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Title: Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Care in Ireland: Implications for Practice

Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study of outcomes for permanence and stability for children in long-term care in Ireland. The aim of this research was to inform social work practitioners on how to enhance stability and permanence for children and to inform decision making and report writing for children in care. The research was designed and delivered in partnership with social work practitioners in the relevant areas. Drawing from the significant literature on this area the main factors impacting on permanence and stability are summarised and presented in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Biographical Narrative interviews were conducted with 27 participants (children and young people, parents and foster parents). This paper reports how amongst a complex array of findings, three themes most linked to affect permanence and stability were found to be Relationships, Communication and Social Support. Underpinning these, the importance of Continuity was significant. Based on these findings, recommendations and practice guidance for social workers were developed in partnership with the Irish statutory Child and Family Agency and are summarised in the conclusion.

Keywords

Children, Care, Permanence, Stability, Social Work Practice

Introduction

This paper reports on a qualitative study of outcomes for permanence and stability for children in long-term alternative care in two Irish counties, Donegal, and Galway completed by researchers at the National University of Ireland, Galway on behalf of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency (Tusla). Alternative care refers to formal public-welfare supported arrangements, or private arrangements coming under statutory governance arrangements, from children living out of their own homes. It is defined by the UN as ‘all care provided in a family environment which has been ordered by a competent administrative body or judicial authority, and all care provided in a residential environment’ (UN Guidelines for Alternative Care, 2010, p. 6). In this study, formal alternative care includes the following arrangements: ‘*Foster care*’ meaning a placement with parents who have been selected and trained to look after children on

a short or a long term basis; ‘*Kinship Care*’ as a subset of ‘foster care’ where a relative is selected and trained specifically to look after a child on a short or long term basis; and *Residential Care* which refers to arrangements where children are looked after in group settings rather than in family based settings (UN Guidelines for Alternative Care, 2010, p. 6). Courtney & Thoburn (2017) provide a comprehensive overview of children in State Care bringing together a broad volume of peer reviewed articles on children in care. While focused mostly in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia the collection gives a valuable global overview of State Care and highlights important considerations to take into account. This includes for example, different histories of State Care and variation in use of language to denote ‘Care’. They also highlight differences in viewpoints about the role of the State in supporting children in care and how child welfare systems will have differing constructions of Care and associated support systems (see for e.g. Fox-Harding Classification). However, it is generally accepted that globally, children in care are at risk and are found to experience relatively less positive outcomes for health, education and well-being (Stein, 2012). They are greatly over-represented on every measure of social pathology and disadvantage, such as unemployment, ill-health, premature parenthood, addictions and criminality. This is also closely linked to their low level of educational attainment (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Ongoing research into the care experience is necessary to inform efforts to improve outcomes for children and young people in these areas.

This research was designed and delivered in partnership with social work practitioners in the aforementioned counties and their administrative support. In this paper, qualitative findings from interviews with 27 participants of which 10 were children are reported on in relation to outcomes for permanence and stability. The main factors were found to be Relationships, Communication and Social Support. Underpinning these, the importance of Continuity was significant. Based on these findings, recommendations and practice guidance were developed in partnership with Tusla and are summarised in the conclusion.

In Ireland, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency regulates alternative care as part of its statutory remit for child protection and welfare. Long-term care arrangements are established initially via a care order under the Child Care Act 1991 or through a voluntary arrangement with the child’s parents of origin. The most recent figures from Tusla show that in February, 2018 there were 6,161 children in state care with approximately 91% of these in either relative or general foster care arrangements (Tusla 2018). In Ireland, a considerable proportion of children spend protracted periods of time in care (e.g. up to five years or more) with adoption from care only

recently enacted through the Adoption Amendment Act 2016 (McCaughren and McGregor, 2018). Indeed, the policy landscape around child welfare in Ireland is undergoing radical transformation at present. This is due, in part to a series of national scandals pertaining to the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and neglect of minors in state institutions (Mooney, 2017), the founding of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011, and the publication of numerous policies such as *Children First: National Guidance for the Guidance and Protection of Children* (DCYA, 2011 revised 2017); *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (DCYA, 2014) and the *Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022* (Tusla, 2017). Underpinning these policies is the State's present commitment to children's rights, evidence-based practice, outcomes-focused research, and children's participation in society.

