Narratives and marginalised voices: Storying the sport and physical activity experiences of care-experienced young people

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Abstract

Existing research has so far failed to provide opportunities for the stories of care-experienced young people to be heard, especially regarding their perspectives on sport and physical activity. As such, a key aim of this paper was to showcase the stories of three care-experienced individuals; stories that focus specifically on the role of sport and physical activity in their lives and highlight the complexities of being in care and the challenges they can encounter in this respect. In drawing on the creative analytic practice of creative non-fiction, and adopting the position of storyteller, we seek to present three stories from individuals who each experienced care in their youth but have now left the care system. We argue that these stories can act as valuable pedagogical resources through which the reader can enter into the lived realities of care-experienced young people and better understand how they experience and manage challenging conditions and events. Moreover, in presenting the articulate reflections of these three care leavers, they serve to offer a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of care-experienced young people as troublesome and uneducated, showcasing instead the nuanced lives they each have to navigate.

Keywords: *care-experienced, narrative inquiry, stories, sport, physical activity*

Introduction

The number of young people being removed from their families and placed in the care of the state is increasing internationally. In England in 2018 for instance, the number of young people entering care was 75,420, an increase of 4% on the previous year (Department for Education 2018), while in the United States of America the number of young people entering care rose by 6,444 between 2016 and 2017 to 442,995 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2018). Similar increases have also been reported in Australia whereby the number of children and young people entering care rose from 7.4 per 1,000 children in 2011 to 8.2 per 1,000 in 2017 – totalling 45,800 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019). These young people enter care and find themselves in a range of different placements, including being placed in foster care, kinship care or state-run residential children's homes. Hence, terminology used to identify this group differs internationally, with, for example, terms such as 'looked-after children' or 'children in care' used in England, 'foster youth' used in America and 'children in out-of-home care' used in Australia. For the purpose of this paper, we adopt the term 'care-experienced young people' as it better encapsulates the experience of being in care and the impact it can have on young people's present and future lives (Quarmby, Sandford & Elliot 2018). To that end, being 'care-experienced' includes both those who are currently in care and care leavers[1].

Despite differences in terminology, there is international consensus that this group of children and 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 (Sempik, Ward & Darker 2008; Prison Reform Trust 2016; Mannay et al. 2017). Despite often being compared to their

[1] A care-leaver is defined (in England) as someone aged 16+ who has previously been in care but are no longer legally 'looked-after' by the state (Roberts et al. 2019)

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), which tends to reproduce a deficit perspective of care-experienced young people. This prevailing discourse is partly a result of a lack of awareness and understanding of the realities of care-experienced young people's day-to-day lives.

Hence, the key aim of this paper was to challenge the dominant discourses about care-experienced young people by showcasing the stories of three care-leavers; stories that focus specifically on the role of sport and physical activity in their lives and highlight the complexities of being in care and the social structures that impinge on their lives. By voicing these stories, we hope to make visible the experiences these young people have had as a result of being in care (as well as prior to being in care) and the various influences that have shaped their engagements with sport and physical activity in both positive and negative ways. To date, existing research has failed to provide many opportunities for the stories of care-experienced young people to be heard, especially regarding their perspectives on sport and physical activity (with regard to access, engagement and impact etc.), and so our understanding of their experiences in this respect is somewhat limited (Quarmby, Sandford & Elliot 2018). This is perhaps, not surprising, given the acknowledged challenges associated with safeguarding and child protection; often exacerbated in the context of vulnerable or marginalised youth (Sandford, Amour & Duncombe 2010). Understandably, perhaps, much of the research to date has centred on the easier to access voices of adults who work with/for care-experienced young people (Quarmby & Pickering 2016) and their perspectives of these young people's

engagements with sport and physical activity. As such, the voices of young people themselves have remained largely silent until recently (see Authors et al. forthcoming). In this paper, we therefore aim to increase the range of narrative repertoires available to those working with/for care-experienced young people and expand our understandings of their attitudes towards, and engagements with, sport and physical activity with a view to improving the experiences of others in the future.

