

Parental and Carer Involvement for Looked After Children: Messages from Research.

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Background discussion paper presented at Enquire annual conference ‘Families as Learning Partners’ March 9, 2010. Workshop ‘Parental and Carer Involvement for Looked After Children’.¹

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“...very often the element of cruelty is entirely absent’ and that the ‘parents are simply immoral and guilty of the occasional neglect...the offenders being mostly the mothers of illegitimate children...A wise administration of the poor law insists upon the refusal of outdoor relief to the mothers of illegitimate children, and persons of immoral or dissipated habits, and the best, and only, way in which the welfare of their children can be safeguarded is by removing them altogether from the evil influences that surround them.”

(Skelton, J. Inspector of The Poor for Fraserburgh 1876, cited in Scottish Poor Law Magazine and Local Government Journal, 1903, p.523)

“What Young People Should Be Able To Expect...Partnership With Parents... Their parents’ rights to be respected and, wherever possible, their parents involvement as partners in the care provided...Young people and children in residential homes and schools should be cared for in ways which maximise opportunities for parents continued involvement, and for care to be provided in the context of a partnership with parents...”

(Scottish Office, *Another Kind of Home*, 1.33; 3.6, 1992)

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Introduction

The experiences of parents whose children are cared for away from home in residential care are typically negative. While the reasons for this are complex and resistant to change, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that attitudes which nourish discrimination are long standing. The narratives around the ‘feckless’, ‘idle’, ‘dissipated’ ‘immoral’ (Welshman, 1999, 2002) have been reproduced in more subtle forms around the ‘dysfunctional family’ and ‘bad parent’ (Garret, 2007;

¹ The authors would welcome comments on this paper and would expect that any information drawn from it would be appropriately acknowledged.

The Centre for Social Justice, 2008; Holt, 2009). This conveniently ignores the contribution of structural factors which give rise to the inequalities parents typically face (Gillies, 2005) and serves to imply that 'good parents' are not those who use residential child care services (DFES, 2006; Scottish Government, 2008). A consequence of this is '...that families experiencing difficulty still frequently occupy the limiting terrain of 'deficient' or 'deviant' and are consequently 'excluded' from participating in decision making' (Morris and Shepherd, 2000:169).

This conference paper draws on research from the writer's thesis (Pilkington *forthcoming* 2010) to highlight that the position of parents does not enjoy the research or policy focus it ought to. Despite this a view of parents which generalizes them as complex and difficult has deep roots. This has resulted in them being overlooked as potentially significant contributors in the care of their children while they are living away from home. The current emphasis on research minded practice places a premium on 'practice relevance' and 'accountability' to service users and organisations (Castle, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2006). This has important implications for parents as it does for all marginalized service users. The drive towards measuring effectiveness and outcomes in social work will shape the support offered to service users. Those groups who do not feature prominently in the struggle for inclusion, and parents of children looked after feature significantly in such considerations, are likely to have their marginalized status compounded (O'Connor, 1997).

Who are the parents whose children are looked after?

While children and young people are accommodated away from home for a variety of reasons, the most prevailing factor associated with residential child care since its inception in the nineteenth century is the compelling correlation between parents unable to cope with the debilitating consequences of poverty and the increased likelihood of their children being looked after (Parker, 1990; McDonald, 1994; Humphreys, 1995; Abrams, 1999). This aspect shows no sign of abating (Action for Children Scotland, 2009).

What requires additional emphasis is that the term 'parents of children in care' doesn't quite capture the reality of the situation as it serves to conceal that lone parents, and in particular lone mothers, have always been over represented among those using social work services and in particular residential child care. The persistence of this phenomenon can be illustrated in research. Wedge and Prosser (1973) revealed that the children of lone mothers in receipt of benefits were 11% more likely to be looked after. Holman (1980) revealed, in a study of families using social work services in the geographical area formerly known as Strathclyde, that 62% of children admitted to care came from lone parent backgrounds. Becker *et al* (1987) in their study pointed to 90% of social work clients being in receipt of benefits. Buist (2000), sampling in the

same geographical area as Holman's study, noted that things had not improved in the intervening decades: between 1985-1992, 78% of children who were admitted to care were from families reliant on benefits and 90% of lone parent household were dependent on lone mothers. McGhee and Waterhouse (2002) in a sample of 1090 families, who used the children's hearing system, highlighted that 50% of the families were from lone parent households; 69% relied on benefits for their income and 93% of these households were headed by a lone mother. The most recent research into the circumstances of Scotland's children (Action for Children, 2009) highlights that the correlation with poverty and the likelihood of a child being looked after is as strong as ever. Recent submissions by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration to the Local Government and Communities Committee Child Poverty Inquiry evidenced that of children living in the most deprived areas of Edinburgh, 7% were subject to Supervision Requirements (nationally children subject to Supervision Requirements account for 1% of the child population) while in the least deprived wards there were no children subject to Supervision Requirements (SCRA, 2008).

