CWDC
Children's Workforce
Development Council

'Who's on My Side?'
In what ways can creativity be used
to discover what young people with
behavioural, social and emotional
difficulties think of the multi-agency
services they receive?

Sharing our experience

This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

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Abstract

In what ways can creativity be used to discover what young people with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties think of the multi-agency services they receive?

The research investigates the effectiveness of using creativity as a catalyst for successful consultation with young people with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. The aims of the research were to explore what the sample group thought of the integrated workings of the multi-agency services they received. The sample group consisted of eight young people from CYCES and the research encompassed the following areas: boundaries and clarity of purpose; confidentiality and organizational limitations; and informed consent. CYCES is a service delivered and maintained by The Together Trust and is for eight to 16 year olds with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. The Together Trust is a charitable organization (established in 1870) that schools and homes young people in the care service.

Each pupil received a pack of toy soldiers. One soldier represented the pupil and the rest represented the professional adults involved in their lives, both past and present. They were asked to choose which soldiers they felt were on their side and which were not. They were then asked to discuss their choices. Film was used as my method of recording and presenting data and involved recording the sessions with the young people and analysing the information obtained.

The research discovered several important findings:
- Having a physical representation of services allowed pupils to make and challenge connections in a way conversation alone would not.
- There is a need for appropriate youth activities and recreational services for young people.

The integration of home and school services at CYCES is successful. Giving young people responsibility for other young people promotes greater understanding and betterment of children's services. In times of change, children need services the most.

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Introduction

Research question: 'In what ways can creativity be used to discover what young people with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties think of the multi-agency services they receive?'

I wanted to investigate the importance, relevance and effectiveness of using creativity as a catalyst for successful and accurate consultation with young people with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. As an outcome, I wanted to ascertain what my sample group thought of the integrated workings of the multi-agency services they received.

My sample group consisted of eight young people from CYCES. CYCES is a service delivered and maintained by The Together Trust. The Together Trust is a charitable organization (established In 1870) that schools and homes young people in the care service. CYCES is for eight to 16 year olds with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. Effective integrated working in a multi-agency setting is integral to improving the lives of those children and young people at CYCES and ensuring that all pupils have the best possible training, qualifications, support and advice.

From the beginning of the project I sought to work ethically by ensuring that all the young people involved, and their parents/carers, had a clear understanding of the research and its potential implications. I wanted to encourage active participation by all the young people involved in order:
  ➢ to ascertain the views and experience of eight CYCES pupils regarding the effectiveness of the multi-agency services they receive
  ➢ to test 'film' as a method of recording and presenting data.

Ethics

Through undertaking this research project I have discovered that there is great deal of contention in relation to qualitative research methods with children and young people. I have discovered that such research presents researchers and organizations with a multitude of ethical and practical concerns and potential obstacles. I now acknowledge that realizing effective and ethical methods of consulting children and young people is paramount to the evaluation and enhancement of integrated workings in multi-agency settings. I drew on the work of Pia Christensen and Allison James (2008) to develop my ideas and to ensure I practised ethical research.

I have learnt that there is not only a need to consult children and young people, but that it is essential to discover a way of doing so that ensures the participants' safety and wellbeing on every level, whilet producing enlightening, useful and accurate data. I also believe that when a child or young person is vulnerable and/or has additional physical, educational and/or emotional difficulties this need increases substantially.

I have also consulted the work of Kim Brown (2008) who argues that the 'write and draw research tool' can go some way to achieving this. However, a critical appraisal of the draw and write technique by Kathryn Backett-Milburn and Linda McKie (1999) states:

> 'We argue that, although the draw and write technique has made an important contribution to health education research; it fails to reflect the processes involved in the construction and collection of such data. A range of methodological, analytical and ethical issues are raised. We conclude that health education research with children must involve taking children seriously as social actors and query the assumption that drawing enables children to communicate their thought any more than does conversational language. We suggest that the development of research should be premised upon an appreciation of the social context and the world of the child.'