Literature Review

Achieving permanence and stability for children in care are key objectives of child care systems globally (Biehal, 2014). However, these concepts regularly invoke a range of meanings (see Beckett *et al.*, 2014). MacDonald defines permanence as 'a sense of security, continuity, commitment, and identity throughout childhood and beyond' (2016, p. 3). Recently, Salazar *et al.* (2018) defines permanence as 'ensuring that children and youth having meaningful, enduring connections to a family or other long-term caring adults' and as 'legal status'. Stability, a related concept, can be defined as children's feelings of connectedness and belonging that are characterised by steady emotional attachments to adults and members of peer networks (see Schofield *et al.*, 2011). Frequently, stability in care is measured as the number of care placements and as the length of time that care placements last (Farmer and Wijedasa, 2013). Internationally, research shows that several factors impact on permanence and stability for children in care such a mental health, poverty and deprivation, positive self-concept, relationships and education (see Carnochan *et al.* 2013; Biehal, 2014). Studies show that lower levels of placement disruption or breakdown allows young people greater opportunities to build strong, supportive peer networks which can improve self-esteem and positive self-concepts (see McMahan and Curtin, 2013).

Some of the main factors identified in the literature as affecting permanence and stability include the child's family structure before s/he goes into care, the length of time the child spends in care (Bromfield and Osborn 2007), the type of abuse or maltreatment experienced in

the family home (e.g. emotional, physical, and/or sexual) (Kimberlin *et al.* 2009), mental health status of parents, parenting capacity (Blakey *et al.* 2012), substance misuse (Rubin *et al.* 2007), parental coping, and a lack of financial resources (Khoo *et al.* 2012). Internationally, the research evidence on gender and ethnicity is weak and there is a stronger evidence-base on how age impacts on outcomes overall (Connell *et al.* 2006). One task in this research project was to collate and summarise the significant literature in a format that practitioners could use as evidence in their practice (Moran, L., McGregor, C. and Devaney, C., 2016; 2016a). Drawing from this, we summarised the main factors impacting on permanence and stability by presenting them in terms of factors intrinsic and extrinsic to the child or young person in care.

The main intrinsic factors are summarised as: mental health status (Salazar *et al.*, 2018); behavioural and emotional development; age at entry to care (*Ibid*); confidence and self-identity; school experiences; and prior experiences of trauma, abuse, and neglect (Metzler *et al.*, 2017). The main extrinsic factors include the number of placement moves stability in the family structure, the foster carer's ability to cope and their resources, the level of alignment in expectations of the foster family, relationships with families of origin, relationships with foster siblings and relationships with social workers (Wojciak *et al.*, 2018). Comparably, Waid *et al.* (2016) offers a comprehensive list of extrinsic factors that affect placement stability such as the level of engagement of parents of origin, agency factors such as short-term and temporary placements, caseworker turnover and case history. To contextualise these complex factors Moran *et al* (2017) argue that outcomes – be they positive or negative - are dynamic and transformative and emerge through the continuous interplay between factors that are close to the child in their micro and meso system (e.g. family, school, community, siblings) and policy/regulatory contexts that work at the exosystem and macro levels, which shape children's and families' everyday lives. For this reason, a socio-ecological approach based on Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1994) was adapted as a framework for analysis and practice guidance as explained in more detail in the discussion where we make some explicit connections between our findings and the international literature.

Methodology

The rationale for the study was to strengthen social workers' abilities to show tangible and measurable outcomes for children in alternative care arrangements (and to enhance evidence-based practice (Moran *et al.* 2017, p. 15). The overall research objectives were to produce a

literature review to inform and guide practice; to carry out in-depth narrative interviews and to provide guidance for practitioners to enhance their ability to improve stability and permanence for children and young people.

The eligible sample included the total number of children and young people in long term care in Donegal and Galway between 2006 and 2013 ($n = 506$). County Donegal is a predominantly rural area situated in the northwest of Ireland. The total population of Donegal County was 158,755 in 2018. Galway is also a rural county but its capital city, Galway City is the fourth largest city in the Republic of Ireland. The total population of Galway City and County in 2018 was 258,522. The criteria for sampling was that the young person was designated as being in long term care through their care plan or their care order. Consent was sought from parents, foster parents and young people with assent sought from the children. This lengthy and complex process which required all three parties to consent or assent resulted in a final sample of 27 participants (See Moran *et al*, 2017). This comprised 10 children or young people, 13 foster parents and 4 parents of origin. The findings from the three sample groups were not triangulated therefore there is no way of knowing if there are any connections between the groups.

A Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was used to conduct the interviews. This approach involves asking a Single Narrative Inducing Question (SQUIN) to allow participants to decide the direction of response rather than shaping or influencing this. (Wengraff, 2001). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research was approved by the relevant Ethics Committee and followed the university and agency protocols fully. Particular attention was paid to the privacy of the individual's story. To ensure this, instead of applying the usual BNIM based emphasis of individual timelines charting 'turning points' in their narratives a Framework Analysis was used which drew out core themes and sub-themes on which the findings were based (see Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Framework Analysis (FA) is a thematic analysis approach that follows a number of stages of analysis to elicit core themes and sub-themes from qualitative data. FA works well with BNIM in this study for two reasons. Firstly, it allowed for general themes to emerge that gave a broad overview that contextualised the more detailed analysis. Secondly, use of FA helped to ensure anonymity of the cases by reporting general themes through FA rather than relying too closely on the biographical narrative that could have led to the identification of the interviewee.

Findings

This section will summarise the main themes that emerged in the research with children, young people, parents and foster parents. Factors highlighted by children and young people that influence permanence and stability included: their experiences before, during and after care; identity and belonging, communication and relationships with families of origin, foster carers, siblings and social workers. Similarly, the main themes from the interviews with foster parents were: their opinions on children's pre-care experiences; foster carer identity; relationships with social workers, children, and families of origin and their attitudes to child welfare systems. Parents' emphasised family life before their children went into care and their life after that, the care admission, perceived social support, parents' relationships with children, with foster parents and with social workers, and with the child welfare system. Overall, we found three core themes to be most significant: Communication, Relationships and Support. We present the findings below under each of these headings though note also the interconnectedness between them. In the Discussion, we reflect on the implications of the findings for practice highlighting in particular how the theme of Continuity seemed to underpin the study findings and implications. Figure 1 illustrates the findings positioned within a broad socio-ecological framework.

Relationships

With regard to relationships, the findings presented in this report reiterate the crucial importance of children's relationships with foster carers, social workers, and parents of origin for improved permanence and stability (Healey and Fisher 2011) and the challenges of managing their 'dual' identity whilst in care paid particular attention to (Boyle 2015). Munro's 2011 review of child protection has already firmly re-established the importance of relationships in child welfare practice and has had the impact of placing greater focus and importance on the processes surrounding relationships development and maintenance (Ruch *et al.* 2016; Winter *et al.*, 2016, O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016). Child Protection programmes such as '*Signs of Safety*' have incorporated this learning in ongoing development of strengths based approaches to family and child welfare interventions (Turnell & Murphy, 2017). Various studies relating to children in care likewise highlight this issue (see for e.g. Stott and Gustavsson, 2010; Skoog *et al.*, 2014). Generally, the findings reveal that young people, parents, and foster carers who had stronger relationships with social workers tended to have more trust in child welfare systems to make decisions on their behalf. Where relationships were

poor, often this was discussed in the context of discourses of power (Moran *et al* 2017). These findings resonate with Buckley *et al.* (2011, p.1), who found that Irish families dealing with child protection services often experience powerlessness and frustration.

With regard to findings relating to children and young people, overall, young people said that while their relationship with social workers must be professional but it must also be ‘child-focused’. Several young people felt that early experiences of abuse and neglect destabilised their care placements, as they found it difficult to settle into care and to build relationships of trust with their foster carers:

‘I lost a lot of weight because there wasn’t food in the house and the doctor said I was malnourished....Those experiences affected my placements later. I didn’t know who to trust... I was afraid of my father. I never knew how he’d react. I thought it was normal to be afraid of adults’.