Despite calls for more prominence in policy considerations for young people living in poverty and deprivation (SCRA, 2008), as yet, there have been no longitudinal studies on the effects on children living in poverty (Long *et al*, 1996), nor have there been any compilation of data on the socio-demographic characteristics of parents and how poverty and inequality might shape the experiences of parents who use residential child care and related services (Pilkington, forthcoming 2010; Holt, 2009). What has emerged from small scales studies is that residential workers in particular had a tendency to not fully appreciate issues of inequality and disadvantage in their understanding of the backgrounds of the parents who typically use the service (Burns, 2007). On a related theme Pilkington (forthcoming 2010) in a research sample which included questionnaire interviews with sixty residential workers found that their understanding of poverty as a significant contributory factor in the likelihood of children being received into care was very limited.

The legal status of parents of children looked after away from home

The importance attached to the position of parents as social work service users has been identified as being largely determined by the value we place on parental involvement vis-à-vis the welfare of children being our paramount concern (Fox-Harding, 1991,1997). Nevertheless, successive Children's Acts throughout the duration of welfare state are less ambiguous and while the child's welfare has always been the 'paramount' concern, there has continually been an emphasis on supporting 'rehabilitation' of the child to the family home whenever desirable and

practicable.² The Children's (Scotland) Act 1995 does not depart from this tradition. Moreover, the Act has added a significant stipulation that partnership with parents is the best method for safeguarding and promoting the child's welfare whether rehabilitation is the goal or otherwise. While the term 'partnership' does not feature in the Act; nevertheless, in the 'Regulations and Guidance'³ to the Act, the principle of partnership is writ large:

Local authorities should work in partnership with families to promote...so far as this is consistent with safeguarding and promoting their welfare [children]...links between children and their families.

In addition, although seldom considered, the Social Work (Scotland) Act, 1968, (s8, (1) (2) (3)) has provision for financial assistance to be made to facilitate research 'into any matter connected with...social welfare' and this remains extant in the Children (Scotland) Act, 1995. This emphasis could readily underpin policy commitments to partnership with parents.

Pinkerton (2001, p. 250) points out that this position enjoys international consensus. The merits of promoting through partnership the capacities of children and their families has the backing of international law articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). While the increased awareness of children's rights is long overdue, what has less recognition is the position of parents. In fact, there are seven family centred Articles (5, 7, 8, 9, 14.2, 18 and 27.2). The Convention asserts the importance of the family to all its members and this should be supported by resources so families can be afforded:

...the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities (article 49, *Preamble*).

This emphasis on a partnership approach to service delivery with parents is a central tenet of how related services approach parents and this also includes a rigorous auditing and regulatory framework for ensuring partnership outcomes are achieved.⁴ Indeed, this emphasis is also a feature of care and residential education services, which, unlike children's care homes which are inspected by the Care Commission, are jointly inspected by the Care Commission and HMIE.

² Children's Act 1948 (10&11 Geo. 6.c.43) s12 (2); The Children and Young Persons Act 1963 (c.37) s1. ; Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 (c.49) s.12; The Children's Act (Scotland) s22.

³ The Children's (Scotland) Act 1995, *Regulations and Guidance*, Social Work Services Group, 1997, p.5. Edinburgh: HMSO; The Children's (Scotland) Act 1995, *Regulations and Guidance, Vol.2, Children Looked After by Local Authorities*, p.76. Edinburgh: HMSO.

