The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England

Technical Report 3:
Perspectives of Young People,
Social Workers, Carers and Teachers

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Acknowledgements

November 2015

Introduction

As explained in our overview paper (Sebba et al., 2015[1]), this paper discusses the analysis of qualitative data from interviews with a sample of looked after young people eligible to take their GCSEs in summer 2013, as well as selected individuals involved in their care and education. To summarise, we collaborated with six local authorities, three of which (from 2013 national statistics) were ranked towards the top in their GCSE results with looked after pupils, and the other three were nearer the lower end. In each, we asked Virtual School headteachers to identify three young people who made better progress than expected between Key Stages 2-4, and three others who made worse progress than expected. For reasons of brevity we refer to these as 'high-progress group' and 'lower-progress group'. We sought to undertake individual interviews with the young people and, with their permission, with their social worker, carer and a teacher (designated teacher or another teacher if the young person felt they knew them better). Interviews occurred in Spring/early Summer 2015.

Some young people approached by their local authority declined to participate and substitutions were attempted. Of the desired 36, 32 eventually gave their permission to be approached by an interviewer. Some subsequently changed their minds, were very difficult to contact, or did not attend prearranged meetings. We ended up interviewing 26 young people. A few did not want us to interview former teachers and we respected their privacy. These non-participants did not unduly influence the characteristics of our eventual sample. Encouragingly, we had similar success in interviewing young people who made good progress (14) and who did not (12). The attainments of our sample ranged from some with 12/13 GCSEs, mainly As and A*s, to others who attained very few. (We did not press the lower attainers for their exact results.) In line with our quantitative analysis, there were more young women (11) than young men (3) in the high-progress group. Overall we managed to interview 15 females and 11 males. Adults and professionals can be equally as difficult to contact as adolescents in care and we achieved 17 interviews with their social workers; 17 with foster carers; one residential worker; and 20 with designated teachers. Some carers were no longer fostering and a few social workers had moved on. In contrast with our quantitative data, no young people had been living at residential homes at the time of their GCSEs, although one had spent time at a residential school previously. Some of our lower-progress group had spent time educated in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) or other types of alternative provision. A great deal of effort

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[1] Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. and O'Higgins, A. (2015) *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking care and educational data*. Oxford, Bristol and London: The Rees Centre, The University of Bristol and The Nuffield Foundation.

went into achieving the number of interviews: we tried to be persistent but not interfering. We have also interviewed the Virtual School headteacher for each of the six local authorities, and the main information from those interviews will be reported later.

It was also explained in our overview paper that we used peer interviewers, who were themselves care-experienced, to talk with young people and foster carer interviewers to interview foster carers and one residential worker. The former particularly managed to obtain very detailed and insightful material. In total we had over 1,000 pages of transcribed qualitative data. This paper attempts to summarise some of the main themes that emerged, drawing on sections from this data[2]. We seek to complement the quantitative analysis by giving insight and possible explanations for the statistical findings. It highlights the perspectives of those involved, especially young people, whose lives, families, problems and achievements we are discussing.

In addition, we address some important, specific points outlined in our original research objectives that are absent from national databases: for example the effects on young people and their education of family breakdown; experiences of transitions in their lives; the role played by carers; and how schools respond to these young people. Our semi-structured interview approach also yielded fresh insights from participants on key issues concerning educational progress. We tried to identify possible differences between the high- and lower-progress groups. Inevitably, this was a broad overview and more detailed analyses and publications will follow. The paper is divided into four main sections: (1) Young people – experiences, effects and adaptations; (2) Entry to care and relationships; (3) Services; and (4) Conclusion - explanations for progress.

1. Young people – experiences, effects and adaptations

Young people had become looked after at different stages of their lives – the earliest aged 3 years and the oldest at 16. They, and the adults involved in their care and education, emphasised how early experiences had a profound effect on their later development and schooling. We did not intrude into reasons for becoming looked after but some information emerged, mainly from the young people themselves in discussion with their peer interviewers. There were many reasons for separation from family. A number had lived for a time with grandparents or other extended family. Several mothers had died. There were frequent accounts of parents' alcohol and substance misuse.

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[2] Details of young people and agencies have been anonymised. Identifying details have also been changed or removed. Some very personal details have been anonymised. Young people are referred to as YP1, YP2 etc. YP1-YP14 are those that achieved better than expected – the 'high-progress' group; and YP15-YP26 those that achieved worse than expected – the 'lower-progress' group. Social workers, foster carers and teachers are SW1, FC1, DT1 etc - the number corresponds to that of the young person with whom they are linked. Virtual School headteachers are VSH1-6.

Many had lived in lone parent families and mother's mental illness was common. Many children's experiences may appear incredible to those unfamiliar with social work. There were reports of constantly being shouted at, malnourishment, abandonment, difficult relationships with new male cohabitees, violence and fear. There were more extreme cases: one girl and her brother were locked in a cellar for long periods without being fed, being let out for school. Here are three illustrations.

> Because my dad, obviously, there is reasons why you get put into care, so my dad was abusive and that, and he used to... Don't know – he was a bit of a mental case, like you say, and obviously that's not good for you, and you're going to school, not doing the same things as him, but looking back now, it kind of influenced...you're kind of not there, really, or you're not having proper night-time sleep, sharing a bed with my brother top to toe, so I was always tired, no breakfast. (YP25)

> We first went into care because my mum didn't want us anymore. Well, it wasn't really that; she'd got a boyfriend, and the boyfriend said, 'It's me or the kids', and obviously she chose him. She took us into school, and I remember it like it was yesterday – she took us to school with packed bags and said she wasn't going to come and pick us up afterwards...Obviously, they had to call the social services because of it. They already noticed that things weren't right, because I had marks, and cuts and bruises where she was hitting me and stuff, and where her boyfriend was hitting us. Obviously, when that happened, my mum had to come to the school because she had to come and explain what was going on. Then I was clinging to my mum, because obviously a five year-old girl does not want to let go of their mum. It took, I think, about two or three grown men to pull me off my mum, and she was sitting there the whole time with her hands away from me, like, 'Get this child off me', and stuff. (YP20)

> Her mother was an alcoholic, her dad was in prison. Nobody really gave [name] any direction, any help, except just - so she was left very much...to drift along and do her own thing. Obviously, her relations with her mother broke down, and that must be very traumatic for any child. Very traumatic to see your mother going through, well, being an alcoholic, being drunk all the time, and things like that, and other things that were going on in her household. So that's very traumatic for any child, must be very upsetting, and when you're upset and, you know, your brain doesn't function right, you feel a bit sick in your stomach - she wasn't eating very well, if at all, at times - so all in all that would make anybody feel unwell. And that with everything else, it just wasn't happening for her, really. (FC4)

Four of the 14 young people in the lower-progress group entered care in Years 10/11. (None of the high-progress group did.) They gave some details of the associated factors. Family life was clearly unstable and there was much moving around. School attendance was infrequent and parents or family members were inconsistent in their care and oversight. One young man and one young woman told us that they had run away from home and themselves asked to be admitted to care. The former observed:

Interviewer   Do you think that any of the difficult things that have happened in your life could have affected how well you've got on at school?

YP   Yes, definitely...Well, I've got severe depression and anxiety, so, I don't know, it's just mainly because I've had, like, a tough life moving around and stuff, I think that's just the main reason why I couldn't really do well at school. (YP23)

A range of emotional and behavioural problems were reported, across the sample, linked to these experiences that affected children's educational experiences and progress. A main problem was the inability to *concentrate* given what was going on elsewhere.

YP   Well, for what I was going through, I mean I always say that I did quite well, but I never really give myself credit for it, because I did go through a lot while I was at school, so it was quite hard for me to focus on anything else. Then, a lot of the time, I was just, kind of, floating about, floating by...Yes, obviously, when you're going through things, you can't really ignore it completely...Although I tried my best to get on with what I could do, and do the best I could, it wasn't always that easy, and it wasn't easy to just block everything out, but I did the best that I could when it came to school. (YP20)

It was not uncommon for problems to spill over into *anger and aggression*.

