Participant: Teacher

Title: How do foster carers and teachers attribute the challenging behaviour of Looked after children?

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Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant T1 (P)

Age: 50

Sex: M

Teacher Role: SENCo

Years experience: 10 years SENCO, 25 years Teaching

I: Ok, so I do have a couple of boring questions to get out of the way first if that’s ok, so are you able just to tell me how long you’ve been in the role, I guess teaching experience or how much experience you’ve had with Looked after children and also your age as well if possible.

P: Yep, so I’ve been here 25 years, been SENCo for about the last 10 and DSL for about 8/9 years. 50, and I’ve had quite a lot of experience with Looked After Children, personally and professionally.

I: Ok great, gosh, so it sounds like you’ve been here for a long time, know the school really well?

P: And a lot of parents and family yeah so, I know and a lot of the professionals and external agencies that we deal with.

I: Oh great. So, I think if we could start off at least with, if I could ask you to try and focus or think about one child in particular that might stand out as either, because they’ve been a more recent experience or because you knew them really well, and just to start off by describing them really.

P: Ok so there’s the last year we had 2 brothers one in year 3 one in year 1, they left us at the end of last year, and we had them since they started here. Lots of issues in terms of family they had siblings and they went into care a year before that, but I’d know the family since they started because of the safeguarding issues, and, they were exhibiting a lot of different behaviours, so we had one, the eldest sibling was, he was in year 3 end of year 3 when he left, he was exhibiting really extreme behaviours in year 2 and then in year 3 so coming up to key stage 2. The younger sibling was exhibiting different behaviour in that he was very quiet, so he was selective mute, so there was a big discrepancy between the two brothers. And a lot of the initial support went in with the older sibling because he seemed to have the greater need he was more obvious on a day to day basis. Whereas by the time that they both left actually they were getting very similar support, but the older sibling was very challenging behaviour.

I: Yeah ok, it sounds like, with the two siblings, especially the fact that they’ve got two slightly different presentations it might be interesting to explore those two a little bit if that’s ok.

P: Yeah

I: So, shall we start with the eldest? So, you described extremely challenging behaviour, what are we talking about?

P: Ok, so initially it was disengagement, disrupting lessons, so eventually he was going to, he was biting himself, scratching himself, hitting his head on the desk, then he started to hide under tables, if confronted or tried to engage he would then start throwing things, shouting erm, running out of class, so it was quiet extreme on a day to day basis. He had a one to one TA that we the school have funded, he hadn’t got an education health care plan at that point, purely to keep himself and other people safe, and because we didn’t want him to be excluded because he needed that attachment with us he needed that security. He did have a lot of internal exclusions, so he was always taken out and given time out daily. Couldn’t make attachments, so friendships were volatile, he didn’t trust anyone, yeah, it was difficult to say the least, and we had to team-teach him a few times.

I: And, when those behaviours were occurring, what was the understanding I guess, either from yourself or from the school as to why...

P: Ok so a little bit of background family information was that, so home life was really bad really poor, parents were very volatile towards each other and the children, there were four children, his two younger siblings, sisters, were taken into care separately so he did see them but very irregular, he had limited contact with mum and dad initially when he was taken into foster care, and then there was a lot of work done to try and get him back to mum. Mum initially agreed, so at the end of Year 2 in the summer term around about this time last year, no the year before last, he was told that he was going to go back to mum and mum was going to have him back with his brother. And then over the summer, and so he left here officially left in the July, and then when we came back in September he reappeared and it was because mum had met up with another partner and moved abroad and hadn’t told the boys so they were then told that that had all, mum had left them again. So they reappeared and so we had to, and they of course didn’t trust a word we said then because it was like you told us we were leaving you told us we were going back to mum, so they didn’t trust anyone so that was a really difficult year when he was in year 3 because he just didn’t want to be here. In his mind he had left and he was going to live with mum, and now he was put into foster care and not seeing his sisters, didn’t make any attachments with his teachers, didn’t trust me anymore even though I’d done three years’ work with him he now didn’t believe a word I said. Erm, so he went downhill rapidly, rapidly. Yeah, he would literally fight anybody and everybody, it was just anger, anger and frustration and confusion, he just couldn’t understand, and he found out his mum was living with another man abroad and that he wouldn't see her, he was devastated. So erm, it was awful.

I: And so, you, I mean do you associate that kind of behaviours as you said with those changes that had occurred?