⁴ Care Commission, National Care Standards, Early Education and Child Care up To The Age of 16. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002/03/10751/File-1>; HMIE (2006) How Good Is Our School? Partnership With Parents <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hgiospwp.pdf>

This has arguably led to differing interpretations of the duties arising out of The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 around the principle of partnership and the role for parents. This Act created the Scottish Social Services Council whose responsibilities include the provision of an evaluative framework of National Care Standards for children and young people accommodated in residential child care. In relation to children's care homes the importance of parents in quality benchmarks does not enjoy the prominence afforded to them in related services. In place of the principle of partnership with parents, Standard 17 offers a return to the theoretically less inclusive concept of contact:

Staff should help you keep in contact with parents or carers and others who are important in your life... where you are unable to do so yourself, your family will be speedily informed of any events, developments or incidents in your life which will be of interest or concern to them...staff treat families with respect and listen to their views.

The Care Commission, charged under the Act with inspecting children's care homes, has recently introduced a form of self assessment and examination under its *Quality Themes and Statements – Grading Assessment*, which is designed to better audit and evidence how *quality* in provision is achieved and maintained in key areas such as service user and carer participation. However, while these developments are welcome, an appraisal of inspection reports indicates that while care homes are being graded between *very good* and *excellent* on key indicators, parents are neither uniformly being interviewed nor having their views captured in the indicators of *strengths* within inspection reports (Care Commission, 2009). This is in stark contrast to related services where a detailed audit of parental satisfaction and participation, as a requirement of the Scottish Schools Parental Involvement (Scotland) Act, 2006, is premised on the experiences of parents being evaluated in their own right (HMIE, 2006; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). The practice at present adopted by the Care Commission may well serve to define children as service users but not their carers or parents, which is insufficiently critical and may additionally serve to present a picture of parental involvement and satisfaction which does not stand up to robust examination.

In this context the often cited 'difficulties' in working with parents require both acknowledgment and qualification. While figures for the children looked after in residential child care for whom the local authority has parental responsibilities are not readily available, the general figures are 424 cases of 'Parental Responsibilities Order' and 134 cases of 'Freed for Adoption', out of a total of 14,886 (Scottish Government, 2007-2008). This places an onus on residential providers to demonstrate why they are not engaging with parents (Scottish Government, 2008), especially so, as the figures for 2006-07 show that when care ended the child's main destination was returning home (52%) (Action for Children, 2009, p.331).

What do children and young people want?

While children may indeed have shared with their parents a marginalised research status, there is a growing expectation that the voices of children and young people should be an integral part of research investigations (Clark and Statham, 2005; Thomas and Thomas, 2005). Research by Murray (2005) would indicate that their inclusion in studies is now marginally more the norm than exclusion. There are of course interrelated benefits. Not only does inclusion have the intrinsic psychological benefits associated with participation, the positive outcomes extend to the influence it bears on policy (Brownlie, *et al*, 2006). As yet parents do not enjoy these intrinsic or associated benefits. While there has been an increased interest in parents who are experiencing difficulty this does not extend to those who typically experience the greatest level of difficulty: parents who are separated from their children (DoH, 2004). Moreover, the voice of children in this respect is frequently overlooked.

A study by Who Cares Scotland (2004) found that looked after children and young people wanted residential staff to be more committed to working with their families. Similarly, research undertaken to collate the views and opinions of young people in relation to the national care standards highlighted the importance they placed in staying in contact with their families. This standard was frequently rated as the most important. While some young people felt staff had helped them keep in contact, other young people did not feel they were given the assistance they required. The report recommended that working in partnership with families and parents should be strongly addressed within units and young people should be assisted to maintain these important links (Stevens and Boyce, 2006). These sentiments were endorsed in the first available review of the quality of care homes for young people in Scotland (Care Commission, 2004). Young people voted the most important standard to be 'keeping in touch with people who are important to you' and 'feeling safe and secure'. In responding to concerns expressed by young people, the Care Commission acknowledged the importance of partnership with parents:

Young people spoke about how vital it is to stay in contact with families and frequently rated it as one of the most crucial standards. While some were given help to keep in contact, others were not. Young people must be helped to maintain these vital links. Time and resource is needed to make sure that partnerships are made with families and parents (39).

A further study indicated that children felt that they and their families had not had enough support before admission to care and it would help if professionals spent some time with their parents as more effort had to be made to deal with family problems 'if there are problems solve them' (SWIA, p. 104, 2006). More recent research indicates that post admission to care contact with families continues to be a key concern for young people. Research undertaken by Who Cares Scotland (2008) indicated that young people wanted their parents to be continually involved in significant

parts of their lives, for example being invited to the unit for birthdays and other celebrations. Significantly, young people defined 'success' in their lives as 'having happy and caring relationships' and that they told family members about their success more than anyone else. Despite this many young people continue to feel isolated from their families. This has led academics (Wheal, 2007) and Members of Parliament (House of Commons, 2009) to conclude that under the terms of the Human Rights Act there may be a growing number of legal challenges by children or parents who feel that partnership with parents had not been promoted.

