

# **Resilience and Social Capital: The Voices of Care Leavers from one London Borough**

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# Outline of the workshop

- *Welcome and sharing names in pairs*

## An overview of the care leavers action research project

- Aims
- Research methods
- How young people were involved
- What they told us about what is important to them

Short film made by the young people- 'a looked after children review'

# Outline of the workshop- Group Exercise

- **Group exercise-** what message is the young person giving?
- What could have been done differently?
- What is important to you about children's rights and how can children and young people in care and leaving care have their voices heard?
- How can care leavers be supported to build their social capital- what helps and what hinders?
- What are the common themes across different European countries
- Summary

# Terminology Used in British social work

care leavers

Looked  
after  
children

Corporate  
parent

Experts by  
experience

Service  
users

# Care leavers journeys to adulthood...

*‘care leavers manage multiple transitions and have already experienced transitions within the care system from home to foster care and perhaps additional placement moves’  
(Allain, 2016 p47)*

*‘In contrast to the extended transitions made by most young people, the journey to adulthood for many young care leavers is shorter, steeper and often more hazardous’  
(Stein, 2005, p.1).*

# Local context

- Rising numbers of children coming into care in England
- *The number of looked after children has increased steadily over the past five years and it is now higher than at any point since 1985 (DfE, 2014, p4)*
- Impacts on numbers of care leavers
- Data shows that there has been a 50% increase in care leavers from 2003/2004 to 2013/2014 (National Audit Office, 2015, p4).

# Fast track and slow track to adulthood

- Briggs (2008) discusses the differences and risks associated between those young people who take the 'fast track' to adulthood and those who remain on the 'slow track'. It is those young people who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, including care leavers, who are more likely to be hurtling through on the 'fast-track' to adulthood.
- *'the timing of when young people leave home on a more or less permanent basis reveals a great deal about their social, emotional and financial capital' (Briggs, 2008, p. 180).*

# An overview of the care leavers action research project

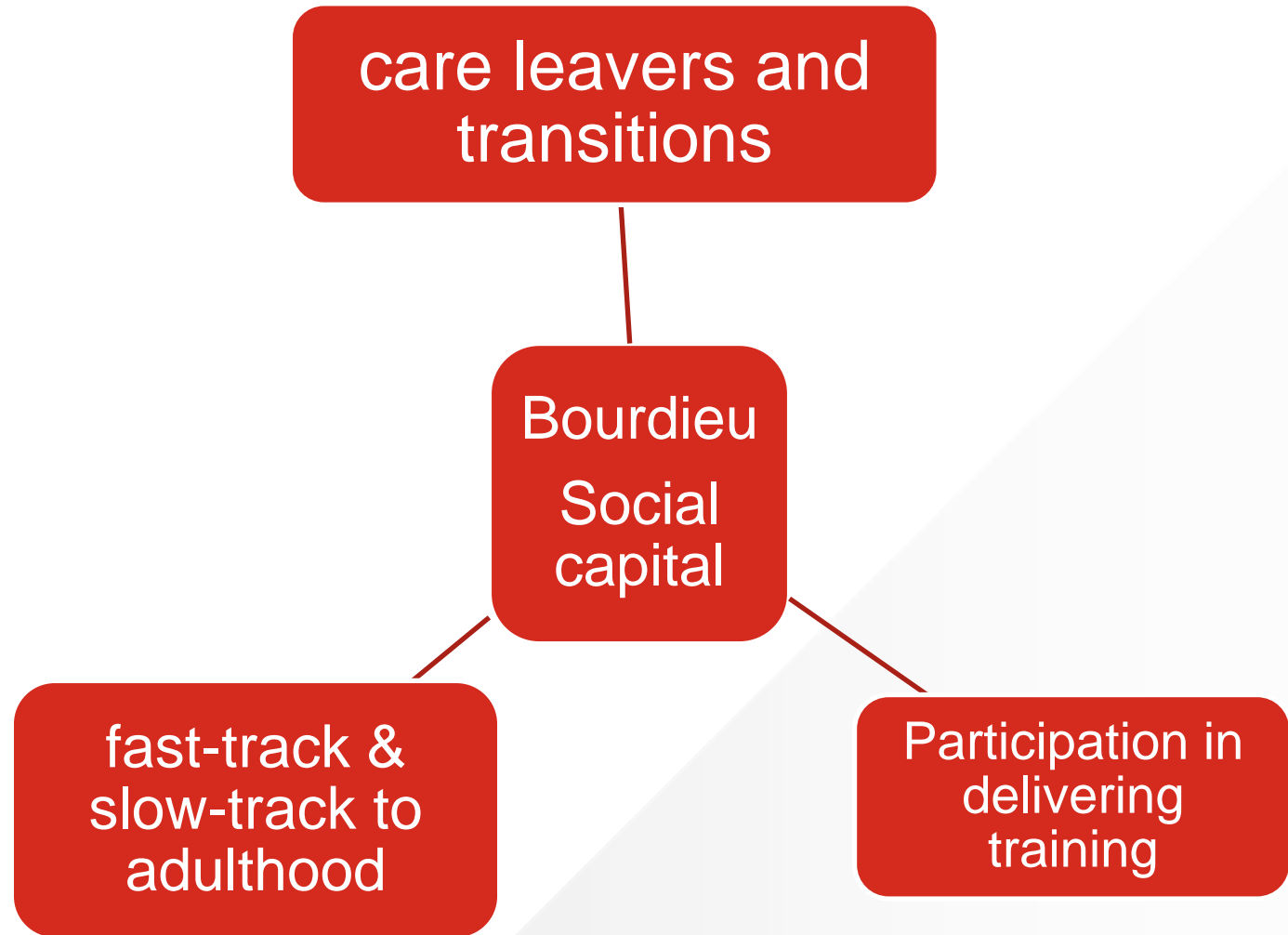
## An overview of the care leavers action research project

