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'I ain't stupid, I just don't like school': a 'needs' based argument for children's educational provision in custody

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ABSTRACT

Whilst the number of children in custody declines, the complex needs of many of them have increased. A review of the youth justice system stated that education needs to be the central pillar in preventing offending. Research suggests that education fails children, by prioritising reputation and the standards agenda over providing care and education that meets individual needs (Runswick-Cole. 2011. "Time to End the Bias Towards Inclusion." *British Journal of Special Education* 38 (3): 11). This paper explores this failure for children prior to and in custody itself, and relates this to a theoretical model that combines children's need and self-efficacy. It suggests that until children are guaranteed an environment where their basic needs are met, there is little hope of either education or training helping them to access a life free from crime, whatever other policy changes in custody are implemented. This research shows that current provisions, for children in custody, fail to support children's needs around safety, belonging and self-esteem. Thus, it is no surprise that children in Secure Training Centres fail to self-actualise their educational abilities, as they lack the self-efficacy to successfully engage with education.

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Introduction

Over the past decade the number of children in custody has declined (20%), with a slight increase noted in England and Wales in 2017–2018 (YJB 2019). Information published by the YJB (2019) showed that the average number of children in custody was 900 in 2018–2019, with the average sentence length being 16.7 months. Despite overall trends showing a decline in the use of custody for children, reoffending rates in England and Wales remain high, with 38.4% of children reoffending within 12 months of their release (in comparison with 38.1% in 2007–2008) (YJB, 2019). The Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2019), on reoffending amongst children leaving custody in 2016–2017, found that 64.6% reoffended within 12 months of release. An inspection of 50 specific cases found that nine children had outstanding criminal matters; three children had been recalled to custody; 10 children had been convicted of a further offence; 25 children were 'released under investigation'; six children were missing; and 10 children breached

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(Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2019). Part of the explanation for this is that the children presently in custody in England, especially those held in Secure Training Centres (STCs) ($n=3$) and Secure Children's Homes (SCH) ($n=15$) are a very complex group, many of whom will have experienced issues such as bereavement, abuse and mental health problems. These experiences can result negatively on educational experiences, which consequently impact on their outcomes and prospects. Although the route each child travels to become involved in the criminal justice system is unique to them, what many of these children share is a sense of 'not belonging' or being 'other', which demonstrates the need for increased support.

The UK government's review of the Youth Justice System in England and Wales (Taylor 2016, 4) clearly stated that education needs to be the central pillar in preventing offending that along with training, forms 'the building blocks' of a life free from crime. This paper aims to explore the extent to which the educational provision available for children entering STCs¹ in England and Wales forms these 'building blocks', using primary data based on the experiences of the children themselves, with a reflection on the statistics on educational achievement, socio-economic deprivation and youth offending. The paper will consider whether the aim of using education as the central building block of a life free from crime is achievable with children in custody. Drawing on Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy and Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs, this paper will explore children's experiences of education in custody in Secure Training Centres (STCs), to establish if the education provisions are based on children's needs. In doing so it makes an original contribution to knowledge by developing a theoretical framework for supporting children in custody, that illustrates the current lack of support for even the needs of children in custody. Indeed, by illustrating how current provision fails to support children's needs around safety, belonging and self-esteem, the paper demonstrates why it is therefore no surprise that children in STCs fail to self-actualise their educational abilities, as they lack the self-efficacy to successfully engage with education. The framework posited demonstrates why children in STCs fail to engage with education (a lack of self-efficacy) that has its origins in previously experienced trauma, familial and peer networks, and their basic physiological needs not being met. The consequences that this has on desistance and life-chances are severe, and offer significant pause for thought for policy-makers currently pursuing Taylor's (2016) Secure Schools agenda.

Theoretical framework

Political and societal attention on youth crime and offending has resulted in a body of literature focused on desistance and recidivism (Maruna 2001; Maguire and Raynor 2006) with a relatively small proportion of literature explaining the impact of educational experiences on children involved in the criminal justice system (Machin, Marie, and Vujić 2011). Understanding the background of children in the criminal justice system is pivotal, with research showing the crime reducing potential of education (Machin, Marie, and Vujić 2011). Indeed, the role of education in crime prevention was explored by the Hazel and Lockwood (2016), who argued that quality teaching and learning are central factors in reducing offending. Despite literature (Hazel and Lockwood 2016; Taylor 2016) on the role of quality teaching and education in reducing offending, the current

socio-political and economic situation, specifically limited funding (UK Children's Commissioner 2015), impact on quality teaching and education.

