

Introduction

- A sense of belonging is an experience which has been associated with a spectrum of important outcomes. However, it is also a construct which lacks theoretical clarity.
- Children's residential care homes frequently care for children and young people (CYP) who have suffered huge adversities and are considered some of the most vulnerable and traumatised in the country (James, 2011).
- Children's residential care is a context which is under-researched; both in terms of outcomes (the impact of care) and processes (what care is received) (Whittaker et al., 2016; Gallagher & Green, 2012).
- Voices of key stakeholders, such as CYP and the staff who support them, are also infrequently included in research (Parry et al., 2021).

Aim

- This study was designed to explore a sense of belonging in children's residential care from the perspective of residential care staff.

Method

- Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology was used to develop a theory of belonging in residential care.

Eight residential care staff were interviewed about:

- 1) Their own experiences of belonging within their role and
- 2) What they understand about how the CYP they support experience a sense of belonging in residential care.

Results

- The theory described key processes involved in developing a sense of belonging and the factors which influence this process.
- The theory summarises the experience of both residential care staff and CYP, from the perspective of residential care staff. The author felt that residential care staff members' perceptions of developing their own sense of belonging within their role, very much mirrored the experiences of the CYP they support.
- Across interviews, there was strong consensus on crucial ingredients of belonging. These were interpreted as three main stages of belonging: Safety, Reciprocity & Forming Your Identity.
- Stages were summarised in a triangle-shaped model, reflecting the sequential (but non-linear) trajectory of developing a sense of belonging and the emphasis placed on the processes in each stage.
- There was a sense that not everyone will reach each stage, with possibly fewer CYP accessing the identity formation stage.
- The process of belonging is continuous, it is not a goal that can be completed, but a constant and active experience.
- One's sense of belonging can process upwards, or diminish downwards depending on factors influencing this process. Key factors were identified as: The Context of Care, A CYP's Journey Through Care and Relational Dilemmas.

References:

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 James, S. (2011). What works in group care? — A structured review of treatment models for group homes and residential care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 308-321.
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 Whittaker, J. K., Holmes, L., del Valle, et al. (2016). Therapeutic residential care for children and youth: A consensus statement of the international work group on therapeutic residential care. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 33, 89-106.
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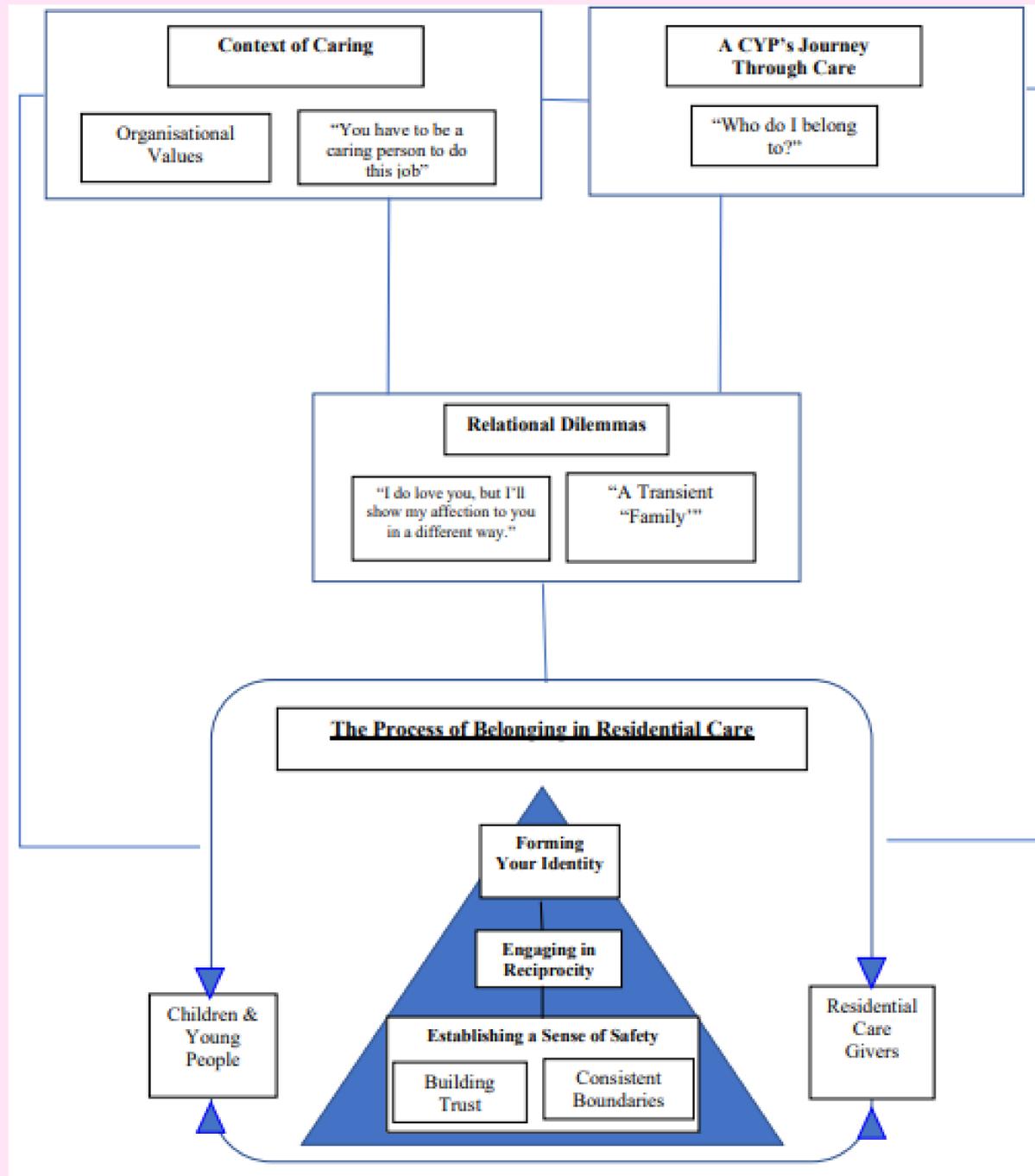


