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An exploration of professional and practice-based perspectives on supporting birth parents towards reunification with their children.

Susan O' Connor Funcheon

Dundalk Institute of Technology, susan.funcheon@dkit.ie

Eavan Brady

Trinity College Dublin, bradye3@tcd.ie

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Abstract

An exploration of professional and practice-based perspectives on supporting birth parents towards reunification with their children.

When children are placed in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care; hereafter ‘care’), it is the State’s duty to work with the children’s birth parents and ensure that systems and supports are in place to enable parents to resume caring for their children (i.e. for *reunification* to take place), when it is in the best interest of the child to do so. In Ireland, there is a dearth of data, research, policy and practice guidance regarding the process of reunification. There is also limited research on the experiences of birth parents whose children are in care in Ireland. This paper draws on data gathered as part of a study of professional and practice-based perspectives on reunification of children in care in Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 respondents from various professional backgrounds including social workers and social care workers. . In this paper, we examine the perspectives of participants regarding how birth parents might be better supported to work towards reunification.

Findings suggest there is limited scope to work with and support parents of children in care in the current system. More focus is required to ensure parents are informed of their rights and empowered to remain present in the lives of their children and to work towards reunification. Suggestions are also made for exploration of a specialised service or team, as in other jurisdictions, to work with parents to promote family reunification.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that parents play a critical role in influencing their children's lives, before and after birth. Children's experience of parenting influences their behavioural, emotional, physical and cognitive wellbeing and outcomes (Connolly & Devaney, 2018). The Irish Constitution holds that the family is the primary and fundamental unit group of society. As such the State has responsibility for ensuring parents are supported to carry out this vital role (Connolly et al, 2017). For varied and often complex reasons, some parents are not in a position to care for their children, in some instances children are then placed in the care of the State to ensure their safety and wellbeing. When this is deemed necessary, it remains the State's responsibility to continue to support birth parents and, when possible, to enable them to resume caring for their children. Despite many developments in the Irish child protection and welfare system in recent years, the area of reunification of children in out-of-home care (hereafter 'care') and supports for birth parents of children in care, continues to receive little attention (O'Connor Funcheon & Brady, 2021). There is limited research in Ireland on the experiences of birth parents whose children are in care. This paper draws on data gathered as part of a study of professional and practice-based perspectives on the reunification process in Ireland. The experiences of those in roles connected to the reunification process including Social Workers, Guardian ad Litem, Family Support Workers, Social Care Workers and Foster Carers provide insight into the current process of reunification in Ireland¹. The findings of this study suggest that there are few supports currently available for birth parents when their children are received into care and limited resources within the child protection and welfare system to focus on working with birth parents and to explore parent and child reunification. These issues go to the heart of fundamental child and parental rights and therefore require urgent consideration for

¹ Unfortunately, due to time limitations and ethical approval it was not possible to involve care leavers or birth parents in this study. This is noted as a limitation and the authors recommend that further research is required to ascertain the voice of those with care experience and birth parents of children with care experience to inform much needed reform in policy and practice.

policy and practice. We aim to shed light on professional and practice-based perspectives regarding how birth parents might be better supported to work towards reunification. This paper will provide a background to the Irish care system, reasons why children typically come into care in Ireland and the key legislation and policy that informs practice in this critical area. This paper will also look at why the area of reunification demands attention within a child protection and welfare system that is focused on the protection of both child and parental rights. What is required in supporting birth parents of children in out-of-home care and international models for promoting parental involvement and reunification will be explored. The findings of this research are then reported under four themes complex narratives regarding birth parents, the challenge of prioritising working with birth parents, informing and empowering birth parents and opportunities to support birth parents.