YP   Like, I shocked myself a lot on my GCSE results because...oh, I just didn't revise, I had no motivation to be at a school or anywhere near that place at the time of my GCSEs, because, I don't know, I just didn't want to be there. There were multiple reasons. I've always been really hyperactive, and they didn't like that I was different, I was always getting taken out of class and spoken to...I ended up in a lot of fights all the time, it was that sort of thing...I kind of, because of the home life I kind of got aggressive and impulsive at school as well, so then I'd...be very sort of rowdy in class and then the teachers would sort of pick me out more and more often, and drag me out of class and make me stay behind and things like that, and [I] just didn't like it. And they didn't understand if you told them, look, I just need space, and they...hadn't got a clue, they probably just didn't know. (YP5)

So...his sort of default setting was to be angry and to be aggressive, and...when he came to our school he couldn't believe that people were actually being nice to him. People that didn't know him were being nice to him, and he found that quite hard initially. So socially he wasn't accepted immediately and we had to do a lot of work around kind of expected behaviour, so he would just be shouting and swearing, and he'd barge into a room and demand - not even ask to speak to somebody, just sort of blurt out all sorts of stuff. So he was quite challenging when he arrived. (DT16)

I used to be a little scrapper. I used to fight all the time. (YP21)

Equally common were *rule-breaking and disciplinary problems* in class. This included defiance leading to clashes with teachers; disruption to impress the class; and disagreements over appearance including piercings. As a consequence, foster carers told of phone calls from school to

come and collect children during the day. Disruptive behaviour applied particularly, but not exclusively, to the lower-progress group ('I turned a little shit when I went into high school' [YP21]).

Another problem often reported for this group of young people was *lack of confidence*. This was often linked with aggressive outbursts and experiences of bullying. Two designated teachers gave these accounts:

> Well, he had a difficult home life. And so, throughout his school life, he struggled with self-esteem, bullying, and problems at home as well. So his concentration was never 100%. It had improved for a while but certainly, I think it was fairly embedded in his perception of how things worked for him. (DT17)

> There was a lack of confidence, definitely a lack of confidence. There were outbursts, there weren't any, you know, massive aggression and stuff. We did a number of things where one of them was she went on a residential for a week with the Army, which instils them with self-esteem and team work and confidence, and stuff like that.   (DT20)

A few young people demonstrated particularly acute problems, including anxiety, depression, incontinence, sleep disturbance and general mistrust. One young person regularly self-harmed; another (and possibly a second) had attempted suicide. Obviously these had a major impact on their education.

However, we should not assume that educational progress for looked after children is always problematic. For example, despite experiencing family breakdown and separation, most of our sample were regular school attenders, across both high- and lower-progress categories:

> I think he's a good one to look at, because his attendance was always really good as well. He didn't have time off - he enjoyed school, he didn't cause problems in school. (SW5)

Furthermore, intermittent attendance is not necessarily linked with poor progress or attainment:

> So I guess in terms of secondary school, well, I did GCSEs, of course. I got around 7 As, 3 Bs and 1 C...I guess if you wanted to ask about my sort of educational background, I was quite a good student from when I was in primary school when I was living with my mother...but when it got to the time when everything started happening, such as my mum's mental breakdown... and as a result kind of withdrew me out of school.

> She didn't let me go to school or anything, so I was always just like at home, so for pretty much...for the whole of Year 7, I could barely remember myself being in school, and during October when I was in Year 8, I got put into care, and from actually September I didn't go to secondary school in the start of Year Eight...And then I decided that I didn't want to go back to my school because I was being bullied from there...So then I got a change to [name of new school] and then I didn't like it at first, but then I just decided to just carry on with it, and yeah. (YP9)

For those who were irregular attenders, links were usually made with the range of emotional and behavioural problems discussed above.   For example:

I   You mentioned that [name's] school attendance wasn't particularly good before she came to live with you?

FC   I can't remember exactly, but something between 35 and 50%, I believe. She wasn't really going very much, and obviously...her grades reflected that. I don't think she had much incentive to go to school...So I think she found school difficult. I think also she had issues at home, which were probably playing on her mind, and I think maybe a lot of the time she didn't feel well, but probably because of everything that was going on in her life at the time...I think that were when she were with her mum, and then she put herself into foster care, and then I think she lived with a neighbour for a few weeks, and then her auntie took her. Then I think she dropped off school altogether. (FC22)

Transfer primary to secondary school

It will be recalled that the particular focus of our study is looked after pupils' progress between Key Stages 2-4. Official statistics indicate that the attainment gap between looked after children and all pupils is wider during secondary schooling. It might be hypothesised that children with unstable family histories, with emotional difficulties and lacking parental support for education might find difficult the transfer from a smaller, more inclusive setting with greater teacher continuity, to a large, more complex and pressurised organisation. However, our quantitative analysis showed that increase in the attainment gap with age is complicated by a variety of factors, particularly adolescent entrants into the care system.

This is reflected in our qualitative analysis. We asked young people about moving from primary to secondary schools. Perhaps unexpectedly, the overwhelming view of both groups was that they had performed *better* educationally at secondary than at primary. A number of factors need to be taken into account. The most important was that, at primary stage, young people had often still been living with their birth families and posed a variety of problems in school. Primary education was very often an unhappy experience. One young man said that he attended 7 or 8 primary schools (YP24). Another had been excluded from primary school and missed a year and a half's schooling (YP16). One young woman spoke of her aggression but calmed down as her life became more settled:

Because when I used to get treated differently in primary school, I used to fight a lot, but as I grew older, I went into high school, I calmed down a lot and tried to focus on my schoolwork instead of fighting people. (YP12)

The factor most often identified as leading to improvements in educational experiences at secondary level was that by then, or around that time, they had left home and entered care. One young woman explained it as follows:

I   So, if it improved throughout secondary school, why do you think it improved?
YP   Because I moved here.
I   ...How were you getting on at school before you came into care?
YP   It was just like, I'd go there, probably late, mess about all day, and go home, and do the same thing every day, just mess about. I wasn't that bothered.
I   Has being in care helped you do better in school?
YP   Yes. (YP13)

A young man from the same authority gave a similar explanation:

I   So, thinking back to when you finished primary school, so that's your Year 6, can you remember how well you were getting on at school then?
YP   Worse, probably. I was bad, because I was living with my dad. This is why I got put into care. So, before I got ever put into care, that was my worst time. In primary school, that was a bad time.
I   So, do you think it changed when you went to secondary school?
YP   Course. As I went to secondary school... Actually, my first year of secondary school, I was with my dad and it was still that bad that I was on the verge of getting kicked out of that school. Then, when I got into care, that's what basically saved me... (YP25)

Educational history

Further interesting findings emerged from our qualitative analysis which shed light on the educational progress that children had made. For about half of our high-progress group, their success was partly attributed by our adult interviewees to their natural ability: variously described as 'bright', 'natural/basic ability' or 'intelligence'. A designated teacher and a foster carer expressed it as follows:

> She was a very bright child - and very capable, but was just lost, and not really given any direction. (FC4)

> ...although we expected her to achieve because she had the ability to achieve there was always that concern because she had so much going on in her home life, you know, so much to deal with, the death of her grandparents, that you wondered how she was going to actually achieve what she did achieve, really. (DT10)

Two of the lower-progress group were described in similar terms, including the girl who had experienced severe neglect (YP20).

On closer analysis, our data revealed that most of this 'natural ability' group had parents or other birth family members who – despite other difficulties - had supported their children's education from a young age and wanted them to succeed. This qualifies the extent to which their ability can be seen as 'natural'. One young woman explained:

> I think it was because my mum always wanted me to do well in school because she never did. Because when they were younger, they didn't have to stay in school, so she always said to me, 'Stay at school, do something, make something of your life', because she never had, and she always said she really regretted it. (YP8)

One young woman, who was said to have always worked hard, had an older sister at university whom she admired (SW4). Another interviewee had regular, positive contact with his birth mother, who took an interest in his life and achievements (YP7).

