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Achievement and outcomes in education: a case study of the experiences of young people looked after in residential and foster care in South Wales.

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This thesis is submitted in candidature for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Summary

This thesis presents a longitudinal qualitative case study of the educational experiences and outcomes of a sample of looked after young people. The majority of these young people are in foster care and a smaller number are in residential care. They cannot live at home for a variety of reasons including: inadequate parenting, neglect, abuse, or because some are beyond parental control. Children and young people who are 'looked after' by the state are vulnerable to a range of disadvantage including poor educational achievement. The study concentrates on a group of fourteen young people in one authority in South Wales whose educational achievements and experiences were tracked over three school years, from Year 9 to Year 11. The study explores links between a number of issues that appear to impact on their educational outcomes including: young people's background, type of care placement, stability and continuity of care and school placement and educational experiences. A number of the young people were interviewed over a three year period while aged between fourteen and sixteen. This was a significant time for the young people as it straddled two important assessment stages in their schooling.

Some of the young people achieved well in their education during this period, whilst for others their schooling deteriorated as their lives became disrupted by care placement and school changes. Another group had particular challenging needs and there was little evidence that any sustained progress was achieved during this three year period. The thesis focuses on multiple in-depth interviews with young people and includes carer and professional perspectives. It identifies individual, operational, policy and strategic features that help account for poor educational outcomes and also suggests ways to improve their attainment in school.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the topic

The focus of this thesis is a qualitative case study over three years of the educational experiences and outcomes of a small group of looked after children from one local authority in South Wales. These young people were tracked and interviewed as they entered school Year 9, after Standard Assessment Tests and Tasks (SATS) and again after they had undertaken (or not) General Certificate of Secondary Examinations (GCSE) in school Year 11. The aim being to identify from mainly young people themselves what assisted or impeded their achievements at school. This opening chapter will outline the broad topic and context of the study including an explanation of the term 'looked after' before moving on to the study aims, objectives and research questions. The structure of the thesis will then be presented through a brief synopsis of each chapter. It should be noted that the terms 'children' and 'young people' are used according to the context and are not linked to specific age ranges unless specified. Also, all respondents in the study (children and adults) are identified through pseudonyms as are all research sites and study locations to ensure full anonymity.

The study context

Children become looked after when their birth parents or members of their extended family are unable to provide ongoing care in either a temporary or permanent capacity. Various and wide ranging circumstances bring children into the looked after system. Many children will have been affected by damaging and distressing experiences including, neglect and physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Others may be looked after because of the death or illness of a parent and a very small minority (between 1-2%) are looked after because of criminal offences they have committed.

The term 'looked after' was introduced by the Children Act 1989 and refers to all children who are the subject of a care order or who are voluntarily accommodated. The general philosophy of the Children Act 1989 is that children are best looked after in their own family, but there may be times when parents need to call on the state for additional services to meet the needs of their children; in most cases this is because the child's parents are unable to provide appropriate care (Thomas 2004). A care order is granted by a court under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989, the criteria for granting an order is that the child 'has suffered or is

likely to suffer significant harm' and children may therefore be placed compulsorily in state care. On the granting of such an order the local authority shares parental responsibility with the parents, but in essence it can limit how parents exercise their responsibility, for example in the nature and frequency of parent-child contact. Once a care order has been granted it is in place until the child is eighteen years old, unless it is revoked by the parents, or the child is adopted.

The legal status of young people who are accommodated with the consent of their parents under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 replaces a previous concept of voluntary care. The term 'care' was considered to have negative connotations and to be unduly stigmatizing and in legal terms is only used to denote those young people who are the subject of a care order. The more neutral term 'accommodation' is used to describe a service, such as foster or residential care that is offered in partnership with parents (Ball and Mc Donald 2002). The legislation in these cases gives 'a positive emphasis to identifying and providing for the children's needs rather than focusing on parental shortcomings in a negative manner' (Brayne and Broadbent 2002: 336). Although children looked after under section 20 have an assessment of needs, a care plan and regular reviews, parents can remove their children from accommodation at any time. The primary duty of any local authority looking after any child, whether under a care order or provided with accommodation as defined by the Children Act 1989 is:

a) To safeguard and promote his welfare; and
b) To make such use of services available for children cared for by their own parents as appears to the local authority reasonable in his case.

Numbers of looked after children: areas of concern for the study

Fostering is now the principle form of care when children cannot live at home and in recent years the numbers of children in foster care have stayed fairly constant, although there is some evidence that children now have more complex needs (Corrick 1999; Trisileotis et al. 2000; Wilson and Evetts 2006). The overall numbers of children looked after have decreased steadily from the 1970s through to the end of the 1990s. In particular since the Children Act 1989 the numbers of children under care orders fell, however there has been a rise in the number of children who are looked after under a voluntary agreement. Also the ages of children looked after is rising (Colton et al. 2001). Official statistics indicate that since the

1980s the number of children looked after in Wales has reduced, although this reduction is slowing down. The figures for March 1980 were 4,861, compared to 3,849 in 2000 rising to 4,380 in March 2005 (Wales Data Unit, 2006). Current trends show that there are more children looked after in the 10-15 age group (41.9%) than any other age group, that they are being looked after for longer and boys marginally outnumber girls in all age groups. The majority of children will now be placed in foster care (73%), unlike two decades ago when there was an equal number of children in residential care and in foster care.

The concerns about children who are looked after and their educational outcomes are well founded when one examines research in this area. The general picture that emerges is that children in public care continually achieve less well than their peers (Borland 1998; Jackson and Simon 2006) and that this under achievement is exacerbated as the young person gets older (DoH 2000a). The broad issues are familiar to researchers, policy makers and practitioners and a core objective of UK and Welsh government is to help looked after children do as well at school as other children (DoH 2000a; NAfW 2001a). In responding to this policy objective, this study has explored a range of operational and policy themes in regard to the educational achievement of a sample of looked after children. The study has sought to involve key stakeholders (children, carers, parents and professionals) and to situate the findings in the context of other relevant empirical research that supports and in some cases challenges the analysis derived from this single setting. Much of our previously generated knowledge in this field has been through an adult agenda with limited attention to the views of young people who are living the life of 'being looked after'. Thus the significance of this study exists in its longitudinal approach to eliciting the voice of young people. Hence, the thesis contributes to a topic where gaps have long been noted in relation to the much-neglected views of young people particularly about their education whilst being looked after:

> Relatively few studies have sought to ask directly care recipients about their educational experiences (Blyth and Milner 1997: 48).

Aims, objectives and research questions

The aims of this study respond to the policy ambitions set out in the *Children First* Programme (Welsh Office 1999a) in that the approaches taken help illuminate specific processes that mediate the educational career of children looked after. The study seeks to do

this by examining possible links between the young person's care background, specific needs, type of placement, continuity of placement, family relationships and educational experience. This holistic approach to the looked after child finds congruence with 'joined up' thinking in child care which recognises that education achievement and placement history are closely entwined. In particular, stability in the care and the education placement are inter-woven for the looked after child and it is crucial that research, policy and practice reflects the inter-agency and multi-disciplinary nature of the service field (Jackson and Thomas 1999). This thesis therefore sought to explore key factors that influenced the educational experiences and achievements of a group of looked after children in one Welsh local authority over a specified period of three years. The age group (13-14 year olds) and study period were chosen as the young people were at a significant juncture in their educational career in that their experiences would straddle secondary school years 9, 10 and 11. During school Year 9 the majority of the young people had completed Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum and were eligible to be assessed by SATS and the completion of school years 10 and 11 marked the end of Key Stage 4, GCSE examinations and compulsory education.

The broad objectives were to:

1. Explore perceptions held by young people in relation to their education achievements as 'looked after children'.
2. Identify education outcomes of children looked after compared with children not in public care via existing literature and government sources.
3. Identify practice and policy issues that impact upon educational achievement of looked after children.
4. Consider service and system factors that may be of benefit to family support and education providers in Wales.
5. Through the study, note any methodological insights that might assist future research in appraising the education of looked after children.

Key research questions

Three key questions and linked topic areas informed the literature review and configured the structure of the study.

The first key question was: how do young people in the looked after system perceive their experiences of school and educational achievement? In addressing this, the following topic areas informed the research design:

- Exploration of attitudes to school. How do young people negotiate their looked after identity in school/understanding of the looked after status
- How do they perceive the support from school staff and other significant adults
- What are their interests outside of school and the impact of friends
- What are their aspirations and ambitions for their future
- What aspects of their lives promote stability and continuity
- What protective factors are in evidence to promote resilience

The second key question was: how do relevant adults such as parents, foster carers, residential carers, social workers and teachers explain and support the achievements (or otherwise) of a group of looked after young people? In tackling this question four topic areas were identified thus:

- What do adults do to promote the achievements of looked after children in terms of support and assistance
- How do adults explain why a young person achieves (or not)
- What are adults' expectations of young people in terms of achievement
- What is the influence of the notion of 'corporate parent'

The third key question addressed the crucial point of education outcomes, asking: what can we learn from the care and school experiences and outcomes of a sample of looked after young people over a three-year period? Here, particular focus was placed upon the following themes and whether these collected together in relation to particular children's careers within the looked after system:

- Placement stability
- Continuity of relationships
- Educational outcomes after assessment periods (SATS and GCSEs)
- Educational stability, continuity and inclusion
- Emotional well-being

Structure of the thesis

Following on from this introductory chapter, Chapters Two, Three and Four present a coherent and contemporary approach to the topic and position the study in a thematic literature framework. The key sources comprise mainly UK empirical research, theory and policy focusing on residential care, foster care, childhood, education and outcomes for care

leavers. The literature search of databases included ASSIA, Care Data, Child Data and Web of Science and others, as well as regular electronic alerts from relevant social work, education and sociology journals. To repeat, the search drew primarily on UK sources as different child welfare systems can make cross-country comparison difficult and unreliable (Borland 2000). This is not to suggest that a cross-country comparison of looked after children within or beyond the UK is not feasible or valuable (see Pinkerton 2006: 193), but rather that such an approach went beyond the span and opportunity of this study. Indeed, there is an increasing body of research and practice across the four UK nations that allows for some contrasting of patterns, similarities and differences (see Mc Auley 2000; Harker et al. 2004; Clough et al. 2004; SWIA 2006).

Chapter Two offers a brief historical overview of key 'phases' in relevant child care policy drawing on themes that continue to be topical in contemporary child welfare discourse. Legislative changes are outlined as well as the changing ideologies in the provision of services to children and families in the UK. The notion of the 'corporate parent' is presented with some brief exposition around the complexities of agencies trying to meet their roles and responsibilities. As well as drawing the attention of readers to the fast moving social policy agenda, the chapter highlights selective aspects of the education policy, looking briefly at historical developments and the importance of sociological insights into the concepts of 'disadvantage' and 'differential attainment'. The impact of major changes linked to the development of the National Curriculum and the emphasis on standards and outcomes are explored in the context of how they may impact on the experiences of children in public care. Policy concerns regarding 'underachievement' are presented briefly and aspects of school exclusion and its relationship to social exclusion are discussed.

Chapter Three presents a selective review of policy and theory that offers, sometimes conflicting, perspectives about why looked after children under-perform compared to non looked after children. These perspectives are drawn from disciplines including social work, psychology, sociology and education. This part of the review is presented in terms of explanatory themes that help illuminate some contested areas of knowledge and practice, for example in regard to corporate parenting, pre-care experiences and the education and care placement.

In Chapter Four a conceptual framework is outlined that draws upon key themes within a 'sociology of childhood'. An overview of this material highlights a number of the issues that have shaped and continue to shape assumptions about the meaning of childhood and what it is to be a child. This chapter helps set the overarching investigative stance of this study: that children can be seen as a distinct population, as social actors with an active role in the construction, social context and determination of their social lives. The chapter then continues with a more detailed treatment of the key messages derived from literature on stability, resilience and attachment theory with particular reference to children looked after. Of specific interest is the research and ecological approach to resilience-led practice and an emphasis on encouraging protective factors and promoting strengths both on an individual and more structural basis.

Chapter Five outlines the epistemological approach of the case study and its qualitative methodology, sampling framework and research methods. The issues gleaned from the earlier chapters are reproduced as research themes which help confirm the relevance of this study. The chapter presents the process of the study through key stages in order to claim some originality and evidence accuracy and accountability (Denscombe 2002). The chapter describes and justifies the selection of research methods and makes visible the approach to reliability, validity and data analysis. The ethical and participatory aspects of research with vulnerable young people are addressed in some detail. Overall, this chapter seeks to convey to the reader a congruent representation of the research process (D'Cruz and Jones 2004) whereby issues of objectivity, rigour and reflexivity are debated in an open and critical manner.

The focus of Chapter Six, the first of five empirical chapters, is to provide contextual and biographical details of the young people in the study including: reasons for becoming looked after, legal status and type of care placement at the start of the study. It summarises the results of educational achievement of the group as measured by standard attainment tests (SATS) in school Year nine and introduces analytic categories derived from sample sub-groups of 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'. There is some preliminary discussion of factors such as school attendance, education continuity and care placement stability that appear to impact on specific school outcomes. The circumstances of a group of four young people who left the looked after system at various education stages are presented to illuminate some particular anomalies within the tracking, monitoring and recording of

outcomes that could be considered significant for these and other potentially vulnerable individuals.

The aim of Chapter Seven is to present the findings from the analysis of interview data from young people and professionals as they attempted to explain the issues around educational experiences and achievements. The chapter highlights a number of shared and divergent views including what young people see as the importance of their active participation in decision making. It explores aspects of family relationships for promoting belonging and resilience. Insights into a variety of care experiences and how these impact on the support offered in school are set out. The chapter concludes with some reflection on themes of identity and gender and how these may impact on the way children and their needs are constructed within the looked after system.

Chapter Eight explores in more detail the school outcomes of the sample via the analytic categories of 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'. These three sub-groups and their education achievements are examined in relation to emerging themes around kinship placements; the institutional emphasis on academic results as opposed to other notions of progress for looked after children; the differing dispositions to learning within the sample and from significant adults. The notion of the 'pushy parent' is considered within the remit of corporate responsibility and 'push' and 'pull' factors that impact on children in foster care and residential care are debated in light of looked after children becoming disconnected from school. Meeting the complex needs of young people as they negotiate their adolescent identity through the looked after system is reflected upon and concludes the chapter.

Chapter Nine offers a detailed account of case specific themes within the care careers of three young people selected from the sample sub-groups of 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'. This exploration of their complex experiences is articulated in large part through the views of three young people over a key period of three years in their schooling. Drawing on the sociological perspective that constructs children as active citizens with the capacity to account for events in their lives and to participate in decision making, the chapter ensures the 'voice' of the young people is prominent.

Chapter Ten first reflects briefly upon two broad issues that impact on the looked after population and were in evidence even in this small sample, criminality and teenage

pregnancy. These two causes of social exclusion are outlined within the context of vulnerability, gender construction and a risk and resilience framework. The chapter then continues with some analysis of organisational responses to aspects of social exclusion within the sample. In particular, aspects of agency co-ordination, monitoring and working together are outlined drawing on examples from the data. The organisational response to the needs of looked after children in terms of a specialist project are briefly discussed with some debate on the sustainability of such an initiative.

Chapter Eleven reflects on the current legislative and policy context with regard to looked after children and education. Within this final chapter the relevance and application of the study is reiterated and suggestions with regard to practice and policy developments are made. The implications and scope for future research conclude this chapter and the thesis.

Chapter 2: The arrival of the Looked After Child: a historical overview of child welfare and education provision

Introduction

To understand how the current discourse on child welfare has evolved and informs contemporary practice and ideology, it is important to view this area of welfare provision through an historical lens. Exploring concepts and themes in relevant legislation and policy is a useful way of charting changes. It also allows us to make sense of how the state interprets its responsibilities and duties (Cameron 2003). This context setting seeks to avoid criticism levied by some that, 'British child welfare practice has suffered from a lack of historical reflection' (Stevenson 1998: 154). Garrett (2002: 841) argues the point more forcibly for a historical perspective with regard to the looked after children system:

> Clearly if there is a failure to interrogate the collective professional past and specific theories and operational modalities, social work will be ill-equipped to analyse and respond to more contemporary 'blueprints' for practice such as the highly influential LAC system.

Section 1: Social work context

This chapter, divided into two sections, will therefore go someway to interrogate selective historical developments in social welfare and education policy. The first part of the chapter will offer a brief historical overview, identifying significant phases of child welfare policy, drawing on themes that continue to be topical in contemporary welfare provision. These phases will include developments in child welfare from 1945, through to the 1980s, modern child welfare as prescribed by the Children Act 1989 and the New Labour modernisation agenda for UK welfare. There will also be a brief discussion about changes in residential care and the impact of inquiries and research in the shaping and refocusing of service development. Ideological tensions, as well as the focus of social work interventions with children and families, and how they are perceived by professionals and the public will be addressed, alongside issues of retention, recruitment and training of social workers. Some concluding comments will be made in the light of the modernisation agenda for child welfare, highlighting the likely impact on the looked after children system and the role of the corporate parent.

The second section will explore some of the more significant contemporary developments in education policy and the possible impact on looked after children drawing attention in particular to aspects of social disadvantage, educational expectations for looked after children, the notion of achievement and the impact of school exclusions

Whilst a detailed historical account is interesting (for example, some of the principles of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act allow for an exploration of the concept of eligibility) this section will limit its scope to the post war period in UK children's policy. However, the significance of the Victorian era in the foundation of some of the large child care charities such as Dr. Barnardo's, National Children's Homes and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children will be noted, all of which have a major role in child welfare today. A history of post-war state child care will now be presented via distinct phases (see also Fox Harding 1991; Parton 2005) in order to offer a chronology of key developments in child welfare policy.

