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The impact of the secure custodial setting on re-engaging incarcerated children with education and learning - a case study in the UK

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vCIES 23rd March 2020
(originally Miami, Florida

Some background

- More than one million children are incarcerated worldwide at any one time (UNICEF, 2008).

- Of these up to a considerable number have dropped out of school (90% in the UK, similar across the world).

- Number of children in custody at an all time low (in the UK 3,000 in 2008 down to 800 in 2019).

Background

- Educational attainment is low.
- Complex family and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- High prevalence of special educational needs 23% compared with 2-3% in the general population of young people (Hughes, 2012).
- Young offenders described as disengaged from education and learning when using dropout as a proxy for disengagement.

But it means those in custody have some of the most complex needs and represent some of the most troubled young people in the UK

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Dis/engagement

- Decline in overall student engagement secondary schools in the Western world (Deakin-Crick, 2012; Fredricks, 2013).
- Decline is characterised by low achievement, high dropout rates and high levels of boredom (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016).
- Children who offend tend to have all of these characteristics (Little, 2015, ahmed Shafi, 2019).
- Delinquency linked to being bored at school (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Dis/engagement

Engagement is multidimensional
- Cognitive
- **Affective (emotional)**
- Behavioural

Fredricks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004).
Engagement is linked to motivation

However, disengagement is distinct to just 'low engagement' which tends to be more acute (Skinner et al 2008, Jang et al, 2017; ahmed Shafi, 2019b)

Disengagement can take active and passive forms in the same person, both requiring different re-engagement strategies (ahmed Shafi, 2019b)

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Education in youth custody

- Education and training in (western) custodial settings is fragmented and lower quality than mainstream schooling (Frolander-Ulf & Yates, 2001).
- 'Instructors' rather than qualified teachers, contributing to a marginal status (Garland, McCarty, & Zhao, 2009)
- High staff turnover (Jeanes, McDonald, & Simonot, 2009).
- Staff do not see the fruits of their efforts due to the transitional nature of prison (Sander et al, 2010) and thus;
- Teacher expectations can also be low (Houchins et al, 2009) with,
- Limited educational aspirations in the young people (Oser, 2006).
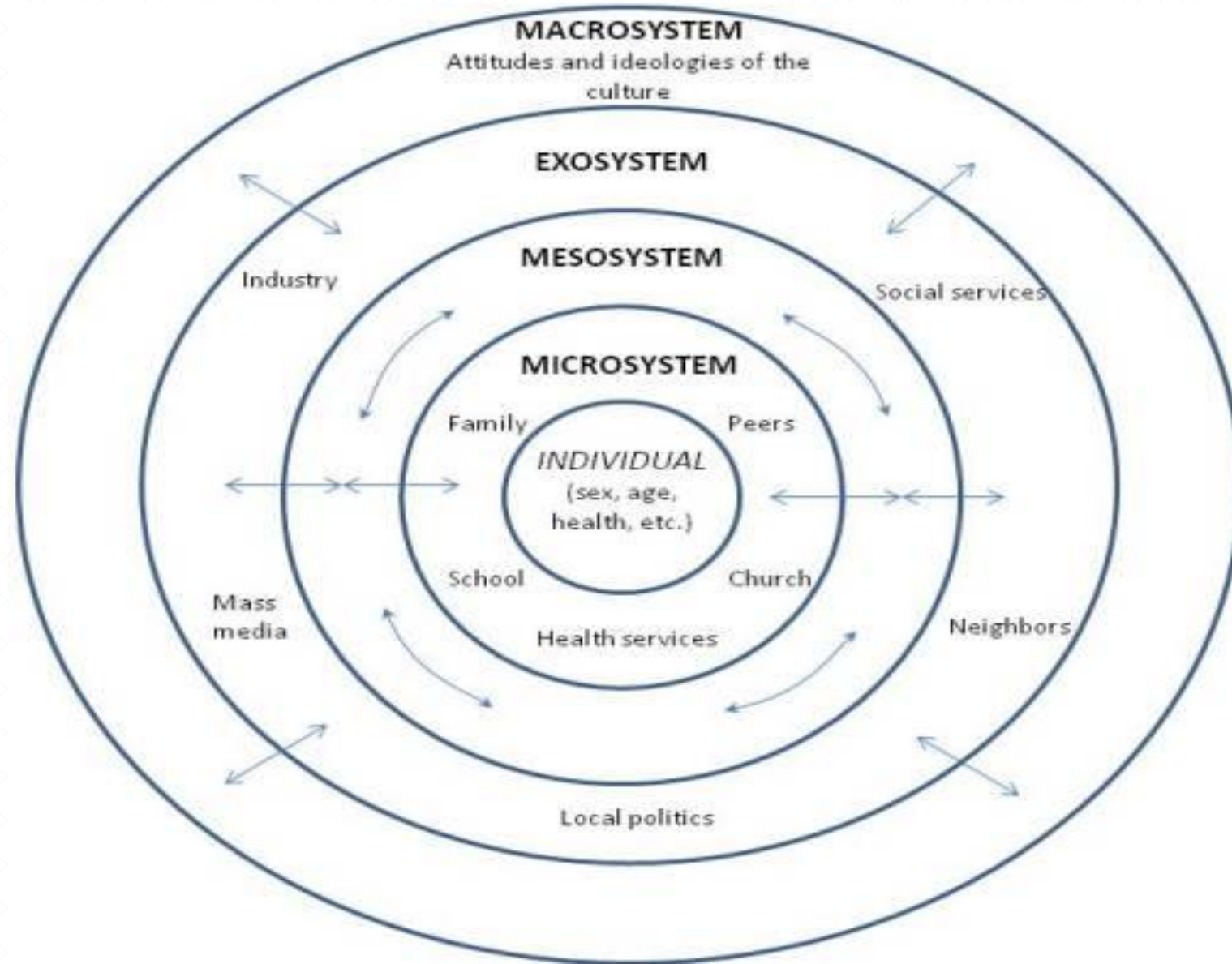
Limited educational research on education in custody. Most of it is on the success of the intervention rather than the overall provision (eg Wexler et al, 2014)

