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Asset-based youth support—reclaiming the roots of youth work at the Foyer Federation

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Asset-based youth support—reclaiming the roots of youth work at the Foyer Federation

Kaz Stuart[1]* and Emma Perris[2]

Abstract: Evolutionary systems theory is widely accepted as the organising principle for life sciences. In more recent years it has also been applied to economics, culture, language, and leadership. In this paper we argue that services for young people need to evolve from deficit discourses to asset-based practices. The argument for asset-based work with young people will be presented through the lens of one organisation, the Foyer Federation who were developing asset-based service design. The findings of a systematic literature review are presented to demonstrate the scope and impact of current asset-based initiatives globally. The assumptions and activities of deficit and asset-based approaches are contrasted with use of cultural-historical activity theory. These findings are synthesised with the developmental work of the Foyer Federation to explicate the philosophy and practice of asset-based work with young people. The findings and implications are drawn out to inform others practice and research.

Subjects: Social Sciences; Health & Development; Education

Keywords: assets; youth work; housing; impact

1. Introduction

There is evidence to suggest the current model of welfare in the UK isn't working. Statistics show £49bn spent on benefits in 2012–2013 (National Audit Office, 2012a), £63 million spent on a Work Programme that has a success rate of 3.5% (National Audit Office 2012b), and an estimated £318

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Much of the services focused on supporting young people treats them as "broken" and in need of "fixing". This paper proposes an asset-based approach that treats young people as capable and able of solving their own issues with appropriate support. A case study of the development of asset-based work in the Foyer Federation in the UK is presented. The theoretical overview and practical ideas of how to plan asset-based services will be helpful to anyone supporting human development in its widest sense. An asset-based approach is suggested to empower people, allow authentic power relationships, and has potential to save state money and achieve effective outcomes. The asset-based approach has a range of implications for the ways services are planned, delivered, managed and evaluated that are discussed in practical terms to support organisations considering the approach.

million spent every year on alternative learning (Taylor, 2012) operating as a remedy to poor outcomes in mainstream education. It is not unreasonable to infer that public funds are not being spent as effectively. The UK model of welfare has developed as reactionary, helping young people to cope when things go wrong rather than proactively helping them progress into thriving, independent adulthood. "Welfare" means much more than the public money spent on benefit. It means all the public, private and other strategic, funding and services arrangements and state, professional and individual efforts, that are expended on "helping people in need". In an era of budget cuts these services are further stretched to provide "fire fighting" services to young people they consider most in need (Gainsbury & Neville, 2015). The treatment of people as problematic, characterised by issues and given solutions by the state can be characterized as paternalistic. Others (McCashen, 2014) have described this culture as a deficit approach where all knowing practitioners make choices about who is "in need", what is "needed", and how young people should engage with the service "provided". Rather than developing further with these cultural assumptions, it is perhaps time for an evolutionary moment, where new assumptions need to be adopted within the DNA of the next generation of services for young people.

Ridley (2015) compellingly argues that humans are not responsible for evolution, rather, the circumstances arise in which evolution is inevitable. We propose that the current circumstances of decreasing resources and increasing need indicate arrival at that point of evolution. Continuing to "target" work "at" young people "in need" may be untenable due to the expense and poor outcomes attained to date and cited earlier. What comes to be, in the process of evolution, is a manifestation of what needs to be. The survival of the fittest services for young people are surely those that best enable young people to thrive—that is the fittest practice. In this paper we explore the extent to which that might be asset-based practice.

The Foyer Federation had found itself delivering services to the prescriptive terms of external funding and this had fundamentally changed the way it related to and worked with young people. This realisation marked a moment when the Foyer Federation would seek to reclaim its original working practices and inform them with contemporary asset-based theory and research. This paper presents the evidence used by the Foyer Federation to inform its revised service design.

2. Methodology

This paper is unconventional methodologically in its synthesis of a case study with a systematic literature review.

A case study was appropriate to communicate the exact context of one organisation, the Foyer Federation, who chose to evolve their existing practice into an asset-based service. The detail within the case study approach provides specificity often described as "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). This richness enables the reader to ascertain the extent to which the case holds similarity to their own situation and therefore, whether the findings are generalisable or transferable to their setting. Case studies have come under criticism as subjective, ungeneralisable and inferior to scientific research. We find these criticisms unproblematic. We ascribe to Flyvbjerg's (2006) five claims for case studies, that:

Practical knowledge in case studies is as important as theoretical knowledge.