Background

In Ireland, out-of-home care for children dates back to the 18th century, initially in workhouses and then by religious run orphanages. Alternative care options most commonly used across jurisdictions are general foster care, kinship or relative foster placements and residential care (UN Guidelines for Alternative Care, 2010). There has been a considerable shift in Ireland from institutional care and, in more recent times, from residential-type care towards family-based (general or relative) care placements (Gilligan, 2019; Moran et al., 2016). Internationally, Ireland now has one of the highest rates of family placements for children in care (Gilligan, 2019; Tusla, 2020); at the end of 2021, 5,860 children were in care in Ireland. Sixty-five percent (3,802) of children in care were in general foster care and a further 25% (1,475) were in relative foster care (Tusla, 2021). However, many children who go into care in Ireland tend to stay for extended periods (Tusla, 2018). Daly and Gilligan (2005) suggest that long-term foster care is a feature of the Irish care system. Moran and colleagues' (2016: 22-24) review of Irish and international literature on children in care, concluded that Irish statistics reflect international

trends and highlight the tendency for some young people to ‘drift’ in care. Internationally, however, the risks of returning children home from care without adequate preparation are well documented (Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Farmer et al, 2011; Biehal, 2007). A focus on working with and supporting birth parents is integral to the reunification process (Chambers and Colleagues, 2016; Fernandez and Lee, 2013).

Reasons children come into care

There is limited data available in Ireland as to the reasons children and young people come into care. However, statistics recorded by Tusla - the Child and Family Agency (CFA) on the primary reason for admission to care confirm that for the 5,818 children in care in Ireland at the end of 2020, 357 (6%) were in care due to physical abuse; emotional abuse was the primary reason for 438 (8%), and 147 (3%) were in care due to sexual abuse. The most significant reasons for admission to care was neglect, accounting for 2,677 (46%), and welfare concerns accounting for 2,199 (38%) (Tusla, 2020)². In 2013, the Child Care Law Reporting Project (CCLRP) was established, to promote transparency and accountability in child care proceedings in Ireland (Coulter, 2014), which had been almost non-existent up to that point (O’ Mahony et al., 2012). Based on observations in district courts Coulter and colleagues (2015) notes that parental mental health or disability, parental drug or alcohol misuse, parental absence or death, domestic violence, child risk-taking behaviour, trafficking or abandonment were typically cited as reasons for children being placed in the care of the State. Although limited, this data suggests that in Ireland, as in other jurisdictions, it is rarely the case that children are placed in out-of-home care for a single reason; issues are often multifaceted, interlinked and complex (Delfabbro et al, 2013; Fernandez and Lee, 2013; Harwin et al, 2012; Farmer et al, 2011; Choi and Ryan, 2007). These findings arguably highlight the need for

² The breakdown of stats for 2021 are not currently available.

extensive and varied supports for birth parents of children in care, if they are to be a positive presence in their children's lives and, where appropriate, safely resume the care of their children.

Key Legislation and Policy

The Irish Constitution recognises the family as the fundamental unit of society and guarantees to protect the 'inalienable and imprescriptible rights' of parents and families (Article 41). The right of a child to be cared for by their own family and the right of parents to care for their children are fundamental human rights (Coulter et al, 2015). These rights are guaranteed in various international conventions. There is also a constitutional presumption that the welfare of the child is best provided for within the family (Ward, 2014: 54). The Child Care (CC) Act, 1991 s3(2)(c) explicitly outlines the CFA's responsibility to 'have regard to the principle that it is generally in the best interests of a child to be brought up in his own family' and outlines the State's responsibility to provide support to parents and families to facilitate this s3 (2).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) described as the 'most important international instrument on the treatment of children' (Kilkelly, 2012:30), makes extensive provision for the family, also acknowledging that when possible the best place for children to grow up is within their family and the interconnected and interdependent nature of children, parents and families (Kilkelly, 2008). Article 18 of the UNCRC also emphasises parents' right to supports from the state in fulfilling their responsibilities to their child/ren. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) outlines that the removal of a child should be of a temporary nature and efforts should be made to reunite parents with children, when in the best interest of the child to do so (Burns et al, 2017).