What can research tell us about how parents are viewed?

The idea that research outcomes should be central to our practice considerations is now a core element in the drive to ensure the social work profession fulfils its public duties. The expectation is unambiguous.

Many pieces of commissioned work looking at effective practice have come to the conclusion that the current evidence base is weak, reflecting a lack of research in social work practice...even where evidence exists it is not readily available to practitioners...if we are serious about developing social work as a profession...then we need to both develop and use evidence to inform practice. (Scottish Executive, 2006, p55)

There is comparatively little research into the experiences of parents when their children are no longer living with them, which points to, at best, an unwitting indifference to their plight. Against this background, research which evidences a more inclusive approach to parents also serves to highlight the enduring nature of the problem. Newman and Mackintosh (1975) although mainly offering policy considerations within residential provision, nevertheless, highlight the inadequacy of arrangements for parents when visiting their children in care. (Family Rights Group, 2004). Aldgate (1977) had as a focus the use and effect of care in bringing about the rehabilitation of children with their parents. Using data from residential social workers, foster carers and parents, she offered an important and in many ways a pioneering contribution by identifying factors, such as the lack of communication with parents and irregular contact, which contributed to the atrophying of parent and child relationships (Pilkington, forthcoming 2010). Milligan and Stevens (2006) have raised the profile of parents in their analysis of what works and what the potential barriers may be to achieve partnership. While Burns (2007) has raised questions on whether residential workers are sufficiently prepared to address the inequalities parents typically experience (Heron, 2000).

Fraser (1989) provides a critique of how policy impacts on residential service provision, which included how work with parents is marginalised by a lack of resources. Kendrick and Mapstone (1991) looked at decision making within child care reviews forums from perspectives which included parents and passed on that parents perceive themselves to be more scrutinised than

supported. Research commissioned by the Scottish Executive (2004) highlights that the timing of reviews varies across Scotland, despite legal obligations to the contrary (Regulation and Guidance to the Children's (Scotland) Act 1995, regulation 9) and longstanding research evidence of the dangers of children 'drifting' from their parents when this was the case (Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Millham *et al*, 1986; Scottish Executive, 2004).

The cornerstone of the Scottish child welfare system is the children's hearing. The inclusion of parents in research as an instrument to inform this system is patchy. Waterhouse and McGhee (2002, p279) note that there has been a 'dearth of empirical research into the effectiveness of the system' in favour of research into administrative effectiveness and philosophical underpinnings. The dearth is particularly acute in studies which include parents, despite a major objective of the hearing system being partnership with parents (Petch, 1988). Authors who have bucked this trend would include, Willock (1972) who canvassed parental attitudes towards co-operation and their understanding of the system. Giller and Moriss (1977) found that parental satisfaction and approval was largely dependent whether the hearing focused on their child's behaviour. Petch (1988) in her accounts revealed that parents lacked knowledge of the hearing system and similarly parental satisfaction mainly derived from their perception that they were actively involved in decision making and hearings which focused on the behaviour of their children.

Freeman and Lockhart (1994) noted that parents welcomed being listened to in contrast to Howells *et al* (1996) who evidenced that a significant minority of parents thought panel members lacked empathy and were 'aloof', 'snobby' and 'insensitive'. Hallett *et al* (1998) focused on the importance of 'co-operation' by parents in influencing decisions. Waterhouse *et al* (2000) noted that while parents commented positively on the communication and information processes, they believed that hearings promised more support than was generally delivered by social work departments. Veitch (1995:101-110) using a sample frame of professionals, but significantly not parents, revealed that parents' rights are 'adequately' rather than 'well protected'. Waterhouse and McGhee (2002) make known that this dearth of research ensures that crucial dimensions such as the typically impoverished backgrounds of families receive scant research consideration.