Phase 1: 1945-1970s

Phase one, 1945-1970s saw what has been considered by some as an age of 'optimism' (Fox Harding 1991), this was partly to do with the creation of the children's departments in the 1950s and the belief and enthusiasm that an agenda tackling child neglect could ultimately be achieved. Hayden et al., (1999: 22) argue that it was the death of Denis O'Neal in 1945 that was 'one of the defining moments in post war consciousness in the child care field'. He died aged 13 weighing four stone as a result of the neglectful and brutal treatment by his foster carers. The Children Act 1948 introduced the provision of regulated care for children who were living in situations of deprivation. Alongside this however was the notion of neglect linked also to delinquency and this was reflected later in the Children and Young Persons Act 1969. Child welfare during this time was inextricably part of an institutional and conceptual framework of law and order with a blurring of the boundaries between children who had previously been seen as a victim now being seen as a threat (Hayden 1999). For those children who lived away from their families, placement with foster carers and in family group homes became the objective; although a large number of children continued to live in children's homes, often run by the voluntary sector. Approved schools, which had an ethos of training and reforming were abolished by the end of the 1960s and replaced with social work dominated principles of working in child-centred way to resolve emotional and social problems (Corby et al. 2001). Whilst residential care attempted to work in child-centred ways

the general emphasis of children's services changed from a child-centred approach to a family centred approach with the creation of the social services departments, as recommended by the Seebohm Report 1968 (DfESS 1968) and incorporated into the 1970 Local Authority Social Services Act. Rather than 'rescuing' children from families who were experiencing difficulties as a consequence of poor parenting, the aim was to support and work with families to improve their capabilities.

Phase 2: A loss of optimism

The second phase through the 1970s was marked by a loss of optimism: Children were spending long periods of time in care and 'drifting' as attempts to reunite them with their families failed. The rehabilitation philosophy was shaken by the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 which Parton (1991: 52) cites as the 'the beginning of modern political, public and professional interest in child abuse'. The inquiry into Maria's death contributed to the 1975 Children Act and a raft of policies and procedures that developed a multi-agency dimension to child protection (Fawcett et al. 2004). This approach, according to Fox Harding (1991), was informed by a state paternalistic and child protection perspective. At the same time the permanence movement was gathering momentum (Packman and Jordan 1991; Thomas 2005) with an emphasis on the consideration of permanency planning either through adoption or long term fostering, for those children who could not live with their birth families. This drive was encouraged by ideological as well as financial reasons; living situations that replicated 'normal' family life were considered preferable and residential care was seen as too expensive (Corby et al. 2001). The fact that parents could lose their parental rights on the basis of their child being in care for three years was seen as a shift to the importance of the welfare of the child, away from the rights of the parents (Daniel and Ivatts 1998).

Phase 3: A catalogue of inquiries

By the 1980s a third phase in child care started to emerge as a result of tragedies and inquiry reports involving Jasmine Beckford (1985, London Borough of Brent), Tyra Henry (1987, London Borough of Lambeth), Kimberley Carlile (1987, London Borough of Greenwich). All of these cases were characterised by inadequate and prolonged patterns of mistreatment and all had the involvement of professionals, in particular social workers. These inquiries (along with others) provided a particular construction of abuse described by

Fawcett et al. (2004: 53) as, 'physical in nature, carried out by parents or carers and was preventable if parents did the right things'.

However, allegations of widespread sexual abuse amongst families in Cleveland and the subsequent high profile inquiry (Cleveland 1988) moved the emphasis in child care services away from neglect to physical and sexual harm. At the same time government reports presented a poor picture of social work services. Daniel and Ivatt (1998:204) summarise as follows:

> The picture that emerges is of poor planning and bad social work practice leading to insecure and unstable placements for children in care. Even worse, examples began to emerge of children being physically and sexually abused while in residential care.

Residential care for children in the UK has a long history. During the nineteenth and twentieth century the majority of children considered needy, typically those that were considered delinquent or abandoned, were cared for in institutions. Within residential care there was a variety of provision, for example children's homes, residential special schools, young offenders institutions, secure accommodation, private children's homes, specialist provision for children with disabilities and community homes with education (Berridge 2002; Thomas 2005). Residential care continued to be a significant resource during the 1970s and early 1980s. However, during the late 1980s with the reduction of the number of children in care and the emphasis on family placements a number of residential units were closed down (Thomas 2005). There were drastic cutbacks, some local authorities even closed down all of their residential provision to fund community initiatives such as family centres. Others considered that a foster care strategy was the best option for children who could not live at home. Those authorities that took measures to close all their residential provision, such as Warwickshire and Lewisham, had then to rely on out of county residential placements for some of their most difficult to place children (Crimmins and Pitts 2000; Corby et al. 2001). The closure of homes was often sudden and unplanned with negative consequences for some children and staff as described by Corby et al. (2001: 32):

> The result of these kinds of changes in many local authorities was one of chaos and confusion. Staff morale was lowered. Those that were retained within the residential services sector often found themselves working with unfamiliar age groups and in very different regimes from those to which they had been accustomed.

The decline in children's homes: a response to inquiries

The decline in the use of children's homes for children in care has been in part due to the huge cost, but also there has been a shift in emphasis away from institutional care to family provision. Linked to this reduction has been the large number of high profile inquiries and reports documenting the abuse of children living in residential care, notably the Staffordshire 'pindown' regime where children were subjected to inappropriate physical treatment (Levy and Kahan 1991). The punitive treatment, including solitary confinement, was considered by an inquiry to be 'ill-judged and emotionally abusive' (Corby 2000: 3). In the response to the 'pindown' inquiry the (then) Chief Inspector of Social Services, Sir William Utting (1991) reported upon a service that was blighted by poor quality care and untrained staff who were dealing with some of the most challenging and difficult young people. Other investigations uncovered regimes where children were systematically physically and sexually abused by staff (see Kirkwood 1993) and an inquiry in North Wales revealed sexual abuse by a number of individuals that went undetected for many years (Waterhouse 2000). These high profile cases highlighted the nature of abuse in residential care and shook professional and public confidence in residential provision. Consistent messages and recommendations from the 1980s and 1990s inquiries was the importance of training, support and calibre of staff employed in residential care, as well as creating a culture or ethos in units whereby young people felt listened to both individually and collectively (Willow 2000).

The Utting report (1997) concluded that the UK was failing to provide adequate and appropriate care for children living away from home. However, although today children's homes and the staff that work in them are subjected to much closer inspection and checks, Jackson (2006: 24) critically argues that 'residential care in particular has proved stubbornly resistant to all attempts at improvement'.

The UK child welfare system at the end of the 1980s can only be described as in flux. There was an ambivalent view of residential care fuelled by scandals that came to light, plus the damning reports of the 1980s regarding children living at home in unsatisfactory conditions and children being unsuccessfully re-united with their families after periods in care. The law concerning the upbringing of children during this period was described as 'at best complex and confused and, at worst, contradictory' (DoH 2001:5). This situation in part led to far reaching legislative and administrative reforms.

Phase 4: Modern Child Welfare: legislation and evidenced-based practice

The Children Act 1989 became active in October 1991 and arguably marked the fourth phase in the evolution of contemporary child welfare practice. It repealed over fifty enactments of earlier child welfare legislation and has been described as:

> The most comprehensive and far reaching reform in childcare law in living memory.
> (Lord Chancellor quoted in Hendrick (2003: 196)

In terms of provision for those children who could not live at home, the trends of the 1980s of foster care as the preferred option and the reduction in residential care continued into the 1990s. Also, because many large children's homes had been more or less consigned to history, some authorities had no residential provision. In consequence we have seen an increase in residential services offered by the private sector. This was in part because of an emerging view that residential care and foster care should be viewed as complementary interventions that need to be seen in the context of a mixed market continuum of services to children in need. Although, Berridge (2002: 86) asserts that children who are in residential care today have more difficulties than previously:

> Most residents today are adolescents, who stay weeks or months rather than years. They tend to come from very troubled backgrounds, having experienced inconsistent parenting, neglect and abuse and schooling difficulties, as well as having presented behaviour problems at home and in the community. Social skills and self-esteem are often poor. As a group, they are more problematic than their predecessors and pose significant challenge for staff looking after them.

However, Thomas (2005:121) maintains that to assume that children in residential care have more problems is to 'oversimplify' the matter. Corby et al. (2001:35), whilst not as negative about the improvements that have been made in residential care, point to some of the ambivalence that still blights this part of children's services:

> While residential childcare services have improved considerably since the dark days of the Poor Law, the changes have been less dramatic than might have been expected. Residential care has always suffered and continues to suffer from being a service for children of the poor, and from being seen as a last resort measure for children separated from their families.

We may argue that the Children Act 1989 tried to change this image by providing a unified legislative framework for work with children and families underpinned by explicit principles, including the child as paramount, partnership with parents and minimal court intervention and delay. The notion of individual family responsibility, a principle that has guided UK policy on children since 1945, was still evident. Daniel and Ivatts (1998: 206) maintain that the Children Act 1989 was implemented 'against a background of resource constraints and an ideology of individualism'.

The impact of research

As well as the legislative changes, at this time, major research was commissioned by the government (DoH 1995a) as a direct consequence of the Cleveland Inquiry. The research involved over twenty studies and is described by Parton et al. (1997: 12) as 'the most significant coordinated research programme into child protection that has ever taken place'. The research drew attention to a number of issues and concepts that needed to be considered in the process of child welfare including definition of abuse, emotional neglect and the damaging family environment characterised as 'low in warmth and high in criticism' (see Parton et al. 1997: 13). The overall conclusions were that services had moved away from child welfare per se to one of developing policies to deal with high-risk child protection issues. Consequently, the workload and emphasis was being distorted with the priority going to investigative work and little priority given to preventative, support services and looked after children.

Labour government influences: the language of inclusion

The new Labour government since 1997 appears to be developing an emphasis on preventative strategies, with a 'social investment rationale' to child welfare rather than overt child protection policies (Fawcett et al. 2004:72). The context of family life is seen as important and this is represented through early years pre-school initiatives such as Sure Start and Connexions (replacing the former careers service in England), which is committed to achieving positive outcomes for young people (SEU 2003). Similarly the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH 2000b), the key document for assessing families has its emphasis on seeing families in need of services and support rather than children in need of protection. With this in mind assessments with families take an ecological approach with the aim of seeing difficulties more contextually.

Thus, this emphasis on prevention is set against a background of failings dating back to the 1970s, in particular abuse within the state child care system that emerged during the 1990s including punitive regimes and a residential sector whose reputation was damaged by a catalogue of failings and scandals including the systematic mistreatment of children (Levy and Kahan 1991; Utting 1991; Utting 1997). The Waterhouse inquiry into sexual abuse in North Wales contributed to an emerging view about multiple inadequacies in policy and practice (Waterhouse 2000). In addition to this, the evidence was mounting that children in state care have poor outcomes in terms of employment, education, housing, and general well being. Similarly, there were also a high percentage of teenage pregnancies amongst care leavers as well as young people over-represented in the prison and young offender population (SEU 2003). All this evidence compounded a gathering perception that the state was not a good parent. These concerns ensured that children looked after by the state were to be more fully included in policy initiatives and that a children's rights commitment was now essential. This was considered by Smith (2005: 109) as a significant ideological change in as much as the 'children's rights agenda appeared to be moving to the centre of policy and planning for children's services'.

However, running through the developments of contemporary state policy and services are sometimes competing perspectives of laissez-faire (not intervening in the natural process of the family), state paternalism and child protection (the need for authoritative and effective state intervention), birth family and parents rights (the role of the state to promote the well-being of families) and children's rights (a radical agenda of children's rights and society's responsibilities) (see Fox Harding 1996; Smith 2005). Thomas (2005: 10) summarises the above perspectives as being in ideological conflict but also notes:

> They are often found to co-exist, in that the same legal or policy systems may contain elements that represent more than one of these value positions.

Operational and practitioner failure

In addition to these ideological tensions, we can see through reports that span nearly thirty years there is still concern that systems, standards and effective communication are not fully in place. Reports and inquiries continue to cite operational and practitioner failure as significant areas of concern, with the solutions identified as improving systems, knowledge

and practice (Smith 2005). One area where the emphasis has been upon much needed improvement is residential care. Although the number of children in residential care has reduced and the number of authorities that have residential care as part of their continuum of services has also declined, there are still some authorities in Wales that see it as a positive choice. Indeed, a survey of local authority placements in Wales (Pithouse and Crowley 2001: 49) viewed the reduction of residential provision with regret and ambivalence seeing it as a 'loss of opportunities for service innovation'. One of the major debates about residential care relates to staffing issues, it has been on the agenda since the 1970s and has been a continual feature of inquiries. Corby et al. (2001) have claimed that little has changed since the 1970s, with qualification levels low and staff turnover high. The National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) system of in-house training has been adopted in many local authorities, but this does not lead to a professional qualification. Whilst the diploma in social work and the new degree in social work, linked to National Occupational Standards, offer some focus on work with children and families and group work this, arguably, is not enough. Clough et al. (2004: 123) criticise current professional training arrangements as 'social work training does not adequately prepare people for work in residential establishments and it is not the proper professional qualification'. This under emphasis on professional training, as some have argued, is part of the continued undervaluing of the residential provision. This, despite the evidence suggesting the role is one of caring for the most challenging young people, some of whom may have behavioural and mental health difficulties (Biehal 2005).

The general reduction in residential child care and the increased demands on foster care means that some authorities are placing children in the private and voluntary sector, often geographically some distance for the child's family, friends and community. This is evident in the data from this study and is addressed in Chapter Nine which shows empirical material from the biographies of looked after children. Providing care, in a professional context, to children and young people who have experienced a range of difficult and damaging experiences is difficult and challenging for the corporate parent. Cameron (2003: 92) offers the most pessimistic view of this challenge, 'public care is more likely to be seen as a stigmatized form of state responsibility than a positive option for enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged young people'.

By contrast Gallagher et al. (2004) see public care, and in particular residential care, rising to the above challenge and as creating positive opportunities for young people. They argue the

public and professional perception can be challenged as long as there is an investment in training, which they hope will help shift negative attitudes and cultures. Challenging Cameron's view they argue, 'residential care should be seen and treated as a positive service, as enshrined in the 1989 Children Act, and not as a 'Cinderella' or 'last resort' service' (2004: 1157).

A re-shaping of provision, delivery and training in child welfare

The majority of looked after children and young people in Wales are cared for in foster care placements. However, an increasing number of foster homes are provided by the independent sector. Some Welsh authorities have recorded between 10 and 27 per cent of children placed in independent foster homes, with a number of these outside Wales (Pithouse and Crowley 2001). Retaining and recruiting foster carers, particularly in the light of concerns about allegations and difficult behaviour is a challenge for all local authorities and the independent sector (Pithouse and Crowley 2001). 'Permanence' continues to be a watch word in family placement. However, this is also within the context of recognising the importance of continued contact with birth family. Rather than birth families being seen as a destabilising influence, there is a heightened demand to recruit foster and adoptive families who can meet this challenge. *The Foster Care Minimum Standards* (DoH 2002) whilst offering some benefits of a regulatory framework, such as support and supervision, also challenges and makes demands on the service in terms of standards and expectations (Collis and Butler 2003). In particular the role of the short term foster carer needs to be acknowledged and valued as essential in reunifying children with their birth family or preparing children for permanence in a foster or adoptive placement.

The emphasis over the last fifteen years in child and family welfare provision has been one of 'corporate focus'. This notion works on the basis that one agency cannot respond to or be responsible for improving the life chances of children and young people and that there needs to be multi-agency co-ordination, planning and delivery of services. Within this principle is the need to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of professionals and agencies are explicit and that there is a measure of accountability. There have been huge efforts to respond to the needs of children, young people and families at a local level and draw together statutory and voluntary organisations to address specific aims. These local arrangements are always set against the government agenda.

Targets and indicators

Since the 1989 Children Act, policy has moved to some extent, from a professional systems approach in favour of a managerial emphasis whereby target setting and its achievement is deemed a measure of quality. Performance measures are seen as improving efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. The challenge for policy makers and social workers of course, will be to ensure that good practice, embedded beneath indicators, are understood and analysed (Tilbury 2004). Child care social workers are increasingly seen as case managers, whilst direct work with children and young people addressing emotional and behavioural difficulties is diminishing as a part of statutory practice (Fawcett et al. 2004). Gilligan (2000a: 270) is critical of this trend:

> As the volume and complexity of the work grows, workers seem to be expected to act less as professionals using judgement and relationships, and more as technicians following prescriptions and procedures.

The increase in the independent sector as providers is noticeable in foster care and residential care, whilst the state is centred on commissioning, inspection and regulating rather than directly delivering services (Gilligan 2000a; Cameron 2003). This increase in the independent sector, demonstrates the enormous change in children's services.

The public and professional perception of social work

There is a fast moving policy and legislative environment underpinning child welfare services. Many of the aims of one decade take time to be worked through, amended and operationalised in practice. The field of child care appears to generate major revision, up dating and developments every five to ten years, often in controversial and emotionally charged circumstances, such as the death of a child. Inquiries in such circumstances frequently act as a barometer on how the social work profession is seen (Daniel and Ivatts 1998; Hayden et al. 1999). The public image of social work continues to attract ambivalent reactions. Individual practice, as well as authorities' uneven responses to child welfare matters have diluted public confidence in the state's ability to protect or parent effectively (Cameron 2003). The high profile cases of the mid 80s, referred to earlier, most notably Jasmine Beckford (1985), Kimberley Carlile (1987) and Tyra Henry (1987) attracted huge media interest and were influential in raising public consciousness about not only child welfare issues, but the role of social workers. In these cases social workers were criticised for insufficient intervention (Hayden 1999). By contrast, in the Cleveland inquiry they were

viewed as overzealous. Overall the image of social work and social workers at that time was not good, as Denney (1998: 154) observes, 'the most obvious popularised image was of the social worker as the hapless incompetent agent of socialism interfering in the nucleur family unit'.