Whilst the rights of birth parents and children have gained due recognition in recent times in accordance with existing legislation and policy, rhetoric can often be somewhat disconnected from lived experiences (O' Mahony et al, 2016a; Coulter, 2015). The Child Care Law Reporting Project (CCLRP) has reported 'considerable' variations and inconsistencies in the application of the law in relation to birth parents in Ireland. The aim of this paper is to outline professional and practice-based perspectives regarding the support needs of birth parents in relation to reunification; an under-examined area in the context of research, policy and practice (O'Connor Funcheon & Brady, 2021).

Reunification

For children who are in out-of-home or alternative care placements, the key objective both morally and legally of child protection and welfare systems is reunification (Esposito 2014; Farmer, 2014; Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Pine et al, 2009). Reunification can take different forms and has been understood as a continuum which can include the return of children to their family of origin on a full-time basis. Where this is not in the best interest of the child the aim is to help children and families achieve their optimal level of connection when living apart via regular visits, written or telephone contact (Maluccio et al, 1994; Warsh et al., 1994).

Existing research has examined some of the challenges in relation to identity and a sense of belonging that children who have been in care for long periods *may* experience. For example, Moran and colleagues' (2017) Irish study, involving a sample group of 506 children and young people who were in long term care between 2006 and 2013, found that difficulties regarding a sense of identity, family belonging, and family identification were commonly experienced. Other research has referred to children in care 'craving an opportunity to feel that they belong somewhere' (Skoog et al, 2015:1888). Biehal (2014) highlights that for children who have been

in care, and move between home and foster care placements making sense of where they belong is extremely complex. Instability in childhood has been shown to have a lasting impact into adulthood (Coy, 2009; Unrau et al., 2008). Kozławska and Foley (2006) and Audenaert (2010) emphasises the ‘risk of harm’ for children in alternate care in terms of long-term attachment needs and suggest this is an essential component of the clinical and legal assessment for reunification. Supporting birth parents to maintain a positive presence in their children’s lives whilst they are in care and working towards the safe resumption of their children’s care, is therefore, an area that warrants further attention.

Supporting birth parents of children in out-of-home care

As previously noted, when children are placed in care it is rarely due to one issue. Co-occurring issues within a family, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence and housing problems, negatively impact the likelihood of reunification and the speed at which it occurs (Delfabbro et al, 2013; Wade et al, 2011 and Marsh et al, 2006). Social and economic risk factors (i.e. poverty and low educational attainment) have also been found to contribute to lower reunification rates (Esposito et al, 2014; Hines et al, 2007). Research in America and Australia shows that ethnic background can impact admission to care and the probability of reunification (O’Donnell et al, 2016; Tilbury, 2009).

Thorpe (2007) reminds us that child welfare and protection practices of the last century attracted considerable criticism for the treatment of children and their families, despite what were seen as good intentions at the time. She further argues that there is a need to be cognisant of how the system of today will be viewed in years to come. Concluding that family inclusion for children in care must be promoted, not least because of the many benefits for children, families and communities. Referring to research on the lived experiences of parents as service

users, Featherstone et al, (2014) highlights that parents are often fearful and powerless in their interactions with social workers. Researching the Irish experience, Buckley et al. (2010) also found the parents experience engagement with child protection services as humiliating, intimidating, daunting and stressful. Whilst Dumbrill (2006) reports an overriding sense of powerlessness and experiences of ‘tokenistic’ involvement. Burgheim (2005) highlights the experience of loss and grief for parents of children in care; loss of child, loss of identity as a parent and a loss of meaning and purpose in one’s own life. Thompson & Thorpe (2003) caution that this grief can be misinterpreted as a lack of interest or poor motivation on the part of parents, highlighting the need for practitioners to be empathic and understanding. O’ Brien and Cregan (2015) reflect on the overriding sense of failure and disqualification for parents, which without support, can result in further deterioration for parents and the relationship they have with their children. Trust, friendliness, empathy, open-mindedness, being believed and understood and being encouraged are reported as central in the development of a positive and respectful relationship with parents and in promoting better outcomes for children and families (Buckley et al, 2007).