Certainly, a policy environment that for a decade has been centred upon austerity, has left educational provision in youth justice (and indeed more widely) struggling. Whilst austerity has exacerbated educational inequality in the UK, such issues existed long before 2010, with Shulruf, O'Loughlin, and Tolley (2009) identifying through analysis of OECD data that educational outcomes for children in the UK were shaped more by familial inequality than any of the other eight countries examined (UK, Netherlands, Canada, Ireland, the US, Finland, Australia and New Zealand). Further, the cuts to spending in social welfare support for disadvantaged families, have negatively impacted 'social citizenship' in the UK and had the most severe effects on 'young people, lone parents, disabled people and recently homeless individuals' (Edmiston 2017, 263). Such impacts are not the unintended outcomes of broad-brush fiscal cuts, but rather a deliberate and targeted attempt by the current government to ensure that its voter base (generally older and wealthier people in society) are not adversely effected, a motive that has therefore ensured that younger people have been hit hardest by cuts (McKay and Rowlingson 2016; Taylor-Goodby 2016). In the current climate with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis (at the time of writing) and the economic recession unfolding, it is difficult to envisage changes to government policy around youth social welfare expenditure in the short to medium term.

Helping children access a life free from crime is a clear aim of the criminal justice system. Children entering STCs have often experienced a wealth of inequalities as a result of parental separation (68%), pro-criminal family members (65%), domestic abuse (51%), bereavement (25%) and/or experiences in the care system (43%), which hinders their development (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan 2006; Cohen, Mannarino, and Deblinger 2017). By exploring literature and research on the role of education within crime prevention, this paper argues that failure to provide children with an environment that meets their basic needs, means that there is little hope of either education or training helping them to access a life free from crime. Before progressing, it is worth defining what has been taken as 'education' for the purposes of this paper/research. Education is defined as the deliberate learning of skills, through a mixture of curriculum and formal/informal conversations and interactions. Indeed, education is key to the development of critical thinking and the creation of more progressive societies (Maher 2011).

Exploring the educational experiences of children entering custody is essential for exploring the impact of specific needs on children's development. Research conducted Farrington (2003) argued that children with low academic abilities may offend as a result of poor consequential thinking and an insufficient means to achieve goals. In the United Kingdom, the Transforming Youth Custody report found 50% of children aged 15–17 years-old were entering custody with literacy levels the equivalent of children aged 7–11 years of age, 45% having SEND, 31% being looked after children (LAC), 44% eligible for Free School Meals and 23% having histories of school exclusion (MoJ 2014). Further, Bryan (2004) found that children and young people entering Youth Offending Institutions suffered from more language and literacy difficulties than the general population, including in relation to vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, memory and picture description. The educational background of children entering STCs mirrors the educational background of children and young people entering Young Offender Institutions

(YOIs), with research conducted by Paterson-Young et al. (2017) finding that for children in the STC between January 2016 and December 2016, nearly 15% had a reading age between 1–5 years lower than expected and 24% had a reading age between 6 and 8 years lower than expected. Indeed, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) Level 2 shows that the United Kingdom performs worse than other European countries for each age-group (McNally and Telhaj 2007).

The experiences of children in education prior to entering custody paints a picture of an inadequate education system, with challenging children often experiencing high-levels of exclusion (Paterson-Young et al. 2017; 2019), resulting in limited educational attainment (Bryan 2004; Paterson-Young et al. 2017; 2019). These experiences transfer to the custodial environment, arguably resulting in children in youth custody becoming 'educationally marginalised' (Lanskey 2014). Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) argued that limited cultural capital plays a part in children's offending behaviour, leading to a lack of engagement with education both before and during their time in custody. Cultural capital has been described as a familiarity with the dominant culture and to understand/use educated language (Sullivan 2002). According to Sullivan (2002), cultural capital is generally learnt through primary socialisation; therefore, chaotic family backgrounds or time spent in local authority care could contribute to a lack of such capital. It is challenging for education to form the building blocks of a life free from crime when so many children in society do not have their basic needs met, in the community or custody. However, despite the challenges, education plays a pivotal role in changing children's trajectories, critical when the data shows that children in custody are significantly more likely to suffer from neurodisability, such as traumatic brain injury (Williams 2015) or dyslexia (Hughes 2015). A much higher proportion of children in custody are Looked After Children (LAC), have grown up in poverty and/or have a family member who has been convicted of a criminal offence (MoJ 2010).² For these children, who may have missed out on needs lower down the pyramid like food or clothing (see below for an in-depth description of Maslow's hierarchy of needs), achieving in education and, in particular, attaining self-efficacy in relation to educational attainment may be more challenging. However, education's importance remains critical, as it can provide them with a means to escape poverty.