A few young people from minority ethnic groups also linked this family support to their cultural background (Somali, Iranian):

> ...nowadays, Somalis that live in this country, it's become a sort of thing that you get your child to do the best they can academically, whether they're a girl or a boy. Back then, it was just more, they take more 'mothery' role, rather than…but like now, just like it's completely changed. So it's actually just any Somali families who gives it. (YP9)

Continuing family influence

Although some were fortunate to have had a legacy of family support and encouragement from an early age, an important finding was that for nearly all of our sample – high- and lower-achievers alike – family concerns continued to influence their lives and education. Most maintained contact with birth parents, mainly mothers in these cases, either through visiting and/or phone/text as well as Facebook. Children did not cease to be a member of a family simply because they were not living in it; and the problems leading to their separation usually continued to manifest themselves in some form. There were numerous examples from the interviews. Parents would often be unreliable or inconsistent:

> I think after she went through the difficult, you know, stages whereby she needed support with regards to her behaviour and her emotional support with CAMHS, after that she settled down really well. As she got older she got used to how mum could be…making promises and then, you know, not turning up, and the disappointments that come with all of that. (SW21)

> Then we had a spate where she'd take them out and then ring us up and say she didn't want to be with them anymore, and dump them. She even dumped them at my neighbour's once. (FC20)

This unreliability was sometimes linked to parents' alcoholism or mental illness. One strategy was to require parents to phone before the meeting to prove they were sober. In some cases there would be conflict or hostility between parents and social workers, which could be displaced onto the foster carers and undermining of the placement. Children had to deal with these divided loyalties:

> The problem around contact was, when the children came back from contact, they seemed to be upset and distressed, and there was strong suspicion that obviously the mother was undermining the foster placement...There were issues whether they should be supervised/unsupervised. We kept it supervised…So, there were a lot of emotional pressures surrounding the children, which obviously would have an impact on [name]...As [name] started Year 11... we then had episodes…where she had taken an overdose and she was in her final year, but she wouldn't give reasons why is she upset – is it pressure? Is it mum? What does she want? (SW2)

Some parents were felt to be particularly poor examples for their children due to their prison experience, drug misuse or prostitution. They sometimes offered false promises:

> ...when [name's] father came out of prison, she had contact with him, and he started saying things, 'oh, you know, we've all the making up to do, and, you know, we'll get this all sorted out and you can come and live with me', and this, that and the other. And although she'd not had any contact with him in quite some time, this was quite a, you know, she wants approval from her dad, of course she does. (FC4)

One young man was relieved no longer to be living with the violence that prevented him focusing on his exams but he had not escaped it completely, observing 'My poor old brother still lives there' (YP5). For two young women their fear was the telephone ringing:

> And obviously, throughout all of this, I was going through so much, the stress of my mother ringing my phone at 12, 1 o' clock in the morning to talk. And because I didn't want to say no, I would talk to her, and then I would wake up in the morning and be too tired to go to school because I was on the phone to her. Then I ended up getting [name of illness] during school, because of the stress-related problems. I used to literally feel like I was going to soil myself every time my taxi drove into my school. (YP18)

One young woman in the high-progress group, who at the time of the interview was considering her university applications, experienced this:

YP   I remember the night before my English GCSE exam, she phoned me up, like, with suicide voicemails and everything, so it just made me lose a lot of focus, so I stopped having contact with her...like, I couldn't go upstairs and revise English or anything, or do an essay, because I'd get worried that she would be...my mind would be on her and what she would be doing, like if she was going to threaten the people that I lived with, or me, or anything like that. So it made me lose a lot of focus and stuff, and got me quite anxious…so I couldn't focus on anything else that I wanted to focus on. My mind was set somewhere else, so I wouldn't have been able to focus very well.

I So when you say you couldn't go upstairs, was it you felt that you had to be near the phone?

YP Yes, in case she rang, yes, so I could quickly get it, or something like that. (YP1)

Faced with these adversities young people found ways of coping, with different degrees of success. Birth family contact was often important for young people but it clearly had implications for their education and overall welfare. We also see later that relationships and services had important mediating roles.

Stigma

We investigated whether young people's educational progress was influenced by any stigma linked to being looked after. Clearly, many had considered how they and others perceived their in-care status. Most responded that they dealt with their status, told close friends whom they could trust and got on with their lives.

I Did you ever talk to other people about being in care? Did they know you were in care?

YP My close friends knew I was, but everyone, they just kind of got to grips with it, really. They didn't know any other, to be honest, because I'd met them actually ... and I was already in care by then, so...But my close friends, and my best friend who's been with me since primary school, going all the way up, she knew, but yes, she was always helpful and stuff, and nice to me.

I ...So people were okay about it?

YP Yes, yes. (YP1)

One young man, who had entered the country as an asylum seeker, considered being in care as a privilege, rather than something that was stigmatised: having been given a chance for a better life and the opportunity for self-improvement (YP6).

Some respondents gave more complex answers, in which others at school did not know they were in care; and, if they did, either others would have expectations of the stereotype, or the individual herself would feel the pressure to conform.

> Like I said, no one barely, at school knows I'm in care, so they would never, ever, ever... I think, if they knew, it would be harder for me to just act like I weren't. Like, it would be harder for me to focus on my education and stuff, because I'd constantly be thinking, 'Oh...' Like, you'd conform, I think. I think if people knew, like, what you were like as being a foster kid, and what everyone else is like as a foster kid, you'd conform, not even realising you were. But, I think where no one really knows, I actually see myself as not in care. Do you know what I mean? I actually see myself as normal, as the rest of my friends are, with parents, and stuff like that. (YP8)

Three young people raised specifically how they disliked being singled-out and removed from class to attend their PEP (Personal Education Plan) meetings. (Although one other liked missing lessons.) One young woman asked for these to be rearranged for after school and her designated teacher and social worker agreed, which seems a sensible suggestion.

Young people's agency

An interesting finding emerged from the interviews concerning how young people themselves exercised control over their education. We have termed this 'agency'. Many of us, in retrospect, wish that we had studied harder but for these young people it had a particular meaning. A theme from our interviews was that some young people had chosen to engage with their education once certain factors were in place. This applied more to the high-progress group. This is a complex area and it overlaps with a number of other issues that we discuss.

It is no doubt a truism but many young people stated that how well they did at school was mainly down to them:

I   And do you think you could have done better at school if you'd have wanted to?

YP   Yes, definitely. (YP23)

YP   I don't think anyone can help you get on in school; it's just yourself, it's if you want to get on, yourself... (YP25)

Another young woman explained:

> I mean, I don't think care's like the major thing that causes people to, you know, do well or do badly in education. It's also to do with your own mind-set, your own abilities. (WFYP3)

It is also no doubt true that many adolescents would rather be elsewhere, doing other things, than sitting in school ('No one wants to really be in school around here, anyway. Like, most average teenagers don't want to be in school, do they, really? [YP25]). But many also remarked that attitudes to school and individual motivation could be influenced by others:

I   So, do you think how well you did at school was helped by other people, or do you think it was you, down to you wanting to do it as well?
YP   ... but obviously, I've got to... It's all down to me, isn't it? But, other people, kind of, change you. (YP22)

One very successful young woman (mainly A* and As at GCSE), with the support of her foster carer, explained it as follows:

> I could easily have been someone… that got in trouble at school, but I just felt like, what's the point in doing it here? Because a lot of the problems started occurring, you know as you get older and you start to realise what people are like? I didn't like it in Year 11, and that's when the major incident was, but then I realised, what's the point? You're going to get kicked out before your exams; you're going to mess it all up for yourself, you get excluded, what's the point? So, I left everything to outside of school, and I kind of learnt that the hard way because I got threatened with an exclusion, and I was a bit, like, oh, this can't happen. Do you know what I mean? So, I think it's important to learn that for yourself, though, because [name of carer] used to always tell me, 'Leave it for outside of school', and I used to always be like, 'Yes, yes, whatever', but it was only when it happened inside school, I actually realised, you shouldn't let stuff from outside school interfere, because you need to focus on what's important. (YP8)

The idea of personal agency was reflected for some young people in their role as a strong self-advocate. Persistence was very important:

> You're almost, in that sense, doing the role, the job of a social worker by deciding what is in your best interests, why it would help you, asking them to do it... Demand X, Y and Z because you need it and make a case for why you want to have it, and then nag them over and over and over again. (YP9)

Another highlighted the importance of genuinely listening to children and responding to their needs. This can also give an indication of appropriate timing:

> Listen a lot, a hell of a lot. Listen, because not enough people do that. I mean, there are a lot of kids out there that do need help, and they won't ask because they're too scared to, or they're too scared to get shut down. So if a child is telling you they need help, you need to listen, and even if they're not telling you, ask questions. Ask them if they need help, because a lot of kids don't get asked that. They just, kind of, 'Well, do you need help?' 'No, not right now'. That doesn't mean I'm never going to need help; that means that I don't need help right now. (YP20)

One of the Virtual School headteachers in particular reinforced this view of children being active participants in their own learning. He made the interesting point of services needing to set the preconditions for learning and the children then had to make the commitment:

> Yeah, but then of course what you do is you just contain the problem, you don't solve the problem...Yeah, it's managing risk not removing risk. So I think it's the people and then there is that other magic resilience enzyme that kicks in and releases the vibes. So you see this: it takes years to destroy a child's self-esteem actually. They're amazingly resilient in the face of what they get, and yet the flick into resilience can actually happen quite astonishingly quickly. And I think that would be really worthy of study. It's like a virus that's laying dormant, but it's like a good virus. So this lad has now got a place in college. (VSH6)

It emerged from our interviews that, in order to engage with education and make good progress, it was often important for young people to be *open to support*. A designated teacher explained that it was not just professional efforts that eventually paid dividends but also the young person's volition. She had accepted to move forward. The teacher chose an apt metaphor while apologising for any insensitivity:

> I think that it's sort of like [unintelligible] factors came together. Of course, it's partly down to her attitude: you can't, you know (I don't want to be [unintelligible] when I know I'm being recorded) but, you know yourself, you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink. We put huge amounts of support in for [name] and with the two boys; however, that support was, obviously, more successful with [name] because she wanted it to work. So her attitude, of course, was absolutely pivotal, it was crucial in ensuring that success. (DT13)

Trust was identified as an important element in young people coming to terms with their circumstances and trying to move on educationally:

I   Do you think how well you got on at school was supported by other people or do you think it was mainly down to you?

