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Young people's participation in the recruitment and selection process for secure care staff

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Introduction

It's about young people having good staff that are dedicated in working with young people (Male, aged 17).

It's about making a difference for young people in the future (Female, aged 16).

The participation of children and young people in decision-making has been an important principle since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1992). In particular, Article Twelve of the UNCRC upholds the child's right to be heard. Children and young people can play a valuable role in the recruitment of staff and some agencies are involving them in a purposeful way. By involving children and young people in recruitment, a very clear message can be transmitted about their value and their centrality to the process. Important policy documents have called for greater involvement of children and young people in selection (e.g. Kent, 1997). Research also recognises the political, legal, social and moral reasons for promoting greater participation by young people in matters which affect their lives (Sinclair, 2004). As the main advocacy agency for children and young people in care in Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland has become increasingly involved in the preparation and support of young people in the important task of staff recruitment. This paper outlines the process used by one agency and discusses the difficulties and the benefits involved.

Background

It's about looking out for people in care and helping people get jobs (Male, aged 15).

Who Cares? Scotland is a national voluntary organisation offering an independent, rights-based advocacy service to children and young people who are, or have been, looked after and accommodated. We were asked by Cora Learning to identify, train and support young people to be involved in the organisation's recruitment and selection process for staff to work within two new secure units. The two secure units in question were St Philips in Airdrie and the Good Shepherd Centre in Bishopton. Cora Learning is a registered charity and a well-known provider of training and assessment services to the care sector in Scotland. It is the in-house learning and development provider for a number of residential establishments for young people in the west of Scotland, including secure accommodation. The organisation had been involved in an innovative

recruitment and selection process and was keen to ensure that young people were properly represented in the process (Watson, Gould, Sullivan & Cockerill, 2006). Approximately 30 young people were involved in this recruitment process from September 2005. The preparatory work and the process of their involvement are outlined. Halfway through the process, an evaluation took place with young people and staff from Cora Learning and Who Cares? Scotland. The evaluation consisted of asking young people and staff about their views on how they had found the process. The comments made by the young people about their experiences are used to illustrate various points in this paper.

Findings

Preparatory work with young people

For me it's about having a say in the decision about new staff and meeting new people (Female, aged 19).

The importance of good preparation for participation has been highlighted in research (Danso, Greaves, Howell, Ryan, Sinclair & Tunnard, 2003). Hence it was important to select and prepare the young people who would be involved in the recruitment process. Young people were identified through the advocacy and support work carried out by young persons' workers (YPWs) from Who Cares? Scotland. Young persons' workers are practitioners working with young people in residential care to provide advocacy support. The Cora recruitment project was explained to young people who were in residential care or who were recent care leavers, and they were asked if they would like to participate. Selection of the young people took place on the basis of their initial interest and their performance in subsequent training and support. When the training process was complete, Who Cares? Scotland staff judged who would be responsible and reliable enough to take part. The majority of young people involved in the process were care leavers, as we were aware that the recruitment interviews would take place during the day and we did not want to disrupt schooling. During school holidays, however, we were able to involve others who were still at school and had shown a keen interest in taking part.

It was suggested to the young people that their involvement was likely to have a positive impact on other young people still being looked after and accommodated, if they took the task seriously and tried to choose the most appropriate candidate to fill the post. It was also explained that their part in the process was highly valued by Cora Learning, and that their opinions would be treated the same as those of other interviewers when considering the selection of candidates for appointment.

As part of the preparatory work, young people identified what they were looking for in a good member of staff. Some of the important points mentioned by young people were:

- Someone who can give eye contact at interview
- Someone who has been in care
- Someone who is understanding, not patronising
- Someone with good experience, who has training and has worked with young people
- Someone with maturity
- Someone who is open-minded.

Issues surrounding confidentiality were discussed with the young people, as it was possible that they could meet a candidate who may have been involved in their care previously. They were also advised to respect candidates' right to privacy and not discuss candidates' applications outwith the interview process. Equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice were also explored with the young people to ensure candidates were given fair and non-judgemental consideration. Attention was given to ensuring that the young people understood fully the questions they would be asking, and consideration was given to possible answers candidates might provide. This was important as we believed it would help to empower the young people, make them more capable of asking their questions confidently, and entering into two-way conversations with the candidates.

The interview process

It's good to be involved because we have first hand experience of care – we are the real experts (Male, aged 18).

Young people were involved in the interview for a wide range of posts, from domestic staff to management positions. For candidates, the interview consisted of a broad-based assessment, with interviews and a variety of exercises. The process used was dependent on the post and included a formal interview (involving a panel of Cora Learning staff and one young person), young people's interview (three young people and a Who Cares? Scotland member of staff), a screening interview, a group exercise and a written exercise.