More than ever social workers have to balance concerns with over and under-intervention, recognising that unwarranted intrusion into family life can lead to unnecessary trauma for the family and children. Parton et al. (1997: 219) put the point convincingly 'the costs of getting it wrong could lead to considerable public, political and media opprobrium'. As evidenced in Lord Laming's Report into the death of Victoria Climbié, this most recent high profile case implicated poor social work due to:

> Widespread organisational malaise, nobody in any of the key agencies had the presence of mind to follow what are relatively straightforward procedures on how to respond to a child about whom there are concerns of deliberate harm.
> (Lord Laming 2003: 2)

This view of children's services and social work practice has been accompanied by a 'crisis' in the recruitment and retention of social workers. Some social workers from the statutory setting have moved to the independent, voluntary or agency based sector with the promise of better working conditions and financial remuneration (Featherstone 2004). The reform of social work education from a diploma to a graduate workforce will continue for some time as the basis for training in the statutory responsibility for child care (Adams 2002). However, 'agencies such as youth offending teams and Sure Start projects are becoming more central to policy and practice' (Garrett 2003: 139).

The aim of any local authority in England and Wales will be to promote sustainable change in the policy and practice of all those who have a corporate responsibility to such an extent that promoting good outcomes and in particular educational opportunities for looked after children becomes embedded in every day practice (Harker 2004 et al.). To provide that care as a corporate parent and for it to be on a par with what one expect of 'any other parent' is a uniquely challenging task. This challenge is also being undertaken at a time of change, whereby 'social service departments are undergoing a radical metamorphose' (Adam 2002: 224) via new organisational arrangements that seek to offer a more 'joined up' and collaborative approach to service delivery.

More recently the UK child welfare system is focused upon the government's modernising agenda detailed in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003). There are clearly some continuing themes that will inform this modernising process, as well as developing a new agenda. The history of child welfare has moved through many progressive phases over the passage of time. Providing basic care, food and shelter was superseded by a concern for the child's proper development and for the role of the state in regulating child care through the Children Act 1948. The difficulty of balancing a care and control perspective was highlighted through the Children Act 1969, whilst the responsibility of protecting children was clearly prescribed in the Children Act 1975 and a legislative overhaul was brought by the Children Act 1989. The care and control debate still causes dilemmas and, as Cameron (2003) argues, the emphasis on state responsibility in terms of concentrating on child protection has done little to ensure the content and quality of care, which she argues, in part, led to poor practice, particularly in residential care.

Phase 5: Post Climbié: the modernisation agenda

Arguably, the fifth phase of child welfare is defined by a modernising agenda where the ideological emphasis takes a more 'holistic' approach to a child's difficulties informed by the legislation (Fawcett et al. 2004; O'Hagan 2006). Significant legislation and policy can be seen to have strengthened this ideological approach over the past fifteen years. The Children Act (1989) can be seen as a fore-runner to these principles as it required children to be considered in terms of their health, development and social needs. These themes have been further developed and underpin the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH 2000b) that requires professionals to adopt a child development and ecological perspective to their assessments. Within this systematic framework for assessment, children and families are considered within three dimensions or domains including: the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors, thereby exploring how the influence of individuals, family, community and wider environment all impact on one another (Jack 2001a). This broadening of our understanding of interrelationships and the impact for children is further strengthened by The Adoption and Children Act (2002), for example, this adds to the definition of harm under section 31 (9) of the Children Act 1989, the 'impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of others' (Adoption and Children Act 2002:71) thereby recognising the impact of domestic violence on a child's emotional development. In addition Aldgate, (2006: 17) points out, 'the

responsibility for improving the well-being of children is a duty within the Children Act 2004', emphasising yet again the ambition that children achieve optimal developmental outcomes.

The Children [Leaving Care] Act (2000), described by Chase et al. (2006: 4) as 'one of the most significant pieces of legislation affecting children in care' emphasises the importance of young people having increased support to make the transition from being 'looked after' to independent living. This legislation compels agencies to address aspects of a young person's education, training, emotional, practical and interpersonal skills and can, according to O'Hagan (2006: 21), be 'justifiably described as holistic' in its attempts to extend duties and responsibilities. The Children Act 2004 (the legislation for implementing the Greeen Paper *Every Child Matters* DfES 2003 in England and the *Children and Young People: Rights to Action,* NAfW 2004a in Wales) and the government response to the Victoria Climbié report, develop this notion of an 'holistic approach' even further (Chase et al. 2005:4). The aim, as O' Hagan notes (2006: 25), is to promote the welfare of the child 'in its entirety, meaning their physical, social, emotional, psychological, moral, educational and cultural well-being'. It is therefore a requirement that by 2008 local authorities in England and Wales will have Children's Trusts (or an equivalent system) that will formalise and have in place arrangements to strengthen multi-agency working in relation to health, social care and education. Running parallel to this is *The National Service Framework for Children and Maternity Services* (2004 DoH/DfES) with a ten-year strategy to improve the standards of children's services in relation to health care.

All of these government initiatives in Wales and England support the view of a modernising agenda, which is founded on multi-disciplinary working that provides integrated services within a National Service Framework and recognises that 'children and young people will receive the strongest benefit from interventions that address need in a holistic way (NAfW 2004a: 13).

In summary, it will be important that looked after children are not overlooked as children's services shift and change with the creation of new forms of interventions, such as Sure Start. Joined up working needs to continue and will become more critical as the number of potential agencies to liaise with increases. Whilst staffing and recruitment issues are evident in some agencies the reorganisation of social work education in line with the National

Occupational Standards will mark further demands as well as opportunities. All of this is set against the ambitious developments outlined in the policy document *Every Child Matters* (Garrett 2003).The modernisation agenda in UK child welfare is extensive. The hope is that the practice and policy improvements over the last decade (Maclean and Gunion 2003) and the emphasis on corporate parenting will not be lost. With the assumption by government that a corporate parent approach offers the best chance to tackle the needs of the most vulnerable young people our aim should be that it does not become an empty cliché but can contribute to an ambitious and pressing agenda for change. This chapter will now look at a brief historical overview of education influences.

Section 2: Education Context: An Overview

The young people who are the focus of this study were being educated at an interesting and significant period in UK education. The prevailing policy orientation was one of challenging disadvantage as stated in the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997: 3):

> To overcome economic and social disadvantage and to make equality of opportunity a reality, we must strive to eliminate, and never excuse underachievement in the most deprived areas of our country....We must overcome the spiral of disadvantage, in which alienation from, or failure within, the education system is passed from one generation to the next.

With these ideals at the heart of government policy one might have expected looked after children to have benefited from this position of 'zero tolerance for underperformance' (Docking 2000: 24). The emphasis was on inclusion and supporting all pupils, with the Sure Start initiative, the largest part of the National Childcare Strategy, seen as laying the foundation for early years care and education. Sure Start, the first government initiative to target the birth to three age group, provides a variety of early education, childcare and family support services for children under four in the most disadvantaged areas. It is estimated that the UK programme, which currently involves some 400,000 children, will have reached an expenditure of £1.5 billion by 2006 (Ball and Vincent 2005). Evaluations of Sure Start projects suggest that the unprecedented funding in early year interventions is reaping positive outcomes in terms of social and cognitive development (Jackson 2004).

Initiatives focusing on standards and accountability such as Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities programmes were all intended to improve educational opportunities and compensate for social injustice (Thruppe and Tomlinson 2005). The Government's Social Exclusion Unit was set up in 1997 with a focus on multi-faceted aspects of disadvantage. Within two years it had produced five major reports addressing issues such as truancy and school exclusion, homelessness, poverty and raising educational achievement (Coles 2004). Other inquiries around the same time such as *People like Us* (Utting 1997) highlighted the poor outcomes for a large number of children who had been looked after. However, rather than benefiting from these initiatives there is some evidence that looked after children have actually been further disadvantaged within the government's continued policy emphasis on school performance. Indeed, Lovey (2000:192) suggests a link between an increase in school exclusions and the 'advent of pupil-led funding arrangements and the importance attached to league tables'. To understand these issues it is important to look at a brief historical overview of education policy in order to set current practice in context.

With the phased establishment of compulsory education through various Acts of Parliament from the 1870 Elementary Education Act, through to the 1970 Education Act there have been attempts to emphasise the role of schools and teachers in the general welfare of children. Historically, policy has been concerned with educational inequality and the impact of social class as a determining factor in a child's educational achievements and subsequent occupational outcomes (Hammersley 1997). The challenge has been trying to disentangle the powerful influences of social and family background on education outcomes. Significant education and social policy initiatives such as those suggested in the Plowden Report (DfES 1967) and the Seebohm Report (DfES 1968) highlighted the need to prioritise help for schools where 'educational handicaps were reinforced by social handicaps' (Sammons 1999: 5). These reports described the potential for collaborative work between the two agencies:

> The fact that teachers and social workers have a different outlook on the problems of the children they are both helping can itself be an advantage. What the schools need is a readily available social worker whom they know and trust, and who can act quickly. There is much to be said for choosing schools as a base for social work units responsible for helping families facing many kinds of difficulties (Plowden 1967: 87).

The same ideas were echoed in the Seebohm Report (1968: 67)

> The setting up of a new social services department gives the much needed opportunity to develop a unified service of social care for school children which would make available a much wider range of services and skills to assist schools in identifying and helping children with difficulties that cannot be dealt with by heads or teachers in a school setting alone.

Compulsory education provided the opportunity for schools to monitor pupils for signs of neglect and to trigger formal intervention in the lives of children and families. Although the recommendations in the Plowden Report for education-based social workers were never realised, we should not overlook that the prior establishment of education welfare, as the oldest welfare service, had helped lay the foundation of modern social work with its emphasis on child centred interventions (Blyth and Milner 1999).

The Conservative agenda: the arrival of the national curriculum

The most important piece of education legislation since the 1944 Education Act was the 1988 Education Reform Act which was intended to bring about 'major structural change' (Trowler 2003; Pole and Chawla-Duggan 1996:1). This Conservative Government initiative changed education policy and 'substantially modified its social relations and reshaped its values, meanings and objectives' (Jones 2003: 130). The era introduced a whole raft of provision that extensively restructured education and schooling in the UK, introducing most notably market principles and the National Curriculum (Power et al. 2003). The National Curriculum represented a major policy change by linking school effectiveness to criteria-derived performance indicators, examination results and inspection reports; culminating in published league tables in England (Mahony 2002). The National Curriculum and affiliated system of national assessments required local education authority schools and grant-maintained schools to deliver a common syllabus of core and foundation subjects. These subjects are delivered at Key Stages in a pupil's academic career and tested through Standard Assessments Tasks (SATS) at Key Stage 2, (last year in primary school) and Key Stage 3, (Year 9 of secondary school). In England, the results of these tests have been published in performance tables since 1996 building on the practice of publishing GCSE (Key Stage 4) and A level results, which have been available since 1992. In Wales school scores are not published. In past decades for insights into Wales Education system it might once have been said 'for Wales see England', this is no longer the case and since the 1998 Education Reform Act, Wales has had separate

and distinct policies (Salisbury 1996). Also, since devolution in 1999 and the Education Act 2002, the 'Welsh and English systems have been steadily diverging to take Welsh education in its own, distinctive direction' (Chitty 2004: 112).

The creation of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED in England and (now) Estyn in Wales) and a national framework for inspection was introduced in 1993 under the 1992 Education Act to regulate and inspect and produce a publicly available report (Sammons 1999; Frederickson and Cline 2002; Trowler 2003). With this emphasis on benchmarking targets and league tables, non school attendance came to be seen as 'one of the symptoms of a failing school' (Cullingford 1999: 55). Similarly, within this new system the drive brought with it a shift in how children's behaviour and needs were viewed and some argue, such as Blyth and Milner (1996: 46), this has influenced the increase in exclusions:

> Children are viewed as potential high cost/low profit investments, as children become *problems* for educators rather than children *with problems,* the evidence is that they are more likely to be excluded either formally or informally.

The claims for education policy of the Conservative government from 1979-1997 can be summarised as: emphasising quality through the development of the National Curriculum and allied processes of inspection; diversity by the introduction of grant maintained schools and parental choice through the quasi-market; greater autonomy for schools by reducing the control of local authorities, and accountability through the process and publication of performance indicators (Docking 2000). New Labour, as we discuss next were not averse to this policy environment.

The impact of a Labour Government: 'education, education, education'

The newly elected Labour government in May 1997 retained much of this education policy legacy which is subsumed within the White Paper *Excellence in School* (1997). The emphasis was summed up in the frequently quoted government and ministerial mantra 'education, education, education' which introduced new target setting and standards, believing it was 'standards, not structures and institutions that need to change' (Trowler 2003: 18). The previous Conservative government premised their education policy on a quasi-market whereas the New Labour government saw the way forward in raising standards through

school and teacher improvement. Both approaches as Gibson and Asthana (1998: 196) argue, ignore 'the impact of disadvantage on school performance'.

Within the 1997 White Paper issues of social disadvantage were highlighted in what Gibson and Asthana (1998: 195) regarded as the 'rediscovery' of the importance of social background. However, whilst the issues have been highlighted this has, arguably, not translated into action. Gibson and Asthana (1998: 205) are critical of the policies:

> There has certainly been a change in rhetoric, not least being the explicit recognition in the recent White Paper of an intimate relationship between school performance and the home background of pupils, but there is little evidence that such is being translated into policies explicitly designed to address the social gradient which, so clearly underpins patterns of school performance.

Standards, inspection and disadvantage

This emphasis on standards and outcomes has been seen to dilute the welfare responsibility of schools and further marginalise disadvantaged pupils, such as looked after children, with schools having 'less flexibility and responsiveness to pupils experiencing emotional difficulties' (Blyth and Milner 1997: 34). One explanation for this is that the whole context of education and issues of inequality have changed, as Jackson (2002a: 78) describes:

> The old language of equal opportunity in schools, with its emphasis on social justice and inequality has been partly displaced by the language of school effectiveness, standards and performance.

There is some support for the view that there has been an unprecedented emphasis on academic standards, inspection and accountability with social justice issues consigned to the margins:

> The concern with measurable outcomes of education can set about raising 'academic' standards, but at the expense of other educational concerns, such as social justice issues (Coffey 2001: 10).

The challenge of achieving social justice in education is complex and the rhetoric between achieving social inclusion 'within a society pursuing market policies sustained by competition and choice' appears contradictory (Thrupp and Tomlinson 2005: 551).

One of the criticisms of the league table approach is that it does not recognise socio-economic disadvantage. The challenge is to ensure that while extraneous factors such as social class, income, gender ethnic background may have an impact on educational outcomes, it is important that these factors in themselves do not lead to the 'negative effects of labelling' (Gibson and Asthana 1998: 198) and a lowering of expectations (Sammons 1999). One of the neglected areas in research on looked after children is the expectations of the adults involved in their lives, albeit there is some evidence of their low expectations (Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Jackson 2001). Some argue that Welsh government targets that were set for 'at least 50 per cent of children leaving care aged 16 and over to have gained two or more GCSE/GNVQs by 2002, 75% by 2003' (NAfW 2001a: 2) themselves may demonstrate a notable lack of ambition for young people who are looked after. Many parents would be disturbed at the suggestion that one or two GCSEs would be an acceptable ambition for their children; arguably the corporate parent needs to mirror the same aspirations as parents generally.

Expectations and outcomes: the language of 'perfomativity'

Of course there can be some difficulty is establishing precisely to what extent expectations of looked after children are reasonable or whether such expectations 'serve to maintain already established low attainments' (Elliot 2002:60). This difficulty may be reinforced by an assumption held by some professionals that looked after children should not have the additional pressures to achieve academically. Elliot's (2002) questionnaire study of 53 teachers (27 involved with non looked after children and 26 with looked after children) and interviews with seven 'Year Heads' who had responsibility for 12 children, examined differences in teacher expectations for looked after and non looked after high school children. This small scale study concluded that in some areas of schooling, such as the completion of homework, teachers did have lower expectations. Whereas in the measure of academic performance, (such as staying on task, accuracy of work and completing the task) there was no lowering of expectations. This is interesting when measures such as help with homework, supporting course work are clearly issues that foster carers and residential workers would be alerted to as an activity that would support a young person in education.

Educational outcomes are at the centre of education policy. However, an analysis of results and 'performativity' offers little to our understanding of the complexities of the educational experience (Harris and Ranson 2005: 573). A broader view can help ensure that 'education is considered as a process, rather than simply an outcome' (Coffey 2001: 75). Whilst measures of achievement and underperformance are now seen as indicators of the effectiveness of education it would be unhelpful to concentrate narrowly on academic outcomes alone (Reed 2002). Social class, gender, race and the impact of poverty have been a recurrent theme in the sociology of education and 'levels of educational achievement continue to be linked in a systematic way and demonstrable way to socio-economic background' (Coffey 2001: 73).

Working with difference: the gendered nature of educational outcomes

In the 1970s and 1980s much of educational research was centred on issues of inequality and in particular 'the relationship between students' learning and the social and cultural conditions of their lives outside school' (Jones 2003:82). There continues to be a debate about the gendered nature of school and in particular examination performance as measured by educational outcomes (David et al. 2000; Salisbury 2000), with the emphasis of trying to establish:

> A better understanding of how, where and why gender differences in statutory assessments and examination performance exits.
>
> (Salisbury 2000: 75).

The 1970s saw concern over the underachievement of girls. Currently the language of inequality has moved towards 'boy's underachievement and male disadvantage' (Jackson 2002a: 78). It has been argued (Smith 2003a) that, given the vulnerabilities and disadvantage that some children experience, in particular those in public care, their underachievement is unrelated to gender. Gorard et al. (1999: 451) support this view:

> It may be that some pupils-both boys and girls-are disadvantaged sufficiently by, for example, their family backgrounds to obscure the effects of gender differentiation.