It is possible to generalise from a single case.

Case studies can generate and test hypotheses.

Case studies can be free from bias.

Case studies are whole narratives that should not be summarised (219–230).

This case study was developed through extensive conversations with the Youth Development Manager at the Foyer Federation, scrutiny of documentary evidence, visits to premises and meetings with 20 residents.

A systematic literature review is situated alongside the case study. The systematic literature review was necessary in order to understand the evidence for the range of asset-based practice that currently exits, its application and its impact. The use of a systematic review would draw in the expertise of other organisations employing asset-based practice and ensure that the reclaimed offer the Foyer Federation hoped to develop would be grounded in the best evidence available (Guyatt & Rennie, 2002). The use of a systematic literature review could potentially reduce the time and resources needed to implement the practice as the findings would present a reliable and comprehensive source of what works (Mallett, Hagen-Zanker, Slater, & Duvendack, 2012). The process of systematic review conducted in this study involved:

(1) Deconstruction of the research question by population, intervention, outcome and comparator.
(2) Development of search strings and protocols.
(3) Systematic search conducted in academic databases and institutional websites (hand-searching).
(4) Retrieved studies are screened on relevance of title, abstract and full text, by using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.
(5) Studies that are included in the final analysis are characterised by intervention, study quality, outcomes, research design and type of analysis.
(6) Extraction of relevant quantitative and/or qualitative data, in order to synthesise the evidence into a final report or written output (Mallett et al., 2012, p. 447).

Papers were searched for that had a worldwide scope, were written between 1995 and 2016 and addressed the needs of young people aged 11 to 25. The search terms used were:

• Assets/strengths
• Youth work/youth development/youth intervention/youth programme
• Housing/housing intervention/housing engagement/housing programme/homeless engagement/homeless programme/homeless intervention.
• Education/enterprise skills/employability skills/nutrition/health/physical exercise.

The search found a total of 210 papers. These were scored out of ten. The 98 papers with a score lower than three was eliminated from the review leaving a total of 112. Thematic analysis led to findings summarised in a 124 page final report that served as a springboard for the evolution of asset-based practice for the Foyer Federation and its membership of Delivery Partner Foyers.

Within this paper the thick description of the Foyer Federation case study gives entrance to the real world of practice, and the systematic review gives insight into the theory, application and outcomes of asset-based practice globally. Two sections case study evidence and two sections of findings from the literature review are interspersed in order to ensure that there is a close link between theory and practice. In this respect the researcher is aiming to achieve some form of praxis (Kemmis, 2010). This is perhaps an unusual methodological turn, bringing case study and literature review together, and it tells of the researchers passion for a mutually enriching exchange of knowledge between practice and academia. Together, it is hoped, they more convincingly make the case for a "new" way of working with young people than either one alone would.

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3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Case study part 1: The Foyer Federation context before asset-based practice
The Foyer's were originally designed for young people not living at home and for whom hostel type service would not provide the access to learning and employability required. The Foyer Federation has always been about service reform and was considered innovative and controversial in its early days, even within the homelessness sector. There was recognition by founders Shelter and Diageo (then Grand Metropolitan) that a sustainable route out of homelessness depended on young people connecting or reconnecting with learning and work and from this was born the Foyer Federation's "offer" of developmental learning and employability activities to residents. By the 1990s there were around 100 Foyer's nationally providing this important work.

In the early days, there was capital funding from government to build new Foyers and convert existing hostels for young people but no core revenue. Income was gained from Rents and Service Charges (housing benefit), fundraising (from a range of sources, the European Social Fund, local re-generation funding, local trusts and foundations) or building partnerships with other organisations with a duty to deliver service to young people e.g. colleges, local charities providing sexual health or employability services. The aim was to create a "balanced" offer with learning and work at its heart.

The Foyer Federation is a central governance organisation which accredits each Foyer. The accreditation was developed at the request of young people and it is a mark that the individual Foyer is offering appropriate developmental processes rather than merely a place to live (Foyer Federation, 2006). The Foyer Federation to date challenges and stretches services and is custodian of this balanced offer, ethos and "Foyerness".