Young people’s relationships with their families of origin also featured prominently in narratives about permanence and stability. Most young people adopted a ‘fluid’ understanding of the meaning of family. The quality of foster carers’ relationships with parents of origin impacted markedly on young people’s relationships with their parents of origin: *‘I love my mother and I get to go to see her and she has come here and it’s cool... My foster parents like her as well.’*

Throughout the findings, a concern about continuity of relationships could be traced. For some children and young people, a strong sense of continuity and stability was expressed: *‘I’ve been permanent here since 2012, I didn’t even mind because they’re such a lovely family...They are absolutely amazing to me’* Young people were aware of the continuities and discontinuities between past family and current family context feeling torn sometimes: *‘I did feel torn right them between them... like who to choose, who do I call Mammy?’*. Not having a sense of continuity into the future also emerged: *‘The thing that really bothers children in care is that they don’t know where they are or where they’ll be in the future. They need to feel safe’*

When it came to maintaining relationships with family of origin and the micro and meso system within which this family exist, the reliance on social workers and the ‘system’ to help maintain

and manage this relationship was significant – indeed without such support, relationships usually cannot be maintained for the child. While maintaining contact with families of origin can impact negatively on child wellbeing, particularly when families engage in ‘risky’ behaviours these relationships are often crucially important to a sense of identity and stability. It is essential that siblings and wider family members are included in this picture (see for e.g. Kiraly and Humphreys, 2016),

Intermittent contact and different assumptions about the level and quality of contact that family members expected had a significant impact on relationships with families of origin:

‘The contact is patchy really, it’s here and there and it upsets me a lot. Sometimes they let me in, sometimes they don’t. It was like rejection no matter what I did’.

All young people commented on the importance of having emotional support from social workers to help them negotiate difficulties in contact arrangements:

‘Because I knew the social worker for so long, that was the main thing why I could talk to her about the family. That was a huge support’.

For all young people who were interviewed, continuity of relationship and trust in social workers was another critical factor in enhancing permanence and stability to help with this process:

‘Because I knew the social worker for so long, that was the main thing why I could talk to her about the family’.

On the other hand some young people expressed low levels of trust in social work teams: *‘my social worker told my mother stuff and it could have put me at risk and my mother went mental. I would never, ever trust them’.*

Perceptions about the power and authority of child welfare services affected young people’s relationships with social workers:

‘You need to make them feel like they can talk to you, like even though you’re a professional... They kind of need to get off that level of, they’re a social worker...they kind of need to stay away from that a bit. Now obviously still be professional about it, but there’s ways of going about it’.

Foster carers saw permanence and stability as providing loving homes for young people and children feeling 'part of the family'. The concept of care emerged strongly: *'It all comes down to care... I am very fond of her, my young one'*. Some foster carers said that the development of strong relationships between their own children and foster siblings was important for permanence and stability too. They regularly stated that feeling *'part of the family'*, *'belonging'* led to more stable care placements. The development of *'family feelings'* was viewed as important for improving educational and social outcomes for children, helping them to forge peer relationships and to develop a long-lasting sense of identity and selfhood. Placement breakdown incited highly negative emotions among foster carers. It was described as *'personal failure'*, as *'turmoil'* and as *'emotional trauma'*: *'I couldn't get up after they left because I thought, 'Is it me?' 'Is it my fault?'* The importance of supports from social workers to help foster carers and children to 'bounce back' after a placement breakdown was frequently discussed: *'It's important that they know about the impacts on foster carers, like placement breakdown. It has serious effects on the children, the foster child, and my own children'*.

Most foster carers expressed supportive attitudes about parents of origin and the importance of maintaining contact for permanence and stability (e.g. for enhancing children's sense of belonging and developing family identity): *'there's nothing I'd like better than if the mother could get well again and have them back and to see them reunited as a family'*. Interviews also revealed the complexity of building and maintaining relationships in difficult and sensitive circumstances. Foster carers frequently spoke of the challenges maintaining regular contact with parents of origin, especially when parents experienced homelessness or alcohol or substance abuse: *'It's very hard to keep the relationship going with the mother, although I like her. She dips in and out with the contact and has been homeless'*

Power and authority influenced parents' perceptions of child welfare systems and thus their relationships with social workers. Social workers were perceived as 'powerful' as they regularly make decisions that affect children's futures and how parents' relationships with children will develop in the future: *'There's an aura around social workers because they have so much power'*. When parents reported that they have strong relationships with social workers, they seemed to have more trust in social workers and they also had more positive perceptions about child welfare systems overall. Parents' perceptions about their level of involvement in care planning affected their relationships with social workers. All parents felt marginalised from care planning processes and did not feel that they are accorded a legitimate role in planning for their children's futures.