If the children's hearings system with its pivotal status in child welfare decision making in Scotland is not engaging with research into the experiences of parents in any comprehensive way, the picture for other key aspects of decision making is not sanguine either. The statutory mechanism, not just to avoid children 'drifting' in care but to engage parents, the 'Care Plan'⁵, follows a similar pattern of research neglect. The lack of attention given to care planning and the

⁵ The Children (Scotland) Act 1995, Regulations and Guidance, Vol. 2, Children Looked After By local Authorities, Social Work Services Group, Edinburgh: Stationary Office.

marginalisation of parents within these processes has been a criticism of residential care (Millham *et al*, 1986; Crimmens and Pitts, 2000; Frizzell, 2009). Within current policy and legislative edicts in Scotland, the care plan has the status of a core principle and benchmark to measure quality (Scottish Executive, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2007). Parents of looked after children are included in the decision making process by the use of parents' report forms. However, research commissioned by the Scottish Executive (2004) evidenced that these were completed in just 20% of the cases, a further 3% were completed but were not in file. It was also noted that 'Assessment and Action' records on 'family and social relationships' had been fully completed by social workers in only 13% of cases and not completed at all in 40% of cases.

These research findings underline the importance of research as a means of safeguarding the well being of families. They are especially welcome as they serve to contrast the level of importance workers and managers typically attach to this key aspect of looked after children's welfare with long standing concerns that what can appear to be indifference by parents is frequently an outcome of having barriers to their involvement placed in their way, which in turn fosters a feeling of hopelessness rather than a lack of care on their part (Millham *et al*, 1986; Fisher *et al* 1986; Pilkington, 2010). Morris and Shepherd (2000) remind us that professional reluctance to engage with service users can readily translate into the labelling of parents as not quite good enough (Scottish Government, 2008).

The education of looked after children and concerns regarding their low level of educational attainment and the overall quality of their experiences has become a feature of UK wide research (Jackson, 1987; Borland *et al*, 1998; Scottish Executive, 2001). However, UK research which has included parents (Cullingford, 1985; Jackson, 1987; Gilligan, 1998) has not been a feature of research as a whole (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Berridge *et al*, 1996; Berridge and Brodie, 1998; Fletcher- Campbell and Hall, 1990). This position is starker in research outcomes which have a Scottish dimension. The exclusion of parents as a research consideration is more prevalent (Francis *et al*, 1995; Lindsay and Foley, 1999; Gallagher, 2004) than their inclusion (Skinner, 1992; Borland *et al*, 1998; Scottish Executive, 2001; HMI, 2003, Connelly, 2003). This marginalisation of parents within social work research discourses is in stark contrast to the importance attached to parental involvement in children's educational development within mainstream educational provision (Scottish Executive, 2005).

The health of looked after children has also enjoyed an increase in research activity. Against a backdrop where Scotland's children have some of the highest rates of child poverty in the developed world (Grant *et al*, 2002), the relationship between poverty and ill-health as a precipitating factor in the increased likelihood of being looked after has been established

(Roberts, 2000). Despite the strength of this correlation residential child care has neither been successful in providing a compensatory role, nor has it been successful in providing the same level of health care as children who are looked after by their parents (DoH, 2002). While there have been improvements to looked after children's physical health, within this already disadvantaged group it is reported that 40% experience emotional and mental health problems (Action for Children, 2009, p.335).

Research which includes parents has not as yet been forthcoming. The duty to do so is nevertheless explicit in statutory and policy frameworks. The Department of Health (2002) advised that those involved in working with young people must adopt a partnership approach, ensuring that birth parents have a pivotal role in meeting their children's health needs and as such health assessments and care plans should reflect this aspect of the drive towards the provision of high quality health care. Pilkington notes the parents did not believe themselves to be actively involved in their children's health care, a perception that social workers and residential agreed with (forthcoming 2010). Research into the application of the Looked after Children strategic framework (Scottish Executive, 2004) revealed that in the health section of care plans, information was 'fully completed in 30% of cases, nearly completed in a further 30% of cases, only partially or minimally completed in 25% of cases and not completed at all in 15% of cases' (p.10).

A welcome addition to our understanding of parents is the recent Ofsted Report (2008) which canvassed the views of 184 parents of 190 children across 58 councils in England. The findings serve to confirm the persistence of fundamental barriers in our approach to parents while acknowledging improvement and satisfaction with the system. Parents believed that they had not received enough support to help stop their children going into care. Almost half the parents believed that they had no say in decisions about their child and almost three quarters wanted more say. 61% said they spoke with their child at least once a week and 8% had no contact at all. Less than half knew how to complain about the service and a quarter did not know whether there were plans to return the child home. While 86% attended Reviews, 17% felt that they could not put their views across. 76% believed that they were not getting enough support while their child was in care and 55% believed that there was nothing good about having a child in care, although the majority thought that their children were being well looked after.