YP   Building up a support system that they trust... and unless it needs to, it's not going to go any further. I think that's helpful, especially with mental health and stuff like that, because it can affect school and stuff so easily. (YP10)

The young woman quoted at length above (YP8) was particularly interested in drama. She enjoyed the training and performances, liked the group and gained personal fulfilment. She made an important point about how interlinked were her achievements with the fact that someone cared about her enough to come and watch:

YP   Oh, yes. Yes, they [foster carers] always came to watch. To be fair, they've come to watch everything...

I   Is that important to you?

YP   Yes, I think I wouldn't have - not in a selfish way - but I wouldn't have done it if they hadn't come to watch me. Do you know what I mean? It would've been a bit like, what's the point? Yes, so I'm glad they did always come. They always had an interest. (YP8)

She was exercising control over her life.

A Virtual headteacher explained this in terms of *emotional readiness*:

> You've got to get them ready; they've got to be in emotional readiness to learn. So there's got to be a resilience from the young person, but they usually can't get there themselves and they need someone who's supporting them, someone who has that parental role, that they have enough respect for, to want to do it for its own sake. So, the more we can make it easy by preparing them for that exam, preparing them for the expectation, to assisting with coursework, the better. (VSH5)

2. Entry to care and relationships

Entry to care opened up a new set of relationships and reconfiguration of past ones. We concentrate later on individual relationships but, initially, we asked young people for their overall assessment of whether entry to care had benefitted their education or not. There was an overwhelming view that becoming looked after had a positive effect. One interviewee felt that it had remained unchanged but none perceived that their schooling and attainment had deteriorated after admission. Carers and professionals shared these views. Young people attributed these changes to several factors, including being shielded from harmful parenting ('Not being shouted at' [YP20]); leading a more settled lifestyle; receiving encouragement and support; and improved resources, such as computing equipment. The following are some examples:

I   Do you feel that being in care has helped you do better at school, or do you feel it's made it worse?

YP   Being with foster families, yes.

I   Yes, it's made it better?

YP   Yes, I think it has. I wouldn't have never got what I've got without the people in there.

I   How do you think it's improved for you?

YP   I've just changed [as] a person; I've obviously become a better person, and want to achieve more, and that's because of what these foster families have done, and obviously my social worker as well, who's pushed it. (YP22)

YP   When I got into care, that's what basically saved me... (YP25)

A designated teacher made an interesting judgement:

I'm going to be very unprofessional and say that probably being taken into care was the best possible thing that could've happened to her. (DT3)

It is interesting that he should see it as unprofessional.

One young person made the pertinent observation that it was not 'care' overall that made the difference to young people's education and general welfare but the relationships with individual people and the degree of support they offered. This could vary:

I wouldn't say being in care itself. Being in the right support is what actually really helped me out, and my carer's what really, like, helped me out. I think that if I was with my mum, I probably wouldn't have done as well... (YP9)

Our interviews contained a great deal of information on young people's relationships with their carers and so we have picked out just some main themes. (There was just one residential worker [RC18] in the 18 carer interviews.) One that stood out strongly was the importance of *consistency*. We saw in our quantitative analysis that fewer placement moves are associated with greater

educational progress; the relationship is complex and it is not necessarily causal. Our qualitative data gives some insight into this relationship. Social workers emphasised generally that placement stability conferred educational benefits:

> The outcome has been that it hasn't had a, luckily, it hasn't had a massive impact on him, I guess because of the fact the foster placement has been so stable and successful. Any trauma of him sort of having to no longer live with his mum has been sort of mitigated quite successfully, which is, you know, the real positive. (SW7)

> I   Do you think where she was living influenced her attainment?
> SW   Yes, it's just stability, and having a secure roof over your head. It's massive. Makes a massive difference to children. As I say, [name] has only ever lived with these foster carers; she's never lived anywhere else, so it helps them.
> I   So there weren't any problems in the home that you were aware of?
> SW   Yes, lots of problems!...Lots of teenage problems, just being a teenager...and things, but no question, that was her home and that was always going to be her home. (SW3)

One young woman, who achieved top grades for looked after children in her local authority, had been living with her grandparents:

> Although she's in care she's been brought up with family, other family members, extended family members, and they've been very, very supportive and rock solid for her, and, obviously, it's given her a very strong foundation...In fact, so much so that even when the unfortunate death with regards [to] her grandparents that were her carers and they both passed away over the last couple of years, and her aunt then moved into the family home rather than move [name] out of the family home, you know, just to give her that stability and that consistency in her life. Her aunt and her uncle, when gran died, pretty much put their own life on hold to make sure they could give [name] the best possible support... (SW10)

Conversely, social workers felt that placement moves hindered educational progress (SW5). One young man who had been living in his foster placement for eight years was informed at Easter in Year 11 that he would have to move after his exams as his carers were retiring. His social worker said that he provided additional input to support him given the circumstances but both he and his subsequent carer confirmed that it affected his exam results. The young man confirmed: 'Messed with my head a bit so I didn't get the grades I was predicted' (YP15).

Most of the high-progress group were living in stable, long-term foster placements. Several of the lower-progress group were also in stable arrangements: stability, therefore, is necessary but not sufficient. However for the latter, although currently stable, there had been much disruption previously (including the young man who had moved between 7/8 primary schools [YP24]). Another young man, now in a *Staying Put* arrangement (a foster home until 21 years of age), did not do as

well as expected in his GCSEs but had improved noticeably since at college. For some, progress may take longer.

One area of inconsistency in young people's lives that was raised across our interviews concerned their social workers. It was clear that some young people had frequent changes: one foster carer mentioned five in 18 months:

FC Because she's had so many changes in social worker, and none of her social workers actually know her.

I So, at the time she was doing her GCSEs, did she have someone who knew her, or not really?

FC No.

I Not at all? So, they weren't really part of the equation?

FC No, forget about the social workers.

I Is that how she felt about it as well?

FC Yes, and still does. (FC2)

Interviewees suggested many explanations for this: some children had been in care many years and changes were to be expected; some social workers left to raise their own families; and social work is a stressful occupation in the public spotlight. We did not inquire specifically but at least one worked for a social work agency and therefore had a series of short-term contracts with children's services.

Some saw little of their social workers. One young woman, fostered with her grandparents, said this:

I Have your social workers affected how well you got on at school? Have they been interested in your education?

YP No, not really... I don't really see them much.

I Do you think they could've done more to help you in your education?

YP Yes.

I What type of things do you think they could've done?

YP They could have asked me, being more involved with the school, as well, but...

I But they weren't involved?

YP No. (YP13)

Long-term fostering, where young people are settled in a permanent arrangement and making good progress, may not be a priority for social work attention beyond the statutory three-monthly visits, reviews and PEP meetings. One young person made the interesting point that social work stability is particularly important when placements are changing: it is very difficult to cope with instability in both (YP9). Given intermittent involvement, several foster carers commented how, if the child needs something, particularly an expensive item (computer equipment etc), their strategy would be to buy it first and claim it back later from the local authority if they could (FC2). Children's and

bureaucratic timescales are not the same and if something was needed, it was essential to have it one way or another.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the instability, opinions were divided about the effectiveness of social work support. Some had been very helpful and supportive, as with this young woman:

I   So have your social workers impacted on how well you got on at school?