Factors associated with successful reunification have been outlined by several international authors. Jedwab and colleagues’ (2018) findings suggest that child and parents’ willingness and readiness to reunify; successfully addressing the initial issues that led to separation; trust; communication and an effective relationship with the caseworker are key in promoting birth parent’s involvement and promoting sustainable reunifications. Reduced caseload to allow caseworkers more time to work with parents to support reunification was also crucial. Child and parents’ contact, utilising natural supports from within the extended family and community and provision of needs-based services and support pre and post reunification were also central in adequately preparing for sustainable reunifications.

In order to work effectively with birth parents to empower them to be present and active in their children's lives and when in the child's best interest resume caring for them, it is imperative that there is an awareness of the resources, skills and commitment required in this domain of practice. As previously noted, the States obligation to support parents, is clearly outlined within an Irish legislative context. However, to date, supporting parents of children in care in Ireland, has not been prioritised and, we argue, requires urgent attention. This paper sheds some light on the perspectives of those working with children, carers, and families in relation to supporting birth parents towards reunification.

Evidence-based models for promoting parental involvement and reunification:

Research demonstrates the complexities involved in reunification practice and the many factors that may expose children to on-going risk when they return home. The risk of repeated family breakdown and subsequent returns to care, highlights the unequivocal necessity for practice to be responsive to the growing evidence-base related to reunification including the support needs of birth parents (Biehal 2007; 2014; Esposito 2014; Farmer, 2014; Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Pine et al, 2009). Some key studies have called for a more specific focus on reunification within child protection and welfare systems as a distinct practice domain with specialist workers or reunification teams (Farmer, 2014; Fernandez and Lee, 2013). Pine and colleagues (2009) suggest that the growing focus on reunification in the US has resulted in evidence-based principles and practice guidance aimed at promoting parental involvement and supports to ensure optimal outcomes for reunifying families. They carried out a five-year comprehensive evaluation of a programme specifically designed to support successful reunification in Connecticut. Their sample consisted of 135 families and 254 children. Services provided were intensive, home-based and tailored to each family's needs. The programme involved regular

parent-child visits and interventions aimed at improving parent-child relationships. Individual, couple and or family therapy was also provided as required. Pine and colleagues' (2009) research concluded that reunification was much more likely to happen and succeed if intensive, family-centred, targeted and home-based services are put in place to support families and birth parents.

Fernandez and Lee's (2013) study in Australia explored 103 caseworkers' perspectives on decisions regarding placement and reunification in Barnardo's Temporary Family Care (TFC) programme. The model focuses on establishing ongoing help and services for families so as to enable them to care safely for their children. Where reunification is not safe for a child, a plan is made for long-term foster care or adoption. Parental visits and foster carer and parental contact are included in the plan to reduce a child's feeling of separation and loss. Their study concluded that individualised needs and safety assessments prior to reunification minimised risk and harm to children and re-entries to care. The authors emphasised the importance of addressing the 'wider socio-structural context' families live in, including welfare arrangements, income support, housing, health care, childcare and parenting supports.

Esposito and colleagues (2014: 286) propose that child protection and welfare agencies must reflect on the question "are we mobilizing the needed community and agency, therapeutic and support services necessary for reunification to occur". Similarly, Fernandez and Lee (2013) argue that birth parent education is important in enhancing awareness of the impact on children of domestic violence, neglect and substance misuse. Farmer (2014: 363) concludes that "there is a need for earlier and more proactive intervention, consistent safeguarding and authoritative reunification practice". Maintaining positive links and promoting birth parent involvement is central to ensuring best practice outcomes for children in out-of-home care (Farmer, 2014; Fernandez and Lee's, 2013; Pine et al. 2009; Thompson & Thorpe, 2003). With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to gain an insight into current practice in this area and to explore

professional and practice-based perspectives on how birth parents might be better supported to remain involved in the lives of their children and where appropriate to work towards reunification. We consider a ‘rights-based’ approach as a helpful lens through which to consider this issue, given its relevance to work related to supporting the position of vulnerable populations (Grugel, 2013). The authors contend this is a critical domain of practice that requires significant review to inform policy and practice developments within the Irish child protection and welfare.

Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach to allow the researchers ‘to capture the full richness of experience’ and in-depth perspectives of research participants (Greene & Hill, 2005: 13). The first author carried out 12 semi-structured interviews with respondents from various professional and practice backgrounds, including foster carers, social workers, social care workers, legal professionals, and foster carers, to explore their experience of, and perspective on, reunification in Ireland. The researchers aimed to include those who hold, or potentially hold, key positions relevant to the reunification process in Ireland. To ensure adequate experience on the research topic (Creswell, 2013), only participants who had been in these positions for one year or more were targeted. This multidisciplinary sample provided varying perspectives and experiences, arguably offering a more comprehensive or ‘birds’ eye’ view of the current process of reunification in Ireland than would have been obtained had a single discipline been selected as the targeted sample group.

Prior to commencement of the research, ethical approval was sought and granted from the Child and Family Agency, Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited from across an urban, rural and semi-urban divide. Regional and area managers within the Child and Family

Agency were contacted and gatekeepers were subsequently identified. Gatekeepers disseminated information to prospective participants who met the following inclusion criteria:

- Practitioners who were currently working in the area of child protection and welfare within the professional and practice-based areas identified above.
- Practitioners who, on the basis of their position, are or should be, regularly involved in decision-making around reunification for a minimum of one year.

Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient to each participant. Twelve interviews were conducted in total; three of these were done via telephone due to participant availability. The remaining interviews were carried out in the participant's or the researcher's office. Interviews ranged from 38 minutes to 90 minutes, with an average length of 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead author. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify and code common themes in the raw data. This was done using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process.

Findings and Discussion

Four key themes were identified during the process of data analysis: 1) complex narratives regarding birth parents; 2) the challenge of prioritising working with birth parents; 3) informing and empowering birth parents; and 4) opportunities to support birth parents – promoting contact and an independent reunification service. These shall be discussed in detail below.

1. Complex narratives regarding birth parents

Some study participants suggested that while the central focus regarding children coming into care was on child safety, perceptions and narratives about birth parents and previous

interactions with them can impact practitioners' views/focus regarding the possibility of change and subsequent decisions or views around contact and reunification.

A GAL suggests:

"I think parents are demonised because of whatever their issues are".

Commenting on the narratives surrounding children in care, a CPC Chairperson adds:

"The kind of stories we tell about kids coming into care really enforces that there is an evil person out there that has done harm to the child"

Such views impacted a solution focused or partnership approach to working with birth parents to overcome difficulties and move towards reunification in some cases. A lack of clarity or changing expectations and issues to be addressed prior to reunification was also highlighted. A Family Support Manager referred to a mother's experience of the goal posts shifting over an eight-year period and how a constant referring back to her failings led to her believing that the children should remain in care:

"[T]he sins of the parent's past were never forgotten in the case, mum herself said because she was constantly getting a finger pointed at her, 'maybe I'm not able to take them, maybe I'm not ready for it'".

Similarly, a foster committee member states:

"That parent has to prove above and beyond your average parent. It's not just 'good enough', it's far more than 'good enough' it's exemplary".

Spratt and Colleagues' (2015) study on 'confirmation bias' among 202 social workers in Northern Ireland aligns with the views expressed by some participants in this study, in that previously held perspectives and hypotheses can become a block to considering new possibilities regarding work with birth parents and family reunification. Shlonsky (2015) and Beakstead (2003) further support these findings and argue that there is a tendency to look for evidence that confirms rather than disproves judgements. Chambers and Colleagues (2016) and Fernandez and Lee (2013) emphasise that clearly agreed goals for the safe return of children home helps to motivate parents and provides a shared trajectory and focus on what needs to happen to move forward in the process of reunification. Without this, the expectations of what birth parents need to resolve to resume the care of their children can seem elusive and unattainable as reported in the findings. Blind spots or bias that impact working relationships must be acknowledged and addressed to ensure the protection of both child and parental rights.