While parents were apprehensive about their future relationships, they were also hopeful about developing stronger relationships with the child/young person. Social workers and foster carers were pivotal to supporting better relationships with children.

Looking to the future, the discourse of '*making something out of my life*' emerged strongly with most parents hoping to build stronger relationships with their children. For some, the uncertainty was great: '*It's all confusing. I don't know. I don't know*'. Parents described trying '*to get on with life*' and spoke about things they want to achieve (e.g. education, employment). This was important for improving their own life chances and creating better futures for their children: '*I'd like him to be proud of me that Mammy is achieving and doing something for herself*'.

Communication

Linked to relationships is the theme of communication. We know from prior research and practice wisdom that open communication between social work, the child welfare system, children and families has a direct positive impact on relationships (Winter *et al.* 2016, p. 4). The *Alternative Care Practice Handbook* launched in Ireland during the study identified five main elements to effective communication as follows; working in partnership, building trust relations, acknowledging that communication is a two-way process, understanding that children should be treated with respect and they should be empowered and encouraged (Tusla, 2014, p.215). Taking forward the need to develop communication skills and relationships building in the UK context, the *Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce* (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010) provides a framework around the significance of emotional intelligence (Howe 2008) in social work practice. Overall, it is evident that relationships and communication between the young person, their family of origin, their foster family, and their social workers or support workers have a major influence on outcomes for stability for young people.

Learning how to communicate with a new family and building trust was important for young people gaining a sense of '*belonging*': Young people also spoke of dealing with separation from their families, learning about family routines, and finding supports:

'It's hard to settle in, and you need support... If you don't like your social worker, you don't have anybody'.

All young people said they need support from foster carers and social workers during the early stages of placements. Emotional supports were said to encompass: *'a friendly word from the social workers'*, and showing empathy: *'if they could show that they know what we're going through'*.

Within this context, themes of identity and belonging emerged strongly:

'I thought I wasn't normal. You know? I didn't want to be looked at. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to have my own mum and dad'.

All young people saw good communication with foster carers and social workers as an important factor in improving permanence and stability throughout the placement experience.

'I think they need to listen to the voice of the young person. I know at times they think, 'Oh they're young, they don't know what they're talking about', but realistically you need to listen to them. You need to'

Parents generally desired greater contact with their children. Some also commented that they do not receive enough communication about their children from child welfare systems and foster carers: *'I don't know anything about her communion, her confirmation, her first day at school, her last day at school, because I wasn't there and there are no pictures'*.

Support

The third core theme that emerged was Support. The importance of family and social support is also emphasised (Moran et al., 2017.) including both informal and formal social support for children and families (McMahon and Curtin 2013). The findings imply that parents value 'everyday' expressions of support like displaying shared understanding of their feelings of emotional loss. This strongly corresponds to Daro (2015), who argues that 'ordinary' expressions of social support are important for parents. These expressions of support include exchanging a friendly word or showing empathy. To do this 'ordinary' work, takes 'extraordinary' skills and ability on the part of direct workers and this research serves as a reminder of valuing this 'ordinary' work of building and maintaining relationships.

Young people reported that they needed high levels of support, particularly in the early stages of care placements, from foster carers, social workers, and parents of origin to ensure stability. Most children and young people discussed the challenges of ‘*settling down*’ in care. Feelings of uncertainty that was encountered at the beginning of new care placements with regard to their role within the new family home, moving in with someone they did not know, lack of knowledge about family routines and having to deal with new school experiences were strong:

‘Someone else makes the decisions for you. It’s not my house... Things could change so I’m always worried about that... Home is a big part because all I’ve done is move about all the time; relationships because, well, I’ve built so many relationships and lost so many relationships’.

Many young people saw the process of transitioning out of care as ‘a challenge’. Young people regularly used terms like ‘*uncertain*’, ‘*unsupported*’ and ‘*difficult*’ to explain what this process means. Some young people felt that labels of being ‘in care’ hindered their chances at finding employment and achieving academically. Past relationships with social workers also impacted on children and young people’s relationships with aftercare workers: *‘I thought I don’t want anything to do with these types of people anymore, social workers, aftercare workers and the like’*. Those who experienced ‘smoother’ transitions out of care reported having greater stability in living arrangements (e.g. they were in the same care placement from early childhood, or they experienced very few placement moves). These young people reported much higher levels of perceived social support and stronger feelings of identification with their foster families. Young people in aftercare valued education, and many acknowledged the role of their aftercare worker in helping them with college fees, supports and counselling for example: *‘They are there if you need anything, like. Last year I asked for counselling and they got it straight away; I only went once or twice but they got it for me straight away’*.