- Aims

- To deepen social workers' and social work students' understandings of the needs of young people leaving care;
- To support young people who had been in care (and were receiving a service from the local authority's leaving care team) to develop and deliver training and teaching workshops to qualified social workers and social work students;
- To improve social work education and practice.



# Key aspects of the study



# Social and emotional capital

- Feminist theorists (Adkins, 2004; Reay 2004) identified the importance of emotional capital which was not directly referred to by Bourdieu but has been developed out of his schema by Nowotny (1981, cited by Reay, 2004, p60) and is referred to as ...‘a variant of social capital’.
- Reay (2004) states that emotional capital ‘encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about’ (p60)
- Care leavers have fewer opportunities to be the recipients of emotional labour given their disrupted journeys through the care system. They are therefore less likely to experience the same depth of emotional resources being handed onto them in comparison to young people who are brought up in their birth families by their parents

# Research Questions

1. What are the views of young care leavers about the services they receive as part of the Children (Leaving Care Act) 2000?
2. How can the involvement of care leavers in delivering training, influence social workers' and students' practice?
3. What were the main messages identified by the young people, social workers and students following attendance at training workshops delivered by young care leavers?
4. How can involvement in delivering this training influence care leavers' social and economic capital?

# Research methods

- Participatory action research
- Multi-methods approach was used to gather data
- Initially a questionnaire to all young people in the local authority's leaving care service –focused on young peoples' experience of services
- Then two focus groups with young people from the leaving care service
- The aim was to capture the views of a sample of young people so that issues emerging from the data in the survey questionnaires could be explored in greater depth; eleven young people were interviewed in two separate focus groups.