Narrative inquiry

Despite care-experienced young people being considered a 'hidden group' (Quarmby 2014) in sport and physical activity research, narrative inquiry offers the possibilities for silenced and alternative voices to be heard (Douglas & Carless 2009; Fitzgerald & Stride 2012). According to Lang and Pinder (2017, 101) narrative inquiry has the potential to elicit and share 'understandings and experiences that can often be lost when using a more traditional approach'. Similarly, Smith and Sparkes (2009a) suggest that narrative is especially useful for those interested in complex, subjective experiences, as well as the intentions, patterns of reasoning and attempts to find meaning in personal experiences (Smith & Sparkes 2009a). That said, even among the social work literature, researchers have noted that despite the interest in capturing the stories of vulnerable youth, only a small amount exists that draws on narrative approaches (Riessman & Quinney 2005; Kelly, Anthony & Krysik 2019).

Narrative inquiry itself is a dynamic process that is built upon a set of epistemological and ontological assumptions. Underpinned by interpretivism, narrative inquiry posits that there is no social reality 'out there', independent of us, that can be accessed and 'known' as it is. Hence, realities and knowledge are socially constructed, multiple and subjective (Smith & Sparkes 2009b). According to Riessman (2008) narratives are considered to be fundamental to human

understanding and therefore critical to how people make sense of themselves and their lives. Smith and Sparkes (2009b) offer a range of benefits of narrative inquiry including its ability to highlight the untidy complexity of being human that would otherwise be omitted from more traditional forms of research. Moreover, they argue that narrative inquiry is relational, in that it places a focus on the ways in which relations between people shape, enable and constrain lives (Smith and Sparkes 2009a). Lang and Pinder (2017) recently argued that narrative inquiry, and the stories that are created through it, can be useful in prompting what Mills (1970) referred to as the sociological imagination. In other words, it allows readers – whether they be a young person (in care or otherwise), a carer/guardian, a state representative, a sports coach or physical education teacher – to make sense of young people's stories from their own vantage point. We therefore hope that the use of narrative in this paper can highlight the complexity of care-experienced young people's lives in relation to sport and physical activity.

The study

This paper draws from a broader study – the Right to be Active (R2BA) project – a methodologically innovative study of care-experienced young people in England and their perspectives on and experiences of sport and physical activity (for further details see Author et al., forthcoming). This broader study recognised the dominance of adult voices in the existing literature (Quarmby & Pickering 2016) and the tendency for care-experienced young people and adults to hold different views when discussing the same issues and/or aspects of practice (Holland 2009). As such, it emphasised the value of making space for 'youth voice' (Heath et al. 2009).

As part of the of the broader project and following ethical approval, a number of care-leavers were approached through local networks and asked to share their stories about sport and

physical activity with the research team via an audio recorded interview. From this, four care-leavers agreed to participate, and this paper reports on three of those encounters. These three were chosen as they reflected a range of issues and experiences that we felt offered a useful contrast for this discussion. After gaining informed consent, the interviews, led by the first and second author, were conversational in nature and used open-ended questions to guide the discussion and probe for further information. Each individual was interviewed once, for between 1 – 2 hours in a negotiated space between the researchers and the participants. Unstructured, conversational interviews were utilised because, as well as providing the participant with a high degree of control over the stories that they shared (Sparkes & Smith 2014), they also allowed the participants to expand on areas of significance to themselves or topics of interest; affording the opportunity, too, for individual and context-specific discussion. While unstructured, the conversational interviews all touched on the following broad areas, identified through both the literature and our own previous research as being central to young people's experiences of sport and physical activity: how the participant became engaged in or disengaged from sport/physical activity, who in particular may have helped or hindered their engagement, what specifically sport/physical activity means to them and how they think/feel when they engage in sport/physical activity. Following each interview, the recorded audio conversations were transcribed to help with the next stage of crafting the stories.