In 2003 the funding challenge became easier as the UK government allowed Foyers to access Supporting People funding through Local Authority's. This funding brought continuity to Foyers for first time. In early stages this finance didn't affect the range of services provided by Foyers, however, as funding got tighter, Local Authority commissioners became more prescriptive, determining who should have access to the service (thus removing the test of a balanced community living in the Foyer) and requiring Foyers to concentrate on the housing related support elements of their offer, often at the expense of the learning, employability and health and wellbeing aspects. The Foyer Federation became increasing concerned at the impact of early Supporting People funding cuts and how they were already beginning to dilute the offer available at Foyers nationally. Gladwell (2000) documents the phenomenon of "tipping points" where the consensus within a culture leads to a change. Practitioner and manger concern created a tipping point whereby the Foyer Federation sought to reclaim their offer in the guise of asset-based practice. A key question first had to be resolved however—was there any evidence that an asset-based approach would work with homeless young people?

3.1.1. Systematic review 1: What is asset-based practice, where is it used, and what is its impact?
An asset is something useful or valuable that a person has. This could be a personal quality such as patience, courage, determination etc., or a property or belonging such as money, a house, a bicycle etc.

Asset-based thinking and practice is therefore focused on what people have and what they can do, rather than what they are lacking and cannot do. Asset-based practice is also referred to as strengths-based or advantaged and these synonyms were widely found in the systematic literature review.

The possession of assets is closely linked to the concept of capital (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005). Bourdieu (1977) was the first protagonist of human capital—the knowledge, skills, networks and culture of individuals and groups. Later Putnam (2000) documented the demise of communities in America as the loss of social capital, and more recently Côte and Levine (2016) have defined the constituents of identity capital, an individuals sense of self. These three theories together document

the inequitable access people have to these capitals, perpetuating oppression and disadvantage. Promoting the development of assets, and working from the assumption that all people have assets could therefore offer an important tool to lever social justice.

To explore the case for asset-based working, it is important to contrast it to the current dominant discourses in welfarist Britain. Discussion of the welfare state is confused and contested. One the one hand, it is hard to dispute that there needs to be a safety net to protect people from poverty, disadvantage and poor outcomes. An argument is put forward, however, that the safety net has become a smothering safety blanket that over protects people limiting development. This is at the crux of claims that welfare state is paternalistic (Saint-Paul, 2011).

In a similar vein, whilst meeting the unmet needs of young people is a sensible approach to service design, its over-reliance and continual focus on "what's wrong" or "what's missing" creates negative or deficit discourse. Disadvantage has become inherent in the language used to communicate about young people as, for example: disadvantaged, disengaged, disaffected, at risk. These negative labels influence the way people think about and engage with young people. If they are constructed as disadvantaged it is likely that services will intervene from the assumption that they cannot help themselves. Further stereotyping occurs in the labels of: Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET), care leaver, young offender, homeless. The discourse of needs-led and targeted services oppresses, marginalises and disadvantages the people it seeks to help, and has potential to blame them for social ills (Pitzer, 2014). These discourses are perpetuated and enshrined in service specifications, pleas for charitable giving and media stories.

Social dynamics feed on deep-seated social fears of young people. Media stories construct young people as "hoodie" wearing youths committing anti-social behavior, unruly, uncaring teenage mothers, gangsters, and extremists (Cannon, 2011). Such demonizing discourses perpetuate a politics of fear (Furedi, 2005) and prompt moral panic (Cohen, 1987). This legitimizes over-regulation, criminalisation and medicalisation of young people, treating them as objects of surveillance and control (Foucault, 1978), rather than as capable and creative contributors to society. This widespread pattern of focusing on the negative aspects of young people and associated responsive practices is what is encapsulated in the term deficit discourse. It would seem that this discourse has prevailed unchallenged for some time, and thinking in alternative ways can be a challenge. Examples of these discourses are presented with newspaper headlines:

- One in Four Adolescents is a Criminal (Hickley, 2017).
- City Teenagers 40% More Likely to Experience Psychosis (Forster, 2017).
- British youths are "the most unpleasant and violent in the world": Damning verdict of writer as globe reacts to riots (Moran & Hall, 2011).
- The 15 Teenage Victims of Violent Knife Crime in 2015 (Proto, 2016).
- Teenage mother, 17, poured bleach into her newborn baby's mouth after giving birth on her bathroom floor following secret pregnancy (McLelland, 2016).

