Why are Looked After Children fixed term excluded from school? Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to understand the process

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I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

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Abstract

Study One

Study one aimed to understand the perceptions and attributions of LAC fixed term excluded (FTE) from school on multiple occasions. This was carried out with reference to resilience, and an understanding of the possible protective and risk factors were also sought. Concepts of resilience (Prince-Embury, 2008; Gilligan, 2009) and attribution theory (Heider, 1958) provided a broad theoretical framework for the research.

Methods: The study followed a mixed method design (carried out simultaneously). One aspect involved semi-structured interviews being undertaken using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2007; 2008) in attempting to generate understanding of the thoughts and feelings of LAC going through the process of being FTE. The second aspect involved the resilience of the LAC being psychometrically measured using the Resilience Scales for Children and Adolescents (RSCA) as a way of validating and contextualising data deriving from the interviews.

Results: Teachers acting as confidants and providing emotional containment appeared to significantly enhance resilience. Opportunities for dialogue and a focus on aspects to be developed in a supportive and positive manner was also important. The majority of the LAC had an external locus of control, appearing to serve them adaptively, allowing them to alleviate negative emotions relating to their behaviour. FTEs generally were causally attributed as stable and global, appearing to derive from entrenched thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The process of FTE appeared to compromise aspects of resilience as well as little positive effect being found in terms of learning and development.

Study Two

Study two aimed to understand how teachers perceived the LAC participating in study one, and providing comparison with perceptions of the LAC of aspects such as FTEs. The study also sought to provide an understanding as to the causal attributions made by teachers related to LAC. Specifically, how these attributions affected their thoughts, feelings (Weiner, 1985) and practice relating to LAC.

Methods: The study followed a mixed method design (carried out sequentially). A survey (SDQ) was used to provide the sample of teachers. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight teachers, using IPA as the method of analysis. The Modified Attribution

Questionnaire with integrated vignettes[1] was also undertaken by teachers to elicit more stable attributions relating to LAC.

Results: Data deriving from interviews found support for Weiner's (1985) cognitive-emotional-action model. Attributions of high controllability and locus increased teachers' feelings of anger and frustration relating to the causes of the LAC's behaviour. Empathy towards the LAC was affected by; collaboration with colleagues and professionals, understanding the needs of the child, ethos of the school, a child centred approach and the LAC's behaviour deriving from their care background. Further key findings are discussed from a theoretical perspective with implications for practice proposed.

[1] Due to low response rate, this is not formally recorded in the results and discussion

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