What can policies tell us about how parents are viewed?

The value attached to professionals working with parents in a form of 'partnership' has been a significant and relatively recent development in child welfare policy and represents a clear break from the philosophy of 'permanence' or 'substitute care'. While there have been statutory

movements in post war child welfare policy towards providing support for families in need⁶ official discourses (The Castle Priory Report, 1969) attach an importance to 'keeping in touch' and this is largely confined to children where there is a possibility of rehabilitation. A decade later, official discourses (Room to Grow, Strathclyde Regional Council 1978) recognized the importance of developing a partnership model between foster parents and local authorities (p.5). However, such considerations did not extend to natural parents, whose role is confined to 'some degree of contact' (p.21); although there is, nonetheless, some recognition that:

Attitudes which view parents as uncaring and unsympathetic to the needs of their children are unhelpful and often misplaced. Parents should be assisted where necessary to maintain contact with their children' (p.37).

Shortly after Room to Grow, the Report 'Home and Away' (Strathclyde Regional Council, 1984) was influential in its advocacy of 'basic' rights for parents, which included to be 'present and involved in all meetings...and to understand and contribute to the decision making process', as well as the recognition that:

Parents of children in residential care seldom have any say in the service they or their children receive. There is no effective forum through which their views can be obtained, and their rights are vague and ill-defined.

In Scotland, this philosophy received a ringing endorsement from the hugely influential Skinner Report (1992). Out of a total of thirty-six, the report offered five recommendations in respect of parents:

1. Local authorities should draw up a statement of rights and responsibilities for parents which should be given to them when their child is first admitted to care (37);
2. Parents should be provided with a copy of the 'Functions and Objectives' of the children's home before or on admission (36);
3. Parents should have a right to complain in confidence (17);
4. Parents should have a right to seek a review of their child's situation when this has not been held within time limits (19); and,
5. A national association should be formed to support parents by parents (38).

In addition there are a further six operational pronouncements which sought to embed parents at the centre of practice orientation:

⁶ The Children Act, 1948 section 12 (2); Children and Young Persons Act 1963, section 1; Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, section 12; The Children (Scotland) Act 1995, section 22.

1. The focus of work with children is their rehabilitation but if this is not the desired outcome 'the relationship with their family is likely to be a significant one and every effort must be made to sustain it as positive and meaningful (3.6.3);
2. Residential staff should be encouraged to work with families to effect rehabilitation (3.6.2);
3. Parents should be assisted in the continuing care of their child (3.6.7);
4. Parents should be told immediately of any significant happenings in their child's life (3.6.4);
5. Parents should have a role in the formation of care plans (3.6.1);
6. Parents should be encouraged to attend school and hospital appointments to retain a pivotal role in their child's welfare (3.6.4).

Above all, what is central to these recommendations is the principle of 'Partnership with Parents':

Young people and children in residential homes and schools should be cared for in ways which maximise opportunities for parents continued involvement, and for care to be provided in the context of a partnership with parents, wherever this is in the interests of the child. (p.59)

The significance of these declarations is frequently overlooked. The instruction to maximise opportunities for the involvement of parents represents a break with the concept of 'substitute care'. In its place is the concept of parents fulfilling a complimentary caring role while their children are looked after. A significant measure of whether residential child care represents a 'positive choice'. However, the principles put forward by Skinner were never fully acted on (Kent, 1995) and an appraisal of policy and reports since Skinner points to a degree of inconsistency. More recently there has arguably been a lessening of the commitment to partnership with parents in favour of an enhanced role for the corporate parent, most especially within Scotland.

Extraordinary Lives (SWIA, 2006) endorses the principle of partnership in relation to children's health and highlights that parents' experiences of resident child care did not always match the principles behind the legal requirement to work in partnership. It further noted that parents were confused about what was 'good enough' parenting as a benchmark for resuming care of their children (p.42) and that while contact was very important to children the actual time they spent with their parents varied considerably.