Figure 1. Diagrammatic summary of results.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- This study explored a sense of belonging within an under researched context and population and developed a unique hypotheses about the sequential (yet fluid) stages of belonging and the key factors which influence this process.
- Recommendations in line with key influencing factors are considered below:

The Context of Care	A CYP's Journey Through Care	Relational Dilemmas
Opportunities for training, debrief, reflection, supervision, accessing external support, building relationships with co-workers, receiving compassionate genuine caring responses to personal and work-related concerns utilising values-based interviewing processes.	Trauma-informed understanding and/or training at macro and micro levels of systems involved in supporting CYP in residential care. Access to consultation from specialist professionals.	Opportunities for reflective practice, team formulation. Opportunities for staff who experience these dilemmas in their day-to-day work to input into associated policy and legislative consultations. Continued work towards establishing formal recognition and support systems for residential care staff.

Developing a Sense of Belonging: Quotations Examples

Safety: "...If we're talking about a child feeling like they belong, I think a safe environment is the absolute epitome of where you want to begin that basis and you want to build that structure from..."

Referring to residential care staff perspective "...I wouldn't actively think 'I'm safe here' [in work], but in the work I do, I suppose I am and that's what makes me feel sort of a sense of belonging..."

Reciprocity: Referring to CYP and residential care staff relationships..."When you ask them to invest in those relationships with you, you can't ask them to do that if you are not willing to do the same. But you measure yours out safely..."

Referring to CYP"...It is so much easier to do the right thing when you know you've got that responsibility of being a valued person...that's what we're providing to them, with the sense of belonging..."

Referring to residential care staff relationships "...First you talk about football...and a few weeks later your ex-wife and three kids. The more you start to share the more sense of belonging you get..."

Forming your Identity: Referring to CYP..."Our non-judgemental approach to allow them to be who they are and to establish a sense of belonging within the house, but still remaining their own personalities and their own likes and dislikes..."

Referring to residential care staff team working..."It is not giving up your identity and who you are, but knowing that there has to be a compromise zone that you go into together..."

Influencing Factors: Quotation Examples

The Context of Caring

Organisational Values: Factors within the context of the organisation which can help residential care staff to feel supported, understood, and competent, subsequently influencing the process of belonging for CYP and RCGs.

"...Training could be a barrier [to building belonging]...staff not having the right training to be able to...understand that child...their perception and...seeing the child for the child...not for the behaviours..."

"...I felt able to approach work and tell them I was struggling, and they were brilliant...I got that time off...now, it is a hugely close bond...there is an awful lot I would do for this company..."

"You have to be a caring person to do this job": The values that residential care staff felt that they need to bring to this role to facilitate a sense of belonging.

Referring to relationships with CYP..."You do get those staff...say "three o'clock halfway through the shift thank God"...I hate that attitude...if you think like that, and want to be in a job like that, this is not the place for you...you have to be invested or involved all the way...It is quite unique I think..."

Referring to relationships with residential care staff..."This job is utterly exhausting, even on the good days...you need to draw from it later on...these people do not need to be your best buddies...but you do need to be, at your own pace, open to investing in them and accepting the investment back, in a professional sense..."

A CYP's Journey Through Care

"Who do I belong to?": The impact of previous care and relationship experiences on the process of belonging.

"...Some people have moved 20/30 homes they must think I don't know who I belong to. My mother and father don't want me...my old foster-carer can't have me...why should I behave? I'm only going to get moved..."

"...For a child who be in residential care for 7-8 years, they may grow up their whole life without ever once being told, love you. I can't imagine what that must do to someone, that level of affection and how they feel could belong..."

Relational Dilemmas

"I do love you but I'll show my affection to you in a different way": residential care staff considered how to, and whether they should, show love and/or affection towards the CYP and how this impacts belonging.

"...For these children...there is a level of affection...emotions do develop but we have to base it in something other than true familial love because that is not appropriate here. But without it, children won't flourish either..."

"...They ask, do you love me? I'm like - you do, of course you do because you're living with them day in, day out and - but it's trying to word it in an appropriate way..."

"A 'transient' family": the impact of the transient nature of residential care on the process of belonging, including the impact of living as a 'family' in the context of perpetual change, uncertainty and with the knowledge that eventually key residential care staff /CYP relationships will end.

"...The difficulty here of course is that they have a transient 'family'...staff come in and some may stay forever...[some] may stay for two mins...how can we build that base and pull the rug out from underneath?..."

"...You can class us as your family and class this as your home, or you say it's where you're living right now...some kids still class their family home as their home..."

"...I think the family sense of belonging we have...even the transient nature of the way that they live...I suppose...the benefits of that...they carry with them through their life outside of being in care..."