A History from Below: The Story of the Rights Movement of Young People in Care

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What I am going to talk about

• The story of the rights movement of young people in care in England – presentation based upon *Care Less Lives*

• A young person’s history of care, how young people experienced their care – identify themes of ‘*a history from below*’

• Reflections on the achievements of the movement, the recurring issues ‘*from below*’ and current challenges.
The rights movement of young people in care

Rights Movement – definitions

• Rights movement – young people’s movement as distinct from ‘professional’ rights groups
• ‘Rights’ widely used but far less defined - follow the UNCRC principles of participatory, protective and provisional rights
• ‘Movement’ – reserved for great historical struggles? – large in numbers but made up of combined action of small groups, present at their ‘own making’ (E.P. Thompson), internal battles for their soul, supporters and fellow travellers.

Rights Movement – groups, projects and organisations

• The Leeds Ad-Lib group – began in 1973-1975
• The National Association of Young People in Care – 1979 to 1994
• Black and In Care - 1984-5
• A National Voice – 1999 and still going!
Leeds Ad-lib group 1973-1975

- Leeds Ad-Lib started by bringing together young people living in care with those who had left care to share their experiences
- Campaigned against ‘special arrangements’ for school dinner payments and buying clothes
- Challenged stigmatising policies and practices – as they had an impact upon young people’s identity and well-being.

- The Ad-Lib group helped young people
  - talk about care and share experiences – grow in confidence through participating
  - educate others about their experiences – Ad Lib mag
  - began to change attitudes and policies towards children and young people at a local level.
Who Cares? project 1975-1978 – still going!

The first national event, for young people aged 12-16, living in Children’s Homes, organised by the National Children’s Bureau, was held in June 1975

• Context for the event: wider concerns about institutionalisation in residential care; drift in care ‘Children Who Wait’; popularity of community and family care
• NCB Event - what did young people think about their care? Mia Kellmer Pringle ‘listening to and learning from children’
  o Lack of public awareness about care
  o Movement and disruption experienced by young people
  o The use of physical punishment – abuse in care?
  o Young people’s lack of knowledge about their care and being involved in their care.
‘Young people not being involved in their care’

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT CARE LEAVERS WHY DON’T YOU JUST ASK?
Who Cares? 1975-1978

• A group of 16 young people and four adults from care continued to meet and published a book – *Who Cares? Young people in care speak out* in 1977
• Stigma of care; lack of public awareness; ‘love’ and ‘family’ in children’s homes?; movement; punishment or abuse?
• Charter of Rights and *Things we want to change*
• Setting-up of four regional *Who Cares?* groups
• Published *Who Cares? News*
• Their views received widespread publicity
• Rights to equality; information; participation, and privacy
  - ‘to be accepted as an individual’.

Introduced the idea of ‘rights’ more widely - a narrative shift from ‘professionally defined needs’
‘The right to be accepted as an individual’

WE LIKE TO TREAT ALL OUR
YOUNG PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS... THIS
FOR EXAMPLE, IS
INDIVIDUAL NO. 1697C
The Who Cares? project came to a sudden end at the end of 1978 – it was announced by the NCB in October that the funding for the project had come to an end. Young people felt let down, ‘used’ by a professionally led project, and having little time to plan for the future. But the anger and commitment was channelled into creating their own independent organisation – the National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC). It was set up in June 1979 in Leeds with four main aims:

- To improve conditions for children and young people in care
- To make information and advice available to young people in care
- To promote the views and opinions of young people in care
- To help start, support and develop local groups.
The National Association of Young People in Care: 1979-1994

• *Ban the Book* campaign – the clothing order book

• *Life in Care conference* 1981 – concerns about: involvement in reviews, punishment and control, access to files, leaving care, complaints

• *Gizza Say? Reviews and Young People in Care*

• *Sharing Care*, NAYPIC’S influential Evidence to the 1984 House of Commons Social Services Committee – outlined detailed concerns and policies – showed the poor state of care at the beginning of the 1980’s

• Carried out further surveys of young people’s ‘wishes and feelings’ – access to files, leaving care, guidebooks, sexual health and parenthood

• Gave evidence to Wagner Review of Residential Care in 1986

• NAYPIC contributed to major changes introduced by the Children Act 1989 as well as policy and practice.
Black and in Care: 1984-85

- In the 1980’s research showed the over-representation of Black and mixed parentage young people in care for the first time – reflected wider debates about racism and the failure of ‘cultural pluralism’ at that time.

- Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals in their evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Children in Care in 1983 described placements with white families as ‘a microcosm of the oppression of black people in this society’. The Commission for Racial Equality’s (CRE) evidence included ‘Black families have imposed on them Eurocentric assumptions of good parenting and proper family life which are used to justify separating parents from children’.

- Black and In Care held a conference in 1984 for black young people and black staff only: topics explored: fostering; origins, culture and racism in care; being mixed parentage, and; leaving care.

- Black and In Care became part of NAYPIC in 1985 – as the organisation to bring about change for all young people in care.
A National Voice: 1999-today

• Context – demise of NAYPIC in 1994, internal struggles

• *People Like Us*, The Utting Report, 1997 – in response to abuses in care, the need for the ‘voice’ of young people in care to be heard

• A National Voice launched in 1997

• *Me, Survive, Out There?* and Amplify Fun event 2002

• Campaigns to end *bin bagging*, make *sleepovers* easier, national minimum leaving care grant, improve accommodation

• 2006-8 Evidence to *Care Matters consultation; House of Commons Committee on LAC* – *had major impact on recommendations*

• 2010 Report on the emotional wellbeing of young people

• Ongoing work - LILAC project, Children in Care Councils, Pledges.
What did the rights movement achieve?

- Children Act 1989 – stronger legal and policy framework
  - Complaints procedures
  - Young people leaving care
  - ‘Racial origin, culture and language’
- Consultative rights – ‘wishes and feelings’
- Developments in participation – at both an individual and policy level
- Local group impact – personal development
- Young people challenging injustices – different from professional concern.

Extended the narrative for ‘participatory rights’ but also raised rights to ‘protection’ and ‘provision’
‘Complaints procedures’

So... apart from the food, housing, support and planning process is there anything else you're not happy with?

Well, that TIE SUCKS!
A history from below: ‘From order books to bin bags’

• Began with ‘special arrangements’ – school dinners and buying clothes

• Care seen as stigmatising and controlling – owing more to the poor law legacy than ‘new’ professional thinking of the day?

• Being ‘black and in care’ – challenges to unquestioned ‘white care’


• Attitudes towards children and care; sanctioned abuses – *Pindown* and Regression Therapy; managerial and inspection failures

• Failures to compensate some young people – educationally, developmentally and emotionally – to maximise their progress in care.
A history from below:
‘From order books to bin bags’

• Changes in the care system since the 1970’s – more young people living in foster care, smaller children’s homes, kinship care

• Changes in staff training and qualifications – direct work?

• Still evidence of movement and instability in care

• Challenge of creating a positive identity for care – loss of ‘family’

• Wide variations in the quality of care

• Young people leaving care early – some improvement but a gap with the general population of young people?

• More support for young people on their pathways to adulthood.

‘A failure to meet young people’s needs in these different ways severely undermines their ability to exercise their hard won rights. But at the same time shows why a rights movement for young people in care is needed. The story continues.’