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Let me tell you a story: Concept cartoons as a tool for representing young people's voices in physical education and youth sport

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Introduction

Within a previous article in *Physical Education Matters*, we introduced the Right to be Active (R2BA) project - a methodologically innovative study of care-experienced young people in England which explored their perspectives on and experiences of sport and physical activity (see Sandford, Quarmby, Hooper & Duncombe, 2020). As we noted within this, the project was conceived in response to research suggesting that, despite sport and physical activity being of potential benefit to care-experienced youth, this vulnerable group may not have access that is comparable to their non-care-experienced peers (Quarmby, Sandford & Elliot, 2018). Moreover, it was intended to address a perceived gap in the literature, as much existing research had failed to provide significant opportunities for the stories of care-experienced young people to be heard, especially regarding their perspectives on sport and physical activity (see Quarmby, Sandford, Hooper & Duncombe, 2020). A core objective of the project was therefore to both examine the strategies in place to support care-experienced youths' engagements with sport and physical activity *and* to explore their lived experiences of these.

There is international consensus that care-experienced young people may be one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, at risk of a range of adverse social, educational and health outcomes (Mannay et al., 2017). Despite often being compared to their non-care-experienced peers, whose daily living situations are much more in line with societal norms, there remains a prevailing societal discourse that care-experienced young people have family issues, are uneducated and troublesome (Become, 2017). Significantly, this discourse frames how people think about those who are care-experienced as well as how care-experienced young people view themselves (Become, 2017). Ultimately, this tends to reproduce a deficit perspective of these young people. This prevailing view can be seen to reflect, perhaps, a lack of awareness and understanding of the realities of care-experienced young people's day-to-day lives. As such, it is argued that there is a need for concerted efforts within research to facilitate a better understanding of care-experienced young people's lived experiences, particularly from their own perspective (Quarmby et al., 2018; Sandford, Quarmby, Hooper & Duncombe, 2021). Within this article, we look to follow up on our earlier discussions and outline our use of concept cartoons as a means of engaging with and sharing care experienced youths' stories.

Concept cartoons as a means of generating and representing data

As we noted in our previous article, the R2BA project sought to overcome the perceived deficits of existing research by drawing upon participatory methods to facilitate youth voice. A series of interactive, task-based focus groups were conducted with 63 care-experienced youth (aged 8-22 years); each including activities designed to enable participants to share their experiences and perspectives of engaging in sport and physical activity (see Sandford et al., 2021). Concepts cartoons – a methodological innovation pioneered by Hooper (2018) – became a central element of these focus groups, functioning both as a means of data representation and data generation, as outlined below.

Data generated with the young people during an initial set of focus groups were analysed to

generate key themes and issues relating to their lived experiences of care and, in particular, their engagements with sport and physical activity. Within this process, it became apparent that stories were often used by the young people as a means of explaining significant perspectives or experiences. Moreover, it was evident that sharing these stories was a means of facilitating a better understanding of their experiences by others. To harness this potential, some common stories were identified within the analysis and drawn upon to produce a brief that supported the development of initial cartoon images by a graphic designer. These images underwent a significant period of drafting and re-drafting – in collaboration with the youth participants – to work towards final versions. During this period, care was taken to ensure that the images accurately captured a range of settings and contexts (e.g. foster care, residential care or kinship care), that they appropriately represented individuals from diverse backgrounds and that they highlighted both positive and negative experiences. In total, five standalone images and four image series were developed, each reflecting common stories that the young people had shared with us (see examples in Figures 1 and 2). These cartoons were then shared with care-experienced young people during additional focus group discussions. This both enabled the participants to check that the images accurately represented the thoughts, feelings and experiences shared during the previous group discussions and, significantly, facilitated the generation of additional data through further discussion and debate (as discussed below).