Research on children's experiences with education prior to entering custody demonstrates that unmet needs play a vital role in children's progression with education. Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs pyramid states that human needs exist in a hierarchy, with basic physiological needs, such as food and housing at its wide base, followed by safety needs, physical protection and health; then love and belonging and self-esteem, and respect for oneself and respect from others. The pinnacle of the pyramid (self-actualisation), occurs once an individual has reached their full potential (Figure 1). Satisfaction of needs allows individuals to progress; however, Maslow (1987) states that the satisfaction of needs is complicated and that individuals do not need to satisfy needs consecutively; rather their needs can be satisfied concurrently and in an incomplete fashion. The application of Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs in education is crucial, as children can only develop intellectually if their basic physiological needs are met. Understanding Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy allows researchers to identify the support that is required to help children move towards self-actualisation; specifically, in understanding the impact of unmet needs on children's



Figure 1. Maslow's (1987) Hierarchy of Needs pyramid.

development. Indeed, as will be identified shortly, the key components of generalised self-efficacy include confidence, motivation and self-esteem (Judge, Locke, and Durham 1997), whilst self-efficacy itself is bolstered through mastery experiences (success in completing tasks oneself), vicarious learning (seeing others similar to you achieving), verbal persuasion (encouragement from others) and one's physical and affective state (effectively the physiological and emotional elements of Maslow's model) (Bandura 1997). The backgrounds of most of the children entering STCs preclude any opportunities for this type of development, due to their basic needs not being met and the familial and peer networks that they are engaged in not offering them vicarious learning and verbal persuasion opportunities. This ultimately precludes them engaging in mastery experiences and so leads to educational failure, withdrawal and reduced self-efficacy.

Children in custody have some of their basic needs met through the provision of accommodation, albeit in less than traditional houses, and through the provision of food. However, safety and security need are not met, with Ofsted (2019) reporting that there were 132 assaults on children and 214 assaults on staff over a six-month period in STC. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that for many children self-actualising education is lacking. Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs can explain the impact of

unmet needs on children's progression; however, there are limitations to adopting this approach in isolation, such as the assumption that you need to fulfil needs in a specific order to benefit from others (Tay and Diener 2011). Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs has been widely used in research. However, applying Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy to understanding children's progression within Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs offers an alternative approach for the reasons discussed above. The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), which reflects a person's confidence in their ability to exert control over their own future could be used to understand children's progression. An individual's expectations of their self-efficacy affects the nature of the activities that they take part in, how much effort they put into them and how long they will persevere when faced with adversity (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy provides the critical link between an individual possessing certain skills or abilities, and their actual engagement in an activity that requires those skills (Bandura, *ibid*). This paper combines literature on the role of education in crime prevention with an review of Bandura's (1977, 1997) concept of self-efficacy, and the importance of self-efficacy in progression in Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs, to explore children's experiences of education in custody and the community. This exploration identifies a severe lack of support for even the most basic needs of children in custody (i.e. safety), which ultimately means that educational attainment and hence positive transitions back to the community are difficult to achieve.

Methodology

This paper is informed by data collected from a larger research project conducted between 2015 and 2018 on how social impact measurement as a form of organisational performance management can enhance the outcomes of children in STCs (Paterson-Young 2018). The fieldwork drawn on for this paper was conducted during a period of challenge in youth custody with Taylor (2016) highlighting the issues with custodial environments for children (essentially calling for a new model – 'Secure Schools'). To address the main topic in this paper (the role of education for children in STCs), case-file, questionnaire and interview data collected between 2015 and 2018 was analysed according to three broad questions: (1) what is the education background of children entering the STC? (2) what education provisions are offered to children in the STC? and (3) what support is offered to children in the STC?

A sequential mixed-method design was used for the research, allowing for an iterative process, with the initial data collected contributing to the data collected in later stages (Creswell and Plano-Clark 2007). This approach was selected to allow for comparison and statistical analysis of results (quantitative) as well as allowing for in-depth information to contextualise the findings (Creswell and Plano-Clark 2007; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004). Data analysed was collected from case-file information held on children accommodated in the STC ($n=95$) to help understand their experiences with education. This analysis was followed by empirical research in the form of a self-reported questionnaire conducted through a purposive sample³ ($n=68$) of children over a six-month period. The questionnaire was followed by semi-structured interviews with children ($n=15$) and staff ($n=15$). Questionnaire items were divided into seven domains: education, training and

employment; personal; housing and community; physical health; mental health and well-being; relationships; and citizenship and community in line with contemporary public discourse.