Crafting the stories

Narrative analysis is a method that takes the story itself as the objective of enquiry (Smith & Sparkes 2009a). In this approach, we adopt the stance of a storyteller and subsequently refrain from adding another layer of analysis and theory. Smith and Sparkes (2009a, 282) argue that "if what we expect of analysis and theory is that they help us understand aspects of our own lives, then a story is analytic and theoretical because that is what it does: stories help us

understand aspects of our lives". Crafting the story thus became part of the analytic process and as such, we leave the responsibility for interpretation and meaning making to the reader. In crafting these stories, we followed the approach outlined by Blodgett et al. (2011). Thus, we initially considered the transcripts from each care-leaver separately because we recognised, on listening back to the audio recordings, that each participant had a unique story to tell. As we were interested in the content of each of the care-leaver's stories, an inductiveanalysis was then conducted independently for each transcript. Here, transcripts were read and re-read before key words, quotes and ideas that represented the individual characters and their story were highlighted. These key features were then transferred to a new document that formed the foundation for the initial skeletons of the narrative (Blodgett et al. 2011). Each transcript therefore led to the creation of an independent narrative that focused on a particular context, plot and characters featured within the interview transcripts.

Fitzgerald and Stride (2012) suggest that a key feature of crafting the narrative is to ensure the story flows in a coherent manner. As such, by adopting an iterative approach, the verbatim words for each interview were reorganised so that connections could be made between different segments of the interview. This was done by the first and second author drawing on a particular form of creative analytic practice (Richardson 2000) known as creative non-fiction (Sparkes & Smith 2014). Creative non-fiction writing represents the actual spoken words of the participants by using 'creative' literary techniques to craft the words into a story (Caulley 2008). This meant rearranging verbatim sentences in the narrative skeleton to create a logical and coherent account and removing or inserting words only when we felt it necessary to make the account comprehensible (Blodgett et al. 2011). In so doing, we also altered the chronology of some of the events as they were reported in the interviews, in an effort to create a more coherent story. Although this may reduce the 'flow' of the narratives, we felt that altering the chronology was

important to retain a sense of authenticity. Finally, in crafting these stories we have kept the phrasing of more colloquial language and grammar in order to remain faithful to the participants' voices. Following this, each author then reviewed the narratives and compared them to the original transcripts to ensure no content was overlooked (Blodgett et al. 2011).

Creative non-fiction therefore generates stories that are fictional in form but factual in content; these stories are grounded in real events and lived experiences (Smith, McGannon & Williams, 2015). Importantly, creative non-fiction helps to protect anonymity since key names can be changed, whilst still preserving the integrity of participants' words (Douglas & Carless 2009; Sparkes 2002). Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) identify three ways of representing creative non-fiction namely: (1) portrait, which represents an individuals' character and experience; (2) snapshot, which provides a description of what was observed in a specific situation, and; (3) composite whereby the stories of multiple individuals are combined into one. Given how marginalised care-experienced young people's voices usually are, we utilized creative non-fiction portraits to showcase the voices of 'real' people; individuals who have experienced what it is like to be in care. Stories, presented in this way, are evidence-based, accessible and credible, and can also act as a meaningful means of knowledge transfer (Smith, McGannon & Williams, 2015).

Once the creative non-fiction portraits had been crafted, they were shared with each participant to encourage reflection and gain feedback (Blodgett et al. 2011). The stories were then further edited to reduce their length. This process of 'member reflections' (Smith & McGannon 2018) enabled the first and second authors to engage in dialogue with the participants and reflect on the stories. Peacock et al. (2018) suggest that this collaborative process helps to minimise power issues that may arise when creating and presenting a participant's story. Following this

dialgoue, each participant expressed their positive views towards their respective stories, deeming these to be faithful to their own experiences, with only minor amendments made for clarity (e.g., occasional word changes and some sentence restructuring).

Finally, in order to help guide the construction of the stories, and in attempting to maximise the quality of our research, a 'list' of quality criteria, as outined by Smith, McGannon and Williams (2015) were employed. Based on the quality criteria described by Smith et al. (2015), we invite readers to judge our work based on the following questions: (1) substantive contribution – has the research provided new knowledge or insights?, (2) focus – is there a clear purpose to the research?, (3) aesthic merit – do the stories invite responses?, (4) expression of reality – do the stories seem believable?, (5) evocation and illumination – does the work affect the reader emotionally and does it raise awareness of a particular group of young people?, (6) engagement – are the stories emotionally or intellectually interesting?, (7) incitement to action – does the research generate new questions? and, (8) meaningful coherence – does the study achieve what it purports to be about?

