

**The Value of Cultural and Creative Engagement:
Understanding the Experiences and Opinions of Care-
experienced Young People and Foster Carers in Wales**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction and Aims of Report

- 1.1 Across Wales, the United Kingdom and globally, children and young people who have experienced care generally achieve poorer educational outcomes compared to those who have not experienced care (Jackson and Cameron 2014; Mannay et al. 2015, 2017; O'Higgins et al. 2015; Sebba et al. 2015), with this discordancy in attainment attracting international concern (Berridge 2012; Jackson and Höjer 2013). Previous research demonstrates that care-experienced children and young people face significant educational disadvantages due to the adverse impacts of abuse and trauma (Bombèr 2007; O'Sullivan and Westerman 2007). Other barriers to educational attainment include unstable and disruptive environments, time spent out of school, poor additional educational support and a lack of understanding of their specific mental and emotional health needs (Social Exclusion Unit 2003; Harker et al. 2004), as well as, generally, the low socio-economic status of care-experienced children and young people's birth families (Forrester et al. 2009; Rees and Holding 2014).
- 1.2 Alongside the educational opportunities and outcomes for children and young people in care in Wales, Mannay et al. (2019) discuss the increased focus on and importance of their everyday experiences, development and wellbeing, adopting a relational approach to these aspects. Political interest in the arts, creative and cultural experiences of care-experienced children and young people has also increased exponentially over the last few decades. For example, the United Kingdom Government paper 'Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care' (Department for Education and Skills 2006) catalysed a shift in interest in terms of improving the arts and cultural experiences of children and young people in care settings. This green paper, part of the broader 'Every Child Matters' agenda, looked to create opportunities to improve the experiences of care-experienced children and young people. The 'Care Matters' policy paper also included the political promise that "children in care must have the chance to participate in sports, volunteering and the arts, and be supported to remain healthy and safe".

- 1.3 In relation to this emphasis on the benefits of the arts for care-experienced children and young people, the Wales Millennium Centre ran an arts-based programme which was funded and supported by the Confidence in Care Consortium led by The Fostering Network in Wales. The arts-based programme was delivered between May and July 2018 and involved eight care-experienced young people and their foster families. The Wales Millennium Centre commissioned Cardiff University to conduct research with care-experienced young people and their foster carers, and facilitators involved with the delivery of the arts project.
- 1.4 The research aimed to assess the current knowledge base regarding care-experienced children's and young people's engagement with the arts, and to explore the views of facilitators, young people, and their carers involved in the arts-based programme at the Wales Millennium Centre.

Objective 1: Collate and report relevant data and literature.

Objective 2: Conduct an in-depth qualitative research study with programme facilitators, care-experienced young people, and their foster families to provide insight into their experience of being involved with the arts-based programme, and their opinions on what could be done to improve the model and encourage engagement with the arts more widely.

- 1.5 The research study was guided by the following central research questions:
1. What is the current knowledge base around arts-based engagement and care-experienced children and young people?
 2. How do foster carers nurture creativity in young people?
 3. What cultural forms are valued by care-experienced young people and foster carers and how do they conceptualise value?
 4. What enables care-experienced young people to take part in arts-based activities?
 5. What are the challenges and issues for foster carers in accessing and sustaining relationships with the arts and cultural education?

6. What changes can arts-based organisations make to encourage and sustain relationships with care-experienced young people and their foster families?

2. Methodology

2.1 The study was broadly split into two phases. Phase one required desk-based research methods to review and collate existing data about care-experienced children and young people and arts-based engagement. Phase two involved engaging directly with facilitators, young people, and their carers involved in the arts-based programme at the Wales Millennium Centre via interviews, focus groups and observations.