With these findings in mind I needed to ensure that my research method and subsequent outcomes would be able to effectively address and satisfy the ethical and practical obstacles presented by the 'write and draw' research tool and other 'creative' qualitative research techniques.

CYCES and The Together Trust do not currently employ a research governance process (Department of Health 2005), but following discussion with my mentor, I chose to adopt an approach that encompassed the following: boundaries and clarity of purpose; confidentiality and organizational limitations; informed consent, including choice to withdraw from project. I already have an established relationship with the young people at CYCES, having previously completed several projects together. Therefore, before I began my research I made sure that the young people understood that this research project was something very different. For example, I emphasized the focus of the research, which was on professional relationships and not family relationships. I considered that family discussion had a potential to raise issues that I am not qualified to deal with. I established that there is a clear child protection procedure in place at the school and this includes issues relating to confidentiality – so if the young people divulged child protection issues through the research I knew how to respond appropriately. I made certain that all the young people and their parents and carers had a full understanding of the research before it took place. Consent in writing for filming and research was gained from each pupil's parent(s), carer(s) and/or social worker(s). Pupils were able to leave the research process or withdraw their input at any time up until the research was complete.

The research sample was opportunistic and purposive (Bryman 2001). All 40 CYCES pupils were offered the opportunity to participate in the research and nine expressed an interest in doing so. Unfortunately, one of the nine was refused consent from their social worker to take part in the research. Of the remaining eight pupils, all are between 12 and 15 years old, seven are male, one female, five are in care homes, one is in a foster care and two live with relatives. Five are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

(ADHD) and all of them have severe and persistent behavioural, social and emotional difficulties.

Achieving my sample was a much lengthier process than expected. In fact it delayed the research by two weeks. This in itself shows some inconsistency in the children's workforce involved with the young people at CYCES. Of the five young people who live in care homes, one had to get consent from the care staff on shift, one from their key worker, two from their social worker and one from their social worker's manager, and of course, there was one young person who could not get consent from any of the professionals who work with her. That young person and I were never offered a satisfactory explanation for this refusal. This shows a potential lack of understanding and consistency of the consent procedure in the children's workforce. I recommend that a full set of guidelines on photo and/or research permission procedure for young people be drawn up and successfully disseminated to all professionals working with young people.

Method

The 'Who's on My Side?' research project gave eight CYCES pupils a pack of toy soldiers and a set of postal tags each. One soldier represented the pupil and the rest represented the professional adults involved in their lives, both past and present. The pupils were then asked to label the postal tags with the name of the person and where appropriate their age and/or job title. On the back of the tag the pupils were asked to write a fact about this person or to write, or draw a picture of, something they associate with them. Work was conducted on a one pupil to one practitioner basis. This allowed each pupil to respond to the task in her/his own time, and in their own way, without being influenced by other participants.

Pupils were asked to arrange their soldiers on the table in front of them. They were asked to put the soldier representing them in the centre of the paper and arrange the other soldiers by distance from their soldier, according to how important they believe the person the soldier represents is in their lives – the most important people almost touching them and the least important on the very edge of the table. They also could choose to have soldiers shooting towards them or away from them or half and half according to whether they think they are on their side or not. Pupils were then asked to discuss their choices in detail. They were encouraged to discuss the following topics: What each soldier does; Why they do what they do; Relative importance of their role; Ways in which each soldier has impacted on her/his life; Whether there is more or something different they could be doing to support the young person; How and to what extent different soldiers connect to each other and the strengths and limitations of these connections. Throughout the process a film-maker recorded the process for future analysis.