The stories

Three creative non-fiction portraits are presented here and, with the participants' consent and to comply with institutional ethical approval and safety, we have chosen to provide pseudonyms for names and places to maintain their anonymity. The three stories below are of Meg (female, aged 25 years), Sam (male, aged 32 years) and Hayley (female, aged 23 years) each of whom have different experiences of being in care that encompass different care placements (foster care and residential care). Interestingly, while each story reveals some similarities, it is evident that the participants also experienced and have valued sport and physical activity in very different ways.

"It's such a big part of my life": Meg's story

Before I was 4, I had 25 placement moves. Twenty-five moves! And that was with my birth mum… in and out of mother and baby units, in and out of foster care. Twenty-five moves![2] It's strange. Being really young when I went into care, I remember thinking that I was really happy. I didn't necessarily understand why, but just knew that I was happy and I didn't want to move. In primary school[3], being in care was fine, but in High School[4], I got bullied for the first two years for being a child in care. Apparently, it means that your parents don't love you, they don't want you and you're different! Being taken out of lessons to go to contact meetings[5] didn't help. Some of the teachers weren't even aware I was in care and this sometimes made things awkward. For example, my social worker would be in school at such a time and I was meant to leave the classroom to go meet them, only for the teacher to yell things like: "you're not allowed to leave, I don't know who you think you are". In the end, I would just sit back down and wait. I was already bullied for not wearing make-up or for not wearing short skirts, or whatever. I didn't want to have to stand up in front of the whole class, some people who bullied me and a few who were my friends, and say, "oh, it's because I'm in care". It was really awkward.

So football was my way of coping. Even to this day it still is! It started when I was young. I was a bit of a tomboy and used to play football on the streets with neighbours. I then realised that there was a team in primary school so my [foster] mum looked at after-school classes in football. I right enjoyed it! When I was 7 years old, I started playing football in primary school

[2] In England, the majority of children and young people (63%) end up in care due to abuse/neglect, while 15% enter care due to family dysfunction (Department for Education, 2018).
[3] In England, a Primary School is a school for children typically between the ages of 5 and 11.
[4] In England, a High School is a middle school that provides education for students aged 11–14.
[5] 'Contact' includes meetings between the young person and birth family members and/or significant others.

and I also started playing outside of school on a weekend. All the boys would come and call for me to play football as opposed to calling for my younger brother. It never mattered to them that I was a girl, it was just a case of "oh we're going for a kick about, are you coming?" That helped me a lot I think. I grew up in a house with two sisters that were obsessed with make up and how they looked. Both my sisters were hell bent on how, if you're over a certain size, you're fat. They're very superficial things that I've never been bothered about, but football really mattered to me.

So yeah, it became my way of coping, but I don't think my foster parents understood that it was that for me. I think they thought "ah she's just really enjoying it". I did and they'd come to my matches and support me and having that support was nice, especially when other aspects of your life aren't going brilliant. But, it was more than that for me, I was able to zone out of everything that was going bad in my life. It was nice just knowing I could kick a ball if I was mad with my brother as opposed to punching him in the face and getting into trouble. Being able to run about and not have a serious conversation with someone about life. Just being able to zone out of my life and all of my problems, the falling out with my siblings, or whatever, to play football really helped. When I'm playing football with my friends, I feel like that's the true representation of who I am.

But it hasn't always been easy. I remember being offered, in primary school, to go see Leeds United play. Because I played for the school football team and I'd done really well, I was asked if I wanted to go. But, because I was a looked-after child[6] I wasn't allowed to go. My [foster] mum was like: "No, we can't. There'll be teachers there but because me and your dad aren't going we can't let you go, you're a looked-after child". I was heartbroken that I couldn't go.

