Participant: T2

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

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Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant T2 (P)

Age: 48

Sex: F

Teacher Role and Years: Currently Deputy Head (1 year); PRU teacher (10 years).

I: Great, so, first if we could start off with just with how long you’ve been in the role and your experience working with looked after children, and also I need your age as well if that’s alright?

P: that’s fine, So previous to this role, I’m currently deputy head at [School] but previous to that I worked at the primary pupil referral unit for 10 years, so from 2008 to 2018 as a teacher and then as a teacher in charge of one of the sites, and also was DSL of all three sites. So, we worked with a variety of looked after children at the PRU, obviously the role at the PRU is quite dynamic so you would get children coming in on a part time basis for like a two-term placement and then you would get children that have been permanently excluded or permanently placed with you until we could find the next appropriate setting. So my most recent work was the last academic year with a boy who was adopted but had been removed from his adoptive parents and have been placed with a short term foster carer, so he was with us while he was in short-term foster care which was probably spanning – October, to about the July – so about 9 months. And then at the end of the last academic year had a place ready in a more permanent foster placement, in a different location. So that was my most recent experience. I’m 48, does that help?

I: Yes thank you. Yes so actually that would be, obviously you’ve got experience working with lots of children but I think its quite useful in this context to be able to focus more on one, so it sounds like that might be an easy one to draw upon. So lets start off with then, just describing the child really, who they are, what they were like, and we’ll just go from there.

P: Ok, so he had been placed form the north of the county into the south of the county in the school, he was immediately referred to the PRU having been placed and this was once he’d been removed from his parents and he’d was in a brand new school, so his whole, his whole part of his life had just completely changed. So within a week of being placed at the new school he was referred due to very violent aggressive behaviour. As a PRU we picked him up straight away, he came to us 3 days a week with two days in mainstream, and that’s quite rare, normally you’d pick them up for one day a week, so immediately to go to three showed the level of behaviour. School at several points along the way thought about permanent exclusion because of his behaviour, we quickly came to the conclusion that within mainstream he needed on to one he needed to be away from the class, and then when he was, so he was three days at the start of the week with us and then two days at the end of the week at his mainstream setting. As part of that package, so throughout the process then school then provided us with his teaching assistant to be at the PRU three days a week so he had the same teaching assistant throughout, so that really worked, that was some consistency for him. We also, towards the end of the experience where it was becoming more and more difficult, timetable reduced slightly within schools, so pupils can go onto a reduced timetable, and then we started to look at alternative provisions so by the end of the week, on the Friday he was accessing like a horse therapy-type sessions so all this did feed into like a full-time education but it was like an alternative type of education.

I: and so, talk to me a little bit about the types of behaviours that you were seeing.

P: Erm, physical violence but mainly towards himself, becoming aggressive, shouting, threatening to throw chairs, storming off, refusal to do what you requested, yeah, very high-level attacking other, going to physical attack other children, verbal aggression, use of extreme language, swearing, the most extreme forms of swearing you can imagine. Yeah, high-level behaviour for a PRU, so in a PRU you’re used to that sort of level and he displayed, especially when he first started because his whole life turned upside basically, a new place to live, you know, being taken away from his adoptive parents who had been through a large process to get to where they were. He had also been separated from his brother, so he was adopted with his natural brother, his brother stayed with his adoptive parents, and he had been moved.

I: do you, was behaviour part of why that happened?

P: yeah I think so, there had been a disclosure at the previous setting, if you see what I mean, and he was the one that....

I: Gosh, that’s hard.

P: Really hard, yeah.

I: Ok, so, when you were seeing those sorts of behaviours, what was your understanding of where they were coming from and why?

P: I mean, we’re very aware at the PRU that all behaviour is a form of communication, so he just need to tell people and he was testing our boundaries and seeing where we were. He needed to know he was in a safe and secure environment. So we would ensure that that was, we had a quiet room and trained staff. I don’t believe we ever held him, so within the PRU we were trained to physical restrain if necessary. I don’t think we ever did because we all perceived that that wouldn’t be appropriate for him. It was used as part of the, you know that could happen, he would find that even the use of the quiet room he didn’t like being in a small enclosed space. Not that the door would ever be closed because that’s not, you cant seclude, the door would be open, but the actual physicality so he would often do that in a larger learning space while the other pupils would be in the classroom so you would have to navigate where would be best for him. Yeah, consistent approach of voice, of all saying the same thing, the se of his TA coming over to us was great because she could then tie in both settings as well so he knew that across each setting it was...