Throughout the sessions I made the decision not use prompt cards in the discussions. This meant that the questions I asked each young person had

the potential to vary from session to session. On analysis of my data this did not pose me any problems; fortunately I asked very similar questions and my sample was relatively small. However, if the research was to be repeated this potential variable could render the data from session to session very different – making a successful analysis of the process almost impossible. What I gained from this decision was an organic and conversational feel to the discussions. I believe that the research participants did not feel quizzed or interrogated by the sessions and that instead they felt involved in a 'natural' two-way discussion that had the flexibility to adapt and develop as the conversation went on. Creating this effect was very important to me as I believe that young people need to feel comfortable, safe and in an enjoyable physical and social environment to divulge what was, at times, personal information. Not having to look down at a prompt sheet also allowed me to have eye to eye contact with each participant. This engaged the young person involved and allowed me to respond to their body language and behaviours accordingly. I also decided not to take notes during the sessions but to rely on a film-maker to record the research data. I was thus able to focus on the needs and responses of the young person. I felt that this benefited the research in both ethics and the quality of data produced.

Due to time restraints my research sessions did not benefit from a pilot run. This meant that I had to learn from and develop my approach as the research went on. This had the unavoidable effect of the latter sessions being more effective and enlightening in terms of information on multi-agency working and also the success and effectiveness of the process. If this project was to be repeated by a different researcher I would recommend a pilot run.

Analysis

While again watching the research data I posed myself the question, why toy soldiers; why not just a filmed discussion about multi-agency services between the young people and me? In fact, in all cases, at some time it appears that the soldiers become superfluous. This appeared to mean that the participants were discussing a topic they were comfortable with, knowledgeable about and/or was not challenging them to make and explain connections between services. However, when a participant became uncomfortable or disengaged with the discussion the soldiers gave them something to play with and focus on. Equally, when I recognized that a young person was becoming distressed or distracted I was able to use the soldiers to refocus and/or redirect the discussion as appropriate. The soldiers became an important behavioural indicator and tool in safeguarding the participant's emotional wellbeing. This benefited the research process by allowing me to tackle discussion of challenging periods in the young people's lives, which were often the times when they needed children's services the most, while at all times being able to monitor their behaviour in order to direct the discussion away from the areas they found distressing.

From analysing the data, I found that the soldiers became most useful when asking the young people to explain how the individuals, or organizations, that the soldiers represented integrate and work together. Having a physical representation in front of both the participant and researcher allowed us to make and challenge connections in a way conversation alone would not. The soldiers became reminders of what had been said previously, so when a new professional or organization was introduced we could easily refer to and make links with ones that had already been discussed, without having to go over or repeat what had already been said. This benefited the research by keeping the discussion flowing while facilitating a depth of conversation that I believe, partly due to the participant's intellectual ability and partly due to their behavioural difficulties, would not have been achieved without the physical representation of the soldiers. In some cases the soldiers were only a subtle aid, in others they were the main focus of the discussion. From analysis of the data this was in most cases down to age, the older the participant the less they were reliant on the soldiers. Nonetheless, the subtle aid of having the soldiers in front of them was still fundamental in producing quality in-depth data for the older members of the sample group. The youngest member of the sample group however, struggled with the concept of discussing and challenging services with or without the intervention of toy soldiers. This has now led me to believe that this method is most suited to older teenagers.

Another unexpected outcome to the methodology was the level of creativity and care expressed by the young people towards choosing toy soldiers to represent the various individual and organizational services they receive, and in particular the choosing of the soldier that represents them. For example, one young person chose a soldier with a big gun for their social worker and proceeded to point it directly at the passive looking head of the soldier representing them. This led me to consider whether, if the research was repeated, there would be scope to give the young people more choice? Could the soldiers be different colours, be in more positions – seated, lying down etc? Do they need to be just soldiers? Is there something to be understood by these choices? Could this approach be more effective for younger teenagers and children? Equally, the young people chose to lay out the soldiers in different ways, some laid them out in one straight line, some with two opposing teams and some with themselves in the middle and the other soldiers surrounding them. Again, is there something to be understood by this? Does this tell us anything about how the individual young people view the services they receive or is it just down to individual taste? I do not know, but I feel it is important to ask these questions.

