

Identifying elements within the context of residential care in Malta that contribute to the well-being and resilience of looked after children and young people – field perspective.

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An outline of the research process and a summary of the research findings:

The aim of the study was to identify elements within the context of residential care in Malta that contributed to the well-being and resilience of looked after children and young people from a field perspective. It adopted a mixed methods design including both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the multi-layered processes that would be happening in the ‘in-between’ of the organism – environment field. The sample of research participants included a current cohort of looked after children and young people who took part in the quantitative part of the study, as well as social support workers, therapists and ex-service users, who were interviewed in order to explore their meaning making and their lived experience of the field. The introductory chapter set the context for the study by presenting the setting, its ethos, and service delivery. It also presented the rationale behind the study and gave an overview of the following chapters.

The theoretical background of this study was presented in the second chapter, the literature review. The debates around residential care were described, paying particular attention to the mental health needs of looked after children and the outcomes for young people leaving care. The focus then turned to Gestalt literature about field theory, and the importance of context when reflecting on practice, particularly when we consider psychopathology from a field perspective. The relevance of field theory to Gestalt developmental theory, particularly the differentiation of one’s ‘life space’ and the polyphonic development of domains, was also explored. Attachment theory was discussed as the basis of

organism self-regulation, followed by a discussion about resilience, and the interplay between nature and nurture, the risk and protective factors, as well as the fundamental role of reflexivity for the development of resilience. The importance of improving children's subjective well-being, the need to give them a voice in research about them, and the tasks of Psychotherapy in residential care, are also discussed. A brief discussion of these theoretical frameworks and how they all point to the intimate inter-connectedness that exists between the individual and the situational context brought the literature review to an end. The chapter concluded with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed and oriented the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning; particularly how field theory, contextualism, critical multiplism, and perspectivism informed the research design and analytic process; as well as contributed to integrative research that attempted to look at 'the total situation' in a 'real world' research context.

The methodology chapter explained the research aims in more detail, and explored the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research questions. The research design was outlined, followed by a description of the sample, and a description of the measuring instruments, justifying their use. The four assessment tools chosen for the quantitative part of the study included the Conner's CBRS, the Boxall Profile, The British Ability Scales, and the Student's Life Satisfaction Scale. In addition, semi-structured interviews were used for the qualitative data collection procedure, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was utilized for data analysis. The recruitment procedure was described in detail, followed by the validity and reliability of the research. Finally, the relevant ethical issues, and the positioning of the author as researcher-practitioner were given due consideration.

The findings chapter first presented the descriptive statistics results for the four assessment tools used, comparing the scales on particular tests with the different raters, and describing some tests that were done to compare the distribution of scores. This was followed

by the qualitative findings, which introduced five Master themes, each of which generated a number of Superordinate themes (22 in total), which in turn generated a cluster of related subthemes. These findings emphasised the ‘lived experience of care’ for those who had either lived or worked in this residential setting, allowing for themes to emerge from the data, that were illustrated in verbatim quotes.

These findings were situated in existing literature in the discussion chapter, as well as compared and contrasted to other research findings in the field. This study continued to confirm that looked after children present with complex mental health, cognitive, and developmental needs which are considerably higher when compared to the general population, yet there is evidence of positive exceptions across and within all the domains; thus, reflecting the heterogeneity and the uniqueness of individual responses to early trauma of this population. They were also found to be mildly satisfied with their life on average. The combination of the quantitative and qualitative results highlighted the interplay of risk and protective factors, which point towards four resilience enhancing factors, namely the importance of relationship, the development of reflexivity, the need for safety and opportunities in one’s life-space, and lastly interventions that aim to create positive chain reactions.

In conclusion this study has contributed to a better understanding of the individual and environmental factors at play in the ‘contact boundary’ that is created between the child / young person, and the organisation of the field in a residential setting. The combination of objective data derived from validated assessment tools, and the first-hand experiences of those who live or work in residential care provided us with important sources of information on the interplay of risk and protective factors, particularly the importance of relationships, the development of a sense of belonging, and the ability of looked after children to participate in decisions that determine their future, whilst being supported to develop reflexivity and make

meaning out of the circumstances that led them to become looked-after. The limitations of this study, including methodological issues and the impact that this has on the generalizability of the findings were also presented. Finally, some recommendations were put forward that point towards the need for a better coordinated vision for residential care, improved inter-agency collaboration, and an investment in staff training and other protective factors.