YP   Well yeah because they give me encouragement and just made it possible for me to carry on. Do you know what I mean?... they definitely put everything there to make it better for me. Definitely. (YP14)

Young people differentiated between the numbers of social workers they had had and their *effectiveness* – the latter could be more important.

I   ...And how well did your social worker help you at school? Did she help you with school?

YP   Yes, she did then. Yeah, she did... she done as much as she could. (YP16)

This young man had experienced much discontinuity in his life and seemed to expect little else. For many young people, as we shall see, carers, teachers, and school pastoral support services played a more important part on a daily basis in their educational progress, and to some extent general welfare, than did their social workers.

Two foster carers raised the important point that a change in social worker could lead to a different approach towards the young person and their future plan. This could cause complications:

> So that's been really difficult, and now we've got a new one, and of course, each one's an individual and each one has their own personality, and they don't always gel with you. They're not always on the same page as you are. (FC2)

Someone who genuinely cares

A point that emerged from many of our interviews with young people was the importance of having someone whom they felt genuinely cared about them. This occurred across both high- and lower-achieving groups and clearly, therefore, was not a panacea. Young people could often sense if they were living somewhere where they were unwanted:

> ...and the thing was, when it came to my last carers, I was getting support, like, food, shelter and like, you know, warmth but yeah, I was getting those ones, but I wasn't getting love, care, you know, compassion. Like, I just felt like it was just a placement... (YP9)

Another young woman benefited from living with her former carers but felt rejected afterwards:

> Sometimes I didn't want to leave my foster mum. I tell you, that woman helped me so much. But then, could you believe that as soon as I left, do you think she's ever called me?... Never. I think the only thing she did recently was message me to say, 'Can you tell your nan I said happy Christmas?' and stuff, and it's like, you guys can... I lived with you for three years, and you guys just struck me off like that. They didn't keep up. (YP18)

It may have taken a long time to achieve but many had found a family where they felt they

belonged:

YP   ... the way I see it, they are my real mum and dad, because obviously I don't know my real dad, and my mum isn't really the best of people, so it's nice to just have a family where I feel like I belong.

I   You've been here for a long time, haven't you?

YP   Yes, a really long time. (YP20)

It was also important to feel a genuine, wanted member of the family and not simply a visitor:

YP   ... with any new places, you have to get used to it, but then after that, yes, because I liked it here, it became more stable, and it was good.

I   What did you like about it?

YP   Just, I was treated like one of their own children, so you become part of the family, and when that happens, it's easier for you to excel. (YP7)

This sense of acceptance was also demonstrated by carers who were forgiving and didn't give up too easily:

Because obviously it's my nan...doing everything they can to help us, and even if we do stuff wrong, they do obviously tell us off, but they still give us another chance. Like, say in my other ones, I did wrong, that was it. But obviously, my nan, I've done so many things here, I could've been...should've been left here long ago. (YP25)

A foster family persisted with a child despite her two suicide attempts and saw this as a turning point:

... I think the turning point started on the first time, where she was with a social worker in a hospital from school. She's just took them at school, and they took her to the hospital. I arrived, and she was saying to the social worker, 'They're going to shout at me, they're going to do this, they're going to throw me out, blah-blah-blah', and I walked in and I said, 'Is everything alright? Are you fine? We'll try to understand, not a problem. We'll deal with it.' That sort of thing...And I think that took her aback...Yeah, and then the second time, it scared her because she'd taken more pills, but she took them here, and come to the bedroom door, knocked on the door...held out a paracetamol box, and we says, 'What have you done? Have you took pills?' So we took her down the hospital, but this time she had to have a drip and she had to stay in overnight, and it really frightened her. But I was there when she was throwing up and because we've got other children involved here, I was there at the hospital most of the time. She'd said, 'I don't want my mum to know about this. Don't tell my mum'. So I was there holding her hair out of the bucket, you know, and that was the turning point...Just for support, and no bad words were spoken...She started to open up, she started to tell us things. (Anonymised)

Another social worker spoke about a young woman who had achieved stability due to her foster carers' 'commitment and unconditional love' (SW10).

When a genuine feeling of acceptance occurred it was usually with foster carers but there were also examples of birth mothers who still cared, other relatives ('He's very proud of me; I'm proud of myself' [YP6]) and, less commonly, a teacher (who could have permanently excluded having been given multiple opportunities [YP8]) or social worker (YP1). Very importantly, this can be reflected in a feeling of gratitude and not wanting to let someone down, even sometimes if they are no longer alive:

> Probably both my grandparents, I'd say, just because when I get to...if I ever feel like I've got no motivation or I just can't be bothered, I just think, well, you want to do well for them, even though they're not here. So, it's that, sort of, like...because they were so supportive all the way through my childhood. (YP10)

The relationship takes on reciprocity. It is best explained by a young woman in her own words:

> I felt very touched, and it kind of motivated me to do something, because when someone does something for you, you don't want to let them down. So you're just like, you know what? I actually need to, like, kind [of] step up to the mark and start, like, doing something, because if someone believes in me, you know, I can't just let them, you know, down on that. And it made me feel touched and it made me feel, like, you know, maybe this is not just a placement. This is not just a carer. Maybe it's someone who actually, like, cares for me or something. (YP20)

Most of our high-progress group identified these relationships. It applied to some of the second group too but did not coexist with other factors necessary for educational success at GCSE.

Carers' own educational background

We asked foster carers about their own educational backgrounds, and explored with young people, teachers and social workers the extent to which carers were supportive educationally and encouraged the young person. As stated earlier, this was complicated by the fact that some carers we interviewed and social workers (sometimes now personal advisers in leaving care services) may not have been directly involved with young people at the time of their GCSEs.

With this in mind, about half the carers overall said they did not have formal educational qualifications. Many left school early and some remarked that they had not enjoyed school. One interviewee was a graduate; 1 attended FE; 1 did A levels (later in life); 2 had done GCSEs; 2 attended adult education classes; and 10 left school without qualifications. Of the final group, one was said by the social worker to be a (minority ethnic) family in which all their own children had attended university and there was a culture of expectation and high achievement in the home.

There was a pattern that most of those who had continued with education after school had been looking after children in the higher-progress group but not exclusively. Several higher achievers had been brought up in homes in which carers had left school as soon as possible.

Irrespective of carers' own education, young people, teachers and social workers felt that most placements had been supportive educationally:

I   So do you think the carers that you were with, and that you're with now, do you think they really helped you with your schooling?
YP   Yes, yes, they did, yes.
I   Did they used to ask you about school and how you were getting on?
YP   Yes, used to ask me about my days, help me with homework, see what help they could do at their work, like research, print some homework out for me and stuff, so yes, they were pretty good, yes. (YP1)

It was the norm for carers to attend PEP meetings and parents' evenings. Two young people (lower-progress group) withheld details of parents' evenings from carers to prevent their attendance ('I never liked them going to my parents' evenings…I did have parents' evening when I was young, in infant school, and it scared me, actually, because of the fact that my parents' evenings were always bad. Soon as I got home, I got beaten' [YP18]). Two young people in the high-progress group told that their foster carers had not been supportive educationally:

I   Do you think your foster carers here helped you at school? Did they have any influence on how well you did at school? Were they encouraging you, or…?
YP   Not really. Sometimes, if I asked them, like not [name] but [name], if I asked him to test me on something, then he would, but he wouldn't volunteer.
I   So they wouldn't then be helping you with the homework at all, they just…? No? Okay. Did they ask you how you were getting on at school, at all?
YP   No, not really. (YP2)

The general impression that emerged from the interviews was that the foster carer educational dimension was not the main *determinant* of educational progress. The overall foster care environment seemed to serve as an important precondition to educational progress, alongside other factors. As we see in the next section on *Services*, young people pinpointed the *school* dimension as key to their learning and attainment, especially extra classes and individual tuition.

Bullying

We felt that our investigation of young people's educational progress should pay some attention to social aspects of schooling. Therefore, interviewees were asked about relationships with teachers, peer relations and friendships, and bullying. A theme that emerged was the experience of bullying.