Journalists are aware that they perpetuate these discourses. The Independent reported in 2009 that: "more than half of the stories about teenage boys in national and regional newspapers in the past year (4,374 out of 8,629) were about crime. The word most commonly used to describe them was "yobs" (591 times), followed by "thugs" (254 times), "sick" (119 times) and "feral" (96 times)" (Garner, 2009). And yet it continues.

These messages implicitly convey to young people that they are faulty, weak, broken and difficult, and to managers and practitioners that they need to punish, control, support, fix the issues and deficits. As a consequence service planning is undertaken by analysis of "need" of communities, population groups and individuals, and then designing a service to meet that need (Dartington Social Research Unit [DSRU], 2014).
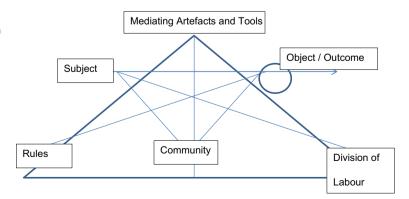
Whist needs should not be ignored, solely focussing on needs places emphasis on what people have not got, are not and cannot do. There is often no reciprocity in the services, they are mandated, or offered on a take it or leave it basis, or offered conditionally for "good" behaviour. An example of extreme conditionality is the Work Progamme (Etherington & Daguerre, 2015). The paternalistic provision of services disempowers young people. It implicitly communicates that they need fixing, they are incapable of doing so themselves, and the service providers know best. This increases dependency and need. Understanding that they need help and are helpless, the young person will always seek help when they experience difficulties. A self-fulfilling prophesy of reliance is created called welfare dependency (Spicker, 2002, pp. 32–37). To exemplify the potential impact of deficit discourses and asset-based discourses, the researcher constructed two activity theoretical system diagrams.

An activity theoretical diagram (Engeström, 2001) is used to illustrate how this deficit-based system operates. Activity theory comes from the cultural-historical activity paradigm that takes account of the history and culture of the context. It places humans as agents of change within their contexts emphasising the individual within a collective consciousness (Edwards, 2005). This is an important first step in accounting for the contexts that young people are born into, and the responses of the different people in that context—rather than situating all fault with young people and the ability to fix with adults regardless of situation.

People are referred to as "agents" within this theory. The agents engage in activities using tools, complying with or breaking rules, operating within a community that is directed to tasks through the explicit division of labour. It is these activities that respond to and act on the context, and for this reason the theory is called an activity theoretical system. A benefit of the activity theoretical diagram is that it can account for all aspects of a situation, all stakeholders and their multiple realities. There have been multiple versions of activity theory that build from Vygotsky's (1978) initial socio-cultural psychological ideas about tools or artefacts stimulating a response (learning). Engeström's, (2001) first generation activity theoretical system is shown in Figure 1.

The system takes collective, artefact-mediated and object oriented activity as the prime unit of analysis. This means that they are concerned with what people do in a specific context, and the results of those actions. They adopt a "community of multiple points of view", as the division of labour creates different positions for the participants. This means that they can represent a range of different perspectives inclusively. A final characteristic is the applied and developmental nature of activity theory. The theory has been applied in many public, private and state sectors to yield understanding of what works using the contradictions and tensions between the different elements of the system as sources of change and development (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2010; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999). The holistic, inclusive and developmental nature of the activity theoretical system lent itself to the study of a practice such as asset-based work.

Figure 1. An activity theoretical map developed from Engeström and Middleton (1996) first generation activity theory.

The elements of the activity system include:

The Subject is the individual or subgroup whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis.

- The Object is the raw material or problem space at which the activity is directed and which is moulded or transformed into outcomes.
- Tools or artefacts are physical, and symbolic, internal and external mediating instruments and signs. These might include meetings, forms, acronyms, objects, resources, and concepts.
- The Rules are the explicit and implicit regulations and norms and conventions that constrain or enable actions and interactions within the activity system. They may include spoken rules and guidelines and implicit understandings of how things are done around here.
- The Community comprises the multiple individuals, or subgroups who share the same general object, they may or may not know that they are members of the community, and criteria for inclusion or exclusion are significant.
- Division of Labour refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical divisions of power and status.
- Contradictions and tensions may exist between conflicting areas of the activity system. Identifying where these contradictions are creates reflection and reconstruction of the situation, and proposed new activity that can be transformative.