P: Yeah I mean initially he was very confused with what was going on within the family he was the eldest and he had witnessed some things at home and so he was like trying to deal with that side of things and not, having limited contact with mum and dad and being with the foster carer, but he was coping, he was better initially it was all much better for him, he had this more stable environment, he settled reasonably well we were quite surprised, and then it deteriorated rapidly when the family basically didn’t go through with what they said they were going to do, so yeah, it all went downhill again for another year. So that year, we were putting in place, multiple support mechanisms to try and cope which worked just about, just about.

I: Yeah ok, what sort of things...

P: So, he went to the pupil referral unit, we call it the oaks behavioural unit. He was going once a week and he went for two terms to support his emotions, virtual schools funded play therapy, he went to forest school, so he was out for a day at forest school. And then we funded a bit more play therapy and support for him. Family resilience were involved with the parents initially but they didn’t engage, then we had lots of we had some ed psych support put in for him here, and a 1:1 For the whole year we paid for because he was going to get excluded otherwise and long term that wasn’t going to help him at all. So, we also provided before and after school club for him funded by the school which gave him some, well he was being fed and he had some social engagement with his peers so, that’s basically what we tried to do for him for that year. We knew that eventually he would go to be permanently placed, which he was, with his younger brother, they went together so that was good.

I: Erm, and how do you, so you talked about a lot of the support that was then put in place, how much of that support do you think was, I guess, contingent almost on the fact that this boy was a looked after child as opposed to being just another pupil in the school.

P: We, we’ve done that with other children as well, similar looked after children similar sort of processes. Erm, I mean he was definitely a lot more going on and social services were quite good actually because they realised that what they’d done initially was they put a system in place so they worked towards that goal, I mean mum let us all down, and obviously the children, but everything was working to a plan, really really well, so we were all going, seemed to be heading in the same direction. And so initially that although that structure wasn’t just us it was social services and the team, were speaking fairly regularly and almost weekly on the phone, discussing how things were going and whether things were working. The big flip was when mum didn't take the children back and that turned everything on its head really. I mean at that point we had to, we realised as a school we had to intervene and do something drastic really, because there was no way this child was going to stay in education if we didn’t. So the head and I, she does the DSL job with me, because we’d been to all the meetings, we just said, look, we’ve got to find some money from somewhere to support this family, and so that was something that she went to the governors, and we went above and beyond what we needed to do really, but erm, initially they were saying, social services were saying it would be like a by Christmas we’d probably get them a family, and it took them a whole year so financially it killed us but you can’t take it away once you’ve put it in place, so yeah.

I: And what about, kind of on a day to day basis in terms of understanding the behaviour and how that behaviour was responded to, how much do you think your understanding of what was causing that behaviour impacted on how it was managed or did it or didn’t it.

P: Erm, so, the reason we did the breakfast club was initially so that we could have touch base with both the boys and gauge what sort of day we were going to have that day, because you could tell as soon as they walked through the door. So, by being at breakfast club it meant that one of us could just have a chat and tell “what did you do last night?”, how, just show them a bit of time really and interest, regain that trust. In terms of day to day, it was just building that relationship with adults and then coming up with strategies, so we employed the one to one specifically to support him, that was their total aim, and we had a structure in place in terms of if this happens then you do this, if he does this then do this so there was a massive plan. We used to use this room for, it was his room, so if he needed time out, he had his own laptop and he had his books, and everything was up here so he could just be alone and let off steam and talk about whatever he needed to talk about. He used to, the sorts of things he did that was quite bizarre really the impact it was having on him. He used to walk around with an atlas, and the reason – we didn’t realise what it was initially – it was just his favourite book, and we worked out that he was trying to work out where mum the island that mum was was in the Caribbean where it was, and how he could get there, he was trying to plot a way of getting to see mum, because she told him that she was on holiday there summer holiday, and she’s still there so, he was thinking right, holiday, I’ve been on holiday before I can work out where that country is in an atlas – he was quite a bright lad – so he erm, that’s why he did it, he walked around permanently looking and googling and very fixated on that. So that’s the sort of behaviour he used to have, and things like birthdays Easter Christmas, any of those key dates, he would really really find difficult.

I: What was your understanding of why those would be tricky?