While Mahoney (2002: 44) argues that the 'blinkered' obsession, or, 'preoccupation' (Coffey: 2001: 80) with academic achievement is misplaced, there remain concerns about children in public care which are well founded when one examines research in this area. The general picture that emerges is that children in public care achieve less well than their peers (Biehal et al.1995; Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Borland et al. 1998; NCH 2005) and that this under achievement is exacerbated as the young person gets older (DoH 2000a). However, the term 'underachievement,' whilst part of every-day language in the field of education and social care, is not straightforward (see Gorard and Smith 2003) and needs some brief elucidation.

Vocabularies of outcome: 'underachievement', 'differential achievement' and 'low achievement'

The terms underachievement, differential achievement, low achievement and achievement *gaps* are often used interchangeably by local education authorities, politicians and school staff. Whilst underachievement is part of a dominant discourse in education there is no universal agreement about the term, 'consensus on its definition and measurement is hard to come by' (Gorard and Smith 2003: 6). For the purpose of this study, definitions have been developed from research that attempts to explain the complex pattern of differential attainment (Gorard et al., 1999; Salisbury et al. 1999; Gorard 2000; Gorard and Smith 2003; Smith 2003a). Underachievement is a lower level of achievement than would be expected using a model of best available predictors. For example, a young person who achieves a level 6 (exceptional performance) in their school year 6 SATS and then goes on to a level 3 (low ability) in school Year 9 could be described as underachieving. A low achievement is characterised by what might be expected as a result of publicly available scores. So, those children and young people who do not attain the expected average level could be considered a low achiever. Differential achievement or 'achievement gaps' (Gorard 2000:391) addresses attainment between groups such as males and females, or in this case children looked after and those not looked after.

There is some discussion in the literature about the relative or limited usefulness of attempting to administer tests and make comparisons of achievement (on an individual, group or school) on a national and international basis. Gorard and Smith (2003:8) go as far as to say, 'it is not possible to identify entire groups of students with a tendency to

underachieve'. Yet, the stark statistics on the formal educational attainments of looked after children would seem to challenge this view. In the academic year 2001/2002, 8 per cent of children in care achieved 5 or more A*- C grades at GCSE compared to 50 per cent of all young people (SEU 2003: 9). In 2003 six per cent achieved 5 or more A*- C grades. Even more concerning, 251 of the 397 young people who left care in Wales in 2005 did so without a single GCSE or GNVQ (TES, Cymru 2006).

The looked after experience as a determinant of outcomes

Of course, the looked after experience itself cannot be offered as the only explanation for poor education outcomes. Other factors such as social class, prior attainment at school, student attitude to school, have all been linked to the debate. However, there are many difficulties in attempting to make statistical comparisons with either a cross matched comparison group or a group from the general population. These problems include the transient nature of the looked after group; they are often a dynamic group who spend short periods in care. Many looked after children will have come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds where their early years experiences will have been marked by abuse and neglect often culminating in 'significant harm'. Also, their 'corporate parenting' may have resulted in a variety of different and unsettling types of care and school settings. Although there is a lack of data on pupil mobility there is some evidence to suggest that mobility between schools may only have a small impact on attainment, particularly for younger children, however, it is the reason a child changes school rather than the move per se that will have the most impact on attainment, as suggested by Strand (2002: 75):

> The many and varied factors leading any individual child to change school may be more influential on the child's progress and adjustment in the new school than the specific experience of joining.

Overall, the cumulative effective of a number of moves following family or carer breakdown or as a consequence of school difficulties such as exclusion is likely to have the greatest impact. Such a view finds support in Brodie's (2001: 166) qualitative study of seventeen looked after children from three local authorities in England who had been excluded from school:

> When transfer took place at unusual points in the school year, that is, outside the normal arrangements for admission and induction they were problematic and disadvantaged the children involved.

The literature seems conclusive insofar as there is no simple accounting for the phenomenon of differential educational attainment and that 'schooling' does not exist in isolation, but that a number of complex interrelated factors influence formal educational outcomes. The influence of 'gender-gaps' in both participation and entry to formal examinations as well as in attainment is important. The long running debate about 'underachieving boys' is confounded by argument and counter argument (Gorard et al. 1999: 441). The key message from recent research is that treating boys and girls as binary opponents is misleading. The currents study, though mindful of gender as a key variable, will concentrate as well on other significant factors:

> The wider community, the expectations and degree of support from the home, peer pressures and ethos may be equally strong or more powerful influences shaping pupils' engagement, participation and examination performance (Salisbury et al. 1999: 418).

Exclusions and looked after children

The New Labour government in May 1997 inherited an education system that had seen dramatic changes, not all of which were successful. Truancy and permanent exclusions had increased, some schools were deemed to be failing and the introduction of market principles to educational choice were considered to be creating a polarization of 'magnet and sink schools' (Trowler 2003: 150). These strategies of school improvements and target setting have been criticised as undermining and hijacking an inclusion agenda, as examination results 'reinforce the academic aims of the school at the expense of the pastoral' (Vulliamy and Webb 2000: 120). In essence, schools in the deregulated market can choose pupils who will, it is argued, enhance the school's image and ambition over examination results (Blyth and Milner 1999). In such a system, children with problems may be more prone to exclusion. Blyth and Milner (1997: 23) offer some explanation of the exclusion practice:

> While isolating pupils with problems from mainstream schooling can be justified as offering immediate benefits for both school and pupils, this ignores the role of school processes in creating and ameliorating the problems which pupils may experience.

Exclusions, the most severe measure a school can take, were introduced under the 1986 Education Act, replacing suspension and expulsion. The actual procedures have been amended under subsequent legislation and government guidance (DfEE 1999a circular 10/99 and similar guidance in Wales, NAfW 2004b) but are summarised as follows: permanent exclusion with the pupil having to find an alternative school; fixed term exclusion where the pupil can return after a period of time (up to 45 school days in any school year) with certain conditions and informal exclusion where limited records are kept (Lovey 2000; Munn et al. 2000).

Exclusion, disaffection and truancy

The nature of exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional social phenomenon (Brodie 2001) made more complicated by the unreliable reporting and data collection therefore it is difficult to judge the scale of the problem. Where statistics do exist they are considered to be an underestimation of actual excluded pupils (Vulliamy 2001). Historically, indefinite exclusions meant that pupils fell outside of education for long periods of time thereby effectively being permanently excluded. The recording of fixed-term exclusions has not always identified individual pupils so a profile of children's circumstances, both at school and home are difficult to synthesise. But the consequences of exclusion as outlined by Munn et al. (2000: 148) are that:

> It can engender or intensify feelings of low self-esteem, stupidity and lack of worth in young people and place additional stress and strain on families already finding it difficult to cope.

Not surprisingly in order for young people to achieve at school they need to be encouraged to attend. Smith (2003a: 584) in her study went as far as claiming that prior attainment and attendance were the 'two strongest predictors of Key Stage 3 performance'. There is some evidence that looked after young people take more unauthorised absences than non looked after young people (SEU 1998; DoH 2003) with some children's homes having a 'culture of non-attendance' (SEU 2003: 29). Similarly, exclusion has long been a factor in the educational experiences of 'children in need' as well as children in care. However the relationship between children known to social workers through their 'children in need' status and 'looked after' status and the subsequent educational outcomes is a complex one, with

poor achievement explained by a 'constellation of factors' (Goddard 2000: 80). Hayden et al. (1999: 115) highlight some of the complications:

> Some children appear to stop attending school or get excluded from school before they are taken into care (the exclusion may be part of the overall situation which precipitates reception into care) and for some children educational breakdown happens after they are taken into care.

Nevertheless looked after children are over-represented in exclusion figures with statistics suggesting they are ten times more likely to be permanently excluded than other pupils (DoH 2003) whilst fixed term and unofficial exclusions may also be a problem (SEU 2003). It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of fixed term exclusion as government statistics concentrate on permanent exclusions; Harker et al. (2004: 201) identify some of the interrelated and complicated aspects:

> It is difficult to determine whether the high rates of exclusions amongst looked after children are due to schools being more disposed to exclude this category of young people or that the combined effects of the turbulent lives of some young people and inadequate support to enable them to adapt and adjust to their situations result in behavioural problems.

The impact of exclusion on looked after children

There is general recognition that 'issues of disaffection, truancy and exclusion often affect the same tranche of the population' (Lovey 2000:195) and for looked after young people their educational disadvantage can increase their vulnerability to exclusion (Brodie 2001). Children looked after share many of the same characteristics of other excluded children, but may have other complications which impact on the way in which the exclusion process unfolds (Brodie 2001).

School exclusions were regarded as an education crisis in which the numbers of permanent exclusions in England had risen from about 3000 in 1990/1 to over 13,000 per annum by 1997/98 (Munn et al. 2000; Lovey 2000; Vulliamy and Webb 2000; Vulliamy 2001). It is no coincidence that exclusion has emerged as an area of concern as their steep rise was in direct response to national policy changes in education and the influence of performance indicators and a reduced commitment to children with a range of difficulties (Brodie 2001). Munn et al.

(2000) develop the view further arguing that a combination of structural and individual issues has contributed to the increase in exclusions, these include: family breakdown, poverty, children seen as culprits rather than victims as well as the quasi-market in education. This combination of factors has created a climate where 'schools are encouraged to rid themselves of pupils with challenging behaviour' (Vulliamy 2001: 180).

The reduction in residential provision in terms of community homes with education may also go some way to exacerbating the problem, as those children now in residential care are educated in local schools and may have the more complex family, schooling and behaviour problems (Brodie 2001). Government concerns over exclusions have been fuelled by the likely consequences to the individual, the family, the community and the economy. Excluding children from mainstream school is likely to be expensive. One estimate suggests the costs of educating excluded pupils in England during 1997/1997 was £81million compared to £34 million if they had stayed in full time education (Vulliamy and Webb 2000). Other costs may occur if exclusion leads to offending and individuals become relegated to the margins of society:

> The public picks up the cost for children who drift onto the streets without qualification and skills where they can easily gravitate towards crime and prison (Smith 1998:1).

The rhetoric and reality of 'social exclusion' in mainstream education

Although 'the expression social inclusion is everywhere in contemporary UK social policy' (Bryne 2005:1) there are a large number of children not included in mainstream education. Whilst it is recognised that schools may exclude pupils if 'their continued presence in the school compromises the educational well being of their peers' (Munn et al. 2000:116). The effectiveness of such a blunt instrument for dealing with disaffected pupils is questionable, so much so argues Vulliamy and Webb (2000: 131) that 'its inclusive education rhetoric is in danger of being submerged by the policy and practice of its standards agenda'. This is of concern as exclusion has consequences not only for the child in terms of their education, but also their relationship with their peers, their feeling of self-worth, their relationship with their families and their continued and subsequent participation in social and economic life.

'Exclusion from school can therefore contribute to an ongoing cycle of social exclusion within families and communities' (Brodie 2001: 21).

There is no question that meeting the needs of a challenging minority and achieving the best outcomes for all pupils in a school is a difficult balance to strike. Policies and initiatives that cultivate early home school interventions are to be promoted and those that foster an ethos of inclusion whereby schools 'develop their own ethical position statement about working with children in difficulty in a school setting' (Munn et al. 2000: 108) can improve the situation. Central to government policy is 'the importance of intervening early in family and community life to head off social exclusion later on' (Bynner 2001:295) and this is part of the expanding government programme to work with individuals, families and communities prone to disaffection. As well as the much published Sure Start programme targeting families with pre school children, other initiative such as the 'Mentoring scheme' and Connexions have become major features to promote social inclusion and are aimed at improving the academic achievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Colley 2003). Such initiatives recognise that 'those children who experience the ultimate sanction of expulsion are those whose personal circumstances are in greatest turmoil' (Brodie 2001: 20).

During the twentieth century various governments, with limited success, have tried to strengthen the welfare role of schools. However, there is evidence to suggest this has not been 'fully absorbed' (Blyth and Milner 1997: 10). Schools in Wales and England have been seen as central to the delivery of the child protection process and support services, such as milk, lunches and some health services. Government objectives outlined in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) and contained in the Children Act 2004 place schools at the centre of one of the most significant debates on children's services since the Children Act 1989. A government programme of change now has a vision that requires 'new ways of working and collaboration between schools' (DfES 2004:38). One of the challenges in the current climate is how to develop an inter-agency, inter-professional corporate response to promote young people's rights to education and replace a culture of non achievement with one of achievement. The two lead agencies, education and social services, may appear to have very different agendas but Fletcher Campbell et al. (2003:9) are enthusiastic and positive about the future. They assert that a focus:

On joining up working practices and services at a national and local level are likely to have a positive impact on the education of children in public care.

Summary

This chapter has offered a brief overview of the development of child welfare and education policy. Ideological changes in the provision of services to children and families and how they have been influenced by inquiries, research and legislation have been discussed with particular reference to looked after children. The interface between child welfare policy and education policy has been presented raising the debate about tensions between one framework that has developed along a 'standards' agenda arguably at the expense of a social inclusion perspective. Whilst this chapter has offered some reflection on both these significant strands of child welfare and education policy this interest becomes more honed in the next chapter through a more detailed treatment of the notion of 'corporate parent' within the context of key policy as contained in the *Looking After Children; Good Parenting: Good Outcomes* materials (DoH 1995b) that have attracted much critical scrutiny.

Chapter 3: Corporate parenting and care placements: key themes from policy and research

Introduction

This chapter will initially outline the significant policy developments in the UK highlighting in particular those pertinent to a Welsh context. It will then go on to offer a selective overview from the body of research in terms of looked after children exploring the notion of 'good parenting, good outcomes' and the concept of 'corporate parent'. Both of these themes are important as they help explore the application of a sociological model of childhood, the participation rights of children and the roles and responsibilities of key agencies in the lives of looked after children. This will lead to a discussion of other key topics identified in recent research on children looked after including: achievement and outcomes, pre-care experiences, exclusion and non school attendance. Issues of professionals and carers' expectations of young people in care as well as aspects of residential care and foster care will conclude the chapter.

The relationship between research and practice guidelines in social work has been strengthened over a number of years as evidence-based practice is seen as a central tenet of policy, planning and decision making (Colton et al. 2001). Arguably, none more so than in children's services where evidence, decisions, resources and strategic planning are inextricably linked. Chase et al. (2006: 1) confirm this point:

> A growing emphasis on research with children and young people in public care has to a large extent informed the policy and legislative agenda in the UK generally.

There is a fast moving agenda around services to children and families and looked after children in particular, and this research took place when there were changes in the legislation, as well as a raft of government initiatives and various locally based projects being implemented.

Policy and Welsh context

A number of authors credit the work of Sonia Jackson in the late 1980s as contributing to the increased attention given to the education of children in public care and for keeping the research interest and debate alive (Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Borland et al. 1998). However, the development of policy interest in the education of looked after children can be clearly mapped through three Department of Health documents in the 'research into practice series'. The first, *Social Work Decisions in Child Care* (DHSS1985) made no reference to education of children in care (which paradoxically highlighted the gap in research), whilst the following publication *Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placements* (DoH 1991a) was critical about the lack of information relating to education and outcomes. The third document *Focus on Teenagers* (DoH 1996) ensured education was more prominently featured (~~Borland et al.~~ 1998). Thus, over the past two decades there has been an increase in scrutiny of both the services that are offered to children and young people in care and greater emphasis on using statistics and outcomes to plan services. More recently, comparative targets, performance measurements and outcome targets have all attempted to inform the development of services based on what we know about outcomes (Simon and Owen 2006).

Concerns about the educational attainment of looked after children and the inadequacies of education were identified in many reports including Wagner (1988) and Utting (1991; 1997). These authors drew attention to the fact that young people are educationally disadvantaged in terms of attendance at school, qualification results are poor, and looked after young people were less likely to continue in education post sixteen. This disadvantage escalated in later life with care leavers being unemployed, homeless, likely to have mental health problems and over represented in prison statistics (Stein 2006). The rights of looked after children and the need for more collaboration and 'joined up' working between social services and education were the central messages of a DfE/DoH circular (13/94 1994) and an SSI/OFSTED report of 1995:

> The care and education systems in general are failing to promote the educational achievements of children who are 'looked after'. The standards which children achieve are too low and often the modest progress they make in primary schools is lost as they proceed through the system. Despite the clear identification of this problem in several research studies and by committees of enquiry, little has been done in practice to boost achievement (SSI/OFSTED 1995:49).

Furthermore, a DfEE (1999b) report surmised that the education culture for looked after children was one of low expectation and poor performance particularly at secondary school.

The Welsh Context

The above concerns have in recent years received the attention of government in Wales whereby the education of children and young people during their 'in need', 'looked after' and 'after care' careers is now a high priority. For example, the White Paper for Wales, *Building for the Future* (Welsh office1999b) and the significant *Children First Programme* (Welsh Office 1999a, as *Quality Protects* DoH 1998a in England) aimed to reduce gaps and poor outcomes for children looked after. The *Building for the Future* implementation plan (NAfW 2000a) set out a range of principles that informed children's strategy that now configure services across all 22 local authorities in Wales (see *Children and Young People's Framework for Partnership* NAfW 2002). These initiatives identified clear targets for the educational achievement of the looked after population to ensure that they benefit from educational opportunities and gain what would be expected of other young people from a similar background. The targets were first set that 50% of looked after children should achieve at least one GCSE or GNVQ qualification by 2001, increasing to 75% of looked after children by 2003. These early targets have been criticised as being 'lamentably low' in comparison to non looked after children (Fletcher-Campbell et al. 2003:9). However, these targets were amended in the *Guidance on the Education of Children Looked After by Local Authorities* (NAfW 2001a) to two GCSE or GNVQ qualifications and the *Children and Young People: A Framework for Partnership* (NAfW 2002) advocated looked after children achieving five GCSEs by 2010. These specific time-limited targets were meant to 'focus' the strategic operations of local education authorities, schools and social services.