'successful' interventions are those which have a personal or authentic element to them (Houchins et al 2009).

Very little data from the young people themselves

The importance of context in education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The study

Ethnographic case study
1 secure children's home in England (aged 10-17 years)
2 Phases

Phase I

- Initial interviews with 16 young people in the secure setting
- Observations
- Field notes

Phase II

- 5 case studies of comprising of interviews, observation, field notes with young people, mentors, teachers, Head Teacher.
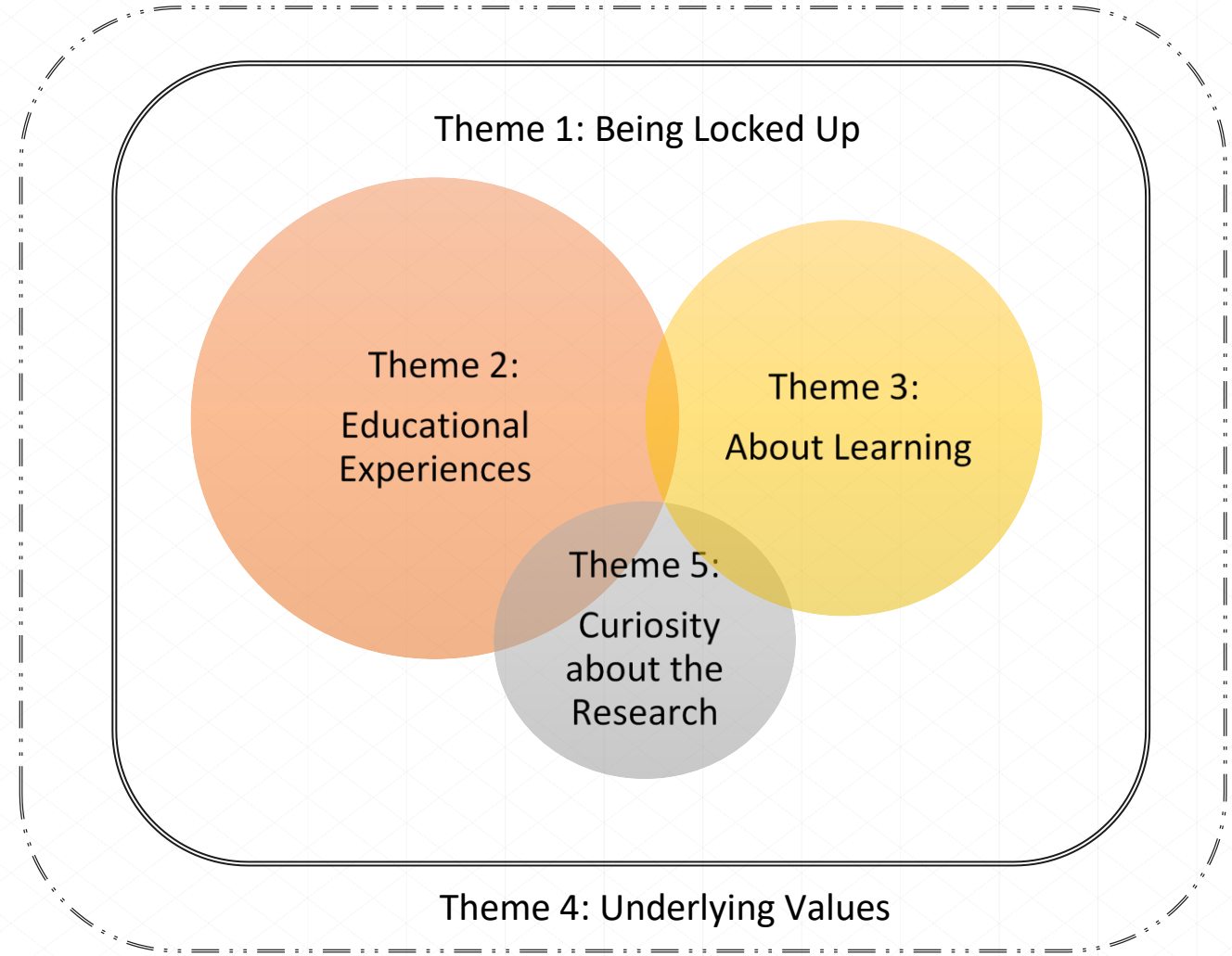- Conducted in secure setting
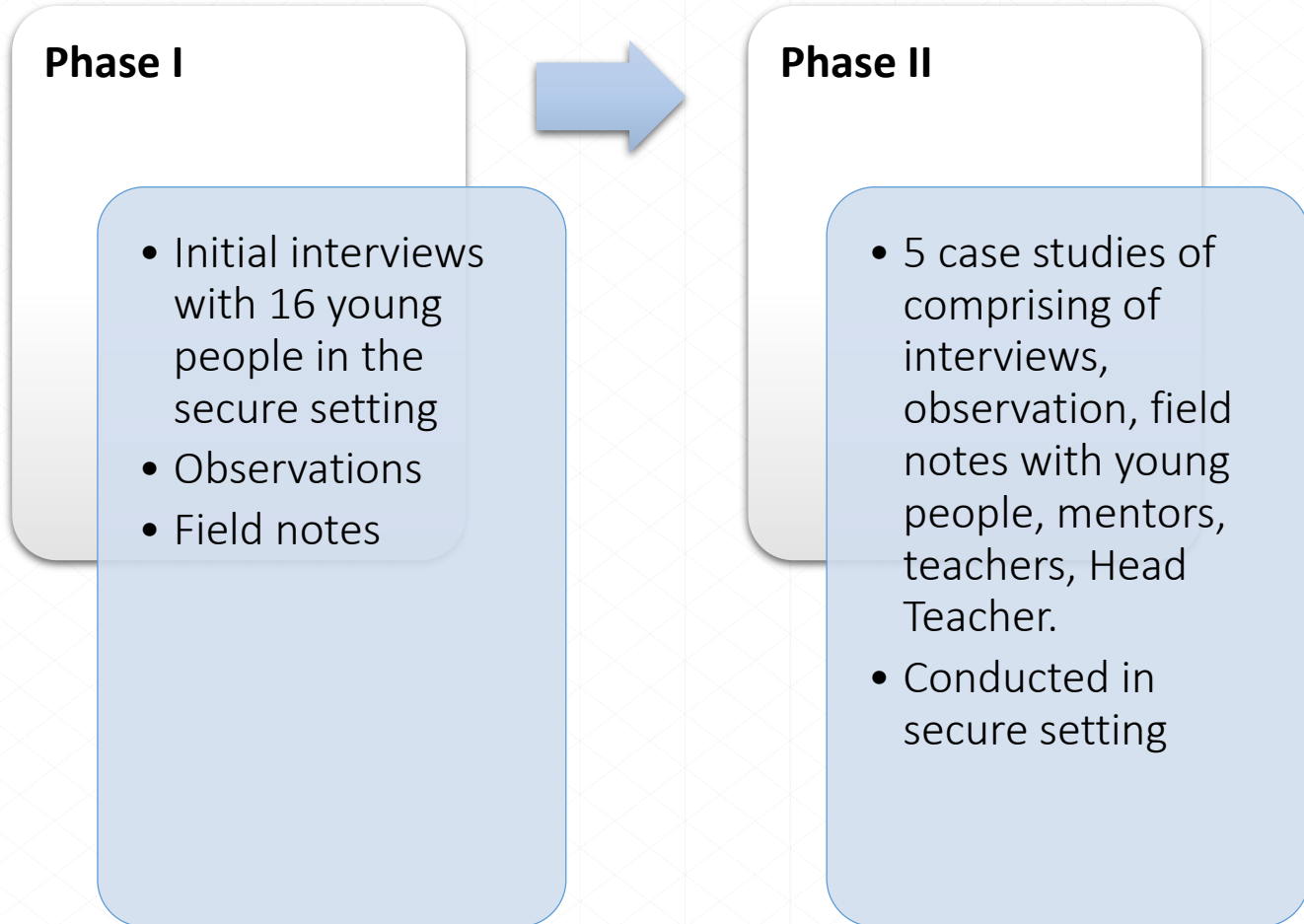
The findings