The questionnaire contained demographic questions (i.e. age, gender and ethnicity); criminal offence information (i.e. type and sentence length); and a series of scale-based⁴ questions developed from adapting existing scales such the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLSS) (Huebner 1991) and General Self-Efficacy (Schwarzer, Mueller, and Green-glass 1999) (See Appendix A). Children sentenced to custody were invited to participate in the questionnaire and support was available for children to complete the questionnaire if required. Questionnaire data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0), with normality tests used to identify the non-parametric nature of data.⁵ Upon identifying the non-parametric nature of data, descriptive statistics offering a summary of the data and Kendall tau-b and Mann Whitney-U tests used to investigate the associations and differences between factors. Results from the questionnaire were subsequently used to develop interview questions.

Interview data was coded and analysed using Constant Comparative Method (CCM) to identify units of analysis, categorise and themes. This method allows for an iterative procedure based on a 'Grounded Theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that focuses on a process whereby the categories emerge from the data through a process of inductive reasoning rather than the application of predetermined categories (Hazenber, Seddon, and Denny 2014.). This analysis led to the identification of units of analysis, categories and themes (Appendix A). This includes the theme 'education, training and employment', which is utilised here as the qualitative basis of this paper.

All children participating in the research were male (the STC accessed only accommodated males) with variations in age, ethnicity, offence and sentence length. We acknowledge the limitation of research with only male participants; however, despite this limitation⁶, the research adds to the body of knowledge on the educational requirements for children in custody. The mean age for participants was 15.9 years-old and was representative of the wider STC population. The ethnicity of participants varied, with most identifying as White British (45.8%), while 32.5% identified as Black, 13.3% identified as Mixed and 7.2% identified as Other White. Overall, the most common crime committed was burglary/robbery (43.4%), followed by grievous bodily harm (GBH) (41.0%). The research recorded information on experience and relationships for children accommodated in STCs, finding exposure to parental separation (68.4%), pro-criminal family members (68.4%), domestic abuse (50.6%), bereavement (25%) and/or experiences in the care system (42.7%) (Paterson-Young et al. 2017). Ethical consideration is integral to research, especially in research with children in custody. This research explored the ethical issues with confidentiality and anonymity; voluntary informed consent; data protection and storage; and the safeguarding of participants.

Ethical considerations were paramount to the research, especially given the vulnerability of children and young people in custody. Full ethical considerations were submitted to the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Head of Safeguarding at the Secure Training Centre. Furthermore, full ethical approval was obtained from the University's Ethics Committee. The ethical considerations for the research surrounded informed consent from children and guardians; confidentiality and anonymity; data protection and storage; and safeguarding of participants. Safeguarding was a pivotal aspect of

research, with the researcher completing advanced safeguarding training with their University and the Local Authority the Secure Training Centre was situated in. Furthermore, the research obtained an updated Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) for research with Children and Adults. The researcher drew on practical experience working in Safeguarding to ensure that children and staff were at the centre of the research, acknowledging the power imbalance in conducting research, that relationships can develop quickly, and that sharing stories can be difficult.

Discussion

A high proportion (83%) of children participating in the research had stopped attending education around 18 months before entering custody. This raises questions about the relevance and effectiveness of schooling for this cohort of children, particularly in supporting them to gain the qualifications and skills to achieve future goals. Information collected from the case-file analysis⁷ and questionnaire on children in custody shows that the majority of children (76%) leave education with no qualifications, training or employment opportunities. This is in contrast to the approximate 54% of children aged 16, who left school in 2015/16 with 5+ GCSE's grade A-C (DfE 2017). Official figures for the number of children who leave school with no qualifications in England and Wales are not readily available; however, estimates from an Education Datalab blog⁸ put the figure at somewhere between 6,200 and 7,700. The case-file review found that a high proportion (85%) of children were Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) before arriving in the STCs, compared with a national average for the equivalent time-period of 11.5% (ONS 2017). Furthermore, over one-third (36.4%) of the children in custody had documented SEND [statements or EHC plans], compared with a comparable national average for males of 14.7% (DfE 2016). Special Educational Needs provision receives considerable attention from the Government; however, this level of support ceases for those classed as NEET. Research on early-cessation from education in the Netherlands, suggests that 27% of early school-leavers were involved in criminal activity in comparison with just 7% for non-school leavers. Most of the children in the STC failed to complete basic education before their school attendance ceased, with the average age for cessation being 14.2 years-old.