I: ...there was an element of consistency.

P: yeah, giving him time to come round and not expecting him to do an A4, you know the learning you cant expect the children to learn when they’re in such trauma so it was just giving hi experiences, so outdoor learning, games, puzzles, time to talk if he needed, but that didn’t, he dint always want to so giving him opportunities to do things that would benefit him. So the alternative provision was a good way of going into that.

P: you mentioned, just then about the, what you can feasibly expect of a child who has experienced that level of trauma, how much do you think you’re understanding of his background, his experiences, impacted on how, I guess his behaviour was managed or his schooling was managed compared to I guess other children who were in the PRU?

P: Yeah definitely you’d be extremely mindful of that within the PRU , you would always be aware that, cause he started off in the mainstream school and you know they’re expecting him to do what everybody else was doing so we had many meetings about what the expectations were in the small nuggets of...because he was a very able child, but obviously with what he’d been through he could not access or couldn’t process the things that I say a mainstream school would be offering to that aged pupil. Yeah, he wasn’t, he did access a lot of the work, but we were very careful in how we approached that. And the work in a PRU is very different to a mainstream setting anyway, the groups are much smaller.

I: Yeah, how much of the just the environment of the PRU do you think made a difference compared to...

P: Yeah hugely, compared to his behaviour in mainstream, especially at the start, mainstream were very much – they wanted us to have him full time but we needed some form of, you’re still in that school, you cant be rejected again, see what I mean? So the fact that we had the use of the TA, the school started to put in a separate curriculum, yeah we worked closely with them and had lots of meetings about how to support him as well.

I: do you think...where do you think the school, mainstream schools, understanding of his behaviour?

P: I think because we’d worked with them previously they got it and I think the headteacher was pivotal in that because she’d worked at a variety of schools, we knew her really well I think some schools wouldn’t have acted in the same way, so I think they were amazing in how they worked with him and offered and offered the TA and offered all the opportunities – when he started to do the alternative provision the head would go with him – they put everything in for this pupil, which was, that wouldn’t have happened in...you know we serve the whole of Buckinghamshire as a PRU and for some schools that may not have happened.

I: Yeah...

P: So I think you have to you have to have a very knowledge and experienced and tolerant headteacher because obviously they’re aware of the reaction of all their other children that they have a duty of care to, so if pupil B is being whacked on the head by a chair, you know, that parent is going to be clearly wanting some form of consequence for that pupil, so school had to manage that extremely carefully.

I: Yeah that is a very hard challenge I think for schools, that however much they might want to do for one pupil, they do have lots of other pupils, it’s a hard balancing act in that respect. Ok, can we, can I ask you to think about like one particular example of an incident that might have happened at school of challenging behaviour and just kind of of talk me through what happened and what was going before that you think might have led to it...

P: I think a lot of, a pattern of behaviour would be outdoor play, so that was ok, you were in small groups of 6, with sort of two or three adults out there. He would often fin d that hard if he perceived that there was a wrong doing or an injustice. So very much ASD traits, I think there was a diagnosis towards the end but we didn’t have that at the start of the process. All of the agencies got involved and that was sort of one of the outcomes. So if there was an injustice outside, wouldn’t be able to cope would go to hit or do something to that pupil and then immediately have to be inside, and would then need the time to be you know, swearing angry with himself, but would just need that time... so he would repeat the “you need to calm down, you need s=to sit down, I’ll be here if you need me” but you wouldn’t push, you know if we’re in that red mist we’re not going to get anywhere, so its just providing those abstract sort of boundaries that you’re in this space you can do what you need but you’re not to go beyond that, so verbally you would be reassuring but not pushing as to why have you done that, you would just park that. So once we’d calmed down you’d then see if we could go back into the lesson, or often an apology, and that didn’t happen for a long time. He couldn’t do that at all, but the times, but that could take up to an hour and hour and a half when those things happened that would be a whole lesson gone if that happened at break time. But over time those coming down times got less and less and less and he would then start and you’d start to get an apology and start to get something, but that, initially those outbursts were huge and lengthy and upsetting for other children involved, but...

I: What’s your understanding of the, I guess, both the fact that it took so long for the de-escalation I guess at the start, but also that that did decrease over time, I guess what’s your...