[6] 'Looked-after' is the legislative term used to identify a child in the care of a Local Authority

Actually heartbroken. I remember just sitting at school crying cos I couldn't go and all my friends had been talking about how they were going and they'd all washed their kits so they could all go and I couldn't. That wasn't the half of it though. I remember being scouted by FC Celtic. We were playing a match and I was in midfield. I felt proper proud and after the match a guy came up to my [foster] mum and said "Your daughter's really talented. We wondered if she'd like to come for a trial with us". I was really, really happy and some of my other friends were like "Wow, FC Celtic are really good". But then my foster parents said to me, actually, it might not be a good idea cos you'll have a whole new team that you'll have to tell your circumstances to. So yeah, that didn't happen.

I also remember one of my football teams was sponsored by the Telegraph and Argos. They'd come to our football matches, take a team picture before the match and then again after if we'd won and got a trophy or whatever. Straight from the off my [foster] parents were like "no you're not allowed to be in the picture". I remember like, it was the first picture they'd take of your team and I'm not in it. I was stood on the side-lines feeling so shit and my teammates were like "Meg, in you come" and I was like "no I'm not allowed". My [foster] mum was like "it's not down to us, you know your social worker says you're not allowed, you can't be in the newspaper". This was for everything, anything, even at school, I wasn't allowed in the newspaper for the school team. I remember being like "aaaarrgggh!"! I got so mad! It frustrated me so much because football was such a big part of my life. I never did well at school, it took me nearly 7 years to get my Grade C in GCSE[7] English, but football I was good at. When you're young and you're not, well especially if you're a girl, if you're not into everything that's

[7] GCSE is a General Certificate of Secondary Education, a subject specific qualification taken by school students aged 14–16

girly-girl and you don't wear skirts or make-up or whatever… With football, I could just be like anybody else!

When I played for Foxton Juniors Football Club, everyone was told that I wasn't allowed to be in pictures, team pictures, and that led to questions from the other players. I remember one girl who left shortly after I started anyway, she ranted on at me about being fostered and just recognising that "you don't look like your parents that are there to support you". She'd say, "Well who are they cos they can't be your parents, they look nothing like you". "Your parents don't love you", that sort of thing. But to other people it wasn't a thing cos I wasn't there because I was looked-after or anything, I was just there to play football. But the thing is with foster families, to me, being able to have my photo taken should have been my foster carers' decision, not a social worker's. I get child protection, I get safeguarding, but my birth mum would write to my house anyway. She knew where I lived! So, me popping up in a photo like "oh yeah, she plays for Foxton Juniors" that should never have been an issue, it just made me feel even more excluded.

'It's given me the tools to deal with life': Sam's story

I suppose you might say I was born into disadvantage. From a very, very early age, the age of three, I remember episodes of domestic violence. My father wasn't a particularly nice man. He was a fisherman, but he was also incredibly tight. Just the general standard of living, was quite tight. It was quite harsh. I moved to England from Ireland at the age of nine but the six-year window from the age of three to nine is a bit of a blur. I have some recollections of not particularly happy or joyous years. The best way to describe it was that we were on the move regularly. We were in and out of different types of accommodation, from hostels, flats, houses

- what I now know as squatting - to living on the street because we had no place to go. We had no fixed abode. The age of three to nine was about avoiding my father really.

During this time, I didn't really engage in any formal physical activity. It wasn't structured in that respect, partly because of the nature of the conditions, the chaotic nature of my life. You know, there's a time element to it typically speaking. So, parents will take you to fixtures or games or whatever it is. That didn't happen! And often there's a cost involved in things like that, and when you're just surviving, like we were, things like that don't feature. Having said that, I was always quite active and I engaged in unstructured recreational activity. Things like cycling, running, playing football. Some of that was done through schools but to be honest I wasn't at school that often because of the nature of multiple moves. My primary school attendance was virtually nil, but recreational activity and sport did play some part in those early years, but nothing structured and nothing that I was overly committed to.

When we moved to England, I still wasn't attending school, clearly wasn't involved in sport, and I suppose at that time we were on social services' radar, and it was only a matter of time before I was subsequently taken into foster care. I have a brother and two sisters, and we were all taken into foster care. One of my sisters went to live with a friend, the other went to live with a friend whose mum was a foster carer, while me and my younger brother went to live with a foster family.

