

Making time to be heard

Lynn Gilmour meets one arts company working to raise awareness about the significant number of disabled looked after children and young people in Scotland

For six children and young people from East Park School in Glasgow, Wednesday 5 December 2012 was a significant date. It marked the culmination of three months of intensive work, and performance of 'Alisha's Surprise', the play that they had written and directed to highlight some of the issues facing looked after disabled children and young people in Scotland.

There are around 16,000 looked after children in Scotland and, although data is limited, it is estimated that at least 7-11% are disabled. However, looked after disabled children often constitute a hidden group in research, policy and practice. So, the group from East Park worked with arts based company Active Inquiry over a fifteen-week period to develop a unique Forum Theatre experience on the topic, 'Being Heard'. The play had its debut performance at The Lighthouse in Glasgow, in front of an invited audience of fifty academics, policy makers, managers and practitioners from across Scotland, and was also subsequently performed for families and staff at East Park.

'Alisha's Surprise'

Created as a fictional story by the group, 'Alisha's Surprise' comprises five scenes, starting on Alisha's 15th birthday, which takes place in a children's home where Alisha has lived since she was 10. Alisha is treated to a surprise party and tickets for a trip to London and a JLS concert! But Alisha's excitement soon turns to disappointment and annoyance when plans to go dancing after a trip to McDonalds are suddenly changed because a staff member is ill, and Alisha is then told that she must give another young person a turn on the Wii. The following day

Alisha's parents arrive to take her out for tea with her boyfriend Jimmy and on hearing about the incident the night before, they force Alisha to apologise to her key worker. The group go out for tea but are not able to go to the cinema because a meeting with Alisha's social worker takes precedence and she has to return to the children's home. At the meeting with her social worker, Alisha does not want to talk as she is still angry at missing the film. She is told that if she does not behave she might not be allowed to go on her London trip. The play ends with Alisha upset and frustrated at the unfairness of the situation. Why has nobody taken the time to listen to her?

The play was performed enthusiastically and with conviction by the young people and staff involved, and was hailed a success by the audience. The innovative use of forum theatre then allowed the audience to actively engage with the issues that the children and young people had raised, by encouraging critical discussion and collective learning. Under the facilitation of Gavin Crichton from Active Inquiry and with the help of some of the young actors, audience members had the opportunity to re-enact the scenes to explore the feelings of the characters and create alternative storylines where Alisha was listened to in the different scenarios. The experience highlighted the powerlessness some children and young people can feel when excluded from day-to-day decisions about their lives. The issues raised will continue to inform the programme, and future opportunities to develop participatory and creative opportunities for looked after disabled children and young people to express their views and experiences are being actively pursued.

Funded by the Scottish Universities' Insight Institute, this innovative knowledge exchange programme, *Getting it Right for Looked After Disabled Children and Young People* aims to explore and understand the experiences of looked after disabled children and young people in research, policy and practice arenas, in order to inform and encourage change. A series of thematic workshops has been developed: Being Counted (October 2012), Being Heard (December 2012) Being Included (February 2013) and Being Valued (April 2013) to bring together academics, policy makers, service practitioners, third sector organisations, service user organisations to discuss and debate the key issues. The multi-disciplinary programme team includes academics, policy makers and practitioners based at the University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde, Action for Children, Active Inquiry and the Scottish Government.

For further information about the programme, please contact Dr Louise Hill at the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children in Scotland (CELCIS), University of Strathclyde (Louise.Hill@strath.ac.uk). Podcasts are available for each workshop with highlights and reflections from delegates, as well as electronic copies of presentations (where available) on the Scottish Universities' Insight Institute website (www.scottishinsight.ac.uk). You can also join the discussion on the blog at www.crfblog.blogspot.co.uk For more information on using Forum theatre, see <http://www.activeinquiry.co.uk/>

The programme team would like to thank all the children, young people and staff at East Park school who made this event such a success.



Credit- David Barras / Strange Boat