

The participation of children and young people in the recruitment of residential child care staff in Scotland

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Introduction

In the wake of a number of high-profile cases of the abuse of children and young people in residential child care, there have been several calls to improve the safety of children in residential care in Scotland (Kent 1997; Marshall, Jamieson and Finlayson, 1999) and indeed throughout the UK (Warner, 1997; Utting, 1997; Kendrick 1998). One strand of policy identified as relevant to this issue is the prevention of unsuitable people from being employed (Gallagher, 2000).

There have been repeated calls for the improvement of recruitment and selection of residential child care staff. Inquiries into abuse have consistently highlighted that selection processes were lax and inadequate, and that there were concerns about references, police checks and other vetting procedures (Levy & Kahan, 1991; Williams & McCreadie, 1992; Kirkwood, 1993; Kendrick, 1997).

Following the publication of the *Children's Safeguards Review* (Kent, 1997), the Scottish Executive funded the Scottish Recruitment and Selection Consortium (SRSC) to contribute to the safeguards for children in residential care by developing a 'Toolkit' of guidance for the safer selection of staff. The Toolkit identified 18 elements which should be included in a safer selection process. The 18 elements were

capabilities, job description, person specification, advertisement, application form, short-listing, equal opportunities, screening interview, identity check, verification of qualifications, reference request, criminal records check, client record checks, personnel records check, selection process, assessment, panel interview and personal interview. The document entitled *Safer selection and recruitment for staff working with children; a toolkit* (SRSC, 2001) was launched across Scotland by the Scottish Executive in 2001. The SRSC recommended that young people should be involved in the recruitment of staff, advocating for their participation within some of the 18 elements.

The process of recruitment and selection is the first point of contact that potential employees have with an employing agency. This process can reflect an open culture which is child-centred, focused on the safety of children and young people and which aims to promote best practice. The participation of children and young people at this early stage in an employee's career can give out a very clear message about the value of children and young people in residential care. Warner made a recommendation that 'Employers should require all short-listed candidates to visit the home' (Warner, 1992, p. 48). The Support Force for Children's Residential Care went further by stating that 'Children and young people can test out a candidate's ability to communicate with them.' (DoH, 1995, p.27). Kent felt that children and young people should be involved in staff selection and stated that 'their (children's) views will be taken into account' (Kent, 1997, p.54).

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 (UNCRC). In particular, Article Twelve of the UNCRC, which refers to the child's right to be heard, has been enshrined in the Children Act (1989) in England and the Children (Scotland) Act (1995). Hart (1997) provided an interesting analysis of this issue, and outlined the following levels of participation:

1) Manipulation

Happens where adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people.

2) Decoration

Happens when young people are used to help or 'bolster' a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people.

3) Tokenism

When young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

4) Assigned but informed

Where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.

5) Consulted and informed

When young people give advice on a participatory situation designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.

6) Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Occurs when the participatory event is initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people.

7) Young people-initiated and directed

When young people initiate and direct the participatory event. Adults are involved only in a supportive role.

8) Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults

This happens when the event is initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults.

The degree to which children are encouraged to participate in making decisions about their care environment can present a challenge to agencies. Aldgate and Statham in their examination of the implementation of the Children Act 1989 in England summed this situation up when they stated that ‘the process of children’s participation is sometimes not as child-centered as it should be’ (Aldgate and Statham, 2001, p. 142). Within their discussions, there is a degree of concern about what is meant by true participation, as highlighted by Hart.

In 2004, the Scottish Executive commissioned research from Scottish Institute of Residential Child Care (SIRCC) to identify current recruitment practices in residential child care, and to assess to what extent the recruitment procedures recommended by the Toolkit had been implemented (Kay, Davidson and Kendrick, 2005). Part of this research examined to what extent children and young people had participated in the processes used. This paper focuses on the findings of the research in relation to involving children and young people in recruitment and selection.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages. Firstly, a postal survey of local authorities, private and voluntary organisations with responsibility for residential provision for children and young people was undertaken across Scotland between February and June 2005. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a sample of survey respondents to gain an in-depth perspective on the implementation of safer recruitment practices. A small number of interviews was also undertaken with trainers and young people. Twenty-nine local authorities and 32 private and voluntary organisations agreed to participate in the research, out of a possible total of 32 local authorities and 43 voluntary organisations including residential schools.

In the second stage of the research, information from the questionnaires was used to identify and select interviewees from organisations with diverse characteristics: small and large organisations, those who were using most of the 18 elements of the Toolkit and those who were using fewer elements. Twenty face-to-face interviews were undertaken with people from eight councils, seven voluntary providers and two training organisations, and with two young people who had

participated in the recruitment process. Further telephone interviews were undertaken with nine respondents to focus in detail on specific elements of the Toolkit. The qualitative data generated by the face-to-face interviews were analysed manually, using themes and concepts arising from the survey data and reflecting issues identified as important by interviewees.

Findings

As a result of the analysis, 15 steps to safer recruitment were identified, one of which was the involvement of young people in selection. Around one third of respondents (38% of those from local authorities, 26% of those from voluntary organisations) reported that young people are involved in the recruitment process, as can be seen in Table One; however, it was also apparent that involving young people in recruitment and selection was one of the less frequently used methods, with only work-related tasks / psychometric testing and assessment centre approaches being less popular, as Table One shows.