# Research methods

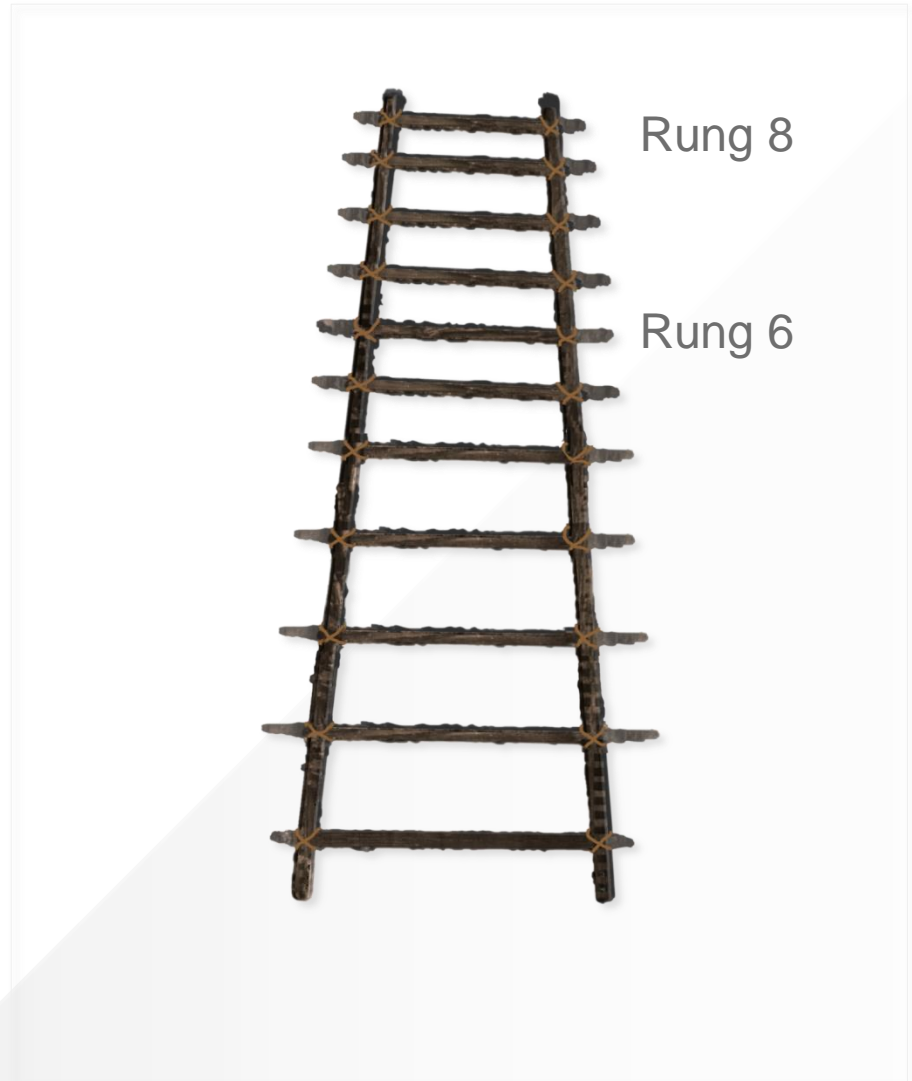
- Developed workshops with the young people for students and social workers- 'train the trainer course' which I attended alongside the young people who had expressed an interest in the next stage of the project which was delivering training to social workers and students
- The fourth and final stage of the project was gathering data through semi-structured interviews with care leavers who had delivered the training, students who had taken part in a workshop delivered by the young people at university and social workers who had taken part in training delivered in the local authority

# Social work values

- Commitment to ethical and sensitive social work practice and research
- Commitment to children's rights and respect for service users
- Awareness of diversity and the unique position of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people who become looked after children and then experience the leaving care system

# Hart's model

- Hart's model informed the process
- Started on 'Rung 6' of Hart's model (1992) which is: 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children/young people' but by the end of the research and throughout planning the final stage I believe 'Rung 8' had been achieved- 'Child/young person initiated- shared decisions with adults'.



# Issues of power and knowledge

- Transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2007) used to explore how the social workers and students experienced this different approach to learning delivered by 'non-professionals' who were temporarily placed in a new power relationship with those deemed to be the professionals
- In the local authority- this was a challenge as some managers found this difficult



# What the young people told us about what is important to them-Questionnaires

- 50 young people responded to the questionnaire- majority of the young people were between 18 years and 21 years old (36) with twelve young people under 18 years old (two young people did not give a response to the age question). There were thirty young women and twenty young men overall in the sample
- 47-of the young people were looking for work or in full-time education
- (37) yp had a social worker from the 'Leaving Care Team' and eight young people had a social worker from the 'Looked After Children Team'

# Focus groups

## 4 key themes emerged:

1. Young people's self-reliance and resilience;
2. The importance of foster carer support;
3. Importance of planning and receiving help at the right time;
4. Getting the right sort of practical and emotional support and being listened to.

# Young people's self-reliance and resilience

- Many of the young people were self-motivated and proactive showing high levels of resilience; there was also evidence of young people themselves taking the initiative and being self-reliant.
- *“Realistically when it came to education, I done it by myself. I knew what I wanted”*
- *“That’s exactly it, because I knew what I wanted to do anyway; I didn’t need much advice on that. I knew what I was good at so I just did it”.*
-

# The importance of foster carer support

- In Group B the greatest source of support was often the young people's previous foster carers.
- *“My foster parent helped me to get work”.*
- *“Yeah, that's what happened to me. My foster parents helped me”.*
- Foster carers giving emotional labour