I guess my entry into athletics was through the school sports day. I ran the 800 meters in the school sports day and I won. As a result, I represented the school in the local athletics meetings. I remember it was a lovely day. I had a random pair of trainers I'd borrowed, I wasn't kitted up for it at all. I think they were Ellesse trainers. They weren't mine, they were too big, I had

some football shorts on, a random t-shirt, and I was going for it. I ran the 800 metres and won. I must have done okay, because I still hold the school record for 800 metres. I think, because of that experience I was on the radar and deemed to be a reasonably good athlete, and it went from sports day at school to then representing the school at the County Championships. I'd no training, was just getting over smoking, clearly I was doing alright and I was winning. I was winning races!

I ended up representing my county at the regional championships and after that I managed to get a coach and join a club. Before then, it was left to my PE teacher and my foster carer. I had support from my PE teacher who'd say, "You were decent at sports day and you were quite good at County Schools, but there's a bit more to it than that, and you're actually a talented runner, so let's get you down to a club". He made some enquiries and he encouraged me to go and, from there, it was handed over to my foster carer. Between them, they got me down to the Athletics Club on a Tuesday night. They trained Tuesday and Thursday but that was foreign and alien to me. It was odd to be taking something that seriously.

What was I… 14, 15 years old? I turned up in my football shorts, I remember having a pair of Nike Air Max, which were nice trainers, but not appropriate for running. I remember training with some guys who had been training for years. I didn't know what the sessions were and I didn't know how to pace myself, but the coach was telling us what to do, giving us the reps, telling us the pace, and I just fell into it and I was doing it well.

After a cross country race I remember my coach describing the guy who beat me. He was telling me about what he would be doing in terms of his training, and I remember just being absolutely flabbergasted that, at the age of 15, 16, this coach was saying that I need to train

more than twice a week. I was like “What? I don't understand that, what the hell do you train more than twice a week for?” I remember at that time thinking I’m not investing in that, it’s too much work, but somehow, someway, I did. So I started to take it a bit more serious, started to invest more in it, and I noticed that my times were improving, but I had a lot of support from my coach and my foster carer.

The nature of athletics is that it’s not local and that’s a challenge for somebody who’s not got that support, who’s in foster care. If they don’t have a foster parent or foster parents that will encourage and support them, it’s difficult. I would often travel 30 odd miles, to somewhere reasonably local, but I could be going as far as somewhere that was 3-4 hours away, and he would take me.

I think running has given me the tools to deal with life and the challenges that life presents. Because sport doesn’t always go your way, it gave me the tools to be organised, to show some determination, to be gritty, to be resilient. I used to go out on a Sunday by myself and run for an hour and a half and that takes some serious determination. Through running, I learnt the tools of organisation, determination, being resilient, doing the things you don’t want to do but knowing you have to do them, and I just applied that to my studies. When I was in Year 11, aged 16, I thought, “I don’t want to revise for my GCSEs, but I know how to, because I’ll apply the logic I apply to running”. When I dropped off in the first year of university I lost a lot of that. I became a bit lazy and a bit unstructured, focusing too much on going out and partying and immersing myself in all the other things that university had to offer. I wanted to get back on track, pardon the pun, and I realised that running was a way for me to do that.

I do think sport has given me so, so, so much. Probably more than I can quantify, you know, relationships you've made, contacts you've made with people. When you think about social capital, I think that's a big thing I gained from sport. When would I, as a young man in foster care, ever get the chance to be friends with and be able to pull on a GP, a head teacher, a lawyer, a director or CEO of an energy provider, somebody who worked for the Evening Post in a senior position, you know. The list goes on. Athletics is quite a middle-class sport, and it's quite middle-class in terms of its profile, and those are the sort of contacts I made. So, as a young man in foster care, rocking up to the track, I didn't identify with those people. I identified with another group of people but over the years I think I've transitioned away from identifying with people who I historically identified with, and those people who weren't always good people and good role models, and I've transitioned into identifying with more middle-class people. That helps in terms of social capital and also in terms of your aspirations. Again, if you're around these people who have high aspirations, have high drive, have high ambitions in terms of their career, it's very difficult to fight against that. You can't help but want some of that!