In figure two, the activity theoretical system illustrates the alignment of all elements of the deficit activity system (with blue lines) with the exception of the match between those and the outcome (shown in red). The subject is a broken, useless, young person defined by deficits in "dis" language. The tools are activities and services designed by adults to fix those needs. The rules of the adult designed system, are that young people must engage (e.g. in school) and must comply and conform to behavioural rules in order to engage. When young people are broken and in need of fixing they will work with a wide variety of practitioners each one a specialist in how to fix each problem they have. It is the adults who are constructed as doing all the work "for" the young people who just show up. It seems obvious that this will not lead to young people who are autonomous, independent and successful, and research exists to support this belief (Bogenschneider, 1998), and yet this system has been in place for a long time. It is likely that the intentions of those working within this paradigm are good, they intend to support young people, but are unfortunately eroding that possibility through their practices. We say this from reflections on our own well intended but deficit practices that have had unintentional negative outcomes. The activity theoretical system illustrates the ways in which the deficit system creates dependent and disempowered young people, hence the lack of success of existing services. The examples given are exaggerated for effect in Figure 2.

Exaggerated examples of an asset-based approach are used to illustrate the opposite effect in figure three. Here the asset-based activity theoretical system starts with the identification and celebration of what young people have, can do and are. Young people set their own goals and aims, and services are provided on this basis with the practitioner working in alliance with the young person facilitating their growth. Competencies flourish in this positive environment and positive expectations lead to further gains and an upwards cycle of positive development (McCashen, 2014, p. 10). All aspects of an asset-based system support one another, and can lead to a young person being autonomous, independent and successful as shown in the activity theoretical analysis in Figure 3.

The key assumption here is that people have strengths and practitioners support them to find their own solutions. From this perspective there are no disadvantaged or homeless people. There are only people experiencing disadvantage and homelessness, whose identities are not solely defined by their labels.
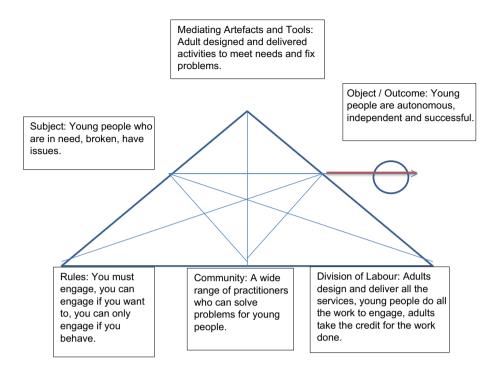
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Figure 2. Activity theoretical analysis of a deficit-based approach to work with young people.

Mediating Artefacts and Tools: Adult designed and delivered activities to meet needs and fix problems.

Object / Outcome: Young people are autonomous, independent and successful.

Subject: Young people who are in need, broken, have issues.

Rules: You must engage, you can engage if you want to, you can only engage if you behave.

Community: A wide range of practitioners who can solve problems for young people.

Division of Labour: Adults design and deliver all the services, young people do all the work to engage, adults take the credit for the work done.
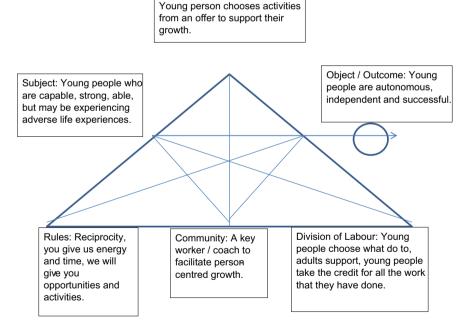
Figure 3. Activity theoretical analysis of an asset-based approach to work with young people.

Mediating Artefacts and Tools: Young person chooses activities from an offer to support their growth.

Object / Outcome: Young people are autonomous, independent and successful.

Subject: Young people who are capable, strong, able, but may be experiencing adverse life experiences.

Rules: Reciprocity, you give us energy and time, we will give you opportunities and activities.

Community: A key worker / coach to facilitate person centred growth.

Division of Labour: Young people choose what do to, adults support, young people take the credit for all the work that they have done.