There were two interview processes involving young people. The first process was a young persons' interview panel. This panel consisted of three young people and a YPW. The YPW was there to observe, to assist if panel members had difficulties at any point during the interview, or to intervene if a candidate asked an inappropriate question (for example, with regards to a young person's care or background). While this rarely happened, young people were aware they did not need to answer any questions which made them uncomfortable. The YPW did not take part in the decision-making process.

The young people had six questions to ask the candidate, and they asked two questions each. They picked their two questions depending on how comfortable

they felt with the question's content. The questions asked during the young persons' interview were selected from a range of questions which had previously been prepared by other young people involved in the selection and recruitment of staff for Who Cares? Scotland. (It is part of Who Cares? Scotland policy to involve young people in all interviews for their own staff). There was also a scenario question which was put to the candidate at the end of the interview.

The questions asked by the young people were very general, and not all of them were work-related. Some of them were designed to help candidates to talk about their likes and dislikes in various aspects of their lives, to help put them at their ease, and to allow the young people to get to know them a little better.

If one of the young people involved felt confident enough to ask the scenario question, then he or she did so. If not, the YPW asked the candidate. The scenario was based around a difficulty the candidate might come across at work involving young people and damage to property, and how they would deal with this situation. The scenario was tailored to the prospective job role of the candidate. If the question was posed to candidates for residential care posts, it would explore damage in the Unit. If, however, the post was for a nurse, it would relate to the nurse's station being damaged. Domestic staff were asked about how they would deal with a break-in to their cleaning cupboard. In this way, the scenario helped to widen out discussion in the young persons' interview.

The second interview process involving young people was the formal interview. The formal interview panel consisted of three members of staff from Cora Learning and one young person. Staff took the lead, with the young person having two questions to ask during the interview. These questions focused on safety issues and the stigma surrounding young people who are looked after and accommodated. In the formal interview, the young person had access to the candidates' application forms, whereas the participants in the young persons' panel did not.

Throughout this process, I saw that other staff involved in the recruitment process warmed quickly to the young person with whom they were working, and clearly valued their involvement. Staff often requested that the same young person should be involved during the next round of interviews. This boosted the young people's confidence noticeably and, in turn, they often asked to be involved with the same staff. Members of staff also asked about young people if they were absent or had not taken part for a while, and welcomed them on their return. This demonstrates the depth and warmth of the working relationship which developed between the young interviewers and their staff peers on the panels.

The 'pink slip' system

Young people made use of a 'pink slip' system which was also used by staff interviewers. This system was implemented if young people felt strongly that a candidate did or said something so inappropriate that they felt he or she should not be considered for the job.

The slips were not often used by young people nor taken lightly by them. They were aware of the possible serious consequences for candidates. They took a great deal of time considering whether it was appropriate to issue a slip, sometimes sleeping on the matter, and not submitting one until the next day. Staff from Cora Learning took the young people's reaction seriously and would speak to them about the issue they had highlighted. They also gave the young people feedback on the eventual outcome at a later time. It was not necessarily the case that candidates were rejected because a pink slip was raised, but issuing them certainly led to further discussion between staff and young people in consideration of a candidate's application.

The remuneration of young people

Cora Learning offered some remuneration to the young people for taking part in the interviews. This gave some recognition of the time input and their important contribution to the decision-making process. In this initiative, depending on where young people were travelling from, they might set out as early as 7.30am, not returning until 6pm. By providing remuneration, a concrete demonstration was given to the young people about how seriously their involvement was being taken. It is my belief that they themselves took the process more seriously because of this. This recognition enhanced the sense of purpose referred to previously.

Benefits of involving young people

It's good to have an input, and maybe make a small difference in young people's lives. It's being part of something big and important (Male, aged 20).

Throughout the year that I was involved in the process, I witnessed substantial benefits for the young people involved. They took the process very seriously, turned up on time and were well-prepared. On Cora premises they conducted themselves appropriately and responsibly.

I also saw the growth in confidence of the young people who were involved. It was clear to me that, over time, they increasingly entered into interactive conversations with candidates. No longer as unsure and nervous as they had been at the start of the process, they developed the ability to answer any question from candidates with much more confidence. At the beginning, young people were unsure of introducing themselves and explaining the process to candidates, and they were particularly nervous about posing the scenario at the end, because it was a lengthier question. As their confidence grew, however, this changed

visibly and they became more involved. Similarly, as young people became more confident, the process itself became much more relaxed and had a positive effect on candidates.