This is a complex issue to define and report. Friction, conflict and violence may be everyday occurrences in many schools. Individual views vary on what constitutes 'bullying' depending on the nature of incidents, frequency, duration and context, including any power relationship. In this we were guided by interviewees' own perceptions, particularly young people's definitions and meanings. Four of the 14 high-progress group said that they had experienced some form of bullying. For the young asylum seeker, according to his designated teacher, it appears to have had a racism dimension and affected his education (DT6). A young woman was singled out due her family experience:

I   Were there any bullying at the school?
YP   Yes.
I   Did it affect you?
YP   Definitely.
I   Do you feel that it affected how well you got on at school?
YP   Yes, it did, because there were this girl, and me and her were arguing, and because I didn't get fed well at my real parents, and she knew that, she actually wished that I died, and that. (YP11)

Another young woman experiencing bullying asked to be moved to different classes: teachers agreed and the behaviour stopped (YP12).

Bullying was reported to have affected more of the lower-progress group, about half. Young people and professionals said that their education suffered. Bullying appeared to be quite endemic for one young man:

Yeah. There were sort of issues...and sometimes it was [name] not wanting to say, but ... [name] was always a bit of like, you know, I'm hard, I'm OK, and actually he's a real softie inside, and so he didn't really want to say if he felt he was being threatened and bullied, 'cos I think he seen that as a weakness...There were some concerns about him, certainly using cigarettes with other young people, and, you know, was he supplying those cigarettes, was he not? (SW16)

A male student had a particular problem with cyber-bullying (Facebook) (FC23). One young woman had an especially difficult time:

Now, one thing that I suffered at school was bullying, evidently enough, although I was seen as the bully. I wasn't the bully, but yes, I went through bullying because for some reason, I was almost double the size of these girls. I'm not fat, at all – literally, I'm not...These girls knew what they were doing. They knew what they were doing. I used to eat my fucking – like I said – my lunches in the bathroom sitting on a toilet seat. And, not only am I sitting there eating my lunch, but I'm looking up at all the things on the bathroom wall about me. That's how bad it was. (YP18)

Our qualitative data suggests that the experiences of bullying, alongside other factors, had some part to play in the educational involvement and attainment of our lower-progress group.

3. Services

Our interviews clearly showed, therefore, that relationships were important for young people and influenced their educational progress. For looked after children, important relationships often happen in the context of *services*, which is the third important area to be discussed.

An important theme concerned the *integration* of services: the existence of a multi-professional approach. For one young person the social worker felt that minimal involvement was required on her part: the young man was in a long-term settled placement, doing well at (a selective) school and on course for excellent results – achieving mainly A*s (SW7). She said that she needed only to step in twice: once to raise with the school their use of pupil premium, and again to arrange continuing funding for additional individual tuition. For others, however, multi-professional involvement was usually considered essential.

A strong view emerged with the high-progress group of good co-working between school, placement and social worker. One designated teacher expressed this as follows:

> A combination of everything, and generally, that is so often the case with young people in care... If you've got really good, education focussed foster carers, really good, aware, designated teacher at the school who cascades information to other staff and helps provide the training, if the school's 'attachment aware', if you're got good links with the social worker, and if you've got a good case-worker from the Virtual School, you put all those things together and that young person is going to progress and succeed in some way, not necessarily at the highest level, but you know, that's a good package of support for them...If they've only got one or two of those things, then it's not necessarily such a good outcome...This might sound quite sad, but I think she was lucky, in some ways, that she got the whole package, whereas another child in care or care leaver, might not have necessarily had that whole package, might still have had the potential, and what have you, but maybe would've lagged behind... (DT2)

'Teamwork' was a term that was often used to express this. Interviewees also emphasised the importance of *communication*.

> So if you haven't got that two-way communication, that is the absolute biggest factor. Everything else from there is about school implementing really, and making sure they support, they've got the structures in place, that helps there if the child needs it, but certainly that whole, round picture. When we talk about multi-agency working that is the absolute key. (DT7)

The 'team around the child', referred to by some respondents, was often said to include children's services staff responsible for the education of looked after children; Virtual School headteachers; and other external services such as CAMHS.

An integrated approach was less evident with the lower-progress pupils. Probably in three cases there appeared to be good, all-round support for the young person (SW15; FC23), including 'excellent' social work support (DT20). Others were more problematic. Asked who had contributed most to a pupil's progress, one designated teacher commented:

> Teachers and a bit of herself, definitely not her carers... I think it fell on deaf ears. (DT18)

In another situation the designated teacher informed us:

> I'll be honest with you, I didn't have much to do with that so I'm not sure; I wouldn't want to make comment on that really...I knew the time she was at school that she was a looked after child but I didn't know the ins and outs of that. (DT22)

Perhaps not unrelated, apart from dropping her off and attending her 'prom', the foster carers had not been in this school and were never invited:

> I would've liked to have gone in and seen the school. Do you know what I mean?...No, because she seemed quite settled and I didn't want to upset anything, but for me, if you are getting a kid that's at school coming to live with you, I think it would've been nice to go in and just see the school, and...then we could've told them what concerns we had for [name]. (FC22)

Two other cases in the lower-progress group involved one in which '... the social worker in this case didn't do much' (DT25); and a situation where there was a communication breakdown between foster placement and school; partially because the young person intercepted letters and messages but also the carers weren't said to be especially proactive in inquiring about dates of meetings and so on (SW15).

So there was variation in the extent of multi-professional working and communication but many interviewees emphasised that the young person's own involvement and motivation were also essential – they were a crucial part of the team, and no doubt the most important member. The best joined-up efforts would be fruitless unless the student also played their part. Others were more general but one social worker quantified this:

> I would say that I would give, out of 100, I would say 60-70% was [name], her own input. She would study hard; she would revise; she would do her homework, stay behind. The rest, foster carers make sure that she did do her homework, offered her support. And then clearly you've got that education children in care team, who would review her progress...; and then obviously building that protective factor with CAMHS...But, I'd say 60-70% was [name].

> She...was bright, and this is why we have to really make sure that everything: because she had the potential..., to support her to aspire, so build this wall around her to protect her from other adverse situations... (SW2)

This is related to the 'agency' point made earlier.

Sources of educational support

Young people were asked whom they considered to be their main sources of educational support. A wide range of figures were identified including teachers, carers, grandparents, personal tutors, school mentors and counsellors; and personal sources such as a boyfriend and supportive adult. Teachers were most often singled out. For example, a young woman in the high-progress group explained:

> I think best, it would've been teachers, yes. Because teachers, I've always looked at them for schoolwork and everything, because they helped me; I've always, like, related to them more than carers or anything. Like, carers and social workers have helped me, but teacher have always been there for me, always. (YP1)

Interestingly foster carers were mentioned on some occasions but it was mainly school-based figures who dominated. Some may have interpreted the question narrowly to mean direct influence on education rather than indirect effects as well. However, in answer to being asked 'Thinking of the different people, is there anyone who has really helped how well you could do at school? It could be a particular carer, teacher or anyone?', about two-thirds were school-based figures – divided equally between teachers, and other individual-/pastoral support staff. There was a similar pattern across high- and lower-progress groups. Foster carers were clearly very important for other reasons but teachers and school support staff were highlighted by young people for influencing their education the most.

Change and transition

Given how looked after young people have often led very unsettled lives, we asked about the impact of changes on their education, particularly transfers between placements and schools. We discussed earlier the transfer between primary and secondary school and saw that this often led to an improvement in learning, associated with entry to care and, therefore, separation from harmful influences. Some of our sample were fortunate in living in the one foster home for many years and not changing school, apart from age-related transfer. Yet we also saw earlier how stress in life stems not only from where you live and the school you attend but also *relationships*. Even when living apart, young people could still be subject to problems with birth families that led them to moving

away. Young people were also affected by changes in social workers, and sometimes substitute teachers, which added other dimensions to instability.

Young people were asked to consider, which change was the most difficult to cope with – placement or school? Responses indicated that this was probably not the wisest question, as they sometimes coexist and both can have important implications in different ways. One high-progress young woman seemed to take the move in her stride, quickly making new friends (YP3). Another said that she had moved a lot previously and was used to it, although it was clearly also problematic:

YP   It was a difficult move but it was okay. I was able to do it quite easily really, it didn't really bother me because I've had a lot of moves so it didn't bother me.

I   So you mentioned that you changed secondary schools, and you mentioned that your second one was better than the first one. Did you change at the start of the school year or did you change in the middle of the school year?