P: Well it just triggered, it just triggered memories of things. When he saw dad, he saw dad every fortnight and every weekend, and every Monday after was always a trigger, so we used to come back and know that he would respond in some form, it was going to come out in some form either rage or frustration or lots of questions. He couldn’t understand why he could see dad, but then couldn't see dad for two weeks. Dad sometimes let him down and that used to be a trigger for him when his dad didn’t turn up. Seeing his younger siblings, he was quite worried about safety, whether they were safe and ok because they were a lot younger than him. His little brother was a year or so below and they used to see each other daily he’s very protective. But fortunately, they were placed together so that was good.

I: Yeah, ok. Erm, lets switch and talk about the younger one then. So, you said that some of his behaviours were more, so selective mute, maybe more internalising –

P: Introvert

I: Yeah, so tell me a little bit about that little one.

P: Yeah so, he didn’t talk. He was ok, in early years and then he went up to year one and then literally went into his shell, very very very quiet, very morose, very sad, frowned. Didn’t speak, so wouldn’t engage at all, went backwards in terms of academics just didn’t want to engage. The older one was very more the dominant child, and so when they went into foster care whether it was protective behaviour or not, he wanted to, I guess, he just dominated the family situation so he made the decisions for his brother, so his brother probably thought, I don’t need to engage because he’ll do everything for me. So, he just sat back and let everyone else do it. You know, he wouldn’t talk so he would just shrug or nod or he would just - he regressed right back. Eventually he did start, some some emotion did come out, but it tended to be negative, he did lash out, he did get cross, again he wouldn’t verbalise why, the older one would, he could tell you. Yeah. Just he did have a speech and language problem as well the younger sibling, initially, ironically did have a speech and language support by a speech and language therapist when he was in early years ad year 1. But erm, he just went backwards to the point he didn’t speak.

I: And erm how did, how did those behaviours and your understanding of that impact what support was then put in place for that.

P: Well, there was a lot of issues regarding safeguarding on that one as well because they were concerned about why, what had happened in the home environment because he wasn’t able to tell us, or wasn’t willing to speak, so was he internalising all of that, in terms of making sense of what he’s witnessed. The older one was very vocal, erm, I just think it was the way that he was trying to deal with it in his brain really.

I: What’s you...because it’s really interesting that they've both experienced the same things kind of growing up but have responded in seemingly very different ways in terms of behaviours. How do you make sense of that?

P: Right, well the older one was the apple of dad’s eye and every meeting that we ever had he only talked about that child, the other three he didn’t, it wasn’t even on his register, it was like everything revolved around the eldest child and he was like obviously the first born, and he, you know dad: “he’s fantastic”. He never spoke about the other three. And I think there was a bit of an element of that that he was the favoured one, the favourite, and I think because he was older that dad did more with him, and I think that the younger boy was just a forgotten child in the whole equation, because he was just quiet and didn’t rock the boat and wasn’t disruptive at home, was just forgotten about really in the whole scheme of things. I mean as a school we were almost guilty of that to start with because the main emphasis was clearly this child who was desperate to get attention, who was doing everything in their power to be noticeable, whereas the other one was just a grey child who just sat in the back, got on quietly, didn’t really engage with any of that. Didn’t witness half the things the older sibling had at home. So, when, as far as we were aware because he weren’t able to vocalise but as far as we could piece together from social services the older child was very much aware of a lot of the things at home, whereas the younger one possibly wasn’t quite aware of as much. So, I think the impact yeah was clear to see from the older sibling. He was disclosing things.

I: I mean, potentially impossible question to answer here but I’m just curious about your thoughts on how much of the differences that you were seeing were due to as you said some of those things that were happening in the home environment that were very different and how much of that is just who they are in terms of being slightly different personalities or temperaments, yeah if you have any thoughts about that.

P: Erm I think, it had a lot to do with what they saw at home. I don’t think there was that significant a difference in their personalities I just think the experiences that the eldest child had seen were extremely damaging in terms of the relationship that he had with his parents and also long term with anybody really, I think the younger one was witness to, I think, semi-protected by his brother, at home and long-term for even now I imagine that he would be dominating, trying to protect his younger brother. I think at home, the older sibling was definitely more the impact was greater definitely at home, and even the parents have sort of acknowledged that, so I guess it’s difficult to put a number on, but I recon significant difference was the home life and what they had at home, because the younger siblings, and I didn’t know too much about them because they weren’t here but we obviously knew a bit of the information, there was even less impact potentially on them.