Interestingly, the children entering the STCs had prior engagement with Youth Offending Services (YOS), which assess children's experiences of education when exploring children's risk of future offending. Once the assessment is complete, the YOS case worker is expected to ensure the young person enters education, training or employment. However, for the children entering STCs with previous YOS involvement the number who are NEET is high (85.9%), much higher than the national average for all young people (8.7%⁹) (Mirza-Davies and Brown 2016). This illustrates problems in the community approach to reducing offending by engaging children in education. Through the analysis of case-file information, it was evident that the various authorities involved seemingly passed the responsibility for a child's education to each other (Paterson-Young 2018). This was evident in statements from children, parents and Case Managers on the number of schools and/or independent provisions children attended in the community. With no continuity between life in the community and custody, the high-levels of children not engaged in education, training or employment is hardly likely to improve upon

Table 1. Reading and numeracy ages for children and children in the STC between January 2016 and December 2016.

	Reading Age (%)	Numeracy Age (%)
1–5 years lower than expected	14.5	50.0
6–8 years lower than expected	24.0	35.4
Total	34.5	85.4

release from the STC. These children are therefore effectively being failed by the institutions designed to help them long before they are transitioned back into society. The (unvirtuous) cycle of crime, punishment and rehabilitation is therefore embedded, mainly because the rehabilitation provided is inadequate.

Table 1 illustrates the reading and numeracy ages for children in the STC between January–December 2016. By the time that they were discharged from custody, the reading and numeracy ages for children had increased during their time in the STC, with an average increase of 7 months for reading and 9 months for numeracy ages. The imposition of custodial sentences impact on children's educational achievement, with increasing in reading and numeracy ages limited. Any improvements in literacy and numeracy levels show children that they can improve in education, which is important for cultivating self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and increasing opportunities for children on leaving the centre. These improvements in self-efficacy are central for progressing in Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs. However, with custodial sentences removing children from community-based education, the opportunity for increasing educational skills is limited, which may result in continued neuropsychological behaviours and reduced desistance (Moffitt 1997). Such short sentences lead to little development in educational achievement, as they do not provide enough time for the more complex needs (i.e. safety, emotional security) identified by Maslow (1987) to be provided. A review of the education being provided in custody could lead to changes, in pedagogy and content, which would help address this lack of improvement in literacy and numeracy. As previously mentioned, physical attacks and restraint are commonplace in the STC and whilst for some children family/friend visits are regular, for others they are less so or do not happen. This social isolation through a lack of provision of key needs including safety and love/belonging, means that any attempts to encourage the development of self-efficacy in education and hence positive educational developments will face severe challenges. Indeed, given the above factors it is actually quite surprising that the STC managed to have such positive impacts on the literacy and numeracy levels of the young people they housed.

Education in secure training centres

Identifying the right type of education to meet individual needs is central in developing appropriate education programmes for children in custody. The STCs enrol children in education for 25 h per week, with the ratio weighted in favour of core curriculum (STEM) subjects. This is despite research (HMIP 2017) evidencing that children in the STCs express a preference for vocational subjects. The reasons children stopped attending education prior to incarceration in the STC varied, as the qualitative data outlined below illustrates:

'I was excluded from school, a few schools. I hated it, its fucking tired man. If I went, I barely went. I get bored easy and that shit is boring, sorry.' (P02)

'I chose to leave but I have been kicked out of 4 different schools and the PRU and stuff. I don't like education here. I learned a couple of things but not much. I suppose I like P.E and the gym, those are the only things.' (P06)

'I never went to education, mum used to try and force me to go but I would just leave. I think education is pointless ... ' (P08)

'I went to a special school with all these stupid kids, I ain't stupid, I just don't like school. So, I left. I mean, my gran wanted me to keep going to school so I did try but then I got fed up.' (P15)