Table One : recruitment strategies used by organisations

Recommended steps in safer recruitment	Local authority respondents (n=29) %	Voluntary/ private organisation respondents (n=32) %
1. Criminal record check	100	100
2. Identity check	100	97
3. Panel interview	100	97
4. Verification of qualifications	97	87
5. Job description	97	97
6. Person specification	97	85
7. Equal Opportunities reviewed	97	92
8. Advertisement issued	93	90
9. Standard reference requests	75	85
10. Personnel record check	66	74
11. Capabilities of post defined	74	63
12. Dedicated application form	61	74
13. Young people involved	38	26
14. Work related task/psychometric tests	17	29
15. Assessment/selection centre approach	14	14

The Toolkit for Safer Selection and Recruitment for Staff working with Children

suggested five ways of involving children in the selection of staff:

- 1) A tour of a unit with two young people.
- 2) A meeting of young people in their unit where candidates can ask them questions.
- 3) A group of young people meeting candidates individually where they put agreed questions to them.
- 4) A group of young people meeting a group of candidates to undertake a group exercise.
- 5) A young person serving as a member of a panel interview.

In practice, two methods were actually used by organisations. In the first method, young people discussed with staff and a support worker which questions were appropriate; then, in the presence of staff who acted as supporters and observers, they interviewed the candidates and presented their observations as advice to the interviewing panel. The other method of participation involved older teenagers who had undertaken training with Who Cares? before joining the assessment team with full responsibility to observe, interview and score each applicant. Some responses from the research indicated that the involvement of young people in staff selection was viewed as helpful.

Young people are developing their skills at interviewing and it seems to be a positive experience for them. They are very articulate and we give a high weighting to their scoring. The involvement of young people has proved useful. Young people are quite astute at picking up whether candidates engage with young people or try to impress the adult person in charge of the task. Sometimes the young people say 'no, we don't feel safe'. We are going to

develop this part of the exercise, perhaps getting the candidates to complete a task with young people. (Kay, Davidson and Kendrick, 2005, p. 31-32)

Young people who received training and support throughout the process reported that they enjoyed the responsibility. One young person felt that they had something to offer the recruitment process as they had learnt from their experience of 'living with these people 24 hours a day'.(Kay, Davidson and Kendrick, 2005, pg. 32)

Some responses from the research indicated that the process of involving young people was not helpful. Those interviewees who reported a negative experience of the participation of young people were likely to have been involved in a situation where the training for the young people was not thorough; sometimes it had not been made clear to staff and children what contribution was expected from the young people, or how the young person's assessment would be treated (i.e., was their assessment to be treated as purely advisory information, or was it to be scored data from the young person as a fully participating member of the interview panel?)

Discussion

The above findings indicate that organisations may be missing out on an opportunity to enhance their safer selection processes when recruiting residential child care workers. The low numbers of organisations who include children and young people in their recruitment processes raises a number of questions about the challenges and attitudes which may have to be overcome to ensure that children have a voice in staff selection.

The findings indicated that the benefits of participation can be profound for both children and residential child care units. Units can be better informed about the actual views of young people, as opposed to their views as perceived by the professionals in their lives. Children can bring new perspectives and fresh ideas as real stakeholders in the recruitment process. Also, the process of participation can help young people to build their own self-confidence and self-worth. If properly informed, young people can also gain a better understanding of the organisations charged with their care. By understanding the value of participation, true partnerships can emerge. Encouraging young people to express their views and taking these seriously can enhance practice and can also help young people to develop their confidence. In effect ‘the process of engagement becomes a learning experience in itself.’ (Atkinson 1999, p.62)

The question of the authentic presence of young people in recruitment, and not mere tokenism, is important. Encouraging young people to express their views and, more importantly, taking these seriously, can enhance the care experience and lead to improvements in feelings of safety and trust. Reports seeking young people’s views such as *Let’s Face It* (Paterson, Watson and Whiteford, 2003) indicate that they appreciate having their views listened to, and that they can also pick up very quickly when they are being treated in a tokenistic way. As two young people commented :

It’s important for all young people to have people to listen to them.

Some of them [staff] you can just see the blankness in their face, thinking about when they are going home... (2003, pg. 14)

There is a danger that participation happens for the sake of being seen to do the right thing, and not because of any underlying belief in the value of the opinions of young people. Badham (2004) calls this 'the new orthodoxy' (Badham, 2004, p. 143). It may be helpful for organisations to consider how to involve young people in a wide variety of ways. The Toolkit identified five possible methods, as outlined earlier; however, the models should also be informed by the degree of participation, such as that discussed earlier in the paper by Hart (1997). The two successful methods used in the research represented examples of Hart's levels five and six, whereas the examples of unsuccessful participation represented Hart's levels one, two or three.

If young people are to be more heavily involved in the recruitment process, organisations will need to review how the objectives of participation fit with the rights and reality of the young person's situation, as well as the imperative for safer recruitment. It may seem that the challenges involved in developing systems of participation in recruitment are too difficult to meet, given resource constraints. When it is well designed, however, participation can contribute to the process in a valuable way. As Barbara Hearn, the Director of Policy and Innovation at the National Children's Bureau, said:

The participation of children and young people is both a challenge and an essential part of the life of all organisations that affect children's lives (Badham and Wade 2005, p. 6).

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