2.2 The main features of the project design included:

- A short and focused review on what is known about care-experienced children's and young people's achievement, attainment and lifecourse outcomes.
- A short and focused review on what is known about the value of engagement with culture and the arts.
- A rapid review of the current knowledge base around art and cultural engagement programmes with care-experienced children and young people, which synthesised source material from five databases, 'grey' literature, and included study references and 'key authors'.
- Observations of nine of the arts programme sessions at the Wales Millennium Centre, a focus group with foster carers (n=5), a focus group with arts programme facilitators (n=3), interviews with young people (n=8) and their foster carers (n=7), and document analysis of young people's reflexive diaries.

2.3 The interviews and document analysis generated 58, 434 transcribed words. All of the interview data was transcribed verbatim and analysed applying a thematic framework, allowing codes, categories and themes to be generated from the empirical data produced with participants.

3. Key Findings

- 3.1 The focussed review of the literature on care experience supported previous research findings and suggested that care-experienced children and young people continue to face a number of barriers and inequalities that can be detrimental to their educational attainment and achievement, well-being and lifecourse trajectories.
- 3.2 The focussed review of the literature on the value of engagement with culture and the arts explored different conceptualisations of culture and the arts, and demonstrated their value in relation to social research, wider society, marginalised communities, and young people.
- 3.3 The rapid review of the current knowledge base around art and cultural engagement programmes with care-experienced children and young people found that the arts and cultural programmes reviewed led to an improvement in stakeholder-reported psychosocial outcomes, such as self-esteem, confidence, emotional literacy, as well as social and cultural capital and relationship-building. However, it was noted that much of the literature reviewed lacked stringent evaluation methodologies and child/young person-centred outcome reporting.
- 3.4 In the qualitative observations and interviews the foster carers illustrated a high level of commitment to involving young people with extra-curricular opportunities. Reflecting on the programme, they reported benefits for young people in relation to developing their cognitive skills, supporting their wider educational trajectories, and offering a platform to develop social skills and emotional competencies, and build friendships.
- 3.5 Foster carers contended that young people's engagement was promoted by being in a space where other participants were care-experienced. It was also noted that the cost free nature of the programme supported participation. The role of the facilitators was important, and both young people and foster carers were highly complementary of the team delivering the programme, stressing the importance of consistency.

- 3.6 Foster carers discussed how they had learnt things from the programme that they would incorporate into their practice with young people in the home.
- 3.7 Foster carers reported that they valued the opportunity to be with other foster carers, to share advice and experiences, and to form supportive networks.
- 3.8 Facilitators noted the development of skills, experience, confidence, and social networks in young people, and what they interpreted as transformative forms of self-development. Facilitators agreed that from their perspective all of the young people had gained something from attending the arts programme, and that this could be evidenced from the visible changes in their engagement, self-confidence and relational practices.
- 3.9 Young people enjoyed activities that were fun and enabled them to illustrate their creativity or provide opportunities for them to learn to be creative. Young people reported growing in confidence, learning new skills, developing social and emotional competencies, and making new friendships, all of which conferred added value to the arts-based programme.
- 3.10 A range of key benefits linked to attending the arts-based programme at the Wales Millennium Centre were positioned as having an impact on young people and foster carers beyond the programme. Young people and foster carers discussed maintaining contact with each other after the programme ended. Additionally, two of the eight young people joined a drama-based activity supported by the Wales Millennium Centre, which was open to all young people. This suggests that the programme acted as a springboard for further involvement with the arts.
- 3.11 Some suggestions for improvement were made in relation to staff training, the timing and length of the programme, and the provision of refreshments.

4. Conclusions/Recommendations

- 4.1 The rapid review of the current knowledge base around art and cultural engagement programmes with care-experienced children and young people, and the contributions of young people, foster carers and facilitators generated

evaluations, ideas and suggestions for future research and practice, which have informed the recommendations.

4.2 The findings set out 18 key recommendations. These recommendations apply to a number of stakeholders and inform the objectives set out by the Wales Millennium Centre for the project.