Children cited boredom or exclusion as the main reason for early cessation and although children in the community may cite boredom as a problem at school – the exclusion rates for children in the STC (59% had been permanently excluded¹⁰) was significantly higher than in the general population of (0.10%) (DfE 2018). Another issue highlighted by children was frustration, relating to challenges in education and/or placement in schools in which children perceived as being for 'stupid kids'. The language used by the children in their interviews: 'excluded', 'fucking tired', 'barely went', 'try and force me to go', 'pointless', 'don't like school, is incredibly negative and highlights just how disengaged they were from their schooling. There was a tangible sense of school not being for them, of a detachment from education and dislike of school, not surprisingly, links to low attainment, which along with other key factors such as the negative influence of school and experience of custody and local authority care, are closely associated with the risk of offending (YJB 2006). What this demonstrates amongst the participants of this study is a fundamental lack of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977; 1997) amongst the children, and a lack of perceived respect from others; both of these areas of need being key elements in progressing in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. It is therefore unsurprising that these young people are unable to realise their full educational potential (Maslow's self-actualisation), as they do not develop the belief (self-efficacy) in their ability to engage in education and achieve (Bandura 1977; 1997). Research (Margolis and McCabe 2006) has found that struggling learners, which may include some who have SEND, have lower self-efficacy in relation to school learning, that may affect not only their ability to achieve successful outcomes, but also their motivation. The language used by participants in relation to their schooling clearly supports this lack of motivation and sense of pointlessness. Going into the STCs with such negative attitudes towards education makes it very difficult for educational success in custody to become an outcome for the children. The challenges for the education system within the STCs are many, some are similar to teaching in general, for example, recruiting and retaining high quality staff; others differ, for example, the complexities around lesson changeovers when the students are from a range of rival gangs and need to be kept apart at all times. Therefore, adding the negative attitudes to education of many children in custody to this mix, will inevitably exacerbate these challenges and lead to suboptimal learning and educational outcomes.

The high-number of children leaving education over 18-months before entering custody raises questions on the effectiveness of education policies and initiatives for this cohort of children. In 2004, the Home Office released a report stating that education 'plays a central role in measures to prevent actual or potential offending amongst their

pupils as well as improve their 'life chances' (Home Office 2004, 5). Some children involved in offending in the community, for whom removal from school was related to offending, outlined the impact of this exclusion on offending:

'I was arrested in front of everyone in education, it was a Tuesday. I brought a knife with me to school once. I tried to stab a guy that bullied me man, he was huge, I kept swinging at him but he banged me hard. It was a hard bang man. I was flat out. That was it really, I was out of it then. No school wants someone like that, I support that is fair really.' (P03)

'I got kicked out of secondary school and two units (PRU), I was home schooled in the end. It's all a circle you know, you get kicked out of school and have nothing to do. You end up committing crime because you have nothing to do, you get bored, and then you end up here.' (P04)

'I used to go to like a PRU, it was alright but well I didn't have a choice to go there. I was banned from my school before that, you know stupid stuff ... I hit a teacher with a chair so I ended up excluded from proper school. I had to be full-time education for my order so I went for a bit but I didn't really want to go. It got boring, so I stopped going ...' (P10)

The quotes illustrate the challenges to children experiencing school exclusion, with one child eloquently describing school exclusion as '*a circle you know, you get kicked out of school and have nothing to do*'. The description of circumstances (for example, violence in school), support research conducted by Lanskey (2014) who found that many of those in youth custody were identified as 'at-risk' in school, but also as 'risky' students who could jeopardise a school's performance or reputation. These risky students who are 'at-risk' are therefore not having their basic needs, such as safety, met and are therefore unlikely to reach self-actualisation (educational success). Whilst some schools may invest in interventions such as 'nurture groups' (Cooper and Whitebread 2007) to try and help some of their 'risky' students develop attachments and build a sense of belonging that make students feel secure, many others do not invest in successful interventions and students continue to fail to progress. Indeed, it could be argued that it is much easier to exclude these pupils or do little to prevent their withdrawal, and One could also go further and state that in such instances, the educational establishment is not even meeting children's safety needs, and certainly not their need for belonging (Maslow 1987).

Educational success emerged as an issue within the STC, as satisfaction with education in the centre influenced children's desire to continue with education, with those satisfied with education in the centre significantly more likely to continue with education or training upon leaving the centre ($p < 0.01$).¹¹ On further exploration¹², the researcher found that the desire to continue with education was significantly higher for those attending education or training prior to arriving in STCs. Furthermore, there was a significant correlation¹³ ($p < 0.01$) between children agreeing with the statement 'I want to continue with my education or training once I leave the STC' and their length of absence from education, with a higher proportion of recent education leavers agreeing with the statement. This data suggests that children with positive attitudes to education have a higher probability of continuing with education. The age ranges of children indicating a desire to return to education were evenly distributed, whilst their predominant offence type was Assault. Disparity was also found in the interview data in relation to children's perceptions of education in custody:

'Some of the teachers are good, they give us proper education work to do. Like they give us sheets of paper with ... with ... I don't know what they are called really ... but they have things on it that help me learn.' (P02)