These key assumptions featured within the asset-based activity theoretical system summarise the findings on the defining features of asset-based practice from the systematic literature review. The theoretical roots for this approach are varied and lie in person-centred education and counseling (Rogers, 1951), appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider & Witney, 2005), positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) and empowerment theory (Maynard, 2011).

Within the systematic literature review, asset-based practices were most commonly found in the fields of Positive Youth Development, Asset-Based Community Development and Asset-based Health

Care. Asset-based housing support was a much more recent development and less evidenced use of asset-based practice. An overview of each of these well-established fields of practice is beyond the scope of this paper, instead a snapshot of the evidence for their efficacy is provided.

Positive Youth Development is an extensive movement in the USA with reach globally. The approach focuses on the development of five "C"s'—competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring, which lead to a sixth outcome—contribution. Three key papers in the systematic literature review demonstrated its efficacy. The first is a study of 27 UK positive youth development projects that were all found to meet their aims (Schuman & Davies, 2007). Second is a synthesis of research projects on 41 USA projects where all 41 were found to lead to increases in the five "C"s' (Travis & Leech, 2014). The third paper, also from the USA comprised a single longitudinal study which again proved strong correlations between the positive youth development approach and acquisition of the five "C"s' (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005).

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is also prevalent globally. The key assumption is that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing, but often unrecognized assets, and thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity. Such assets include: individuals, associations, organisations, physical assets, and connectors within the community. In the UK the approach is most common in Scotland and the Scottish Community Development Council (n.d.) evidenced the impact of an ABCD project with 120 neglected children in Glasgow. Levels of activity and community engagement increased due to the project. ABCD is widely used in the USA and general impacts are well evidenced (Walker, 2006) as well as specific outcomes achieved such as improvements in mental health in rural communities (Boyd, Hayes, Wilson, & Bearsley-Smith, 2008).

Asset-based health care is a more recent phenomenon that is gaining hold in everything from specialist to general practice health care. Its presence and impact in the UK was well evidenced with comprehensive guidance from NHS Scotland (Sigerson & Gruer, 2011), an NHS toolkit and pilot project in England (Greetham, 2011), suite of case studies in NHS Wales (Jones, 2014), and most convincingly, a study in Coventry and Warwickshire was clinically evidenced to reduce COPD by 40% (Lilley, 2014).

There was less evidence of an asset-based approach used in housing support. In Australia a systematic review found positive evidence of outcomes from a strengths-based approach to housing support (Thompson, McManus, & Voss, 2006). Indeed asset-based working seems a well-established way of working in Australia. In the USA a five-year longitudinal study has documented the development of socialisation through a positive youth development approach to housing (Rew & Horner, 2003). More robust evidence was found in the Netherlands from the "Houvast" study (Krabbenborg et al., 2015). This nine-month study involved 251 participants in a random control trial and attributed statistically significant change to the group who received the asset-based housing support.

Asset-based practices were found globally across a range of services including youth work, community work, health, housing, education, employment, enterprise, nutrition and exercise. The data for the outcomes of asset-based practices in these sectors was predominantly qualitative and short term, and there was a range of over 100 different outcomes that arose from this breadth of work. This presented the Foyer Federation with a comprehensive list of outcomes possible that potentially needed rationalising into the outcomes they intended to work towards with their offer. Rather than adults deciding which outcomes were appropriate for young people, the Foyer Federation and researcher worked with young people to shape a final list of outcomes. The research provided an a la carte menu, in effect, from which young people selected a set menu to be used in Foyer's.

3.2. Case study part 2: Implementation at the Foyer Federation
The Foyer Federation began to ask themselves "What does a smooth transition to adulthood look like?" They drew inspiration from Team GB's preparations for the 2012 London Olympics. This was

characterised by personalised investment in individual talent and potential, a coaching approach to provide challenge and support, and creation of a climate of high expectations. The Foyer Federation set out to create just this asset-based practice.

A pilot programme was established called "Open Talent". National fundraising was used to enable the Foyer Federation to pilot approach across their network. For example, Big Lottery funded health programme allowed the Foyer Federation to train staff in 100 Foyers to use life-coaching approach rather than traditional support work model in their 1 to 1's with young people. Talent bonds (initially funded by Virgin Unite) provided small, individual investments in young people's talents and aspirations enabling them to go on to further or higher education. And a Housing Corporation Innovation grant allowed the Foyer Federation to develop "Working Assets" employability programme. Whilst these were all positive moves, they did not embody the systemic change required to work in an asset-based way. To this end, the Foyer Federation worked to define their philosophy, called "Advantaged Thinking".