2. The Challenge of prioritising working with birth parents

Most participants felt that once a child is placed in care, work with birth parents often becomes less of a priority. Limited resources to work with birth parents to overcome difficulties that led to a child being placed in care are very limited, for this reason when children are placed in care they can remain there with little exploration of returning home. A foster care committee member reported:

“There is a general assumption that if kids are in care that they'll stay there”

A CPC Chairperson reports on the importance of starting to work with birth parents on reunification as soon as a child is received into care and emphasises when this doesn't happen the situation and relationships can deteriorate further.

“There is a period of time where work can and should be done with natural parents. Natural parents often feel that they are not necessarily abandoned but neglected when the child goes into care, especially where you get the care order because it is nearly like that is a done deal, I don't think we give people enough information”

A Fostering link worker adds:

“At times we may not put in the supports [for birth parents] that are required as early as they should be and that can certainly determine an overall long-term result as in reunification”

A social care manager suggests that there is a need to work collaboratively with birth parents and to focus on building relationships:

“Building relationships with the families should be part of the plan ... working collaboratively with parents would help towards better outcomes for children.”

The majority of participants suggested that more could be done to support and motivate parents to remain involved in their child's life, to empower them to address the issues that led to their child coming into care and to engage in the process of reunification. The lack of support and clarity for parents was viewed as potentially leading to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness, resulting in them becoming further isolated from their child(ren)'s lives. Parents' perceived refusal to accept the concerns and the reasons the child was taken into care,

a lack of motivation and commitment to address these concerns and ‘to go the distance’ was emphasised by participants as being a significant barrier to reunification. It was the experience of a CIC SW TL that *“parents who are willing to engage and interested in what needed to be done was key to success”*

Some participants reported that they felt more could be done to support parents who on the surface appeared withdrawn or unmotivated. Adding that it was important to maintain an open mindedness and curiosity as to ‘why’ they were presenting this way.

The views expressed by participants in this research resonate with findings of Jedwab and colleagues (2018), Delfabbro and colleagues (2013), Sinclair and colleagues (2005), and Cleaver (2000) who all found that parental motivation and willingness to accept identified worries and work to resolve them plays a key role in supporting reunification. Jedwab and colleagues (2018) and Ankersmith and colleagues (2016) further argue, however, that establishing positive working relationships with parents can motivate them to engage with services required to resolve the difficulties that resulted in the child being placed in care. O’Brien and Cregan (2015:7) argue “the stigma and disqualification from parenthood” that follow when children are removed can amplify difficulties and lead to a downward spiral.

Fernandez and Lee (2013) and Thoburn and colleagues (2012) have emphasised the centrality of relationship-based practice between parents, practitioners and foster carers in the process of reunification. Jedwab and colleagues (2018) and Spratt and Callan (2004) also highlight the importance of practitioners understanding the loss and anger experienced by parents when their child is placed in care and the importance of affording time to work through these issues. As argued by Turnell & Murphy (2017) birth parents must be recognised as ‘people worth doing business with’. As in other jurisdictions, within the Irish context there are both moral and legal

obligations that require an increased focus on working with the birth parents of children in the care of the State - such obligations must be given due recognition.

3. Informing and Empowering birth parents

Participants felt that more could be done to support parents to ensure they were fully informed of their rights as parents. A Fostering link worker states:

“I think there is a very, very crucial piece of work to be done with the parent in explaining the care order system, the legal system and I think the relationship there and the honesty from the outset could predict at times how a parent will work with you ... rather than them feeling 28 days later “this is it my child is in care there is no going back”.

Many felt that parents can also lose their voice, that the process becomes so formal and intimidating they become overwhelmed and disengaged. A CIC SW explains:

“I just don’t think a lot of parents are educated in that respect and maybe feel intimidated by the service and that it is out of their control once there is a care order, I mean it must just be devastating for a parent, I don’t know if they lose the fight at that stage”.

A Guardian ad Litem adds:

“I don’t think they are even aware of the process or have an understanding of the process, they get lost in the system, kids go into care and that’s it ... I don’t see there being any follow up to support parents”

Other participants reported that there needs to be increased empathy towards birth parents and an understanding of how they are feeling when their children are removed from their care. A CPC Chairperson suggests:

“A lot of parents feel resentful and hurt, they feel angry because they can provide for the child but there is somebody else doing it”.