# Importance of planning and receiving help at the right time

- Two key areas emerged as critical in relation to planning for independence; one was education and employment and the second was housing and setting up a first home.
- In Group B the young people made reference to struggling with the care leaving process and expressed bewilderment with what choices should be made:
- *“It’s like they put you in a room with doors and they’re expecting you to go through the right door each time without knowing anything”.*
- Others said: *“I’m grateful to them because they support me during the time I need them because I came through a vulnerable time”.*

# Getting the right sort of practical and emotional support and being listened to (1)

- Young people often focused on practical matters being attended to as they act as a platform for independence:
  - *“Money, accommodation and status... citizenship”. “Once you’ve got that you know you can do it. Then you can get out of here and fight for yourself. You’ve got to be a survivor anyway, living in care you’ve got to be a survivor”.*
- In Group B the young people expressed concern and frustration about their experiences of a lack of support. Some said there needed to be more social workers as they were unable to give the time needed and this was linked to caring and listening.
- *“they’re trying to do as much as they can... there needs to be twice as many social workers but they also need to care a lot more... When I spoke to my social worker the last time I was allocated one, she’d never opened my file for a year... because we’re just a number to them”*

(2)

- There was a focus on the importance of the relationship they had with the person they were seeking advice from:
- *“... it depend on the relationship that you have built with your social worker. For example, my one, ... I don't find it difficult ... to explain how things are going in my life so if I have any problem, I just go straight away to her and explain all what's going on and maybe ask for advice”.*
- *“Some go through three four social workers but I'm lucky I've had one to help me get where I am today”.*

# Findings from the semi-structured interviews

- firstly- everybody learnt something new: the young people, the students, the social workers and the organisations;
- secondly, the power of direct testimony in enhancing positive practice and meaningful participation with young people using care services;
- thirdly, the importance of listening, respecting and sharing power between young people and professionals within organisations



# Quotes from semi-structured interviews

- *“I really enjoyed it, I think it made a big difference being taught by the young people, I really just feel quite inspired by them... I think that is the first time I have been on a training course where I have heard young people speak... I could have really listened to them a bit longer actually... it does make me think that we need a lot more training in direct work in communicating”. (SW)*
- *“The way they presented themselves was quite inspiring ...” (student)*
- *“It kind of made me look at things differently... How can I make them feel like I am hearing what they are saying” (student)*

# Young People

- *“It was a shock for me because I didn’t even know if I could stand and talk in front of a lot of people... I was quite comfortable you know talking with them and doing exercises and activities and at the end of the day I realised that they are just people like me.” (YP)*
- Young people expressed the ways in which their confidence had grown:
- *“Speaking in public, I know more about that now... I’m a bit shy but you know it really helped me ...standing in front of people. ..It is something you need to deal with because some day you will have to do that in work or even when you study, you have to do some group exercises... this was really helpful”.* (YP)
- They talked about learning something new and having fun:
- *“I didn’t think it was going to be as much fun as it was. It was really fun and quite interesting because I didn’t think you would learn about how to interact with people and communicate with people at the same time so it was good”.* (YP)

# Young people

- There was a focus on working as part of a team and gaining new skills over a range of areas:
- *“I have learnt a lot- I have learnt to work as a team; I have learnt how to train people. I have never held a session before and taught someone- anything, like the way we did so I learnt to teach in a way and I liked that.”*

# Integrated themes from the findings: what did care leavers say they needed?

**Theme 1:**  
Timely practical and  
emotional support<sup>†</sup>

**Theme 2:**  
Involvement in  
service  
planning-having  
a voice

**Theme 3:**  
Professionals to  
listen,  
communicate,  
and respond to  
their [*care  
leavers*] needs  
over time

# Outcomes and achievements

- The young care leavers co-authored a book chapter for a *'Advanced Social Work with Children and Families, Post-Qualifying Social Work Practice'*, Cocker, C and Allain, L (2011) and the chapter is Allain, L and Cocker, C, with Hinds, O, Naluwaga, E and Babondock, A (2011) *'What's important for looked after children? The views of young people leaving care'*;
- The young people gave a presentation about their experiences at a local authority children's services conference which influenced change in the local authority;
- The university social work department has embedded the delivery of teaching workshops from young care leavers into its curricula

# Film

- Short film made by the young people- 'a looked after children review'

- **Group exercise-** what message is the young person giving?
- What could have been done differently?
- What is important to you about children's rights and how can children and young people in care and leaving care have their voices heard?
- How can care leavers be supported to build their social capital- what helps and what hinders?
- **Summary**
- What are the common themes across different European countries
- Conclusions

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