YP   Halfway through year, so it was Year 9 and they were taking their exams. I didn't know so they sat me in the school taking these prep exams and I didn't know what on earth I was doing. (YP14)

Another young man explained that he liked change in his life and meeting new people:

I like meeting new people in a way, so to a person like me, I kind of enjoy it, moving schools and going into a new place and seeing new people. (YP25)

For others, moves were complex and stressful. If anything, the language used indicated that placement moves were especially traumatic. One young woman told us:

Because when you get attached to one person, or two people, and then you get moved away, it's like part of you being dragged out of you, really. (YP12)

We saw earlier how one young man, understandably, said that his performance had suffered on being informed by his carers at Easter in Year 11 that he would need to move out after his exams. Yet school moves could be very stressful too. The young asylum seeker found it difficult joining his new school (YP6). His teachers made efforts, with a teacher welcoming him by speaking his first language. But he experienced racism from his peers, asking the interviewer 'Have you ever felt like a stranger?'. Giving that bullying was a not uncommon experience for our sample, many expressed trepidation in joining a new class with an established friendship group.

I   And what was it like joining a new class [in Year 10]?

YP   Yeah, it was horrible. Nervous, no-one knew me. I knew no-one down there. No-one knew me, it was just horrible, horrible. Got used to it, though....Just be as confident as you can, really. Keep your head down. Don't cause any trouble. Just try and get through it. And it's

not that bad. It's just, I think, the first time is you're just walking into a class, when the same people in the class have been in that class for, like, over three years. (YP16)

The point was also raised about the difficulty of dealing with a (new) social situation in which the student may be struggling with their schoolwork and behind the rest of the group.

The main lesson from this would appear to be that, unless placement or school needs to change for exceptionally good reasons, we should do everything possible to prevent it.

Travel to school

Given the difficulties sometimes of aligning placement and education, issues can then arise about travel to school. Just under half of our overall sample travelled to school by taxi. It was slightly higher for the lower-progress group but not greatly. Some important issues arose from our interviews about this process. The general view was that, although the taxi often entailed getting up early and a long journey, the inconvenience was worthwhile as it enabled children to stay with their friends when faced with other disruptions in their lives. As we have seen, it would also avoid the educational and social adjustments required in starting a new school.

Hence, in the main, young people spoke positively about the idea of travelling:

YP   So, the first two years of being in secondary were spent doing taxis and stuff like that.
I   Did it make it difficult for you?
YP   Well, it was a place where I couldn't really see my friends, so school was kind of nice to...because obviously that was the only time I saw them, really...
I   So, how far away was the furthest you travelled to school?
YP   Half an hour...
I   So, do you think this helped how you got on at school, or do you think it made it difficult?...
YP   Day to day thing, really. (YP11)

It may have been the preferable option but the organisation of taxis and their inflexibility caused problems for several. One young woman shared a taxi with her brother who attended a different school (primary):

YP   ...my brother went to school in [name] as well, but he was at primary school for a bit of it, and then he came to my school, and if I had revision sessions after school, I couldn't do it because we went in the same taxi, so he would have to stay later and he'd have nowhere to stay…so it'd have to be at exactly the same time. So, I missed out on stuff like that...
I   Did you ask if that could change?
YP   Yes, but they said no, because there'd be two taxis, it'd be twice the money. (YP2)

Another interviewee had the same problem, sharing a taxi with three others who were at school together and being forced to leave early (YP22). One young woman complained that her taxi could

be unpunctual, making her late for school (YP2). There was another situation in which the taxi drivers were described as unpleasant and inflexible in their timing. She also felt unsafe each day being in a confined space for a long period with men she did not trust (anonymised).

There were other types of journeys. One student was grateful that her foster father drove her a long way to school each day (YP20). A different young woman had to face a difficult journey by public transport:

YP   ...some days, if I just couldn't be bothered, I just wouldn't go in because it was so far. Like, it wasn't round the corner; it took me a good hour and a half, two hours to get there.

I   How did you get to school?

YP   I used to get the bus, the [train], then the bus, and then walk.

Her response seemed understandable in the circumstances.

Hence, the evidence suggests that there were clear benefits in maintaining continuity in schooling, wherever possible, and young people preferred long taxi journeys to the alternative. However, the advantages could be undermined by travel complications.

Educational resources

There was a general view among young people, professionals and carers that young people had adequate daily resources to support their education. The one notable exception was a young woman who lived with her grandmother, who did not have proper study facilities and did not wish to pester her nan to provide them (YP5). Apart from this, there was usually somewhere suitable at the foster home to study; access to a computer; books and study guides. One young man had successfully persuaded his local authority to buy a more sophisticated computer which he required for his course (YP7). He plans to study aeronautical engineering and is in the air cadets at school: his social worker unsuccessfully applied to use his Pupil Premium to fund flying lessons – we can admire her ambition. From this data then, whatever the reasons for the lower progress of looked after pupils, access to everyday educational resources did not appear to be one of them.

In addition to main lessons, there were many forms of additional educational support experienced by our sample. These were variously termed: teaching assistants; learning mentors; small groups; student support centres for pupils with special educational needs and others; and additional revision- and other classes. Local authorities operated different forms of Looked After Children Education Teams; Virtual Schools organised specific education events; and there were local

authority contracts with private education companies to support looked after children. These were offered sometimes at school or, on other occasions, elsewhere. An additional service experienced by the vast majority of young people – high- and lower-progress groups alike - was individual (or 'one-to-one') tuition. Of the few who did not have individual tuition, two were offered but declined it; and one young woman did not like one-to-one teaching (anonymised). Individual tuition was offered at different sites: at school, in the foster home, or at a separate venue.

There was an overwhelming view from young people and others that individual tutors had helped with young people's educational progress:

> Yes, it definitely helped, yes. I was able to get to grips more with certain things, and that helped me a lot. They said if I was to fail my maths, then they would give me more, but I ended up passing so I didn't need any more. But, no, that helped a lot, one-to-one. (YP1)

A social worker emphasised:

SW   Hmm...I think the tutoring definitely helped. Definitely, definitely helped. (SW5)

One young person highlighted that a personal tutor, for the first time, had suggested dyslexia, which led to her SEN assessment (YP17).

There were just two dissenting views from young people on the usefulness of individual tutors: one was supposedly being supported in maths by someone who was not a subject specialist and did not fully understand (YP2); and someone else, who thought that tutors were mainly financially motivated (YP20).

Additional individual help was sometimes provided in school by teachers outside regular hours. One young man arrived at school at 8am each day for an hour's individual help (YP6). Elsewhere, an art teacher stayed on at 4-7pm most evenings to offer extra support:

> I mean if I'd been going home on the bell every day, [name] wouldn't have even got a D, because she did very little in lessons, she wasn't good in lesson times because it's more structured. But after school when you have the tea, radio on and stuff, then she did much better. And if I hadn't run those sessions then she wouldn't have got the grade she achieved. (DT18)

Tutoring arose mostly through Pupil Premium funding and was co-ordinated at PEP meetings. However, we were informed that two foster carers themselves funded private tutoring in the home: one tutor jointly worked with the looked after child and her foster sister (FC4); and another was a very aspirational, dedicated family, who paid for 40 hours of intensive tutor support in the lead-up to GCSEs.

Despite its benefits, a few young people complained that they had wanted individual tutoring sooner but it had happened late, too near exams for example:

YP   Maths and English, but that didn't last long. That was just before my exams, like a couple of weeks, so that didn't help...it was useful in a way, but it just was left 'til the last minute, so...

I   Do you think that if you'd have had it earlier, it would've helped you a lot more?
YP   Yes. (YP21)

Indeed, there was sometimes a view that offering additional educational support was not only about helping individuals to succeed but also about meeting school- and the local authority government-set target of 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths. One pupil was on course to achieve a C in Maths but the school funded tuition which led to a B (YP2). A young man was conscious of missing a Grade C by 5 marks. One young woman, who has been quite outspoken elsewhere, had some pithy observations on educational assessment:

> And because I did the lower paper, it's C and below, getting a D is all right. I mean, no one's expecting me to get a C, realistically, you know, not of our predicted grades, unfortunately, which I think is very rude. I don't like predicted grades: it makes kids feel like they're shittier than what they are. (YP18)

There were mixed views on whether resource constraints hindered the educational progress of these looked after children. Some felt that services were well-funded (DT20); others disagreed. Arguments raised included the point that local authorities which had previously provided laptops for young people had now stopped (YP6). A designated teacher maintained that there were insufficient teachers resources in the school to provide the required support (DT8). Difficulties in accessing educational psychology input were highlighted (DT3); and it was claimed that fewer 'Statements' (Education, Health and Care Plans) were now being made. A social worker feared for the future funding of the Education of Looked After Children Team (SW15). Two young people stated that, due to cost considerations, a local authority would not provide two taxis when necessary for her and her brother (YP2); and a young man had been told that taxis had been discontinued as they cost £30 a day (YP17). Hopefully, resource constraints will not have a greater adverse influence on looked after young people taking their GCSEs after our group in 2013, as the Pupil Premium Plus will help offset any cuts.