Many participants reported that the lack of focus or process around reunification often resulted in children ‘drifting’ and remaining in the care system. A family support manager declares:

“They are drifting and staying in the care system too long...attachments [are] then damage[d] between the parent and child and that’s hard to address”.

Child in care (CIC) reviews are statutory meetings established to ensure the welfare of all children in care is optimally supported. CIC reviews are required to consider children’s contact with their birth parents and family and to enquire into the possibility of children returning home. Several participants in this study reported CIC reviews to be a difficult process for birth parents that can often do little to promote and encourage their involvement in their child’s lives. A CPC Chairperson suggests:

“I think we can control CIC Reviews easily, but I think that needs to be looked at, the CIC review process of how we do it rather than just ticking a box ... I don’t hear that question being asked ‘what’s stopping this child going home?’ , ‘why can’t that child not live with their parents?’ As time passes that issue becomes like the elephant in the room, it doesn’t

get discussed ... I don't think we get down to the nitty gritty, the real important stuff in the CIC Reviews".

Buckley and colleagues (2010) report that service users experience child protection services as intimidating, nerve wrecking and difficult. Such experiences arguably disempower birth parents in working towards reunification. Research by Fernandez and Lee (2013) and Pine et al (2009) has demonstrated that establishing a plan for return home at the initial care placement, as part of a reunification process, increases the probability of reunification and successful outcomes. It could be argued that failure in this regard negates legal obligations pertinent to the rights of both parents and children, albeit unintentional. The CCLRP and recent studies on childcare proceedings in Ireland demonstrate that the protection offered for parental rights in legal provision is not always apparent in practice (O' Mahony, 2016a, 2016b; Coulter et al, 2015). The findings of this research suggests that an increased focus on working with birth parents is required to inform and empower parents to play as meaningful role as possible in the lives of their children.

4. Opportunities to support birth parents

Promoting contact

Many participants felt that contact between birth parents and children in care was critical in working towards reunification and that even when returning home was not possible, contact was still central to maintaining relationships and promoting child wellbeing. A Fostering link worker states:

“I think it is essential for the child in their long-term development that they know who they are, they know what’s core. I think it is essential they are in contact with birth parents. Contact can take several forms, it can be telephone, it can be written during those difficult times but I think no contact certainly isn’t in anyway positive for the development of any child”.

A CIC social work team leader adds:

“I think one of the key things around rehabilitation is the amount of access that you can engage in with the parents building up to over nights, shared care, full time”.

Highlighting the importance of working with birth parents and families for child wellbeing, A GAL states:

“...you can’t end family, family is there till you die, so, you know, that is the most important significant relationship in anyone’s life, that family is your connection, your identity, who you are, where you are from”.

Existing research focused on reunification highlights the importance of maintaining regular contact between parents and children in promoting and supporting family reunification (Delfabbro et al, 2013; Thoburn et al 2012; Thorpe, 2007; Biehal, 2007; and Wulczyn, 2004). Suggestions put forward by participants regarding maintenance of meaningful contact even when return home is not possible appear similar to the approach taken to reunification in the US, where reunification is seen on a continuum that not only refers to children returning to live with their parents but also promotes optimal contact so as to

maintain connections to birth families (Pecora, 2010; Pine et al; 2009; Maluccio et al, 1994 and Warsh et al, 1994). Further research in this area could help inform policy and practice developments that would provide opportunities to enhance contact between children in care and their birth parents, support birth parents to remain active in their children's lives and to work towards reunification where appropriate, ultimately improving outcomes for children, parents and families.