The cartoon images certainly proved engaging within the focus groups and much discussion was generated amongst the young people, often with little prompting required. Indeed, given that the images presented to them depicted a range of settings and contexts, most young people were able to find at least one image that they could relate to. However, even where images did not resonate personally with the young people, they still served as a means of encouraging discussion about the experience of 'others' or exploring alternative perceptions.



This cartoon was intended to tell the story of a young care experienced boy who was starting at a new school following a placement move. He is nervous when he is dropped off because he doesn't know anybody there. While he is at school, the boy takes part in a PE lesson but feels a bit left out because the other children all know each other. He is also wearing the wrong PE kit because he hasn't got his new uniform yet, so this makes him feel different. During the PE lesson, the boy needs to go and meet his social worker, which means that he misses out on the rest of the lesson. At the end of the day, the boy doesn't have someone to collect him but is picked up in a taxi to go back to his care home.

Figure 1. 'New Boy' concept cartoon series (with accompanying narrative)



This cartoon tells the story of a care experienced girl who is looking back on a positive experience of sport. She is looking at a medal that she won in an athletics competition and is happy about the feelings this gives her. She remembers that when she was at school a helpful teacher pointed out that she seemed to be good at sport and might enjoy going to an after-school athletics club. This encouraged her to join the club and develop her skills in athletics, which lead to success at school and county competitions. It is a happy memory.

Figure 2. 'Looking Back' concept cartoon series (with accompanying narrative)

Storifying experiences through concept cartoons

The R2BA project adopted a theoretical framework that broadly aligned with (visual) narratives (Prosser & Burke, 2008). On the topic of narrative inquiry, Lang and Pinder (2017) argued that such an approach, and the stories that are created through it, can be powerful in prompting the sociological imagination (Mills, 1970). That is, narratives enable readers to make sense of stories – in this case, those told by care-experienced youth – from their own vantage point. This was certainly the case within the R2BA project, and the stories told by and through the concept cartoons meant that they became a valuable tool for sharing the perspectives and experiences of care-experienced young people. Indeed, inviting viewers to reflect and ‘reimagine’ in this way both stimulated further dialogue and lead to the sharing of additional stories with us and each other.

As noted above, the cartoons were shared with the youth participants in focus group discussions. Initially, the cartoons were provided either as standalone images or a series of images and participants were asked to ‘storify’ them (i.e. to write/say what they felt the images represented). Their interpretations of the images then facilitated conversations about key topics and issues and, often, led to further sharing of their own stories – whether similar to or different from those represented in the cartoons. Within the discussions we also shared and discussed the original stories behind each cartoon, and this led to the generation of a ‘youth-friendly’ narrative to accompany each concept cartoon (see Figures 1 and 2).

The concept cartoons were also shared with adult stakeholders (e.g. teachers, coaches, carers, academics and local authority staff) at dissemination events and workshops towards the end of the study. As with the young people, the images proved effective in engaging adult participants and promoting conversations about personal experiences, as well as debates about possible developments in policy and practice. Comments from the adult stakeholders about the cartoons also highlighted their potential for exemplifying the voices of care experienced young people and giving an insight into their personal experiences. It would seem, therefore, that concept cartoons hold much potential as a learning tool. Indeed, we have work ongoing in this regard focusing, in particular, on the notion of trauma-aware pedagogies (Quarmby, Sandford, Green, Hooper & Avery, *in press*).

Conclusion

The concept cartoons developed through the R2BA project have proven to be a powerful tool for representing the voices of care-experienced young people. They have led to important discussions among key stakeholders, which hold promise for improving care-experienced young people’s opportunities and access with regard to sport and physical activity. Such discussions are important since there have been few efforts to date within the field of physical education and youth sport to examine the complex lived experiences of care-experienced youth (Quarmby, 2014; Sandford et al., 2021) nor consider how practitioners in these fields might tailor their pedagogies to better reflect the diverse needs of this more vulnerable youth population (Quarmby et al., *in press*). Indeed, it is hoped that the R2BA project might be a significant step in working towards better supporting care-experienced young people within physical education and youth sport.

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