The philosophy includes the following beliefs that young people have:

• Assets that can be harnessed and developed

• Talents that can provide solutions

• Experiences we can draw on

• Resources we can tap into

• Energy to spark change and create progress

• Potential to lead society and

• Ability to be authors of their own destiny.

These beliefs need to be demonstrated in the language and communicative actions of the staff in Foyers. In order to establish fidelity to this philosophy, the Foyer Federation established seven tests of advantaged thinking, making it clear that the philosophy needed to influence all aspects of practice. The tests are:

How we *talk* about people

How we *understand* people

How we *work* with people

How we *invest* in people

How we *believe* in people

How we *involve* people

How we challen*ge* ourselves and others (Foyer Federation, 2015).

While staff sometimes need to describe people in terms of their experiences, and refer to stereotypes, the Foyer Federation were clear that the negatives should never outweigh the positives developing the importance of an advantage ratio informed by Seligman's (2011) ratios for flourishing. The Foyer Federation have committed to talk more about people's abilities and qualities than their problems and challenges. Otherwise, they are simply adding weight to the things they are working to undo. It's about ensuring that positive language and imagery is in higher ratio to the negative. This includes the way they talk to and about young people, the way they design and describe their offer, they way they advertise and seek funding.

The second step of the Foyer Federation's reclaimed offer was creation of a theory of change in consultation with residents. This work makes the range of activities and associated outcomes in the

offer clear to young people, staff and funders and commissioners. Each link in the theory of change was supported with evidence in the systematic literature review ensuring that it is as assumption free as practicably possible.

This has firmly positioned the offer in the skills and welfare (rather than homelessness) space. It re-establishes the Foyer as an "approach" not a building or range of accommodation solutions. Opportunities come first with access to opportunities for learning, employability, personal development etc., and development is expected to soon follow. Non-negotiable aspects of the offer include voluntarism, a genuine "something for something" deal, a broad range of young people accessing the service to become residents, creating the balanced community, and a focus on learning and work.

In order to work in this way, Foyer's need to diversify their funding base with entrepreneurial approach to brokering the offer as they will no longer be able to rely on Supporting People funding, nor commissions that determine who, what and when services are delivered.

Rather than remaining an abstract philosophy, asset-based work needs to be embedded in the micro practices of Foyer's. Lists of key asset-based practices have been developed across the following areas:

- Place and space—a quality space that communicates value to young people, images and messages that convey trust and capability.
- Relationships—reciprocal and trusting relationships with staff with coaching as a prevalent tool for development.
- Language use—positive, affirmative, anti-oppressive.
- Goal setting—set by the young people not by staff.
- Assessment, monitoring and evaluation—grounded in individuals assessment of own strengths, goals and development.
- Decision-making—in consultation with young people as the key stakeholder in the Foyer.
- Staff development—that values the assets that staff have.
- Management—that is grounded in positive and appreciative values.

Fidelity to these practices has become enshrined in a new quality assurance and accreditation scheme (Foyer Federation, FOR Youth QA, 2015). In addition, due to the fundamental importance of trust, the Foyer Federation, in partnership with InspireChilli, an innovation organization, have developed a Trust Tool (Foyer Federation/InspireChilli, 2016)—this is an anonymous online survey that enables young people to rate the trust that they have in the Foyer offer, the staff who work in the Foyer and the community they are part of.

There are currently five Foyer's across the UK who are seeking to implement the full range of asset-based practices through piloting the new Quality Assurance system.

3.2.1. Systematic review 2: How to evidence the impact of the Foyer Federation's asset-based practice

An external evidence base has been developed that supports the Foyer Federation's introduction of asset-based practice. For many of youth workers and community development workers this may be familiar practice. Indeed, the values and practices of asset-based approaches are the same as those of other professional fields. This is perhaps then a rebranding, or in the Foyer Federations words a "re-claiming" rather than an adoption of something new. In evolutionary terms, we have perhaps come to a cul-de-sac in the deficit approach, it is perhaps time to return to something different; strengths-based, or asset based work.