An independent reunification service

All participants acknowledged the support and work that needed to be carried out with birth parents to enable and empower them to parent again. However, participants also highlighted that there was no one identified within the system to do this work. A CPC Chairperson states:

“This [supporting birth parents] doesn't become anybody's role... what tends to happen is people will work within their own silos, I think there is an attitude with some CIC social workers that their role is with the child, not the natural parents, so it's about a change of mind-set”

A family support manager states:

“I don't think as many children would be in care if there was a dedicated team’

It was the experience of many participants that because this work takes time, it can often be the crucial piece that gets overlooked. Participants were generally in favour of having a separate or independent service to support reunification practice. Some participants also felt that this could offer a fresh approach to exploring the possibility of reunification.

Farmer (2014) and Fernandez and Lee (2013) have also called for a distinct domain of practice to promote the process of reunification. The application of a practice framework for reunification would prioritise the promotion of children returning home successfully, provide workable solutions where strained relationships exist between parents and enhance caseworkers' skills in this area of practice (Ankersmith, 2016). Chambers and colleagues' (2016) and Pine and colleagues' (2009) research also demonstrates the benefits that independent, intensive, family-centred, targeted community and home-based services can offer in resolving difficulties that led to children being placed in care and in supporting children, parents and families to reunify.

Some participants referred to the significant turnover of staff as a barrier to continued work and support of birth parents. Limited resources, high caseloads and time constraints on social workers were also believed to significantly impact capacity to engage with birth parents, arguably providing further evidence for the need for an independent service to support birth parents. A reunification service worker suggests:

“Sometimes, not every time, care is a relief to social workers ... that’s nearly seen as the end for the social work involvement ... they’re safe now and I don’t have to worry about it ... I can now concentrate on my other cases”.

Chambers and colleagues' (2016) research in the US also found that large caseloads, high rates of staff turnover, and limited time for practitioners to develop trusting relationships with families impact the availability of practitioners to build relationships with birth parents, resolve identified difficulties and support birth parents and children to reunify. These organisational conditions can undoubtedly limit practitioners' availability and openness to work with birth parents to explore reunification, impact quality service delivery and outcomes for children, parents and families.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on how birth parents might be better supported to work towards reunification with their children living in care in the Irish context. In the absence of an existing body of work in this area this study points to some early findings in relation to core issues in this area including the impact of complex narratives and perceptions of birth parents, the challenges to prioritising working with birth parents, informing and empowering birth parents, and opportunities to support birth parents. This paper provides a glimpse into the complexity of this issue, and we suggest that the experiences and support needs of birth parents, when it comes to the reunification of children in care, is an area that requires further research. If we consider the legal obligations on the CFA to promote optimal family contact and unity where appropriate, then undoubtedly the support needs of birth parents warrant further attention and consideration both from a research *and* policy and practice perspective. The key role that birth parents can play when it comes to helping children in care developing their sense of self, a rounded identity and so forth, suggests that we need to pay closer attention to how we can best optimise the experience of contact and connection for all parties involved. Furthermore, in recognising the rights of birth parents and their value as individuals, supports and services must be available to assist them in addressing their individualised difficulties and needs.

This paper represents a valuable contribution to the knowledge base in relation to birth parents and their support needs with regard to reunification in Ireland however, the findings are subject to several limitations. In particular, the views of birth parents were not gathered as part of this study – nor were the views of children in care, care leavers, or care-experienced adults. This is a gap in knowledge that will need to be addressed in future work in this area. A rights-based approach would be a potentially valuable framework to draw on in future work in this area

seeking to promote the active participation of birth parents, children in care etc. on this issue (Pells, 2012). The study is also small in scale and while this allows for depth over breadth in data, future work in this area would benefit from gathering the perspectives of a larger sample and from a more focused look at various professional and practice-based perspectives on the issue.

Implications of research

We suggest that the primary implication of this paper is that further research is needed in order to examine the support needs and experiences of birth parents in more depth when it comes to the reunification process in Ireland. There is an opportunity to support birth parents in this process and we argue that this paper goes some way to highlighting this as a practice issue in need of attention, particularly given the absence of national policy and guidance in this area in Ireland (O'Connor Funcheon & Brady, 2021). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this paper points to a limited focus on working with birth parents - a cohort who can be 'forgotten'; and has implications for birth parents as individuals as well as for their children who remain in the care of the State.

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