'Sport fizzled out quite quickly: Hayley's story

I first went into care when I was 15, 16 and I suppose it had some impact on my sports participation. I mean, when I was young, my brother wasn't interested in anything remotely sporty, but I was. I was the boy! When I was at school, I really struggled with girls. There were too many rules. I was never anybody's best friend, so I played with the boys, and the boys played football, so I played football. But when I wanted to play football outside of school, there was hardly any girls' teams. So, I wasn't allowed to play. I played at school, but I wasn't allowed to play outside of school. This was all before I went into care and my mum was always like, "I'm not standing in the rain". But one day, a basketball club came into my primary school

and said “come to the club”… so I did. I think I was so hyperactive, anything that got me moving my family were happy with. What I liked about basketball was that it wasn’t very ‘girly’, and it wasn’t ‘normal’. I wasn’t just playing football like everyone else. It was still cool, but it was so different.

When I was in care, I used to get moved every six weeks, so I didn’t always know where I was going to be. I had this one foster carer who didn’t have a car and they’d have to borrow a car every time you wanted to go somewhere. This was where there’d be a bus maybe once an hour, so I had to find ways of getting myself to training. I moved around a lot and I ended up in Derby in a children’s home. That was the last place I went. When I was there, it depended on who was on shift, who could drive you, and to where. My sport participation fizzled out quite quickly. I’d say that within about 9 weeks of being formally ‘looked-after’, it had all stopped. I think when carers are strangers you don’t necessarily want to ask them for stuff. Plus, you don’t know where you’re going to be from one month to the next, so they won’t commit to anything. Everything became ‘pay as you go’ and you don’t get any consistency.

When I was in foster care, I know I had an allowance, but I can’t remember how much pocket money my foster carer would give me. The first thing they do is sanction your pocket money but I always felt I was a little bit untouchable. I paid for my own phone, I paid for everything, so I was like ‘what are you going to take off me?’. I didn’t have any boundaries because the people telling me what to do were replaceable, they were irrelevant. When I went into the residential home, it was different. They have an allowance per child and that was sent into the office. A certain amount of that money was meant to be for like food and activities, but we never had food and we had no activities. They had a table tennis table, but I put a chair through it. They had a pool table, but that was broken too. They had a bit of a garden and there was a

massive recreational field nearby, but we never went there because you've got certain people who can only go out with certain members of staff or the right number of staff. Then you've got to risk assess everything.

So yeah, I liked sport but I didn't do much when I was in care but I knew I wanted to work with children and I'd always done leadership, like since I was 14. In school, I'd go down to the PE department to help out in free periods and at dinnertimes. I also used to work in the sports department after school – my carers would just delay my taxi, tell it not to pick me up until later. But I used to get left, because I was one of the lowest profile kids and last on the list to get collected. It could get to 10, 11 o'clock at night and I'd still be waiting and that's how I met my 'now-parents'. They used to bring their kids down to do sport on the same days that I used to work.

I guess I was a bit short-changed by the care system. When you come into care, you're meant to have a medical check, but I never had that. So, the corporate parent[8] knew my physical health and everything but not other things. It wasn't until I went to my 'now-parents' that they said, "hmm, I think there's more to this child than meets the eye!" and I was diagnosed with ADHD. Basically, that's when I started being cared for - I wasn't cared for before that point, which was around my 18th birthday. They use the term 'support' but there's no support. I think I had six, seven social workers. No, more than that. I had five within the first three months of being in the care system and they kept changing. I was moving that often, I had two social workers that I never even met! I always got the impression, "oh you'll be gone in three years, don't worry about it". I'm pretty sure I'm still meant to have an after-care worker; that you have an after-

[8] Corporate parent is a term used to describe the collective responsibility of a local authority, its members, employees and partner agencies to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for a person in care

care worker until you are 21, unless you go to university and then you have them until you are 24. I graduated last year, and they were like, “right, you’re finished”. You know, looked-after children get so much – they get funding at school and they go to college and they get that as well. And then it just finishes. All that structure is taken away and you’ve then got someone that is vulnerable and, and I don’t care what anyone says, is not developed. People look at you and think, “Oh, you look quite normal, you’re doing all right”. You don’t realise that that’s only because of the stuff that my parents have done for the last five years. Not the system! The system has taken credit for that, but it’s not the system that has done it. I don’t deny that some people have amazing foster carers that do amazing things, but there are a lot of people that don’t.