'And getting back into education, it's shown me how much I missed education. As soon as I get out of here, I'm getting back to my college course, I'm getting back in.' (P11)

These positive comments about missing education, teachers being 'good' and 'proper education' indicate that, for a few, the education they receive in the STC is beneficial and could be the first steps on their route to a crime-free life. Educational opportunities and qualifications help to cultivate self-efficacy (Bandura 1977; 1997) and increase children's ability to access meaningful opportunities on release (Farrington 2003; Paterson-Young, Hazenberg, and Bajwa-Patel 2019). Given the importance of education for children serving a sentence and children transitioning from custody, the STC has an obligation to ensure children receive appropriate education (Paterson-Young, *ibid*). Positive views of education were overshadowed by the negative views of education as boring and/or inappropriate:

'Some teachers are lazy though and give us word searchers and cross words. Sometimes that alright like, if you have a long day, but it's not really education.' (P02)

'I had exams this week. Some don't teach you the stuff that's in the exam, so you can't do it. It's too hard. I get on with most of the teachers here, sometimes you do nothing though. You don't get consistency. Not like mainstream school, you don't have topics that you study every week, they just tell you what to write. Like they tell you the answer but not how to get the answer. You don't learn stuff.' (P04)

'(Education) Shit, they just give us the answers. I would rather stay on the unit. You do more work on the unit that you do in education. You don't do anything here, you colour man, what's the point in that, I don't learn nothing doing that, nothing at all.' (P05)

'I think it's boring. Obviously you don't really learn that much. Like, from when I come here last year, I've done some work that I already done before I come here. I already done the stuff so it's boring.' (P10)

The quotes above show that the children did not feel challenged or engaged by the content of the lessons, one participant describes it as, 'not really education' and two others remark on how they have not learnt much or anything. The lack of challenging or engaging educational provisions hinders children's self-efficacy, which in turn, hinders progression through Maslow's (1943, 1987) hierarchy of needs, preventing actualisation and the establishment of robust self-efficacy. Considering the role of education for reducing recidivism and promoting desistance, providing effective educational provisions in custody is key. If children in the STC, many of who were detached from education before being sentenced, are finding the education provision boring, unchallenging and do not feel that they are learning anything then clearly significant change is needed. The current educational component in the Centre has existed, in some form or another, since the initial conception of STCs for 12–14 year olds in 1998. With STCs now accommodating 12–18 year-olds, the effectiveness of current educational activities (particularly for the older age groups) requires consideration. Research (Holden et al. 2016) suggests the importance of additional vocational training for children aged 16–17 years-old, whilst Eikeland (2009) found that prisoners were motivated to participate

in educational activities if time was spent on perceived sensible and useful activities. Given the changes in the cohort of children sent to custody and the numerous negative comments about education made by children in this study, reviewing educational provision is essential to improving motivation and behaviour. As well as improved provision in youth custody there also needs to be a shift in the education and mental health provision for children in the community. Improved training for school staff, alongside more accountability for the outcomes of all students, could help provide more effective education for more children. Schools need to be held more accountable for the students they exclude, perhaps through enhanced working with alternative provision providers or, ideally, not excluding them in the first instance. Better training and awareness of the impact of childhood trauma and brain injuries could also help ensure that mainstream education and healthcare meet the hierarchy of needs of these children and provide the kind of support and successful outcomes that lead to a life free from crime.

Conclusions

Education is described a 'building block' to a life free of crime (Taylor 2016), yet children in custody are receiving education, which the participants in this study describe as '... not really education'. Machin and Meghir (2004) explored the correlation between crime and wages in England and Wales, finding that the influence of education on capital accumulation was important for developing effective crime reduction strategies, to be woven into wider efforts to reduce crime. These conclusions are relevant to the research conducted on the social impact of custodial environments on children, particularly in exploring educational attainment and school attendance. Given the relationships between poor educational attainment and skills with crime (Machin and Meghir 2004; Hazel and Lockwood 2016; Taylor 2016), implementing effective and sustainable services to support the children in education in the community and custody is paramount to reducing recidivism and improving the life chances of these, often severely disadvantaged, children. Evidence shows that they have a higher incidence of neurodisability than the general population, presenting challenges for children trying to access education whilst requiring appropriate support. Research also shows that 1/5 young offenders have mental health needs that are unmet, which may be the result of childhood trauma. Education in custody can make a difference and lead to changes and reduced recidivism; indeed, the evidence here is strong (Holden et al. 2016; Eikeland 2009).