At the centre of the recent guidance are clear messages about more 'joined up' working and collaborative arrangements between education and social services that extol the importance of the role of corporate parent. Linked to this is *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* (NAfW 2004a, see *Every Child Matters* DfES 2003 in England) which adopts the UN Convention on the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and translates these into core aims. The needs of looked after children can be read across all of the seven aims where the emphasis is on the priority of services provided as of right.

A framework for collaborative working

The documents that draw together the emphasis on collaborative work are set out in the National Assembly document *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2000b), the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (NAfW 2000c) which is an assessment and planning tool which complements the *Looking After Children* Materials (DoH 1995b). The ultimate aim is that these will all combine into a single comprehensive set of procedures and associated tools within an *Integrated Children's System* (NAfW 2000d). In addition to these the *Guidance on the Education of Children Looked After by Local Authorities* (NAfW 2001a: 1) sets out a clear framework for the joint collaboration between agencies to ensure there is a 'climate which is conducive to achieving measurable improvements for looked after children'. Similarly, the *Mental Health Strategy* (NAfW 2001b) promotes the coordination of services and access to those by children. Finally, the Strategic *Framework for Improving Placement Choice and Stability* (NAfW 2004c) is linked to these policies and strategic planning contexts.

Research and implementation agenda

In addition to the above policy environment the National Assembly for Wales have commissioned a number of research projects in an attempt to inform and guide an implementation agenda to provide better services for children looked after. The associated reports for these research projects include: *A Study of the Placement of Looked After Children in Wales* (Pithouse et al. 2000); *Fit to Foster* (Collis and Butler 2003); *Children in Specialist Placements: An All Wales Study* (Payne et al. 2003); *Review of the Purpose and Future Shape of Fostering and Residential Care Services for Children and Young People in Wales* (Clough et al. 2004). Reports prepared for the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales, Estyn and other statutory agencies have sought to improve services and promote better outcomes for children (see *Educational Provision for Looked After Children: A Joint Inspection Report* SSIW/Estyn, 2001; *The Learning Country* NAfW 2001c).

Two key UK government documents informed the policy fields in Wales and England, these are: *A Better Education for Children in Care* (SEU 2003) and the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003). These followed the inquiry led by Lord Laming into the tragic death of Victoria Climbié. As previously mentioned, when fully implemented the *Every Child Matters* and *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* will aim to strengthen and increase mutli-disciplinary teams and multi-agency working with particular emphasis on the integration of

health, social care and education, all of which, it is anticipated, will have an impact on the service to looked after children (Chase et al. 2006). However, as discussed next these sorts of policy initiatives are unlikely to find universal approval.

Looking after children materials: the impact of policy on practice

A significant development in highlighting the needs of the looked after population was the introduction eleven years ago of the *Looking After Children: Good Parenting, Good Outcomes* (DoH 1995b) materials. These were developed during the 1990s in response to extensive studies in the 1980s and summarised *Social Work Decisions in Child Care* (DHSS 1985) and *Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placement: Messages from Current Research and their Implications* (DoH 1991a). These studies, along with a *Looking After Children Project* (Parker et al. 1991) between them, identified insufficient monitoring, corrective action and specific outcome measurements as a significant weakness in the child-welfare system (see also Colton et al. 2001).

The commonly known 'LAC materials', with the support of the Department of Health, were disseminated and adopted throughout the UK in order to provide structure and integrate systematically the assessment, action, planning and reviewing of looked after children. These LAC materials include a series of age related essential information, assessment, action and review records (assessment and action records). From the mid 1990s they have been accepted, although not without criticism, as the basis for the assessment and planning for looked after children. They attempt to outline explicitly what good parental care means in practice and are specifically designed around seven dimensions of development that are considered important: health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development and self care skills (Colton et al. 2001; Butler and Roberts 1999). Whilst some heralded the development of the materials as 'very impressive' (Gilligan 2000a: 268) and even a 'groundbreaking move to make services more child centred' (Kufeldt et al. 2003: 8), others have been more critical. Garrett (1999: 28) highlights a perceived lack of conceptual treatment of childhood despite:

> The whole LAC enterprise being founded on a particular social construction of a particular group of children at a particular moment in history.

Winter (2006) takes this argument further, maintaining that the model of childhood inherent in the development of the Assessment and Action Records within the LAC system was one of privileging protection and provision over children's rights to participation. This, she claims, resulted in a system that was founded on an adult-led agenda, with minimum input from children in devising the material, thereby reducing them to passive recipients rather than active agents. She goes on to suggest that the LAC materials are characterised by normative assumptions about developmental stages and do not acknowledge children's 'agency, capabilities and capacity to operate in their own context' (p57). Arguably, these LAC materials do not 'fit' with the claims of a more critical sociology of childhood (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four) which suggests the LAC system perpetuates the notion of 'adults in the making' and as Winter (2006: 57) claims 'does not acknowledge aspects of autonomy, rationality and responsibility'.

The system has also been criticised as a simplistic, form filling exercise that avoids 'debate and difference' (Knight and Cavney 1998: 37). Kufledt et al. (2003) in sharp contrast applaud the system as a) giving a voice to young people, b) promoting dialogue between agencies and c) focusing on positive action and strengths. In addition, and in contrast to several other authors (Kufledt et al. 2003: 9) endorse the child centeredness and the planning potential of the system:

> In the aggregate, the data generated provide valuable information for policy development and management of resources.

The looking after children materials: a missed opportunity for monitoring, recording and reviewing.

The LAC system is not, or rather should not be considered as a bureaucratic exercise, but can be used as a tool for communicating, gathering information about children and liaising and tracking the responsibilities of those that have corporate responsibility (Thomas 2005). The use of the materials has significant potential for promoting a co-ordinated approach to monitoring and evaluation (see Jackson 1998a: 54).

It has been estimated that by the end of 1998 some ninety per cent of English authorities and the majority in Wales had adopted the materials as part of mainstream child care practice, thus lending some weight to claims about the potential of the system for regular

developmental monitoring and targeting of outcomes (see Hayden et al. 1999; Daniel and Ivatts 1998; Colton 2001 et al; Butler and Roberts 2004). Indeed, the *Children First Initiative* (Welsh Office 1999a) and the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH 2000b) were seen by Hayden et al. (1999:5) as:

> a transferral of the 'Looking After Children' approach from the individualistic, child-focused level of monitoring onto the broad canvas of local authority and public policy.

It is noteworthy that whilst the Looked After Children system is seen as the principal mechanism for promoting the responsibilities of the corporate parent, social workers and other relevant individuals are not always effective in operating these materials. This has been evident in a number of research projects (Berridge and Brodie 1998; Hayden et al. 1999) as well as this study. This concern is explicitly stated in a report from the Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (SSIW 2003-2004: 42-43):

> For looked after children more attention needs to be given to improving the quality of records and record keeping in order to evidence good practice. There is still a need for authorities to get the basic building block of assessment for looked after children in place.

The Looked After Children materials can be a set of useful tools if they are used effectively and if such practice is promoted and supported by management (Jackson 2002b; Kufeldt 2003). Equally as Francis (2002: 449) argues 'the materials should be seen as the beginning of a process rather than the end (a stepping stone) and that ongoing monitoring and development of the materials is essential'. Hill and Watkins (2003) demonstrates that ninety-eight per cent of local authorities in England and Wales record and monitor the welfare of children through the Looked After Children materials including the Action and Assessment records. However, the effective use of this monitoring, recording and reviewing systems is variable (Evans 2000; Fletcher-Campbell and Archer 2003).

It would appear that the building blocks are not yet fully in place, reviews of the poor educational outcomes for 'looked after children' have long been an issue of concern (Jackson 1987; Fletcher-Campbell and Hall 1990; Utting 1997; Goddard 2000) and calls for a much more co-ordinated approach. Hence, the Children Act 1989 and in particular the Guidance to the Act (DoH 1991b; 1991c) emphasised the need for education to be given a higher priority

in joint planning for looked after children and for this to be included and monitored in the child's care plan. Likewise, the research into leaving care has consistently highlighted the many difficulties experienced by young care leavers (Biehal et al. 1995; Stein 1997). The Children [Leaving Care] Act 2000, which came into force in 2001, makes more clear the joint responsibility of planning and for ensuring that 'eligible' and 'relevant' children as defined by the legislation have a pathway plan that encompasses attention to education, health and other support services. This may include financial and other assistance to help with training or progression to further or higher education (Thomas 2005). Similarly, the Children Act 2004 that came into effect in July 2005 specifies that the local authority has 'a duty to promote the child's educational achievement'. This strengthens the Children Act 1989 which referred to more general duties, rather than highlighting education in particular.

The corporate parent: a critical perspective

The concept of 'corporate parent', whilst highlighted in the development of the LAC materials (Parker et al. 1991), has evolved through the *Quality Protects* (DoH 1998a) and the equivalent *Children First* (Welsh Office 1999a) initiative in Wales. Local authorities are compelled to act in their caring duties in the same way as a good parent would do towards their own children (Hibbert 2001) and that such parenting should go on for longer than it has to date. The model for achieving this is outlined in a number of documents including *the Strategic Framework for Placement Choice and Stability* (NAfW 2004c: 23). Here the emphasis is on corporate parenting and extends beyond just the local authority and outlines the duties and responsibilities as follows:

- ensure that policy development, planning and service design across the council's activities takes account of the needs and aspirations of looked after children
- allocate resources and provide services to meet the children's needs and ensure good outcomes for them
- co-ordinate the activity of the authority, in particular social services, education and housing
- work in partnership with health services to provide services that ease the effects of disadvantage and promote social exclusion
- monitor outcomes for children

Ongoing developments in policy and legislation ensure the 'corporate parent' notion stays high on the agenda. The Children (Leaving Care Act) 2000 introduced extra measures to improve the level and length of support available to care leavers. These measures put a duty on local authorities to meet the care and support needs of young people through a range of services including: a personal adviser, a pathway plan and continued accommodation during university vacations. These services should emphasise continuing support, training and accommodation in order to mirror a model of good parenting. However, the notion of a corporate parent as an attempt to model good parenting has received some criticism.

Jackson and Sachdev (2001) examine robustly the concept of corporate parenting in regard to two distinctive activities, whilst others (see Garrett 1999) are more sceptical about the overall usefulness of the term. Jackson and Sachdev first recognise the importance of the corporate parent policies and initiatives at a national-level and their implementation by all relevant agencies in a local authority and not just by social services. They distinguish this more strategic role from the every-day business of an individual social worker, linking up with school, care placement and carers. Of course, this latter activity raises challenges whereby there might be countless professionals involved in the lives of children yet there may not be an holistic picture of the child, their achievements, and their care history. Unlike many other children, they may not have anyone in times of trouble to advocate on their behalf. Jackson and Sachdev (2001) therefore emphasise clearly delineated strategic and individual responsibilities, even though the two need to be co-ordinated (see Harker et al. 2004). If one looks at the 'plethora of initiatives' (Fawcett et al. 2004: 90) in terms of policy documents that have been introduced in order to contribute to a corporate culture, and accepts the principles of the concept, then there has evidently been some movement in the idea of a corporate parent becoming a reality. However what is needed at a strategic level to deliver effective services is made clear by Jackson and Sachdev (2001: 14) who argue that:

> Local authorities must devise systems, procedures and working practices to ensure that all their departments and employees, other public bodies such as health trusts, and other organisations with which they have contractual arrangements, work together for the benefit of children in public care.

By contrast, Garrett (1999: 32) argues that 'an inorganic entity-a local authority-cannot be *a parent*' (author's emphasis). Whilst there is some inescapable logic to this point, he does not concede the symbolic importance of the term, but goes on to suggest the promotion of such a

term is a retrograde step as it can undermine the role and identity of a young person's actual parents.

Concern over a lack of corporate commitment and energy in promoting better outcomes and achievements for this vulnerable group of young people (with a myriad of contributing factors in relation to their needs) has been a prominent message of several UK and specifically Welsh reports in the recent past (DoH 1995a; Utting 1997; SSIW/Estyn 2001; Waterhouse 2000). A selection of these issues will now be discussed.

Key factors and educational attainment

The UK research conducted with this group of vulnerable young people suggests that educational outcomes are generally disappointing. This is evidenced by a catalogue of underachievement in terms of formal exam results (Biehal et al. 1992; Marsh and Peel 1999; Barnardo's 2006) and failure to continue education both at further and higher degree levels (Broad 1994; Biehal et al. 1995; Stein 2006) school exclusions (SSI/OFSTED 1995; Social Exclusion Unit 1998) and unemployment (Biehal et al. 1994). Other sources suggest this is not altogether surprising as the looked after population originate from some of the most disadvantaged sections of society (Bebbington and Miles 1989). However, Hayden et al. (1999: 132) draw a clear connection between education and being 'looked after':

> All available literature suggests that looked after young people suffer additional disadvantages in the education field; disadvantages which relate to the looked after experience.

Evans (2000) in one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies of educational achievement of looked after children noted that whilst children achieved the predictable (albeit below average) outcomes in school years 6-9 their performance fell dramatically in years 10 and 11. Over a decade ago, bleak statistics suggested that almost 75% of young people leave care with no formal qualifications (Biehal et al. 1992). The current evidence, although at times unclear or contradictory continues to raise concerns. Whilst the UK national trend is for more young people than ever to be involved in education after the age of 16, this does not appear to be mirrored in the looked after children population (Goddard 2000). Whilst Hayden et al. (1999: 43) concur with this view they also acknowledges that historically 'precise figures are difficult to establish due to a lack of effective national

monitoring strategies'. Stable care careers and evidence of permanency planning have been identified in a number of studies associated with improved educational outcomes (Aldgate et al. 1992; Garnett 1992; Jackson 1998b; Ajayi and Quigley 2006). More generally, it is evident that there is a complex relationship between a variety of components - what Francis (2000: 23) refers to as 'the interplay of a variety of social, structural and professional factors'. One such factor is the pre-care experiences of looked after children.

Pre-care experiences

Essen (1976) reporting over thirty years ago on the National Child Development Study suggested that there was some evidence to indicate that even when social disadvantage prior to coming into care was accounted for, those young people who had been in care were underperforming. More recently, Lambert at al. (1997) have highlighted that the behaviour of children in care, regardless of what age they were when coming into care, usually deteriorated. St. Claire and Osborn (2001) building on studies in the 1970s developed their longitudinal survey of 16,000 children over five and ten years by identifying 127 children who had been in foster care, 48 in residential care and 18 who had been placed in one or other during the first five years of life. The study compared characteristics of the 'in care' group with other children from similar socio-economic circumstances. Perhaps not surprising, the group of young people who had been in foster care or residential care were shown to have experienced early disadvantage, however the more worrying finding was that the:

> Residual deficits attributable to the in-care experience, and which were largest for those in residential care, worsened the already poor developmental prognosis for these children (St Claire and Osborn 2001: 70).

Bebbington and Miles (1989) in their study of two and a half thousand children who came into the care system found that they had shared characteristics in areas of social disadvantage including: parented by one parent on low income, local authority housing and poor neighbourhoods. This finding resonates with current literature in that 'children who come into care are drawn overwhelmingly from families with multiple disadvantages' (Hayden et al. 1999: 51) and may well have been children in need of social work services before becoming looked after (Sinclair et al. 1995). Some will have experienced neglect and abuse and this will manifest itself in characteristics like poor self-esteem, poor concentration, behaviour problems, attachment difficulties, as well as the consequences of being under

stimulated from an early age. The study by Fisher et al. (1986) concluded that families rarely received support services for older children and adolescents, and had to plead to have children admitted into care, which meant this often occurred in unplanned and traumatic circumstances, when the family were at desperation point. Evidence from other studies where children had been returned home on trial after a period in care found that the care experience had done little to change difficult behaviour; instead it had contributed and exacerbated disruption in their lives (Farmer and Parker 1991).

Earlier research has attempted to distinguish between those children that were 'responsible' for their admission into care (Packman et al. 1986), or to put it another way, distinguish between those young people that were in need of protection and those who were disaffected (Farmer and Parker 1991). These early descriptions of the 'sinned against, rather than sinning' approach (Borland et al. 1998: 37) were prominent in a number of studies (Bullock et al. 1993; Fletcher 1993). It has also been recognised that children and young people come into care for a range of complex and interrelated factors. This is supported by the research of Triseliotis et al. (1995) who were able to demonstrate in their study of 116 young people, that the issues that brought young people to the attention of social workers were impossible to disentangle. A number of commentators (Heath et al. 1994; Sinclair and Gibbs 1998; Berridge and Brodie 1998; Francis 2000) have examined and highlighted the issue of pre-care experiences. Whilst these issues need to be considered and may undoubtedly impact on a person's achievements other research suggests (Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Borland 1998 et al.; Evans 2000; Harker et al. 2004) that there is still more that can be done, both at an operational and attitudinal level between the major players (social services, education and health) to improve the outcomes for young people. Borland et al. (1998: 46) argue:

> There is evidence that early disadvantage and behaviour difficulties are important factors in accounting for the generally low achievement, children's experience of care, appears to compensate for earlier deficits only rarely. Thus part of the problem of poor attainment can be attributed to some aspects of the interactions between the care and education systems.

Although historically there has been a reduction of children and young people coming into care, Pithouse et al. (2000) in their study of the placement of looked after children in Wales identified that more children are looked after for relatively short periods. However, a large number of children and young people who come into the 'looked after' system will have had

difficult and troubled histories that can be exacerbated whilst in the care system. As highlighted earlier exclusion and non-school attendance are but two examples of such difficulties that challenge social services and education professionals alike.