The systematic literature review had demonstrated the potential of asset-based working, the next step was to develop an internal evidence base that demonstrates whether, and to what extent the Foyer's specific practices lead to positive impact for young people.

The systematic literature review found a prevalence of short-term qualitative evidence for the efficacy of asset-based practices. These are appropriate and highly congruent with an asset-based approach to evaluation as such an approach must be owned by and work for each young person. But this is problematic in a society that currently values medical science techniques over social science techniques. In the UK a drive for quantitative data generated from validated tools prevails. But this is not congruent with asset-based work, such medical science approaches are imposed on young people to demonstrate how effective services are. These methods may not always work, as shown by the phenomena of lower scores on an evaluation tool when a young person exits services than when they arrived (Knight, 2012; Stuart & Maynard, 2015). In contrast an asset-based system would be grounded in what the young people want to measure, in terms that are meaningful to them. This is the evaluation approach that is in use in the Foyer Federation, self-determined, self-perceptual measurement of the progress that the young people have themselves made. Quantitative papers do exist exemplified by Krabbenborg et al. (2015) large scale and longitudinal control trial. This has created valuable insights into the impact of asset-based services compared to deficit-based ones. As such the Foyer Federation's next step is to conduct a large scale comparative study of Foyers who are and are not using the asset-based practices in order to demonstrate the efficacy of this type of work, but through the use of asset-based evaluation techniques. We look forward on reporting on the efficacy of this approach and the asset-based practice in due course.

The danger of an asset-based approach is of course that we can focus on developing individual assets so much that it obscures the role of the structures that challenged young people in the first place. Asset-based practice is therefore not to become an excuse to place responsibility for wellbeing on young people enabling the state to escape responsibility. Focus on creating a socially just world and challenging inequality, oppression and marginalisation must remain a focus of our practice alongside support of young people's agency. Nor should asset-based working become an excuse for the state to further reduce investment in services or welfare. All people have assets, however, for some people leveraging those assets requires additional support in order to create an equitable access to assets.

4. Conclusion

The evolutionary moment has perhaps come for children's services. Evidence has been presented that the current way of planning services and the current discourses surrounding young people may not enable them to self-realise. The Foyer Federation came to this realisation and therefore explored the potential of asset-based approaches to offer an alternative. The case study material from the Foyer Federation provides practice-based evidence of when an asset-based approach may be helpful. This is complemented with a systematic literature review that presents evidence-based practice of the efficacy of asset-based approaches. The systematic literature review provided insight into the principles and practices of asset-based working, outcomes that may be anticipated and forms of evaluation. The review did not retrieve any examples of asset-based approaches failing to work or leading to negative outcomes, that said, there was no search conducted for evidence of asset-based approaches not working. In this respect there is a positive bias in the literature towards assets.

Bringing the case study and review together has created a rich praxis a combination of theory and practice. Added to this, activity theoretical system mapping demonstrated the contradiction between activities of the system and the outcomes intended for the subject inherent in a deficit based way of working. This tension is removed in an asset-based approach which is removed by an asset-based approach. A rich area of future study would be data collection to inform the activity theoretical diagrams with real data rather than exaggerated examples in a wide research project to ascertain the extent to which these separate discourses exist. There is always a danger when presenting

opposites that a binary is created of "either" "or", and the reality of any situation will be more nuanced and complex. Many organisations, for example, may have some aspects of asset and some of deficit based working. Understanding where these nuances exist and how they operate will be useful to the field.

The Foyer Federation's reclaimed offer has evolved from their initial realisations and evidence from the systematic literature review. This asset-based practice is now being implemented in Foyer's nationally. An asset-based evaluation toolkit has been developed to capture the changes that young people choose to make for themselves rather than the changes the Foyer's achieve for them. A next step is to collate this to constitute an internal evidence base of the efficacy of the approach in a housing support offer across the UK. Future research will be published in this area.

This paper has attempted to highlight some contemporary challenges in the planning and delivery of services for young people in the UK, to highlight the contribution that asset-based working provide, to being together research and practice evidence and highlight the use of multiple methodological frameworks. Within each area there are strengths, and also much score for counter argument, development and future research. It is in this spirit that we hope you engage and consider its ideas and content.

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