P: I suppose to start with his world was in turmoil, so he would just be angry at everything and didn’t know how to cope with everyday events, so would react in that way. And I suppose because then over time he knew the staff he had the same staff he had the same physical space the same way we’d speak to him all of those things would then become it would gradually get better for him and as he started to process what had happened to him as well, because by then we’d got social workers involved, we were having you know, work done with him, so over time the fact that all that was coming together enabled him to be able to work through those things, but initially it would have been the complete trauma of school and home and the issue that had led to where he’d got to. Because there were also times when the foster carer who we’d known form previous students as well so we knew this foster carer, there were times when she almost said I cant, I cant have him, so you know there was respite for her and there were weekends with respite carers to support her, but as I say she was an amazing person but even she almost got to the point where she couldn’t quite deal with where he was at, so he was an extremely...

I: ok, and I just wondering about you mentioned earlier I think that you , I guess as a school, as a service that actually the use of more like physical restraint and handling actually wasn’t necessarily going to be appropriate in this case for this young child. What’s the, what was your thinking behind that decision, and then also how did you mange him without the use of that technique if that’s a technique that would more typically be used in the setting?

P: I think we knew because of what he’d been through that that wouldn’t be appropriate, due to you just know with some children, due to sort of early trauma and hence why he’d been initially in care and then adopted and then in care again. Erm, he would flinch if you went near him even in a productive caring way he couldn’t cope with that at all, so that’s the reasons why that didn’t happen. What was the second point again?

I: how you did manage those behaviours, maybe the example...

P: I think just by giving sort of clear instructions and being very you know you do all the normal sort of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, or this will be the consequence or, there were times when you know one of the consequences would be at the end of the day he’d find it hard to go home to the foster carer at the end of the day and if he wasn’t in the right space we’d cancel the taxi and then either we would take him home when he was calm or ask the carer to come and get him, so he knew that they were sort of our consequences and we followed through with that not often because by then he knew that that would happen. And again we knew that we could follow through with that so that’s quite common that you would so if they’re not ready to go in a taxi by themselves you cant put the taxi driver at risk so we between us as a staff time would go and drop off and do that in our own vehicles, so he knew that by alternative means that the consequences were in place. And I think he knew from the initial huge elements of violence, you know he’d seen us then – evacuates too strong a word – but you know move the children into a different area, and I think at times he was possible scared about what he own behaviour could lead to, he’s extremely strong, only a small lad but you know when they’re absolutely pent up with adrenaline and an extremely strong child, so would do things and then I think then afterwards be quite shocked as to what he’d broken or you know the consequences of what he’d done. So, but yeah, it was just through being really consistent and then with then whole staff team, you know ,we had a behaviour plan which most of the children would have anyway, but ensuring that all staff would be following the same routines and saying the same things, erm, and knowing that he had key people that he could talk to and try the escalation but you’d know that that needed to be done at the right time.

I: thank you, I think I just have one final question which is I guess maybe on a slightly different tact, but if you have a particular example or erm, memory of a positive time with this child at school, so something that kind of stands out maybe.

P: Yeah, I think, towards the end, so several things, so the horse therapy worked really well. And I didn’t see him there but the feedback was that he was amazing, you know and it wasn’t just horses, it was like a farm so there were different animals so knowing that being calm keeps the dog calm or the animals calm, and it was the TA that went with him who worked at the PRU and other members of the mainstream staff, but that was great. And then also towards the end he was able to have a birthday party and invite PRU children along to the birthday party, and that would never have happened, you know in October, so the fact that he’d built on those friendships, and also he got on fabulously, he got on much better with the younger children than his peers, so the older ones and he fell into that upper key stage two age range, he would have, there would be more conflict with those because they were probably closer to his own age, whereas the younger ones he would nurture and play with and want to, which, is quite common in PRU children to be honest because that’s where they can find their feet as it were and its not a threat. The other pupils they’re not an immediate threat in that sense – that doesn’t sounds right – but do you know what I mean.

I: Yeah I know what you mean.

P: the fact they can sort of buddy up with somebody and play, and also play much younger games with them and that’s ok because I’m with a five year old whereas actually they probably miss that early play particularly looked after children so they need, they need the power rangers and the whatever the dolls, and the really early play that they didn’t get and that gives them an excuse, that actually fees into their process of sort of overcoming what they’ve been through as well. So yeah, can think of a specific but there’s sort of elements of bits that were sort of positive towards the end.

I: No, it does sound it, definitely. Ok, thank you. Is there anything else, any particular thoughts that you wanted to share?

P: I don’t think so, no, hopefully that was...

I: No that was great, in that case, I’ll turn this off.