Disrupted schooling

Exclusion from and non-attendance at school, especially as young people move into adolescence, is a major concern. Some suggest (Warren 1997) that looked after children are ten times more likely to be excluded from school than other children. Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) concluded from their research of 48 children's homes that a third of school age children from these homes were not in school. The rates at which children in care are more or less likely to truant than other children is difficult to quantify as 'there is little hard evidence about the attendance rates among children in care' (SEU 2003: 29). However, there is evidence that some residential homes have a culture of non-school attendance and some foster carers are unclear about their responsibilities; both of these issues will be discussed in Chapter Eight. Whilst foster care might seem the preferred option when young people can no longer live with their birth family, this type of placement does not ensure protection from educational difficulties. Research into foster care services revealed that 25% of 16 year olds were excluded or not attending school (SSI/OFSTED 1995). More recent research by Farmer et al. (2004) in their study of sixty-eight young people (which explored what services make a difference to the outcomes for young people) found that half of foster carers had limited involvement with schools, with up to twenty foster carers recording no contact with a young person's teacher. Contrary to this, Sinclair et al. (2005a) in their study of 596 foster children explored what contributes to success and found that in circumstances where carers were able to encourage the young people placed with them in aspects of their education they were more likely to be successful (Sinclair 2005:153).

It was highlighted in Chapter Two that as schools are put under pressure to perform in assessments, meet targets and contribute to league tables, so the potential link between exclusions and looked after children becomes more pertinent as a potential issue. The difficulty with making any definite correlation between looked after populations and school exclusions are the lack of reliable data. Berridge and Brodie (1998) however in their longitudinal study of children's homes in the 1980s and 1990s found that poor or non-attendance at school and exclusion was a major problem that emerged within the 10 year span of the study. The prevalence of the problem is probably under-stated, as there are likely

to be many young people who do not attend, but have not been formally excluded and these data may not be calculated in a reliable and consistent ways. There is some evidence that schools skew the statistics and operate various forms of exclusion (Brodie 2001; Fletcher-Campbell et al. 2003).

A National Children's Bureau study looked at a total of 80 children with an average age of 14 years residing in three English local authorities (see Harker et al. 2003). Findings suggested that 1 in 20 children could be considered as taking unauthorised absences. This is in contrast to figures highlighted by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998) where it was noted that 1 in 10 pupils of about the same age were absent from school without permission on a weekly basis. In terms of exclusions, 23% (n=18) of the young people said they had been permanently excluded, compared to 0.12% of the overall school population who experienced permanent school exclusion in the academic year 2000/2001 (Harker et al. 2003; DfES 2002). The study highlighted a number of anomalies in the interpretation of exclusions and whilst permanent exclusion were widely reported, there were times when there was a reluctance to provide details of exclusion in order to 'promote a more inclusive impression of a school by deflating exclusion rates' (Harker 2004: 204).

Generally, exclusion from school is considered to have negative consequences for young people in terms of limited alternative educational provision, difficulties of re-integration, separation from peers, escalation of difficulties with families or carers as well as the increased opportunity for getting into trouble, criminal activity and feeling isolated from mainstream activities (Brodie 2001). There is some, albeit scant evidence, that exclusion from school, for some young people, when they are placed in an environment that is tailored to individual needs and working towards re-integration back into school, can actually benefit a child's education (Fletcher-Campbell 2001; Lloyd et al. 2001). Lloyd et al. (2001: 71) confirm that:

> Plans and strategies worked when they were the right thing for the young person at that time-when they were individualised responses.

When children and young people are at risk of exclusion from school it is important that measures are put in place to actively promote inclusion and steps are taken to pre-empt exclusions. Also in the event of an exclusion all should be done to offer educational continuity as well as supporting young people to re-engage with education (Jackson and

Sachdev 2001). Lloyd et al. (2001: 70) observe that whilst there are many attempts to work in an inter-agency way in order to build a holistic picture of a young person's life it is not always clear where responsibilities lie. In addition they note:

> Rapid policy innovation and short-term funding of projects also contribute to a sense of it being difficult to keep up with developments.

Lloyd et al. (2001) suggest that as looked after children may be more at risk of low attainment it is crucial that teachers and schools are sensitive to exclusion issues and that they only use such measures in exceptional circumstances, and that a plan for educational continuity is in place (see also Brodie 2001; NAfW 2004).

The care placement: supporting the child in school, care settings and systems

Residential care

There is some debate (and disagreement) about the kinds of assumptions held by professionals and whether or not they hold expectations over the educational capacities of looked after children that are either too low or too high (Heath et al. 1994; Stein 1994; Sinclair 1997). A number of studies have identified the relative absence of educational qualifications amongst some residential staff and the apparent lack of priority they place on the educational interests of the young people for whom they care (Berridge & Brodie 1998; Martin and Jackson 2002). Conversely, there are examples of many good initiatives and residential establishments that have a proper awareness of the needs of young people going through the education system. Jackson (1998b) in her study of high achievers identified a number of factors that made a difference to a young person's attainment including learning to read fluently, having access to books, having friends outside care who did well at school, attending school regularly. Jackson also identified the importance of a significant adult who both valued education and offered support and encouragement. A more recent project-based study by Ajayi and Quigley (2006: 68) which focused on a sample of 129 care leavers who went on to higher education concluded that 'there were no obvious differences in the family background of (project) participants from what is known of the care population generally', but identified similar supportive factors like foster carers who valued education and local authorities that provide stable placements and financial support.

Contrary to this, other findings have suggested that although it is the social worker who will likely hold the statutory duties and responsibilities towards looked after children, they do not always see the education of children as a priority and therefore are not, *prima facie*, going to be an effective adult (Aldgate et al. 1999; Francis 2000). This is summed up by Brodie (2001: 25) who points out that:

> The care system itself is frequently viewed as unhelpful in improving the educational prospects of young people, and there is considerable evidence that insufficient account has been given to the significance of education in the lives of young people looked after.

It is often considered that it is the children who are placed in residential care that are afforded the least support in their schooling even though residential units attempt to model their provision on a family environment that replicate the normality of family life (Colton et al. 2001).

A number of significant research reviews pertaining to residential care have been undertaken (Parker 1988; Bullock et al 1993; DoH 1998b; Berridge 2002). The earlier reviews concluded that different regimes impacted on children's behaviour, that establishments needed to be child focused not institution orientated and that the management of institutions was very influential in making changes in children's behaviour (Parker 1988). A later review by Bullock et al. (1993) looking at some sixty studies concluded that the young people in residential care tended to be adolescents with particular difficulties. Interestingly, in this review many children suggested they preferred residential care as an alternative to foster care as it was 'less restrictive, and minimises conflict with family loyalties' (Bullock et al. 1993: 16). *The Caring for Children Away from Home Review* (DoH 1998b) looked at twelve research projects and provided messages about the importance of clear objectives within children's homes, strong leadership and the importance of children maintaining contact with family members. Berridge (2002) working with the notion of 'what works' from research evidence suggests there are four main contrasting themes to consider. Firstly that children's homes are very variable but that some do meet the needs of their residents. Secondly, although this may be the case, some residential establishments become 'professionally isolated' (p.100) and do not draw on the expertise of colleagues in health and education. Thirdly that organisational issues need to be addressed to ensure that there is agreement about the expectations of young people in terms of going to school and behaviour. This

theme finds congruence with the work of Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) who studied a range of children's homes and found that where the behaviour of the residents was good, so too was the training and morale of the staff. Finally, Berridge (2002) argues that successful residential care is dependent both on the direction and management offered by the head of the establishment, as well as the quality of the interaction between the young people and staff, and this in turn will rely on training and a clear understanding of the task expected of residential workers. These tasks have been broken down by Whitaker at al. (1998) to include knowledge and understanding of family dynamics and the consequences of group living, skills in communicating with and on behalf of young people and personal qualities that promote the values of residential care. Berridge (2002: 98) goes on to suggest that it remains difficult to be confident about what works based on a lack of research evidence because:

> The extent of empirical research on residential care is still very limited and we have barely begun to scratch the surface of some highly complex problems.

Clough et al. (2004) agree up to a point, suggesting that residential care has been adequately researched but 'inadequately theorised' (p.96). They go on to say that although there is knowledge about the structures in place in residential care, there has been little evaluation that has been tested and which demonstrates an improvement in the service.

Foster care

Different trends in child welfare, ideologies and forms of 'family' have influenced the development of services to children who cannot live at home. These changes are clearly in evidence when examining the provision for children that has evolved from residential care through the foster family to the current 'Family Placement Services' (Sellick and Thoburn 2002:13). As highlighted in Chapter Two, influencing this evolution has been the notion of permanency in the 1970s and the emphasis on adoption, through to greater support for the birth family in the 1980s and the importance of preventative work through to the 1990s. The primacy of the birth family as sanctioned by the Children Act 1989 together with the significance of parental responsibility can all be seen to have influenced an ecological view of child welfare where the child is seen as part of a network whereby the community and

kinship care are given greater prominence (Clough et al. 2004). Broad and Skinner (2005: 2) are not surprised at the increased interest in this type of care arrangement viewing it as:

> a positive way of supporting children and young people in need by providing continuity of care, family, school and friendship networks, and sustaining cultural and individual identities.

Thus, the focus of contemporary child welfare is family preservation in terms of preventative services and family re-unification if a period of voluntary accommodation is necessary. For those children where re-unification is not possible the emphasis is still on 'permanency' on the basis such an arrangement will contribute to security, stability and consistency for children and young people. Although permanency planning is the ambition this is increasingly being seen within the context of continued contact, either direct or indirect, with the young person's birth family (Colton et al. 2001).

The foster care service has attempted to respond to these needs and agencies have consciously recruited and maintained a range of placement opportunities. Therefore fostering can mean many different types of provision. One survey identified as many as 47 different tasks being described as foster care (Waterhouse 1997). Clough et al. (2004) narrow this down identifying short, medium and long term descriptions and suggest these may be the most useful whilst recognising that these classifications may still be very variable. For example, short term can cover holding placements before a child moves into a permanent arrangement as well as an emergency and remand provision. Medium term can be seen as providing a bridge or preparing a child for permanence or as a treatment service. Long term fostering is generally viewed as a placement where the child will be brought up. Triseliotis et al. (1995) offer a similar definition whilst including relief care and private fostering; (although as the name suggests private fostering is quite distinctive and is not arranged by the local authority). Foster carers have needed to respond to changes in light of what is understood to lead to increased success, such as supporting children's contact with birth families and being well prepared and adequately trained (Berridge and Cleaver 1987; Aldgate et al 1999). Whilst these principles may be considered to be in the best interests of the child they also make more demands on the foster carers. The regulations have attempted to reflect the changes with more emphasis on approval, regulation and review of foster carers and the services they can offer (Children Act 1989; Care Standards Act 2000; Fostering Services Regulations NAfW 2003).

Specialism, professionalism and remuneration in foster care

The 1980s saw the development of specialist foster carers who were recruited to meet the needs of what were considered 'hard to place' children and adolescents. With this development, the 1990s saw a blurring of what was regarded as traditional fostering and specialist fostering as local authorities and voluntary agencies developed their recruitment support and training and contracting strategies (Butler and Charles 1999; Walker et al. 2002). There has been a greater emphasis on the contentious issue of the professionalisation of the fostering role and the desire for foster carers to be better trained and qualified and for this to be linked to better remuneration (Hill 1999; Kirton 2001). For example, Welsh Assembly Government supported a programme with a target of twenty per cent of foster carers to achieve an NVQ in Social Care Level 3 by 2004. While concerns about training and remuneration have gathered some momentum as (arguably) the challenges of foster care have increased, so Clough et al. (2004: 37) suggest 'traditional notions of altruism may no longer be counted upon as sufficient incentives for carers'. However, there is still some reluctance to move away from long-held assumptions highlighted in Triseliotis et al. (2000) that foster carers come into fostering with a range of motives not just remunerative. Sinclair et al. (2004) confirmed more recently, 'foster care provides an outstanding example of community altruism' (2004: 171). Remuneration continues to be a complicated part of foster care with anomalies and variations in the use of discretionary payments, fees, allowances and specialist payments for children with special needs or challenging behaviour. There are differing views about the roles and responsibilities of foster carers as well as how they should be trained, supported and remunerated. Wilson and Evetts (2006) ague that while fostering can no longer be viewed as a voluntary activity and while professionalistion would bring 'proper recognition, status and standards' (p.39) this may not contribute to their empowerment as practitioners or how they advocate on behalf of a child as they would be more clearly and inextricably linked and managed by the agency that placed the child.

Operational structures

Research by Pithouse and Parry (1997) carried out across Wales highlighted the variety of fostering arrangements, operational structures and terminology within the different authorities making comparisons and evaluations of effectiveness difficult and rudimentary. Sellick and Thoburn (2002) argue that the variety and variation of both the foster care task and the array of departmental systems in place for supporting, monitoring and evaluating the

multiplicity of outcomes for both carers and young people contributes to a 'complex research agenda' (2002: 14). Butler and Charles (1999: 9) highlight that whilst fostering may be considered the preferred option there has been a scarcity of studies exploring the nature, impact and outcome of fostering. They offer methodological and conceptual explanations for this:

> This dearth reflects the complexity and ethical considerations of implementing outcome studies involving human beings, particularly where there are questions of measurement and definition, and variable ideas about the constituent elements of successful placements.

Clearly the human element and ethical considerations make an in depth qualitative study of fostering processes and operations challenging.

Challenging behaviour

There is some evidence that children and young people placed in foster care are believed to display more challenging behaviour (see Sellick and Thoburn 2002). Sellick (2006: 68) sums up the contemporary concern:

> As foster care usage has expanded and residential care contracted, many children are experiencing significant and enduring emotional and behavioural difficulties which challenge their foster carers, sometimes beyond their limits.

Supporting this view the study by Pithouse et al. (2002) looking at children in four local authorities observed that 50-60 per cent of children with challenging behaviour placed in foster care were deemed to have some type of disability or special need according to case records and professional opinion. However, less than 10 per cent had a statement of special needs in that regard. Such findings enjoy some congruence with the study by Triseliotis et al. (2000) who completed a census survey in thirty Scottish authorities covering a six-week period of requests for foster placements. Of the 753 children referred, 404 (54%) were said to have some special needs 'the predominant one was the display of emotional/behavioural difficulties, followed by school problems, offending and disabilities' (Triseliotis et al. 2000: 86). In a further study by Sinclair and Wilson (2003) behaviour and emotional problems were cited in over 50 per cent of the children referred for a placement. It is unclear how these

special needs will be planned for on a strategic level and addressed by individual foster carers if there is a variable inter-agency approach to the recognition and assessment of such needs. Clearly foster carers need ongoing support and professional expertise to fulfil their important stability role.

Placement choice and independent fostering providers

Two overarching themes to emerge and influence the development of looked after services are placement choice and placement stability; both are linked to views about effectiveness and outcomes for children. While foster care is often the first and preferred placement choice there is a serious lack of options to meet the specific and individual needs of children and sibling groups (Triselotis et al. 2000). There is some evidence that as the child gets older the placement is more vulnerable to disruption with some estimates that the attrition rate can be as high as sixty per cent (Triselotis et al. 1995). This often results, particularly in unplanned and emergency situations, with children being placed with foster carers outside their approved range for numbers and types of child. This lack of choice then has consequences for stability as foster carers are unable to deal with behavioural and emotional difficulties; frequently cited as a challenge to placement continuity (Sellick and Thoburn 2002; Pithouse et al. 2002). Although challenging behaviour is perceived to have made the task of caring more difficult, it is not necessarily training that is considered the most helpful response (Pithouse et al. 2002). However the support offered by the social worker is vital and an 'important element in any strategy that aims to retain good foster carers' (Fisher et al. 2000: 225). Kirton (2001:199) highlights what could be perceived as a crisis in foster care, one that is:

> characterized by problems of recruitment and retention of carers, high levels of placement breakdown, and poor performance in relation to goals such as education and health.

These issues will predictably impact on the stability, continuity and ultimately the educational outcomes of this group of vulnerable young people.

The body of foster care research has grown over the past decade, Sellick (2006) in his review of the literature refers to it as 'from famine to feast' (p.67). As foster care is now considered the preferred placement choice there has been a huge government emphasis on scrutinising

the changing face of foster care, the impact of foster care and what contributes to best outcome for children who cannot live at home. In particular, research has concentrated on how foster care can be used as supplementary care to support parents for periods of time, either on a short term basis or shared care arrangement. Also, when and how it is used in a permanency, long term situation (Sellick 2006). Wilson et al. (2004) in their scoping review of the literature focused on improved outcomes for looked after children and the way in which foster care can bring about change. They examined the type and purpose of fostering, the needs of foster children, children's care careers and the transition to adulthood and independent living. These authors conclude that foster care needs to provide a flexible service that is planned, can provide choice and within that 'pays closer attention to the areas of education, behaviour and the child's understanding of her/his history' (Wilson et al., 2004:69).

The recent work of Sinclair et al. (2004; 2005a; 2005b) has contributed greatly to the knowledge base of foster care. From these studies we know that one of the keys to a successful placement lay in the child's school experience (Sinclair et al. 2005b). We also learn from (Sinclair et al. 2004) that aspects of placement disruption were highlighted as a cause of stress for foster carers although there was little in the findings from this study to link placement disruption with school disruption, a factor that is known from other research to impact on the stability of a placement (Sinclair and Gibbs 1998). In the third study by Sinclair et al. (2005a) a finding of much interest was that those children and young people who returned home showed little, if any, educational improvement. It was notable that those children who expressed happiness at school in the first year of the study continued to do well. As Sinclair et al. (2005a: 64) confirm:

> Anything that can be done to enhance the child's adjustment at school or improve her or his ability to relate to others may pay longer-term dividends.

The above studies offer much needed insight into the experiences of children and their foster care arrangements. They re-emphasise the importance of schooling and the continuity of education as factors contributing to the stability of care placements. In addition, the importance of educational achievement once a child returned home (and for their general well-being and happiness) was viewed as a critical outcome. These messages were further re-enforced by Sinclair (2005) summarising the key findings from sixteen government funded research projects covering issues such as: contact arrangements between parents and

children, adolescent fostering, training needs of foster carers and specialist fostering. Here too, the importance of giving priority to children's education while recognising the practical difficulty of doing this was also confirmed (Sinclair 2005: 98).