With regard to Support, for Foster parents, the discourses of ‘*fighting for services*’ and ‘*doing my best for the child*’ emerged very strongly from some foster carers. Foster carers also acknowledged the pivotal role of social work professionals as ‘enablers’ to services; ‘If the social worker isn’t committed, then it falls apart’. Some foster carers worried about services that would be provided to young people when transitioning out of care; *‘I wonder what will be out there for him and what he can do. I do think a lot about what will happen to her when she must transition out of care, or will she just be left with me? And what will my life be like?’*

Most foster carers expressed very positive attitudes about their support from social workers though some thought there was too much focus on procedure: *'They're brilliant, the social workers but they are kind of killing it. Too much emphasis on procedure and not on the needs of the child'*

On the other hand, parents of origin mostly commented on the lack social supports for them from child welfare systems. Interviews were replete with stories about social isolation, loneliness, and feelings of uncertainty: *'I don't have anybody. Effectively, I'm on my own and I probably always will be'*. Most parents were anxious about how relationships with their children would develop in the future. Parents were worried that the child would not accept them as they moved into adolescence, and some parents were afraid of explaining to the child why they went into care in the first place:

'See, I don't know because it's hard to tell, because he has his own problems going on at the minute, so I don't know how he's going to, what kind of a person he's going to transform into. Is he going to accept it all, is he going to find it hard and struggle with it all?'

Discussion

This qualitative study in two counties in Ireland adds to the significant and robust body of research relating to permanence and stability for children in care in Ireland (e.g. O'Brien, 2013), the UK (e.g. Biehal, 2014), Europe (e.g. Stott and Gustavson, 2010) and wider international context (Moran *et al.* 2016).

As reported in the findings, the most predominant themes that underpinned these findings were that of *Communication, Relationships* and *Support*. Underpinning these findings, the importance of *Continuity* resonates with regard to security in the foster placement; in the connections with family of origin and in relationships with social workers and the support system.

The adapted socio-ecological framework in Figure 1 illustrates the overall message from the research. Implicit within the three main themes of Relationship, Communication and Support, we found that these themes need to be seen as part of a complex inter-play between the young person, their two micro systems (family of origin and foster family) and the wider support

context. In order to capture the necessary complexity of the context for children in care, such an approach recognises the need for practitioners and service providers to consider not only relationships, communication and support with a linear focus on the child's micro system but also their multi-layered interactions and connections with their wider networks and contexts. Figure 1 shows how Continuity connects each of the three core themes and needs to be considered in a number of ways to include continuity of placement; continuity of connection with the past and family of origin; continuity with regard to relationship with the child welfare services/system and individual practitioners and continuity with regard to networks and connections in the young person's wider life (school, clubs, interests, activities).

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1; Relationship, Communication Support and Continuity within a socio-ecological framework

It is important to focus on the interactions and dynamic interplay between the levels of a child's ecosystem at any one time (chrono) seeing it as a moving and evolving space. Because children in care have moved at least once in their lives, and often more frequently during their care experience, special effort is required to help them to build, sustain, rebuild and develop continuities in their social system which effectively becomes their social network as they age out of care and into adulthood.

Continuity needs to be viewed beyond just placement stability and educational stability (Stein, 2005) even though these are crucially important. Continuity needs to be considered in a multi-dimensional way taking into account the dynamic and complex interplay of various factors within the multi-layered ecosystem for the young person in care. Continuity of relationship emphasises the importance of the ethic of care including the crucial importance of 'informal, complex networks of care relationships that may be held by young people' and the need for 'continuity in formal and informal care relationships' (Holland 2010, p.1664) Skoog *et al* (2013) highlight the impact of lack of continuity of relationship with social worker and disrupted care placement on children in Sweden showing the in-depth emotional impact it has