Some of the young people reported that being involved in the recruitment exercise brought some structure and purpose to their day, especially if they were not in employment, education or training. Their involvement also gave them a sense of achievement, as they perceived that their input would have positive effects on the lives of other young people. They felt that their involvement allowed young people's perspectives to be reflected in the choice of candidates going on to work with other young people living in secure care.

During the recruitment period, five young people left to start work or begin college placements. It is unlikely that this was due only to their involvement in the process. Anecdotal reports from staff, however, suggest that this experience was definitely a contributory factor in gaining jobs and college places.

I had nothing else to do just now and it's really good to put on my CV (Male, aged 16).

All young people involved said they would be involved again. Indeed, many of the young people enquired whether more interviews were being arranged. Feedback from candidates who had been interviewed by young people was positive. Although they were initially nervous at the prospect of being interviewed by young people, they relaxed as the interview progressed, and commented afterwards that they had enjoyed the experience. Many candidates finished their interview by congratulating the young people on how well they had done and speaking about the benefits of having them involved in the process.

Difficulties with the involvement of young people

There were no major difficulties encountered during the process. On one occasion a young person felt that his or her input in the formal interview process was not being taken as seriously by one particular member of staff. This could have been because this staff member did not fully understand the benefits of the young people's participation or perhaps that they had insufficient preparation. Alternatively, it may have been a clash of personalities between the staff member and the young person. On this occasion the young person did not want anything raised formally. I spoke with the member of staff in question about the value of having young people involved, re-emphasised the benefits for young participants and reiterated young people's right to participation. Research has indicated that adult attitudes to the participation of young people can be a barrier to their involvement (Danso et al., 2003). I swapped the young person involved with another young person who was taking part in another panel running at the same time (after checking that all involved agreed). This worked well, alleviating the

tension between this young person and the staff member.

Incidents between the young people themselves were minor, and staff and young people involved dealt with any situation appropriately. These incidents are predictable when working with young people, and can be related to the different personalities of the young people coming together and the time required for them to get to know one another. The possibility of such difficulties can be alleviated by good preparation and the presence of experienced supportive staff.

Conclusion

It's good because I get a say on future staff members – it's too late for me but my wee sister is in care – it might benefit her. (Female, aged 17).

This paper demonstrates that the participation of young people in interviews was a positive experience for them and for the other staff members involved. The young people benefited greatly from the experience as their confidence grew. It gave a sense of purpose to their day and they felt they were having a positive impact on the care of others. Wider research also indicates that the participation of young people in recruitment is valued. For example in a study of participation in Children's Fund initiatives in England it was reported that:

Participants in a children's forum had contributed to 'real and meaningful' decision-making for staff recruitment, appraising funding applications and allocating resources (Spicer & Evans, 2005, p.184).

It is hoped that processes which involve young people in recruitment will continue and become a feature of residential child care in the future.

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The story of Matthew: an ecological approach to assessment

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Introduction

Although developmental stage theories in psychology have deepened our understanding of looked-after children, they have always run the risk of fixing the individual into a generalised framework so that their uniqueness is obscured (Scourfield, 2002). While theories such as those of Piaget (1959) or Erikson (1963) have forced us to focus on the importance of childhood, it could be argued that they also contribute to a view of the child as completely constrained and determined by internal and external factors (for instance disability, temperament and upbringing).

Concerns have been raised by writers both within the psychological tradition (Sameroff, 1987; Rutter, 1988) and within the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990) about the implicit view of a passive child being socialised in a uni-linear direction by biology and environment. Piaget’s methodology and his conclusions have been questioned by later psychologists, some of whom argue for a greater emphasis on children’s competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, attachment theory as developed by Bowlby (1969; 1988) has also been influential. Attachment theory stresses the overwhelming impact of early relationships and has enabled us to examine their importance. It is argued, however, that once again we have not explored sufficiently how its deterministic view of the causes of problematic behaviour links with our belief in a child’s capacity to change (Scourfield, 2002; Saleebey, 2006).

New approaches gradually became evident in the writings of Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Sameroff (1987). They questioned the apparent determinism built into some of the theories in developmental psychology, and suggested new approaches based on transactional relationships between the child and his or her environment. In particular, Bronfenbrenner (1979) presents a theory describing how internal and external factors around the child interact. Building on Piaget’s (1959) theory, Bronfenbrenner emphasised the mutual accommodation between the child and their ‘environment’, focusing on the reciprocal and systemic nature of human interaction. The relevant ‘environment’ incorporates interconnections between settings such as home and school and wider socio-cultural influences. This ecological approach is conceived as concentric circles, named microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).