The fostering service in the independent sector has seen a rapid growth since the 1990s. Sellick and Connolly (2002) in their survey (n=55) of independent fostering agencies examined six main areas including: operational arrangements, services, fees, staffing, foster carers and a profile of children placed over a one-year period. A similar study of eight (out of a possible nine) of the independent fostering providers in Wales offered a snapshot of services, structures and foster carers across Wales (Collis and Butler 2003). These two surveys provide some useful insights into the fast growing independent sector in the UK. The general trend is for providers to be small to medium organisations. There was some evidence that foster carers found this a positive feature in terms of better working relationships with durable and accessible social workers, better access to support services such as training and more connection with the aims of the agency thereby leading to more satisfaction in the task of fostering (Sellick and Connolly 2002). Services to children in the independent sector included educational liaison workers, whereas specialist services to local authorities included the capacity to place sibling groups; both were noted as a positive.

Support factors for foster carers in the independent sector were highlighted in terms of 'round the clock support, with respite care arrangements and with basic training' (Sellick and Connolly 2002: 109). This level of support has been recognised as particularly welcome by foster carers and can 'attenuate the experience of strain' (Farmer et al. 2005: 250). However Collis and Butler (2003: 50) note that there was a 'significant difference between local authorities and independent agencies in the nature of the support available outside office hours'. Whilst 24 hour, 7 day a week telephone support was available in the independent sector, those in the local authority had to rely on a variety of *ad hoc* arrangements including the generic duty team and a number of supervising social workers unofficially giving their home telephone number. On the face of it, the cost of placing a child with an independent fostering agency is higher than placing a child within a local authority placement but as Sellick and Connolly point out (2002: 119) 'we know they are expensive but because we do not know the real costs of services for all looked after children we do not know whether they are cost effective'. A similar point has been made by Clough et al. (2004: 20) who acknowledge that far more goes into the cost of a fostering placement than just the fostering

allowance but that it is difficult to compare different provision as 'there is insufficient uniformity in the elements that go into the calculation'.

The independent fostering agencies in the Sellick and Connolly (2002) study did not appear to have difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified social workers. In the Collis and Butler (2003) study it was noted that most local authority family placement teams held vacancies and workers were carrying what was considered, by their managers, as unreasonably high case loads. Earlier research studies (see Berridge and Cleaver 1987) have highlighted aspects of working conditions including: flexible contracts, manageable workloads and training opportunities; all cited as explanations for employee satisfaction. The children that were placed with independent foster carers in the Sellick and Connolly (2002) study did not appear to fit into a particular category of need. Some were considered to have particular behavioural or emotional needs and therefore a placement was sought that could meet these needs, whilst others were placed on a planned basis on the understanding that no local authority resource was available and an independent fostering arrangement was the best option.

With the move way from residential care over the last decade there has been some attempt to determine which regime, residential care or foster care, delivers better outcomes. However, to date, the evidence is mixed, whilst there is some research evidence to suggest that children in foster care do better than children in residential care, characteristics of the young people and all of the variables of the two groups have rarely been explored in enough detail (Stein 1994; Borland et al. 1998). In earlier research where the variables were taken into account the conclusions were that the different types of care made little difference to the outcome (Aldgate et al. 1992). Clough at al. (2004: 19) are clear about some of the difficulties:

> There are methodological problems comparing outcomes between such groups such as small sample size and intervening variable which make comparison difficult.

Summary

Young people who have been through the care system typically exhibit more indicators of exclusion (e.g. homelessness, joblessness, poor qualifications) than any other single group. Goddard (2000:4) suggests:

> If one wishes to reduce these indicators more generally then this is the prime group to address and assist.

Whilst some care leavers will be 'successful' as adults in terms of their psychological and social development, statistics suggest otherwise for a sizeable minority. Between a quarter and a half of young people who have been in care sleep rough, they are two and a half times more likely to be teenage parents and a quarter of adults in prison will have been in the care system (Social Exclusion Unit 2003). The report *A Better Education for Children in Care* stresses that (2003:14):

> Low educational attainment is an important contributor to the high levels of social exclusion faced by care leavers.

To conclude, this themed literature review has sought to engage with a large corpus of UK research and this has allowed for more specificity and 'fit' with the key themes and topics within the field of enquiry in this thesis. The review has provided a foundation in which the research findings can be compared and contextualised. While some of the methods and findings in later chapters cover the same ground as earlier studies it is also the case that as Darlington and Scott (2002:20) point out:

> Research is essentially all about seeing the world in fresh ways, about searching again or re-searching the same territory and seeing it in a different light.

This study into the background, circumstances and educational achievements of a group of looked after children attempts to search the field again and seeks to generate fresh insights about their experiences of school, their attitudes to education and their outcomes in respect of qualifications. The next two chapters will continue with the process of contextualising the conceptual and methodological basis of the study as well as demonstrating the appropriateness of the research methods chosen. Chapter Four will address the specific theme of childhood, resilience and change. Chapter Five will provide a detailed account of methods used to understand children's experience of education while being looked after in foster care or residential care.

Chapter 4: Understanding childhood, stability and resilience: a conceptual approach to looked after children

Introduction

In this Chapter three important conceptual frameworks that helped inform the analytical focus of this study will be outlined; the concept of childhood, the importance of stability and the notion of resilience. The first section will acknowledge the contribution of a 'sociology of childhood' by offering an overview of the discourse on childhood, highlighting a number of the issues that have shaped and continue to shape assumptions about the meaning of childhood and what it is to be a child. It will set the overarching domain of this study: that children are seen as a distinct population, as social actors with an active role in the construction, social context and determination of their social lives.

This chapter will continue with a discussion of stability and related issues that have long been identified as impacting on the outcomes for children in public care. However, the emphasis has often been on placement breakdown without attempting to consider the complexity of instability and interrelated issues. This section will therefore consider factors such as: what is meant by stability, the causes of instability, how stability impacts on other aspects of the experiences of children in public care, their well-being and development. Attention will be drawn to how stability, or at least continuity in some aspects of life, can be promoted (see Jackson 2002b).

The final section of this chapter will highlight the notion of resilience and attachment theory and the location of these concepts within a psychological and sociological approach. This is a significant area of interest, as over recent years a conceptual framework for evidence-based child and family welfare has been informed by resilience-led practice which has encouraged the promotion of protective factors and endorsement of strengths, on an individual and a wider structural basis. There will be a discussion of the types of adverse situations in which children and young people find themselves and how protective factors can contribute to resilience. There is a particular focus on adaptability and vulnerability and the role of the school in promoting resilience.

Theorising Childhood

The lived experiences of children throughout their childhood do not just happen, but are influenced by many factors including: social, cultural and economic conditions, as well as the prevailing models of childhood within a given society (Prout 2005). Alongside this, the status of children and young people is evolving and changing within the shifting boundary between childhood and adulthood. This section looks at a theoretical account of childhood, the influence of developmental psychology, the development of a sociology of childhood, the contradictory discourse of childhood and the contribution of a children's rights perspective to a contemporary view of childhood. Some of the issues relevant to children in public care will be highlighted, in particular the identity of the looked after child within a social constructionist framework, foreshadowing material to be covered and explored in later chapters.

The notion of childhood is often assumed to be a period of time in the lives of children that is united by a range of common and shared experiences. However, the reality is that whilst childhood in our society may have common elements, it is fragmented by the diversity of children's lives (James and James 2004). A child's experience of her or his childhood will be determined by the spirit of the time and the social world they inhabit (Jans 2004). Changing ideologies and conceptions of childhood have been important features in the historical debate of what constitutes childhood, whilst a range of contradicting and contrasting themes inform what is meant by contemporary childhood. As Archard (1993: 40) observes:

> The modern conception of childhood is neither a simple nor straightforwardly coherent one since it is constituted by different theoretical understandings and cultural representations.

Over recent decades there has been an expansion in the various ways children and childhood is understood. There has been an emphasis on the theorizing and sociologizing of childhood. The seminal work of the French historian Phillipe Aries has become increasingly influential in theorizing childhood (Prout and James 1990; Corsaro 1997; James et al. 1998; James and James 2004). His broad principles were that firstly, conceptions of childhood should be seen not as natural biological phenomena but as a 'particular cultural phrasing of the early part of the life course, historically and politically contingent and subject to change' (in James and

James 2004: 13). And secondly, that how adults see and treat children shape their experiences of being a child. Even though there has been some criticism of the reliability and sources that inform the work of Aries (see Prout and James 1990; Montgomery 2003) his contribution has had a major impact on the ways in which social scientists and historians view childhood (Corsaro 1997; Gittens 2004). Montgomery (2003: 55) goes even further suggesting that in his classic text (*Centuries of Childhood,* Aries 1962). Aries 'engendered' the very idea of childhood as a social construction.

Of course there are now many constructions of childhood drawn from a variety of disciplines including history, psychology, sociology, and education. These different perspectives can lead to a variety of interpretations, resulting in varying conclusions on the same topic (Frones 1994). Whilst there is debate about what and when childhood is, and when the notion of childhood actually began (Aries 1962), Mills (2000: 9) sums up some of the main areas of agreement:

> It is clear that childhood, or rather childhoods, are social constructions, cultural components inextricably linked to variables of race, class, culture, gender and time.

Influence of developmental psychology

When considering childhood, a major area to keep in focus is the developmental psychology paradigm. Theories that inform knowledge about child development can be tracked back to seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy. John Locke (1632-1704) employed the term 'tabula rasa'– blank slate, believing a child is 'written on' by parents and other important individuals, whilst Francis Xavier and John Watson were also advocates of what we might state as the 'nurture' wing of the nature-nurture debate that has remained both topical and durable. In contrast, Rousseau believed in the notion of maturation and progression of development through stages (Montgomery 2003; Kehily 2004a). The modern era saw Freud and Erikson promoting the idea of development linked through a series of psychological and social stages, yet it was Piaget who became the more influential theorist (Smart et al. 2001). He claimed that children pass through a range of stages that help build their cognitive development. These stages of development, that transform how children think, are summarised as: sensory motor 0-2 years; pre-operational 2-6 years; concrete–operational 6-12 years; formal operational 12 years and over (Stainton Rogers 2001a).

The work of Piaget and the notion of children learning through stages, as well as the emphasis on the individual child's development became a highly influential theory of the late 20th century. However, critics of the approach suggest one of the main failings of the theory is a neglect of complex effects of social interaction upon children's thinking (Woodhead 2003; Ford 2004). Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2002:63) go even further arguing:

> Discourses derived from developmental psychology which in its adherence to a biological model tends to maintain the subordination of children.

Whether development is a biological process or a socialisation and learning process, the nature versus nurture debate is an area that has long influenced developmental theorising (Stainton Rogers 2001a; Woodhead 2003). Leather (2004: 51) endorses this view:

> The argument is about the degree of influence of the two viewpoints, and is usually described as nature vs. nurture, or heredity vs. environment, and has been debated over the centuries. It is one of the oldest and most controversial issues in child development and influences many other research areas.

Interestingly, Prout (2005: 110) suggests that if the growth in childhood studies, as an academic field of enquiry, are to be truly interdisciplinary then there has to be a move away from the 'addictive simplicities of the nature-nurture debate', instead there needs to be an exploration of what can be learnt from biology and culture. Kehily (2004a: 8) supports this view, acknowledging that whilst it is helpful to look at the 'differences between developmental psychology and sociology it is also appropriate to hold onto commonalties and points of continuity between the two approaches'. Given that one of the objectives of this thesis is to explore how young people navigate their way through stages in the school curriculum (linked to notions of age and capacity), it would be ill-judged to dismiss a developmental perspective without good reason (see Fawcett et al. 2004).

Sociology and childhood

A significant landmark in the development of childhood sociology is the work of Prout and James (1990) which attempted to offer a new theoretical framework about children and childhood. The distinctive features of their perspective are worth reproducing from the

original as these continue to inform both research and growing interest in childhood studies (see Jenks 1996; Kehily 2004; Jenks 2004; Thomas 2004; Wyness 2006). Prout and James (1990: 8-9) list the key features of the paradigm as follows:

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretative frame for contextualizing the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific and cultural component of many societies.

2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.

3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.

4. Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.

5. Ethnography is a particular useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows a more direct voice and participation in the production of a sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.

6. Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present (see Giddens, 1976). That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

This sociological paradigm challenges the idea that childhood is a staged and a universal process; such an idea has undermined the lived experiences of children, suggesting that these have little conceptual value. Similarly, the notion of time and the temporal nature of childhood has been given little consideration in exploring the actual experiences of children's

daily life. As James and Prout (1990:225) argue 'time in childhood.... is made secondary to time of childhood'. This theme suggests that because childhood is viewed as a discrete stage into adulthood it fails to recognise the significance of the experience, or the influence of the environment in the lives of children. Some have argued that because childhood is seen as a state of *becoming*, not one of *being*, this has resulted in childhood being seen as an incomplete or inferior stage (Archard 1993; Qvortrup 1994). By adopting the Prout and James paradigm as a conceptual framework this ensures that children are engaged in the development of a contemporary childhood as active participants. In addition by moving away from presumptions about childhood it allows for an exploration of children and young people influencing, as well as being influenced by social structures. This influence might be most in evidence through the individualization notion afforded to young people through the children's rights perspective (Christensen and Prout 2005). Before exploring this further it is worth noting some contrasting ideas that have shaped a view of childhood.

Childhood a contradictory discourse

It is of note that contradictory themes run through the discourse of childhood, Goldson (2001: 40) suggests a 'curious ambivalence underpins adult conceptualisation of children and childhood'. This conceptualisation goes from the popular assumptions of childhood as an idealised world of innocence, joy, freedom, naiveté, imagination and seamless opportunities at the one end of a continuum, to the demonazation of children leading to moral panic and threats to adult order at the other end (Davies and Bourhill 1997; Scraton 1997; Goldson 2001; Wyse 2004). Prout (2003:13) explains this ambiguity as children caught between two problematic images of childhood 'children in danger and children as dangerous'. Perhaps coinciding with this are the different approaches to children that have, to date, been informed by a needs or rights perspective (James and James 2004). Whilst a needs perspective is sometimes synonymous with a paternalistic controlling approach, the rights approach has gained increasing currency via principles that children should be more involved in both decision making and participation (Burr and Montgomery 2003). Similarly, to ignore children and young people in research would be to omit the views of an important social group. Mayall (2002: 2) outlines what needs to be considered is:

> The upgrading of childhood as a social status, taking account of respect for children as moral agents, of their contributions to the social order and of their rights.

The historical discourse on childhood is rife with contradictions, anomalies and paradoxes. Children are seen as pure, innocent, untarnished (Goldson 2001: 34) and simultaneously as victim, threat, investment (Daniel and Ivatts 1998: 15) and occasionally as evil, devils, fiends (Kehily: 2004a:17). There have been a number of ideas, themes, concepts and constructions of childhood over many years, Smart et al. (2001: 3) summarise some re-occurring themes:

> Notions of children as 'devils', 'savages', or angels have become intertwined in contemporary adult thinking, reflecting a deep-seated paradox about the true condition of childhood.

Whilst it is now generally agreed that children live their lives in many ways and there is no one 'real childhood', there have been some attempts to look at the commonality of some forms of childhood. For example, Qvortrup (1994) attempted to delineate shared themes and differences such as, working-class, single-parent and suburban childhoods. By extension, this thesis will present some of the shared and different characteristics of 'public care' childhood. As Qvortrup (1994:5) suggests when utilising the term childhood:

> Children who live within a defined area–whether in terms of time, space, economics or other relevant criteria – have a number of characteristics in common.

Others have questioned how useful the notion of childhood is for developing our thinking about children and their world. Gittens (2004) argues that childhood has in effect become a myth. This stance is also taken by Butler and Roberts (1997) who argue that because certain issues, particularly decision making to do with children and childhood, have been the responsibility of adults 'the history of childhood is the history of adult myth-making about childhood' (p.19). Some go even further suggesting childhood is not only a myth, but disappearing altogether by the breakdown of boundaries between adult and child (Prout 2005).

Nevertheless, it has been asserted that since the new paradigm in childhood studies, children and young people can no longer be viewed as passive bystanders, their views of the world and perspectives on the events that shape their experiences are important sources of valuable

information (Thomas 2004). It is important that any research looking at the views and experiences of children and young people is framed within the changing context of the lives of those young people. In particular, that regard is given to the contemporary construction of childhood. The new sociology of childhood lends itself to the promotion of children's rights and in particular participatory rights. In addition to this, issues that involve children and young people can be viewed from an entirely new perspective, while at the same time challenging conventional wisdom about the notion of childhood (Smart et al. 2001; Fawcett et al. 2004).

The children's rights perspective

More recently there has been a move away from seeing children from purely a needs perspective to a children's rights discourse where children are seen as citizens with their own 'concerns, priorities and aspirations' (Stainton Rogers 2004: 134). This children's rights discourse has been developed even further into what Stainton Rogers calls a 'quality of life discourse'. This takes a holistic approach to the provision of non stigmatising services which in turn ensure 'recipients taking an active part in what is done, rather than passive receivers of services' (p.143). This approach has been informed by the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The emphasis of the agreement was to ensure children were protected and had rights to (a) provision of appropriate support and services for their healthy development, (b) protection from exploitation and abuse and (c) participation in decisions made about their upbringing and care (Stainton Rogers 2004: 135). In addition, as well as a general principle of the child being paramount, the Children Act 1989 makes it explicit through a welfare checklist that children and young people must be consulted about 'their ascertainable wishes and feelings' before a court can make decisions regarding their best interests (Hershman and Mc Farlane 2006: 18).

The identity of the 'looked after' child

The emphasis of a 'rights' perspective is magnified when attempting to conceptualise and understand childhood in relation to children and young people in public care. Typically, most children in public care are there because their birth family, for what ever reason, have been unable to provide them with what society has constructed as their basic needs and requirements. The majority of children, as we know, are looked after in foster care. Brannen at al (2000: 3) highlight one of the anomalies in this situation:

> The every day care of foster children is carried out by those who are *not* invested with general responsibility for the children; this responsibility remains with the state (social services) and with the birth parents.