Also while watching the research data, I also posed to myself the question, why film? Why not a tape recorder or Dictaphone? The answer is that I feel film has allowed me to interpret and distinguish between whether or not a young person is engaged by a topic of discussion, excited, energized, bored or distressed by it. It has allowed me to interpret the meaning and depth of thought a participant has given to their responses. For example, one young person would become very animated when talking about his local council and other, mostly medical, professionals. Importantly, these responses were given spontaneously. He used language that was considerably different to his

regular vocabulary and he used his hands in his speech more often. He also became more aware of the camera, at one point actually talking directly into it. Juxtapose that to the quiet considered way he was talking about being bullied at an old school and the help he had received dealing with bullying in his new school, and you see a complete change in style of communication. On reflection, it is my belief that when the participant was communicating in an agitated and heightened way, he was emulating the words of another – in my opinion most likely a close relative. I feel this difference in behaviours needs to be taken into account when analysing data. I do not feel I would have been able to make this distinction between styles of communication and thus the quality of data without the use of a video camera. It has also allowed me to consider and analyse the body language and eye contact of participants. Also, I was able to consider and analyse the way in which a participant puts a toy soldier in place – do they do it with care, do they put it down with force etc. This is of course subjective, but I would argue that the whole nature of qualitative research is in fact subjective, but nonetheless important in our understanding of what young people and children think about the services they receive.

Findings and discussion

In addition to the extra scope for analysis, having a film-maker who is also experienced in working with young people with behavioural needs in the room, allowed me to have another adult present throughout the research process without the young people feeling threatened or overwhelmed. It is my belief that having that person behind a camera enabled both myself and the participant to feel as if he was not really there. This allowed uninhibited discussion between the young person and me while still having the advantage of an extra adult present. Having another adult in the room while the research took place meant that if any child protection issues or behavioural needs presented themselves then there were two trained adults in the room to deal with the situation, not just one. In addition to this, it is my belief that setting the research environment up as a film studio rather than as a regular classroom added to the excitement and enjoyment of the research process. This was reflected in the young people's behaviour and feedback. It is also my belief that film will allow the research findings to be disseminated to a wider audience, including the young people. I believe, rightly or wrongly, that film is a much more accessible and immediate medium than reading a 4,000 word report. This assumption will hopefully allow my research to have greater resonance and life than it may otherwise enjoy.

By analysing the research data not only have I gained an understanding of the importance, relevance and effectiveness of the research method, but as a product of this understanding I have been able to draw some conclusions on what the sample group think of the services they receive; with particular attention to how and/or if these services were integrated. I have done this by comparing and highlighting similarities and differences in the young people's

responses and then making recommendations based on these comparisons. It is to these that I now turn.

I have discovered a shared need for appropriate youth activities and recreational services. For one example, one young person, because of his ADHD, felt that he was only comfortable accessing a youth club for disabled young people. He felt isolated and marginalized in other community settings. Another young person, when changing schools, arrived at his new school to discover the headmaster had told pupils about his ADHD – this led to prolonged intimidation and bullying and the eventual removal of the young person from the school. The research has also highlighted that there is a considerable variability in the youth activities and recreational services accessed by young people in care homes and young people in long-term foster care or living with parents. It would appear that if young people have proactive parents or professional care staff they are able to access youth activities and recreational services; however, if they do not, they quite often do not seem to know they exist. For the young people living with parents or long-term foster placements, lack of money, transport and knowledge seem to be key factors in not gaining access to youth activities and recreational services. All participants agreed that being active and occupied was fundamental in them managing their behaviour appropriately. In most cases they also showed a shared need for a service where they could talk to adult professionals confidentially without fear of repercussions in their home and/or school. In most cases youth activities and recreational services fulfilled this need. With all this in mind, it is my recommendation that more youth activities and recreational services are made available to young people with behavioural difficulties, and/or the services that exist receive additional training in working with young people with behavioural needs. In addition to that, young people with behavioural difficulties who are living with parents or with long-term foster parents need to receive support to enable them to access the youth activities and recreational services in their own neighbourhood.