on young people while at same time their resilience and ability to adapt to new environments. Research based in Germany and Israel, using biographical interviews with care leavers, Rafaeli *et al* (2017) add depth to the notion of continuity and recognition of its complex dimensions by breaking it into four different patterns described as follows: '(i) creating continuity, (ii) transforming continuity, (iii) discontinuity by breaking up continuity and (iv) enabling continuity by discontinuity' (2017, p. 336). As in this research, they refer to continuity in relation to stability, relationships, activities and places. They refer to transforming continuity through allowing change within continuity and discontinuity by breaking continuity acknowledges that some continuity (e.g. poor relationships) should be discontinued. Finally, enabling continuity by discontinuity refers to the need to discontinue some aspects to allow other important features of a system to continue. Our research emphasises the importance of considering the various aspects of continuity within a socio-ecological frame that stress the importance of continuity within the young person's micro system as well as their relationship with social workers and social support systems, with their family and context of origin and with their networks and supports developed over time.

Our research strongly supports the value of moving the lens away from a focus on linear to multi-dimensional focus and a deliberate placing of micro issues such as individual characteristics and family context within a wider socio-ecological perspective in planning, intervention, assessment and review work. Overall, the use of a socio-ecological framework for practice offers an approach that can achieve a stronger rights and social justice base approach to support children and their families (both of origin and foster families). The same framework can be used to challenge the stigma and stereotypes around care impacting especially on children, young people and their families or origin and acting as barriers to the achievement of stability and permanence for children and young people.

Due to the continual evolvement of Bronfenbrenner's theory, it is important that scholars explicitly state which version of the model they are using as their research foundation in order to avoid any conceptual confusion or misapplication.

As Lytle (2009) contends, a social ecological framework is good for multi-disciplinary research and gives a framework to consider a range of dimensions from the micro to the macro level. Using an ecological framework, it is of particular benefit that reciprocal interaction between an individual and environments, incorporating persons, objects, and symbols can be identified

(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These can be specific detailed interactions on an individual level or connections between different layers of the system. While usually used as a tool to map connections and relations, the ecological model also offers great potential for developing a social justice approach in working with children in care. With regard to this study, the particular value has been shifting the focus away from the micro and intrinsic level factors affecting the young person and allows for greater focus on the interactions within the different layers of the micro and meso system, and the wider interaction with policy, support, legislation and resources (the extrinsic factors). This allows for a more critical refocus away from the individual characteristics and behaviours of the child or young person and more on the structures and barriers that facilitate and constrain their ability to develop stability and continuity within their lives in care and after.

Conclusion: Recommendations and Practice Guidance.

We conclude this paper with a summary of the recommendations and practice guidance which was developed from the research. Recommendations and practice guidance were developed in close collaboration with practitioner colleagues with an overall intention to help inform and improve practice. The practice guidance was provided to consider how the learning from the research could be integrated into day to day practice; used in supervision and reflective practice; applied to enhance existing approaches used in practice, inform care planning processes, inform foster carer training; inform practice in relation to direct work with children; inform practice with parents and families of origin and foster families and inform service planning and resource allocation (Moran *et al.*, 2017a, p.6). For example, the guidance outlines how socio-ecological and network maps can be used in child care plans and reviews to help capture the complexity of the child's micro system by virtue of being in care and ensuring close attention to the interactions within their overall unique meso and exo system in particular. As well as providing general practice guidance, specific tips for practice with children and young people, parents of origin and foster carers are also made. Skills for direct work with children and being enabled to have time for the essential relationship building is highlighted.

Overall, social work and social care practice with children and young people through an ecological lens demands an approach that automatically considers the full system picture and recognises the intrinsic connection between the macro and exo level (e.g. the resources, the national and local policy; the supervision, the paperwork of the care processes), the meso levels

(the young person's immediate environment which may span two families/neighbourhoods) and the micro-level (the child at the centre and their day to day experiences, psychological issues, emotions, feelings, connections with siblings, foster parents, own parents, their social worker etc.). The conclusion to the practice guidance draws from the influential work of Vera Fahlberg and captures the overall ethos and message from this research:

'If "the system" makes it difficult for us to meet the child's needs, then we must change the system rather than asking the child to forego their basic requirements' (2012, p.12).

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Figure 1; Relationship, Communication Support and Continuity within a socio-ecological framework