PEP meetings

There were many comments in our interviews about PEP meetings, including their monitoring, co-ordinating, resource allocation and accountability functions. We cannot do full justice to this here

and so focus particularly on young people's views. We saw earlier how young people can dislike being removed from class and having to explain to friends where they had been and why. Another young woman pointed out that PEP meetings were linked with broader LAC Reviews: in these she would become emotional as it was made clear that she would not be returning to her grandmother, thus colouring the PEP discussion (YP18).

Young people usually attended their meetings. One young woman, with admirable efficiency and who did not consider her education to be a problem, felt that she had more important things to do with her time: she did not attend but asked for a report afterwards, and would follow-up on anything with which she was concerned or disagreed (YP8).

Opinions were divided among young people about whether PEP meetings were useful. Some were refreshingly frank:

> Honestly? I...sometimes think it's a stupid waste of time, to be honest, 'cos they don't do anything particularly well. They just tell your social worker, and she might forget it, she might not. (YP6)

> Pointless. (YP14)

A similar number were positive about the meetings and thought they served a useful function, including obtaining feedback from others:

> Yes, I did. I quite liked them. There were very [few] of them, but obviously, they were good, because...the people that was important knew how everything was at home and at school and everybody gets together and talks about it, so it was good. (YP22)

Professionals could also check with the student whether extra support was required:

YP   They were quite good. They helped me a lot. They always asked me if I needed help, and if I needed help, they got me it. So, that did help me a lot...I've never...been good at maths. I'm okay at it, but I've never been completely okay with it, and when I was in lessons and stuff, I used to get distracted really easily... They said to me, 'Do you want us to try and get help in the class for you?' So, I obviously said 'yes', and they asked my school if they could put another TA in there for me, and they did do that, so yes...I always had a say. They...just helped me a lot, and I always got a say, always. (YP20)

PEP meetings could help empower young people, which relates to the 'agency' discussion earlier.

Some remarked that PEP meetings were more important and useful for adults than for young people (YP4); especially when they found it difficult to speak out in front of a large group of, sometimes unfamiliar, people (YP2). An interesting point was made by one young man, who explained his lack

of attendance at, and engagement with, meetings was because he did not look to the future or plan ahead:

> Yes, but talking to me now, it's like a completely different person to me in school then...Then, I wasn't interested in getting better grades; I wasn't interested at all in school. I was just living. Know, what I mean? Wasn't focussed on the future. I didn't think it was going to end... (YP25)

One young woman used the meeting mainly to hold other professionals to account about the support being provided to her birth mother:

> Oh, I'm very outspoken...and I was quite articulate in what I wanted. So I was just like, 'This is what I want, and this is what I'm asking'. And you can see I was a bit of a gutsy person, so I wasn't going to take no for an answer...I'd just literally go to my IRO and say, 'Look, my social worker and her manager are not helping me out here. So can you help me out, please? Like, I don't know, nag them or do something to them, but just get them to do something.'...I wanted to ask my social worker about helping my mum, because she's not been taking medication for a year now, and they've been like...they literally will say, 'Oh, we'll look into it, we'll look into it, we'll look into it'. But they never look into it. So in the end, I'm just like...and I literally, review after review after review, I'm telling them I need someone to look at that. (YP9)

This is a very important point, given how we saw earlier that family difficulties often still impinged on young people's lives and affected their educational progress.

CAMHS

We did not inquire in detail into young people's mental health difficulties and their possible links with educational progress. However we were informed that five young people had accessed CAMHS, the effects of which were reported to be very positive. These concerned a range of experiences including: bereavement counselling; anxiety and panic; anger management; depression; stealing; incontinence; self-harm and attempted suicide. A young woman described the benefits of having '...such a big support system', a very important member of which was her CAMHS worker. Another young woman attended regular weekly CAMHS sessions, accompanied on occasions by her foster carers. They assessed its contribution as follows:

FC   She had counselling at school, both schools that she's been to, and she goes to CAMHS, and I think that's a crutch...she accepts it for what it is, and it's like a routine that she's in, and it's a steady thing.

I   So would you say that the counselling and CAMHS in particular has...

FC   - Aided her?...Yeah, without a doubt.

One social worker related familiar problems in accessing CAMHS; whereas another, in the same authority interestingly, said that obtaining the service had been straightforward and there had been no waiting time. A young woman said that she suffered from bipolar disorder and ADHD, neither of which had been identified by children's services despite her many years' involvement.

4. Conclusion - Explanations for progress

To pull together some of the main themes from our qualitative interviews, there have been many insightful comments and powerful expressions from young people especially. We need to remember that our young people were in very different circumstances: some had lived with foster carers for most of their lives and had always excelled at school; others entered care very late, in crisis and with GCSEs looming. Their living arrangements varied between highly aspirational affluent families and loving yet impoverished grandparents. It is no wonder, then, that educational progress and results differed.

To recap on our main findings, we saw that many young people had very difficult birth family experiences, which often had a profound effect, including on young people's learning. Despite this, some children managed to do very well at school. Even young people with lower prior attainment had often still made very good progress. There was an overwhelming view that entry to care had been beneficial educationally. This often explained the fact that our sample considered that they generally performed better in secondary school than primary. Successful children had often been supported educationally from a very young age, notwithstanding other family problems. For many, birth family problems continued throughout their teenage years, affecting their learning, and did not cease on entering care.

A very interesting finding was the way in which young people themselves navigated all of this – an expression of agency. Young people often remarked that, ultimately, it was all down to them: which is undoubtedly true, although adults and professionals could help influence how it occurred and its educational consequences. In this, our evidence suggested that young people needed to be open to support. This was manifested through relationships with individuals, usually foster carers, who could show that they genuinely cared and would not give up. Particularly for those who made lower progress, in order to expose themselves to vulnerability and possible failure, young people needed

to feel that they would not be let down – which had been their past experience – and that their life *mattered*. It needed to matter to others before it could matter to them.

Integration of services was important: some expressed it as teamwork. In light of the above, the young person is an important member of the team. Foster carers' support for education seemed more important than their own educational background. Most seemed to provide good daily educational resources: study space, computer etc. Continuity in schooling was important and children usually preferred staying at the same school even if it meant withstanding a long taxi journey. Teachers were especially important in influencing educational progress. Pupils welcomed additional support, most notably individual tuition, although often they would have welcomed it sooner. More children than we would perhaps have expected had experienced difficult relationships in school, including bullying.   No doubt there are many more but some immediate practice implications of our findings stand out: organising PEP meetings outside of school hours rather than during lessons; making taxi services responsive to children's individual needs; and prioritising continuity in children's relationships with social workers over service restructuring and reallocation.

Young people summarised succinctly the implications of all this in the following ways. The final question in their interviews was 'Thinking about your experiences, what do you think are the main things that can be done to help children in care do well at school?' Their answers can be grouped as follows:

- Solutions to children's educational problems need approaching individually.
- Very important are children's own motivation and frame of mind.
- Children need to be happy where they are currently living.
- Deal with the emotional issues.
- Children need to be consistently pushed in the right direction ('even if its subliminally').
- Teachers need to be understanding ('Give a longer leash').
- Offer more tuition if needed.

One young man concluded: 'Well, I always thought, you can't change the past, but you can change the future' (YP26).

So far we have not linked these findings to the theoretical and empirical literature and that is the task ahead. Certainly much would resonate, for example, with writings on attachment, permanence and resilience. There are also many connections with our quantitative analysis, which will be

brought out in our overview paper. Our final thoughts are that the effects of inadequate and harmful parenting are many and profound. They have complex personal and educational consequences, which are not always easily remedied, especially late-on. Young people often made very significant progress in care and were themselves proud, even if they did not achieve sufficient C grades. They did so alongside the persistence and dedication of carers and teachers. Clearly the state must not fail children for whom it accepts responsibility. However, in judging the effectiveness of this, we need an informed and thoughtful understanding of the *progress* of looked after children. To date, policy and research have focused mainly on their *attainment*, which is inadequate and potentially misleading. We hope that our research helps to redress the balance.