The secure context was a defining feature - represented by the solid line

How disengagement manifested itself was dependent on their emotions which were heightened by the secure context i.e. passive or active

Theme 1: Being Locked Up

Theme 2: Educational Experiences

Theme 3: About Learning

Theme 5: Curiosity about the Research

Theme 4: Underlying Values

The secure context and impact on emotions

'…wouldn't you find it annoying if you were f*ing locked up all your b*tard day? (Tabitha, aged 14)

'It's hard knowing that like going from like your family, what you call it? What you call it…family environment, coming to somewhere you don't know, somewhere like this' (Josh, aged 17)

'Just long is all I really think about. I try not to really think about this place.' (Wayne, aged 14,)

'Staff just dock points for jokes…it winds me up' (Cameron, aged 14)

'Just knowing you've got to be here for like a really long time and then… Like I'm 16 now obviously like it's just the end of my teenage years isn't it?' (Jack, aged 16)

Educational experiences

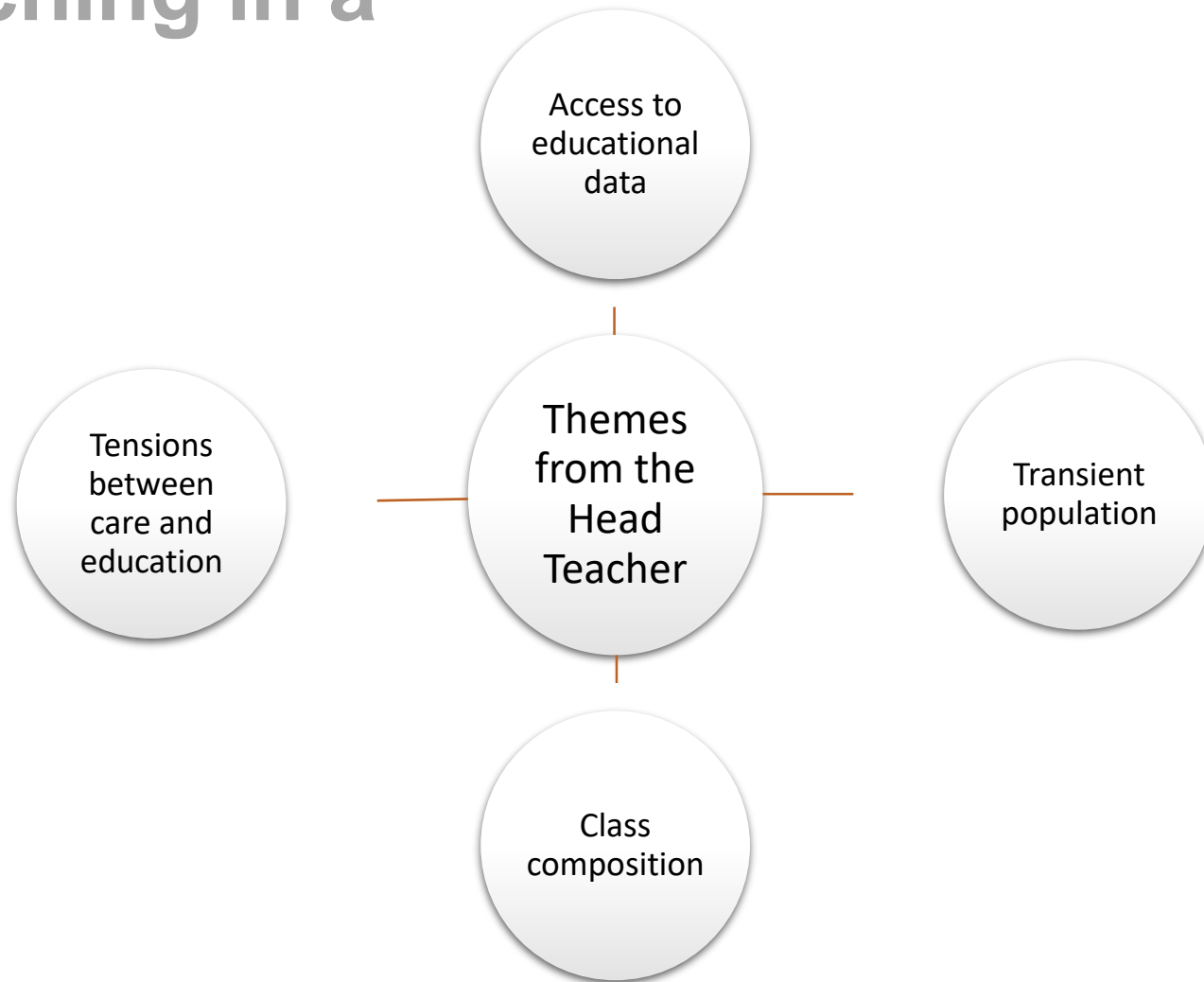Despite reporting mainstream school experiences as boring, there was a sense of nostalgia about mainstream school when in custodial settings.

It was considered higher quality with more structure, boundaries, support and greater opportunities for learning - the 'gold standard' of schooling and as Andrea (aged 17) described '…for normal kids'.

'Like, I regret, like, massively you know, leaving mainstream school'.
(John aged 17)

Challenges of teaching in a secure context

These emerged from the teachers and Head Teacher

Access to educational data

Themes from the Head Teacher

Transient population

Tensions between care and education

Class composition

The conditions needed for re-engagement