The Report 'Fit for the Future' (NCB, 2006) neglects to consider a role for parents in future proposals for residential child care. A further Report published in the same year by the same organization includes parents by way of highlighting that research points to the importance and

benefits of contact, but takes the view the fact that recent changes in education 'have mostly sought to strengthen the influence of parents' rather than children's views' (p.12).⁷

Despite the admission contained in the title of the Report 'We can and must do better' (Scottish Executive, 2007) there is one recommendation that training is made available to parents (in common with social workers and related professionals) to help them meet the needs of their children. It is unclear whether the term 'parent' always refers to birth parents or corporate parents. What is less ambiguous is the lack of attention to parents in the context of the inequalities and disadvantages they typically experience. Rehabilitation or partnership with parents is similarly neglected. This approach is in sharp contrast to reports from a UK perspective (DCSF, 2008) which stresses the importance of a partnership approach with parents, who 'have the most important relationship for almost all children, whether in care or not'. (p.11). This involves a commitment to 'working in real partnership with parents and families and building on their strengths 'doing with, not unto' ' (ibid, p. 37) . This is endorsed and consistent with the Report by Farmer *et al* (2008) for the Department for Children Schools and Families which advocates improved quality assurance mechanisms for parents and tailored services addressing parents' and children's difficulties.

Despite some recognition of general improvements in residential child care provision (NCB, 2006b) this drive towards corporate parenting is in response to criticisms of residential child care provision within the UK (National Children's Bureau, 2006; House of Commons, 2009) but most especially within Scotland (Commissioner for Children and Young People Scotland, 2008; SWIE, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2007, Scottish Government, 2008). This can only result in parents' voices remaining in the research wilderness (OFSTED, 2008). The increasingly influential Scottish Report: 'These are our bairns' (Scottish Government, 2008) largely contains reference to parents within the reminder to local authorities 'that unless parental rights have been removed corporate parents must seek to work in partnership with parents' (p.5). Just how that this would be achieved strategically is not examined and is in sharp distinction to the welter of advice about how the corporate parent should act like any 'good parent'. This generalization of the perceived inadequacies of parents is more explicit and forthright in the Report by the Commissioner for Children and Young People Scotland (2008) which, while setting out the corporate failings of local authorities, contains its reference to parents by commenting on the relationship with young people and their parents as likely to be fraught with difficulty, whereby:

⁷ The authors are referring to legislative changes such as The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2007, Edinburgh: Scottish Government. It is an interpretation which is open to challenge.

Some young people have sadly unrealistic hopes about fitting back in with their families. They convince themselves that things will be better than they were before. Sometimes parents collude in what turns out to be wishful thinking (p.15)

This reduced role for parents contained within corporate parent strategies is not without criticism. Garrett (1999) warned that the construct of corporate parent is troubling as it may serve to 'marginalize and disparage *actual* parents with whom the local authority is working in partnership' (p.32). In addition, while a move towards a reduced role for parents has ethical implications the constraints on its likely success requires ignoring key lessons from inquiry reports which have pointed to local authorities' strategies for children being hindered and compromised by Best Value budgetary constraints (Marshall, 1999). A consideration that may help explain why children continue to leave care at 16 when they are not ready to face the challenges this presents: a sharp contrast with the leaving home age of children living in the community (Sweet 16, Scottish Commission for Young People, 2008)

What can abuse inquiries into residential child care tell us about how parents are viewed?

It is now evident that the abuse of children and young people in residential child care has been widespread, has had a remarkable longevity and is not confined to historical accounts (Stein, 2006; Crimmens and Pitts, 2000; Frizzell, 2009). Yet there remain serious gaps in the literature on risks associated with children and young people who are looked after in residential child care (Barry, 2007). One of those gaps is a consideration of why the parents of children who are accommodated away from home are not considered as a protective factor in the lives of their children. The marginalization of parents in this vital respect is an inescapable conclusion by their conspicuous absence in most seminal Inquiry Reports.

Within The 'Pindown'⁸ report parents are absent from the recommendations and the general report. Kirwood's Inquiry⁹ into Leicester County Council's residential services does not acknowledge any role for parents in the conclusion and recommendations, yet in the evidence to the Inquiry it is clear that a number of parents where the initial source of disclosure of abuse or the initial source of complaint (pp. 77, 257, 311) inadvertently highlighting their potential role as 'whistleblowers'. The Report also recognizes that protection from outside scrutiny existed by controlling the visits of parents, field social workers and management officers who all had to make

⁸ Levey, a. and Kahan, B. (1992) *The Pindown Experience and the Protection of Children*, The Report of Staffordshire Child Care Inquiry

⁹ Kirwood, A. (1993) *The Leicester Inquiry 1992*, Leicester County Council 1993.

appointments. In a similar vein the Waterhouse Inquiry¹⁰ revealed that while many of the residents understood that they could complain to a parent, they perceived the disincentive to do so to be numerous and substantial (p.22). The children's isolation was complete by transferring those who were 'difficult' to a remote establishment cut off from their families (p.57). Yet despite these revelations the role of parents is consigned to a discussion of how information regarding how complaints are managed (p.217) and in the comments relating to safeguards the role of parents is omitted.