In general, I felt the young people in care homes had a better understanding of the services they received and, in particular, how they integrated. The young people living with parents or with long-term foster parents had fewer professional individuals and organizations working with them. Their parents or foster parents would act as the point of contact. This often meant, particularly with the young people living with their parents, that they were not as actively involved in their life decisions and thus not aware of how the services integrated in order to make these decisions. It was not clear if this is a negative or positive factor.

Some of the young people, those who were involved in children's rights and/or children's councils, appeared to have a greater understanding of how their services work and were thus better informed to say what they thought of them. Having responsibility for other young people, and in some cases a fee for that responsibility, appeared to give some participants a desire to understand the services young people receive and a desire to make them better. I would recommend all young people with behavioural needs,

irrespective of where there live or who they live with, be given the opportunity to be involved in children's rights and/or children's councils in the hope that it leads to greater youth understanding of children's services and a shared desire to improve them.

All the young people were aware of integration between their school and home. Perhaps more surprisingly, they all saw this as a positive. Behaviour in school, both negative and positive, impacting on the participant's home life, appeared crucial in the management of their behaviour – both for the individual pupil and the workforce as a whole. The integration of home and school services seemed successful for the participants in my sample, with all young people being aware of procedures and happy with them. As one young person told me:

> 'I know it is working 'cause I don't like it!'

The relationship between the young people and their social workers seemed very strained. Most said they did not like their social worker or felt they did not really know them. Almost all young people showed an understanding of the link between their social worker and contact with their relatives. Most participants complained about not being able to get hold of their social worker when they needed them. However, one participant complained that his social worker would not leave him alone and he wished he could tell her he would simply call her if he needed her. In almost all cases the young people had had a series of different social workers and quite often numerous home and school placements as well. One young man talked about 53 placements and ten social workers, appearing to throw these figures about as if they were not unusual. All the young people seemed aware that professional adults needed to change jobs from time to time, that they may need to adapt to new people and places – that present circumstances would, and often need to, change. Problems seemed to arise when the change was frequently and periodically absolute – all too often young people were put into a situation when every professional adult in their lives had changed. In my sample group this often happened at a time when their behaviour was most erratic and they were most vulnerable. I feel this is when reliable and recognizable child services are most needed in young people's lives and this, almost ironically, is when they are most lacking – in my opinion one becoming indicative of the other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, due to the breadth and nature of my sample group, the research time frame and the confines of my aims and objectives, I cannot accurately state that my research method has effectively addressed the ethical and practical obstacles presented by the 'write and draw' research tool, or any other 'creative' qualitative research techniques. However, I do believe that my research has shown that using creativity with film is a helpful and worthwhile tool in discovering what young people think of the services they receive – in particular, the nature of my method facilitated in-depth discussion on integrated working. Having said that, I believe my established

relationship with the young people of CYCES was the overriding factor in them feeling comfortable enough to discuss their thoughts and opinions with me. With this in mind, I would like to recommend that if the CWDC want to discover what young people with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties think of the services they receive, they should continue giving the existing professionals working alongside the young people with behavioural needs the confidence and skills to go about discovering this effectively. Creativity, in my opinion, is one possible key to unlocking this knowledge and film is a very useful tool for recording and subsequently analysing it. In addition to this, it would also appear that giving young people responsibility for other young people promotes greater understanding and betterment of children's services. I would recommend that this factor be utilized as much as is possible.

Finally, as a result of my research I strongly believe that young people want to feel they are being listened to by the providers of the services they receive. They want action to be taken as a result of their suggestions and the desires they express. They understand that this will not necessarily result in them getting what they want, but what they do want is to be not completely ignored. The ability of children's services to listen to and respond to the needs of young people, and for young people to be made aware that a response has taken place and, where appropriate, disseminated throughout their workforce, is paramount in young people being happy and satisfied with the services they receive.

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The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

We want England's children and young people's workforce to be respected by peers and valued for the positive difference it makes to children, young people and their families.

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