Emerged from the 5 case studies in Phase II

Facilitator of engagement

Barrier to engagement

Task value, authenticity

The systems of the secure custodial setting

Re-engaging young offenders with learning

Context of trust and autonomy

(autonomy and competency)

Facilitator and barrier for engagement

Supportive mentor (relatedness)

Agency (individual differences)

Facilitator and barrier to engagement

Facilitator and barrier facilitator to engagement

In summary

Both phases of this research pointed to the secure unit and its structures as presenting particular barriers to engaging children with education and learning.

These included barriers at the
- organisational
- systemic level

The organisational level referred to the organisation of the secure unit itself (microsystem).
The systemic level referred to barriers created by the wider youth justice system affecting interaction with other agencies or systems (meso and macrosystem).

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Education in custody – a way forward which addresses the micro, meso and macro systemic levels of context

(i) Organisational structures of secure units should be arranged to foster the development of relationships to support the emotional and psychological needs of young people in the custodial setting so they are ready for learning (microsystemic level)

(ii) Training could help equip staff with the skills needed to be responsive to the need to understand the significance of the emotional component of disengagement (mesosystemic level) and its impact on learning.

(iii) Position education and learning as key to re-entry into the community as otherwise they return to the same context. An alterative horizon needs to be presented to the young people (macrosystemic level)

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