Inquiry Reports which have featured Scottish provision have better acknowledged parents but have been far from inclusive when it comes to recommendations. The Marshall Report¹¹ highlighted that some children had no real outside links with their parents (p.29) and that parents offered an external protective role as 'sometimes the person trusted...will be the child's parents. Even inadequate and/or difficult parents can sometimes be the child's most trusted confidantes' (p.66). The report makes no reference to poverty, inequality or disadvantage, factors which have typically formed the background to the 'inadequate or difficult' parents. Concerns were nevertheless highlighted regarding the standard of written information for parents (p.122) and that children should be told on admission that should they be concerned about their safety they should inform their parents (p.186) who should also be familiar with the complaints procedure (p.204). However, the role for parents is marginalized within this report in contrast to the weighting given to the role and the responsibilities of the corporate parent. One of which is, of course, to work in partnership with parents.

Despite the acknowledgement of a role for parents within the Marshall Inquiry, such considerations were not built on in the most recent Inquiry into abuse in residential care. The Kerelaw Report¹² does make reference to parents right to contribute to care planning (p.27) and the duty of external managers to talk and listen to parents as part of a monitoring strategy (ibid). That is where considerations end, despite evidence emerging where parents were instrumental in ensuring that complaints and allegations were followed up (p.86). The Report other than the use of the term poverty in an academic quote, makes no reference to poverty, inequality or disadvantage, factors which have typically formed the background to the children who were abused. The Report concludes by stating that the Inquiry would take into account the legal and regulatory framework which was operating in Kerelaw at the time (p.150), but the legal

¹⁰ Waterhouse, R., Le Fleming, M. and Clough, M. (2000). *Lost in Care: Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd*. London: The Stationary Office.

¹¹ Marshall, K., Jamieson, C. and Finlayson, A. (1999) *Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care*. Edinburgh: The Stationary Office.

¹² Scottish Government/Glasgow City Council (2009) *Independent Inquiry into Abuse at Kerelaw Residential School and Secure Unit*. Edinburgh: Crown Copyright.

requirement to work in partnership with parents appears to have been overlooked in this process.¹³

Conclusion

The intention of this paper is to make a small contribution to the discussion about the experiences of parents whose children are looked after away from home. Social work providers in Scotland are currently required to examine our professional identity against a background which emphasises the need to effect 'transformational change' principally through greater accountability to service users through the medium of partnership approaches (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.2, 25). In the most recent Report into residential child care in Scotland¹⁴ this approach is further endorsed with the recognition that there was limited engagement with parents in the compilation of the report and that this 'reflects a need for all agencies to consider how to seek and gain parental participation' (p.8).

In order to do move forward in this respect, there is a need for all of us involved in social work, in whatever capacity, to improve the position parents typically find themselves in. This incorporates strategic considerations and a preparedness to change our attitudes. An increase in the commitment to including parents in research investigations should be dovetailed with locating the findings in regulatory frameworks¹⁵ designed to review and measure the quality of service provision against national care standards and Quality Themes and Statements¹⁶ which more explicitly capture the legislative requirements to work in partnership with parents – whenever this in the child or young person's best interests. There is no evidence that partnership with parents has failed, yet the evidence is plentiful that the corporate parent has frequently failed children, young people and their parents.

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January 26, 2010.

¹³ Neither the Marshall nor the Kerelaw report consider ethnicity. While the Marshall Report preceded the duties arising out of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 introduced ethnicity as an important recognition of children in need.

¹⁴ National Residential Child Care Initiative (2009) *Higher Aspirations, Brighter Futures: National Residential Child Care Initiative Overview Report*. University of Strathclyde Glasgow: SIRCC.

¹⁵ The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act, 2001(asp 8)

¹⁶ Scottish Executive (2003) National Care Standards: care homes for children and young people.

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