> I didn't want to be in the care home and social services were taking their time to move me out of the care home. I didn't like it. I didn't think they treated us right. I didn't want to be there and I knew that the only way that I wouldn't have to go back in that care home would be if I beat her up. They wouldn't want me there (Carly).

These girls did not realise that although such behaviour secured them a move in the short term, their behaviour was carefully documented and had longer-term repercussions. Indeed, these instances were often instrumental in gaining the girls' criminal records and increasing the view of them as 'trouble-some' (O'Neill, 2005, p. 114). The recording of information also meant that girls learnt to be more careful about the level of trust they invested in professionals: 'I don't really trust anyone with my secrets' (Lola). This breakdown of trust was endemic in defining young people's relationships with professionals outside of Hester Lodge and in creating a divide between them, meaning that young people would be less likely to share their experiences in future: '... if anything did happen to me, I wouldn't tell them, because I wouldn't want to risk getting put back in a place like this' (Hayley).

Taking back control

Lots of the girls voiced their frustration about being labelled as a 'bad kid' and felt that their reputation followed them around because of the case file which accompanied them to each placement. Many claimed that they were tempted to 'act out' to annoy carers and professionals who made unfair judgements of them: 'I am just so tempted to make her life a living hell. I was just going to kick off just to piss her off' (Lola). However, rather than impacting upon professional lives, these responses, while satisfying in the short term, meant that girls justified negative professional opinions of them, that 'good kids don't get locked up'. A number of girls, including Lola, felt that Hester was different from other placements they had lived in and felt that staff were accepting of young people who tried to change their behaviour. Staff reported their own concerns about children's case files and most preferred to get to 'know them' as individuals first: 'A lot of the stuff that comes in we find is crap, [a letter might state that] we're getting the most violent kid ever, [then they] come in and they're lovely' (Member of staff).

Despite staff assertions that they discounted much of what was written in case files, the girls stated that previous experiences of working with professionals had taught them to withhold disclosures that might heighten professional interest in their lives. A number of girls also stated that, although they liked and trusted most of the staff in Hester Lodge, they would 'think carefully' before disclosing sensitive information because they knew that, once disclosures were written down, notes and comments were immortalised within their records.

Conclusion

Although these data are taken from interviews and observations conducted with young people in secure accommodation, their application has wider implications and reflects the views of children and young people 'worked with' by welfare professionals and practitioners more generally. Most

notable is the apparent miscommunication between young people and the professionals working with them. Although recorded accounts of young people by welfare professionals were empathetic and usually non-discriminatory, all thirteen of the girls secured from local authority care felt that they were perceived as being a 'bad kid'. These feelings were exacerbated by the prominence of case files which followed children between care placements and undermined their sense of a 'new start'. This study shows that young people's case files were a source of anxiety and worry for young people, made worse because children did not feel that they had any opportunity to give their side of the story or even read what practitioners had recorded about them. Despite the changes in legislation that demands that young people are given a right to participate in decisions which affect their lives, this research shows that young people did not feel that their views were taken seriously or recorded when they differed from professional perspectives (Coleman *et al.*, 2004, p. 229).

By the time they were released, fourteen of the girls felt that Hester Lodge had been a positive placement for them, mainly because of the caring and supportive relationships that they formed with members of staff in the home. These findings concur with research by others (McLeod, 2010; Gaskell, 2010) who note that positive relationships are formed on a basis of trust, shared experiences and respect. In the increasingly hostile financial climate both in the UK and across Europe, concerns are raised about the increasing pressure to deliver such support with diminishing resources and greater demand for them. Staff in the unit considered that they were 'lucky' to spend a deal of time 'really getting to know' the young people in their care, as opposed to community-based practitioners whom they felt managed increased caseloads amidst reduced budgets. Concerns are thus raised that, amongst pressures of increased work and decreased resources, contact time with individual children may become further reduced, meaning that case files will continue to offer an integral source of information about children to the professionals trusted to make decisions in their 'best interests' (Taylor and White, 2006). The difficulty of this of course means that children already jaded by the fear of negative and inaccurate case notes become reluctant to share information with professionals that can be stored and used later, ultimately meaning that practitioners will have less information at their disposal when deciding how to best care for children. This paper therefore calls for practitioners to be more transparent in their recording of 'significant' life events, to share sections of file notes that are 'appropriate' for children to read and to allow opportunities for children and young people to make their own written contributions to case file records.

Funding

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