I: Ok, ok that’s interesting.

P: And they were two girls.

I: Yeah yeah, ok. Erm, you mentioned a specific example earlier in terms of contact having, being almost, that you’ve been able to draw kind of that correlation between that if they go to contact there tends to be a bit of a fall out. Were there any other kinda specific examples or either a specific behaviour where you could kinda attribute it, so saying oh well this thing happened last night, or oh they’ve responded this way because this happened at home, yeah, I don’t know if there are any other ones...

P: Yeah massively, I mean initially when we were first having some of the child protection and child in need meetings the erm, in hindsight at the time we saw triggers of emotions here and then the parents finally admitted to various events happening, so mums behaviour at home, the volatile relationship between mum and dad that came out when the police reports came out that the domestic violence etc, tied in with the behaviour we saw the following day or the following week at school. Yeah, I’m trying to give, I’m trying to think of specific things.... yeah, erm, definitely, definitely, erm contact with dad. Mum withdrew them from school at one point and went off to London and they became missing in education. [interruption in the office]. The erm, yeah definitely contact, and as I said mum took them off to London and they were missing in education and that had a significant impact when they did return because she brought them back here to school, and that that really shook them up...

I: Yeah, how long was that for?

P: About two weeks, she was put in like a hostel care place with them, and got thrown out because she broke the rules that she was supposed to adhere to, so she had nowhere to go so she came back to the family home, but she only took the two boys, she left the two girls, and then dads behaviour towards the boys was, he, he tried threatening to run off with them, or well the eldest, he was only going to take the eldest and he told him that, and that had a significant impact on him as well.

I: In a negative...

P: Yeah, well again its promises promises and the you know it’s never going to happen, safety wise.

I: So was it kind of the, I’m just wondering was it the promise of it that caused the behaviour in terms of the uncertainty or was it that it didn’t happen?

P: A bit of both, dad, the problem with contact was, well initially the problem between the two parents was that they were using the children as a weapon between each other, so they would accuse each other of doing things and then almost prime certainly the eldest child to try and back that up. He was clever enough to know that some of it wasn’t necessarily right and dad towards the end when mum was trying to get custody and dad wasn’t and he was having contact, he was using, he was, social services were really concerned that he was using the contact time to erm, I dunno, I wouldn’t say brain wash, but certainly influence the way the children were towards their mother. And erm, at that point they split the contact so the boys didn’t see their dad together, they were seen separately and under very close supervision, because again coming back the following day or a few weeks after or days after, the eldest, was really saying some really strange things which we had to feed back to social services, about what dad was telling him to do or say. And my dad said I can do this, or my dad said we’re going to do this and it was all not going to happen, it just wasn’t true, and that was just feeding that mistrust and confusion and we had a lot of issues to do with that, so contact went from I think it was almost weekly to start with and then it went fortnightly and then eventually it was almost monthly or every two months towards the end because they just thought this isn’t this just isn’t healthy.

I: Ok, great, thank you. I just have one final question if that’s alright just to wrap up. I guess it takes a slightly different tact but just to think about, or if you have an example of a nice or a more positive memory or experience of the boys in school or something.

P: Yeah I guess absolutely the difference between them from when they were first taken into care to when they left and the relationship they had with their foster carers was massive, and the change in their life from I mean right – admittedly it all went slightly wrong in the middle, but, sort of took a few steps back – but when they left us they were in a far better place the work we did with the adopters or the permanent foster carers and the next school was massive we did an awful lot of transition work so they had a lot of meetings and they came here, and I spoke to the foster carers and they did school visits and we did a lot of work to try and help them through the transition and that was really really positive, so I was more than happy when they moved on, I was more than happy that it was going to be a much more huge positive step forward for them. So, we brought them presents and we planted a tree, they’ve got a tree in the field across there. We went out the week before they left and they planted a tree and I said that’s their tree and they can come back and see it whenever they wanted, so that’s still there, so it was very positive. So erm, what we were going to do, the end of this year was to send them a picture of their tree so they can see how much its grown, and a “hope you’re doing ok”, so yeah that was really positive.

I: Ahh yeah that sounds really nice. Ok, thank you. Is there anything else you wanted to share in particular?

P: No, I don’t think so no, we haven't got any with us at the moment, which is unusual because usually we do but we haven’t got any at the moment. Which is unusual.

I: Ok, thank you.