- Recommendation 1: The evidence-base for arts-based interventions with care-experienced young people remains limited. As such, we would recommend that more robust studies are needed to be conducted and that these should include experimental and qualitative designs, and longer-term follow-up with participants.
- Recommendation 2: We would recommend that support and investment in systematic reviews of this area is required to generate scientifically robust evaluation. Future studies in this area could improve on the rigour demonstrated in this study by undertaking a full-scale systematic review with several researchers, and by rating included studies in terms of their design quality, reliability of reported outcomes and evaluation rigour.
- Recommendation 3: Future studies on this topic should foreground participant-centred feedback from care-experienced young people, as many rely largely on adult-reported feedback. This study drew on the perspectives of foster carers, facilitators and care-experienced young people and this model should be adopted in future work to gain a more nuanced understanding and evaluation of arts-based programmes.
- Recommendation 4: This study suggested that a programme aimed at care-experienced young people was advantageous, but that data on the gendered element or age range included in the programme did not offer any firm conclusions. Therefore, future research should focus on the debates raised regarding the differing effects of 'mixed' and 'non-mixed' groupings within arts programmes, and whether these either contribute to or mitigate the likelihood of care-experienced participants feeling stigmatised, ostracised or isolated.
- Recommendation 5: This study reported a number of benefits from attending the programme, including improved confidence, social and

emotional development, and arts-based skills, which were evidenced in the accounts of young people, foster carers and facilitators. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to explore whether these perceived benefits are transient or have lasting impacts.

- Recommendation 6: Future programmes should provide free to access activities for care-experienced young people and explore transitional pathways into further activities to increase the sustainability of arts interventions.
- Recommendation 7: Foster carers reported the value of the involvement of the War Horse production in incentivising care-experienced young people to attend. Future programmes should consider provision and which elements can be included to encourage attendance and completion.
- Recommendation 8: Facilitators had mixed views about the value of the Arts Award and the time commitment required to attend to its set requirements. Consideration should be given to whether programmes including an Arts Award should extend the number of sessions to enable the completion of set tasks without detracting from the central aims of the provision.
- Recommendation 9: Consideration should be given to the position of the biological children of foster carers and whether places should be offered to them on arts-based programmes for care-experienced young people, particularly when they are close in age to their foster siblings.
- Recommendation 10: Future programmes should consider the ways in which arts-based projects can access, engage and include children and young people in care who do not have the support of an 'engaged' foster carer.
- Recommendation 11: Facilitators of arts-based programmes aimed at care-experienced young people should be offered specific training for working with children and young people who are in care. It may also be advantageous for facilitators to be supported in sessions by a representative from a relevant third sector organisation, such as The Fostering Network or Action for Children.
- Recommendation 12: Consideration should be given to staffing levels. The programme evaluated was attended by two researchers that increased the

number of adults available to provide support. The attendance of two researchers was not envisaged in the design process, but they were nevertheless involved in supporting young people. Therefore, future programmes may require additional staffing or the involvement of volunteers to run effectively.

- Recommendation 13: Arts-based programmes aimed at care-experienced young people should ensure that there is consistency with key facilitators across the programme to engender support and stability for participants.
- Recommendation 14: Consideration should be given to catering arrangements as care-experienced young people may have a history of problematic relationships with food.
- Recommendation 15: Foster carers should be consulted about the specific needs and requirements of the young people they care for in advance of the onset of programmes.
- Recommendation 16: The findings of this study suggest that it was useful for foster carers to be actively involved in the initial programme sessions. Future programmes should consider this model in the design process.
- Recommendation 17: A steering group of foster carers, care-experienced young people, and experts in the area of care should feed in to the design and planning of future programmes, and considerations about negotiating the endings of programmes and pathways to continue engagement with the arts.
- Recommendation 18: Foster carers reported the value gained from having an opportunity to network with other foster carers. Future arts-based programmes aimed at care-experienced young people could consider the provision of a room and refreshments for foster carers to socialise while young people are involved in activities. More widely, consideration should be given to supporting and extending initiatives such as The Fostering Network's Fostering Ambassadors scheme, which offers a forum for foster carers to exchange views, experiences, advice and support.

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