Reflections and Conclusion

Narrative can serve as a tool for understanding how young people experience the social structures that impinge on their daily practices. As such, this paper sought to foreground the voices of three care leavers and (re)present their stories about the role of sport and physical activity in their lives. In this paper, we have chosen to situate the stories of these young people at the forefront of our concerns, as we consider them to be the best informants about their lives and the ‘custodians’ of their experiences. In so doing, we hope we have made visible how their experiences of sport and physical activity, both positive and negative, have been shaped by their time in care and, moreover, helped to identify their fluctuating and complex everyday realities. For example, the stories presented here speak to challenges presented by safeguarding processes, frequent placement moves and variable levels of support, as well as the potential benefits to be reaped with regard to health/well-being, generating social capital and the construction of identity. The latter is particularly important for care-experienced young people since literature suggests they have poorer health outcomes and struggle to make and maintain

friendships in comparison to their non-care-experienced peers (Sempik, Ward & Darker 2008). We have discussed our own interpretations of these issues elsewhere (see Author et al., forthcoming) but will not expand on them here, since, as noted earlier, while we recognise that each narrative can be read differently, from various perspectives, we adopted the stance of storyteller. For storytellers, the analysis *is* the story since stories are thought to do the work of both analysing and theorising (Sparkes 2002). Rinehart (2005, 503) suggests that when stories are told well, the reader should "come away with not only knowledge of what has happened, but a deeper underlying sense of empathy with the Other". Hence, the goal of storytellers is to evoke emotion and generate intimate involvement and engagement with and through stories; something we hope to have achieved here.

We have already noted how care-experienced young people are often identified as 'vulnerable', which can lead to perceptions of them being 'at-risk' or 'in trouble' (Become 2017). We also know from wider literature that they are a relatively 'hidden group' in sport and physical activity research (Quarmby 2014) despite the fact they might have much to gain from sport and physical activity participation due to its purported benefits with regard to, for example, personal and social development (e.g., Quarmby, Sandford & Pickering 2019). We therefore hope that these stories can provide valuable insight and be used as resources through which the reader can enter into the lived realities of these young people and better understand how they experience and manage challenging conditions and events. In a similar way, Sparkes and Stewart's (2016) recent study suggested that autobiographies – stories of people's lives told in their own words – can act as powerful pedagogical resources, while Power et al. (2012, 42) argued that such accounts provide a valuable means of vicarious experience. Hence, we argue, the stories outlined here might help those working with or for care-experienced young people (e.g., PE teachers, coaches and physical activity leaders) to better understand their dynamic

and lived experiences in relation to sport and physical activity. Moreover, these stories may also be of value to other care-experienced young people who may recognise certain elements of the narratives and/or have experiences that resonate with the stories of Meg, Sam or Hayley. Sparkes and Smith (2014) suggest that stories can stimulate a degree of reflection and critical thinking and so, for some, these stories will hopefully help them to expand the range of narrative resources that they themselves are able to draw upon, in order to help them make sense of current or past experiences in their own lives.

Returning to one of the central aims of the paper, in presenting these stories, we hope to have provided a counter narrative to the wider societal discourse about care-experienced young people – particularly, the deficit perspective that pervades in the literature (Become, 2017). As the individual stories demonstrate, while care-experienced young people may face challenging situations, their care status cannot be attributed simply to personal fault, nor are they necessarily troublesome or uneducated. Indeed, all three of these care-experienced young people attended and completed university. As noted above, while each of their stories offers something different and raises issues around relationships and identity, safeguarding and inconsistency (that many non-care-experienced young people may take for granted), they also offer insights into the challenges these young people face in accessing sport and physical activity in the same way that their peers do. It is evident that there are challenges with regards to navigating official systems and processes, and this often means that they experience life in a more structured and 'artificial' way than those not in care. Ultimately, we hope these stories will stimulate readers to engage in ongoing conversations about the lived experiences of care-experienced young people in relation to sport and physical activity.

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