Despite the astronomical costs (over £160,000 per place/year), STCs are currently failing through the education they provide. If children in custody are to be supported to become productive members of their communities, to realise their potential, to cope with the normal stresses and strains of life, to not reoffend and live with dignity then appropriate and sufficient education, mental health, neurodisability provisions and 'purposeful activity' must be made available across all types of youth custodial provision in England and Wales. Essentially, these are 'the building blocks' that are missing in the provision offered today. However, it must be noted that even before these children reach youth custody, the education, social care and health systems have already failed many of them. Without having the feelings of being safe, secure, healthy and belonging, children's development of self-efficacy is hindered, which in turn, impacts on achieving the educational success that could help them lead a life free from crime. Therefore, whilst

education in the STC could be improved upon, there are many more changes required, some of which may not be possible to achieve in a custodial environment. Some of these, such as 'nurture groups' could be utilised more often in mainstream education to help at-risk students develop their attachments, sense of belonging, self-efficacy and self-esteem and prepare them more effectively for learning.

Policy implications of this research relate, specifically, to the need for replacement provisions for children that focus on developing self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and meeting individual physiological and affective needs (Maslow 1943; 1987). More specifically to education, provisions are needed to ensure children receive age-appropriate education based on their own individual needs. In the current climate of austerity (and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic), this will be challenging given the impact that austerity policies have been shown to have on young people generally (McKay and Rowlingson 2016; Taylor-Goodby 2016; Edmiston 2017). The education provisions in STCs were initially introduced for children aged 12–14 years-old and, despite the age-range extending to 17 years-old, the education provisions have remained largely unchanged. Indeed, if children are being provided education that is either too advanced for their needs (or not advanced enough) they are being denied the opportunity to develop genuine, positive mastery experiences, which are fundamental to developing efficaciousness (Bandura 1997). Another policy implication relates to the use of short-sentences, which reduces the opportunity for increasing education and/or vocational skills for children. Developing an alternative to custody to support children to develop education and/or vocational skills can help improve children's self-efficacy, which can consequently improve outcomes. Taylor (2016) recommended the introduction of Secure Schools to provide child-focussed support with specialised education, healthcare and physical activity provisions; however, similar recommendations have been proposed in the past (Audit Commission 1996) that had little or no impact, before a new government White Paper (No More Excuses 1997) emphasised system efficiency and personal responsibility. It is essential that Secure Schools are monitored and evaluated effectively from the start to ensure the provisions are fit for purpose.

The research reported in this paper has a number of limitations. The first relates to our sample, which is exclusively male focused and relatively small (in statistical terms), limiting our ability to generalise to the wider population. In addition, the small sample-size also caused some statistical difficulties in our analysis, as the data was not normally distributed and so non-parametric tests were required. However, we believe that the combination of quantitative and qualitative data here mitigates this, as both datasets offer support to each other through a process of triangulation (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004). Furthermore, for a mixed-methods study, a qualitative sample-size of 15 participants is considered sufficient to allow effective analysis and triangulation (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004). Our access to participants also limited the study, as whilst we could understand children's history (through case notes) and their current experiences of education in the STC, we could not follow their journeys post-release, denying us another dataset that could have provided additional richness to our findings. Nevertheless, we believe that the data gathered and the theoretical framework utilised in the analysis makes this study unique. We are unaware of other research that has explored these issues in such depth within the STC environment, and so our findings offer tentative conclusions from which other researchers can build upon in the future.

Notes

1. A custodial provision developed to “accommodate trainees in a safe environment within secure conditions; and helping trainees prepare for their return to the outside community” (STC, 1998) with emphasis on delivering education provisions.
2. When compared to the general population.
3. Young people on remand were excluded from the study due to sentencing status.
4. Seven-point or five-point Likert scales were used depending on the question domain.
5. Identifying that the data was non-parametric allowed the researcher to selected appropriate non-parametric tests such as the Kendall tau-b.
6. Statistics on the Youth Justice System (year ending March 2018) show that 81% of all first-time entrants were males.
7. Information on the educational experiences of children in the community including school reports and reports from Youth Offending Services.
8. <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2018/06/whos-left-2018-part-one-the-main-findings/>
9. The figure 8.7% is based on information for children aged 15–17 years-old.
10. Based on case-file information with reports from education indicating permanent exclusions prior to entering custody; therefore, this figure may be higher.
11. Chi-squared non-parametric test.
12. Chi-squared non-parametric test.
13. Chi-Squared non-parametric test.

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