The Children Act 1989 is the main legislative instrument that underpins social work with children and families. James and James (2004) have suggested that this framework encourages certain childhoods to be seen as having a *double status.* These are: an age-based legal status (the need for the state to intervene when children are not being cared for or protected adequately) and a kinship status that relates to a child's familial ties. James and James (2004: 198) develop this idea:

> If we do conceptualise the child as a minor or as a family member, the meaning attributed to the concept of 'the child' is in terms of a status that is derived from the experience of being parented: the child is the object of parental love, care and protection.

Gilligan (2006) develops a contrasting idea that argues that children may adopt a 'master identity' that is based on their in-care status that dominates their sense of self. The concern for children if they do not have opportunities outside of their looked after status is that this social role may contribute to a 'consuming and stigmatizing identity' (Gilligan 2006:2).

The above perspectives would suggest that there is limited scope for the looked after child to be conceptualised in their own right. Rather, they are seen as a product of parenting and their childhood is seen through the experience of being parented. This would seem to be at odds with the much-quoted sentiment of Lady Butler Sloss, concluding at the child sexual abuse inquiry in the Cleveland Report (1988) 'the child is a person, not an object of concern'.

Post-modern childhood

Stainton Rogers (2001b) makes a persuasive case that post-modern childhood is grasped essentially through two main discourses. These are, she argues, the romanticization of childhood (this sees the child as innocent and wholesome) and the puritan discourse that sees childhood as wicked and sinful. These themes inform the principles of contemporary child welfare. They are framed around the concepts of care and control (Stainton Rogers 2001b; Lansdown 2001) or as mentioned earlier children in danger or children as dangerous (Prout

2003:13). As we shall see in later chapters there is some evidence from the sample in this thesis that children and young people are caught within and between these tensions and contradictions; particularly as they get older. There is a sense that whilst as young children they were entitled to a 'good childhood' (Stainton Rogers 2001b: 30) as they become older they have become less deserving and more responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. As Goldson (2001:41) suggests 'children and childhood, or more specifically identifiable children and particularized childhoods, have been demonised'.

However, a number of children in this study of looked after children and education have alluded to double or even multiple statuses. Most commonly to the difficulties and concerns of negotiating with a variety of social relations, notably if their family relationships cross different social settings. For some children this includes birth families, foster families (current and past), step families, siblings placed in different locations and even in different countries. In the UK the concept of care, and in particular foster care, has been shaped around the notion of dependents and carers, where children are seen as passive recipients and foster carers, typically mothers, taking some of the responsibility of caring (Brannen et al. 2000). In this sense it could be argued that the child in public care is still regarded as a project that must be managed by adults (Smart et al. 2001). This contradicts the notion of the child *becoming*, rather than, (as has been highlighted in the new sociology of childhood) the child understood as *being* and thereby contributing to the social order (James et al.1998; Mayall 2002).

A social constructionist framework

This thesis has been informed by a social constructionist framework as advocated by Prout and James (1990). Essentially, this perspective allows for an explanation of childhood which acknowledges that it does not exist in a 'finite and identifiable form' (James et. al 1998: 27). The adoption of this approach allows for a thorough exploration of the child as a social actor. As Jans (2004: 34) highlights when reviewing this paradigm:

> Research in this approach takes the life of the child in its whole as a starting point and studies children as an independent group with their own culture and characteristics and meanings.

The looked after young people in this research have had difficult, complex and uncertain lives. It is important that they are not seen as an homogenous group, or as some stereotypical 'looked after kids' (either victims or villains) but that they are given the opportunity to contribute to an understanding of their shared and individual experiences of childhood. As Prout (2003:22) recommends, 'what is required are ways of thinking about real, lived experiences of children and the complex character of childhood in a changing world'.

The contradictions, anomalies and paradoxes for the children and young people in this study will be explored and challenged and re-framed so they can be viewed as active beings, participating in the social world (Prout 2003). This conceptualisation allows us to see children and young people who have abilities and capabilities rather than adults in waiting (Brannan et al. 2000). Further chapters will explore how the childhood of the looked after children in this study are determined by a range of social institutions that make up their public care and private lives. First however, it is important to explore the concept of stability and the associated notion of continuity. These two inter-connected areas are increasingly recognised as providing the link between security and improved life chances for looked after children. Stability and continuity are of great importance to children and young people who are unable to live at home. A number of factors associated with greater stability have been identified including: maintaining the child's networks, continuing contact with parents, regular school attendance (Jackson and Thomas 2000). It is of note however that, 'hardly any research has looked at instability from the child's perspective' (Jackson 2002b: 54), thereby confirming that there would still appear to be some scope in adopting the paradigm outlined by Prout and James (1990) that views children and young people as central to the research enquiry and which acknowledges their agency and competence as social actors.

Stability Factors and outcomes

It is complicated to disentangle the circumstances in which looked after children find themselves and to link this to outcomes. Whilst there is a wealth of research that points to stability as one of the key indicators for favourable outcomes it is unclear whether poor outcomes 'reflect the intrinsic difficulties of the children or the effects of movement per se' (Clough et al. 2004: 15). In this thesis it will be noted that some young people oscillate between home on a trial basis and then returning to the looked after children system. Other young people returned home and their subsequent offending behaviour resulted in them being placed in youth offending institutions. Ward and Skuse (2001) found in their study that out of

249 children a third of children entering the care system had previously been looked after and moved between family and care. For those children that do return home it can be seen that in their teenage years movement and instability has been a feature of their in care experience and that 'school performance is unlikely to improve' (Clough et al. 2004: 18). Biehal et al. (1995) identified that care leavers were likely to have had on average at least four moves. A more recent review of research by Sinclair (2005) highlighted that for those young people placed in care aged 11-15 there is around a 40 per cent breakdown rate within the first year and 50 per cent of teenage placements breakdown before the child reaches 18, thereby contributing to instability. Stability and a secure placement are factors associated with educational success (Jackson 2001); unsurprisingly, frequent placement moves can undermine achievement (Goddard 2000). This said, more may need to be done to compensate for disadvantage and early years experiences (Heath et al. 1994) and educational continuity is one area that should be given a high priority (Jackson and Thomas 1999). This section will go on to discuss in more detail aspects of stability including how it is defined, placement moves and continuity for looked after children.

Defining stability

Promoting stability needs to be considered across the range of provision for looked after children including: foster care, residential care and when children return home. One estimate suggests that the majority of children and adolescents who are separated from their families actually return home; sixty per cent within six months and nearly ninety per cent within five years (Berridge 2003). Foster care, and in particular placement with relatives, have shown to be more effective in terms of stability than other forms of care although research to date is limited and inconclusive (O'Brien 2000; Flynn 2002; Broad and Skinner 2005). For many local authorities residential care continues to be part of the continuum of services, whilst the number of residents tends to be small and it is often an emergency resource. Some authorities are increasingly using specialist foster and residential placements. This term specialist refers to a placement whereby the placement is secured to meet what are considered the 'substantial difficulties' (Hill et al. 1999: 36) of a young person. In these types of placements carers have received in-depth training, have specialist skills and are supported and remunerated by the placing agency accordingly.

A study of specialist placements in Wales identified 317 children in specialist placements (Payne et al. 2003). Data on legal status were available for 268 of them. From these, 194 individuals were accommodated under the provision of the Children Act 1989, whilst 99 of them were looked after under Section 20 of the 1989 Act and 95 on an interim or full care order under the same legislation. Interestingly, if a purely 'number crunching' approach is used to define and assess stability, then these 194 children, although they have some of the most complex needs, they may in fact present in statistics as the more stable, especially if they are located in secure or semi secure establishments. Clearly the subject of stability for looked after children in terms of research, policy and practice is much more than a simple calculation of an individual child's placement moves. Harwin and Owen (2003: 31) suggest that:

> Stability has little to do with counting the number of moves and measuring permanence. It has much more to do with working out what factors, both singly and in combination with each other, predict successful and stable placements.

Child and carer characteristics

A multitude of factors including child and carer characteristics influence stability and instability in care placements. Child characteristics include: pre care experiences, age at placement and challenging or difficult behaviour. Carer characteristics include their abilities to handle difficult and disruptive behaviour, how they view the level of support from social workers, opinions on financial remuneration and training. All these have been shown to impact on stability (Pithouse et al. 2002; Beek and Schofield 2004). A child's route to placement, particularly placement matching, whether the move was planned or unplanned all have a bearing. So too do interagency issues in terms of how children and families are supported in the process of developing a child's resilience. The relationship with a child's school, for example, all have an influence on short and long term outcomes (Sellick and Thoburn 1996; Berridge 1997; Sinclair 2005b). The relationship the foster carer has with the child and how they are able to promote and supervise activities is important, as well as how foster carer's campaign on their children's behalf to overcome difficulties, such as problems at school (Schofield 2002). Furthermore, the ability of foster carers to handle emotional issues, such dealing with the 'pain of separation and loss' (Cashmore and Paxman 2006: 239), or allowing the child to act his emotional rather than chronological age and allowing reflection on their past is deemed important for a secure base and stability (Farmer 2003).

These child-adult relationship themes have been noted and developed in other studies. Sinclair and Wilson (2003) from their study of 472 children in foster care identified three factors that they argue led to a successful placement. These are, attractive qualities in the children including few disturbances, child orientated foster carers and interaction between carer and child. In addition to this, the fact that a child wants to be with a particular family and the family matches their needs and wishes bodes well for and improves the chance of stability. These are factors that would seem to be elusive in Wales given that the number of children looked after rose from 2,991 in 1998 to 4,382 in 2004 and it has been reported 'there is very little capacity within the sector to "match" children to the family placements most likely to meet their needs' (SSIW 2004: 49). This significant increase has presented local authorities and children with serious challenges, which are discussed in later empirical chapters of this thesis.

Placement moves and reliable data

Generally, it has been the number of care placement moves that a young person has experienced in foster and residential care that has been the focus of stability research for many years. The work of Rowe et al. (1989) described by Berridge (2003: 6) 'as probably the most authoritative research on placement process' looked at children that had been in the care system for one year and the number of subsequent moves they had over a two-year period. This study looked at over 2,000 children across six local authorities and found that over half of the young people had no moves during this time; however 38 children had more than five moves. Those most vulnerable to placement moves being adolescents aged 14-17, with adolescent offenders experiencing more moves than other young people of the same age. Biehal et al. (1995) in their study of children in care (n=74) found that only 1 in 10 young people had stayed in the same care placement during their care career and a further 1 in 10 had moved more than ten times. Once an 'unsettled' pattern was established it tended to persist. Berridge and Brodie (1998) undertook a study of young people (n=70) in residential care and compared their experiences with a similar group a decade earlier (Berrridge 1985). Although the time spent in care was shorter and the number of placement disruptions and subsequent moves were fewer, the average number of placements for adolescents was still 3.3 and a third had lived in five or more placements. Shaw (1998) reported in his large scale study (n=2000) from a questionnaire survey that a quarter of his

sample, regardless of age, had been in 11 or more different care settings. More recently, Ward and Skuse (2001) in their longitudinal study of 249 looked after children examined the number of placements in the first 12 months of their care episode. The research sample selected children from six local authorities. They found that 44 per cent of children stayed in the same placement; 26 per cent had two placements and 28 per cent had three or more. This led Ward and Skuse (2001: 339) to suggest that, 'although movement is still distressingly frequent, stability may have considerably increased since the early 1980s in England'. Whilst this view may be accurate in terms of the number of children that stayed in the same placement, it is important that those children with a number of placement moves and in particular adolescents who may be most vulnerable to an 'unsettled' care career, continue to be the focus of an improved service. It is imperative therefore that any data on stability and the positive interpretation of that data does not mask real needs or limit ongoing improvements to service delivery.

Contrary to the view that stability may have improved for some children, evidence suggests that there has been increased instability during the period since Rowe at al. (1989) completed their landmark study. Here we might note that the recorded statistics for placement moves are indeed very mixed. Studies looking at the welfare of children in public care have demonstrated that the data are often confused, inaccurate or not available. For example, Hill and Watkins (2003) longitudinal study of health assessments of looked after children found in a sample of 49 children that information on placement stability was available in only 37 cases. Statistics that are available suggest that in England for the five years 1995-2000 the average number of placement moves in the year were up from 2.9 to 3.5. In 2002, 15 per cent of looked after children had experienced three or more placements during the year (www.dfes.gov.uk). In Wales in 2003 the average number of children looked after experiencing three or more placement moves was 8.25 per cent. By 2004 this had risen to 11.02 per cent (SSIW 2004). The study by Jackson and Martin (1998) examining a group of 'high achievers' at school, interestingly identified that this group of looked after young people were not much more likely than others to have stability in their care career (with the average number of moves being 3 for boys and 5.5 for girls). Indeed, these 'high achieving' young people did have fewer moves than the non-achieving comparison group which was 5.7 for boys and 4.4 for girls. We can note however that the emphasis of the above research concentrated on care placement moves and offered

relatively little insight into an understanding of how continuity with other aspects of the lives of children and or young people were being addressed or promoted.

Placement stability as a service performance indicator (see *Quality Protects* DoH 1998a; *Children First,* Welsh Office 1999a) should help ensure that issues of stability will be given more attention and should prompt action in response to why certain progress is not being made and how services may be improved (Ward and Skuse 2001). Although there is more information available on the movements of children in Wales and England through specific target setting (currently set by the DoH 1998a/Welsh Office 1999a at no more than three placement moves a year), a lack of reliable data precludes a definitive analysis of the characteristics of change in placement movements.

Placement breakdown and in particular foster care disruption is the area of instability that has attracted much research attention. This is not surprising as this is where the majority of looked after children are placed. The causes of instability are complex and multi-faceted and because of this it is important to categorise the notion of stability into different aspects addressing not only stability of placement, but stability in other areas such as education, community, relationships and personal identity (Jackson 2002b). By this process of analytic separation it may be possible to identify different aspects of continuity and stability. Jackson and Thomas (2000: 19) differentiate carefully in their categories thus:

> We have therefore chosen to distinguish between stability and continuity, using *stability* to refer to a child's remaining in the same placement and *continuity* to mean all other things that we have identified as important in terms of relationships, identity and care.

Stability and continuity: a framework for resilience

This distinction between stability and continuity has also been developed in other research. Schofield (2002) in her study interviewed 40 adults who had spent a considerable time in foster care; her research confirmed the importance of a secure base for developing resilience and positive attachments. The research also stressed the importance of continuity of relationships even when a placement ceased either on a planned or unplanned basis. Schofield promotes a psychosocial model of long-term foster care where the theoretical framework of attachment theory and resilience are prominent. One aim being to build a foster

family that will support the principles of continuity not only through childhood, but into adult life, recognising the importance of ongoing relationships for security and developing resolution to loss in order to help develop a reflective and mature capacity for the individual.

The aspect of stability has resonance in this study and other recent research which suggests that when a care placement disrupts not enough emphasis is placed on the continuity of education. Thus, continuing to meet the ongoing expectations of the national curriculum and school mediated course work is often ignored. This is particularly important for teenagers where the education emphasis may need to be highly individualised and subject related (Evans 2000; Francis 2000). Maintaining relationships with relatives, foster carers, friends, teachers, social workers may well be a way of maintaining continuity and helping a child or young person make sense of their history and identity, however this to date has been given a low priority. Jackson (2002b:46) argues that:

> Social workers have a very important role ensuring that, when a placement move is unavoidable, serious efforts are made to minimize ill-effects for the child in relation to the different aspects of stability.

While recording of placement moves may be unreliable (see Evans 2000; Fletcher-Campbell and Archer 2003) there are also variations in the way authorities categorise planned moves, unplanned moves and how numerous short-term placements are recorded. Of course any move may well be very significant for a child, for example, one could that argue that a child experiencing a couple of short term moves on route to a permanent placement is not really comparable to experiences of a child who is forced to move following the breakdown of a number of years in what was intended to be a long term placement (Clough et al. 2004).

Ward and Skuse (2001) collecting data from case files including assessment and action records longitudinally for three years identified a number of factors associated with placement change including previous experiences. Whilst all children in the looked after system can be considered to be vulnerable in terms of experiencing abuse or neglect, rejection or parent addiction, some additional features were characterised as contributing to more placement moves. Their findings, which are corroborated by Mallon (2005) suggest that children who were rejected or estranged or who had behaviour problems and /or offending behaviour experienced more placement moves than those who were in care as a

consequence of neglect and abuse or because their parents were ill, disabled or had an alcohol or drug addiction. It did not appear that placements were more likely to be disrupted if children had learning disabilities or health issues. Of course the age of the child or young person and the cumulative experiences of a number of 'short stay' experiences may well mean that they become more difficult to place as they become more unsettled (Biehal et al. 1995). Children in the looked after system and in particular older children demand a great deal from their carers, in terms of skills motivation and durability. A number of authors (Hutchinson et al. 2003; Pithouse et al. 2004) have identified that behavioural and emotional difficulties displayed by children may mean that the task of the corporate parent and in particular foster carers is more challenging than in recent decades.

Promoting stability and continuity

The study by Holland et al. (2005) has contributed to our understanding of stability issues for looked after children. Their review of secondary data and telephone survey across 47 local authorities (21 in Wales, 18 in England, 6 in Scotland and 2 in Northern Ireland) as well as five voluntary agencies, examined practice and policy initiatives that maintain and contribute to promoting stability and continuity. Respondents in Wales saw the development of specialist teams set up in response to the *Children First* Initiative (Welsh Office, 1999a) as working within a stability 'ethos'. Similarly, Holland et al. also identified support services for foster carers, participation and support to young people, and specialists in the area of education and health also contributing to the emphasis in *Children First* on stability and continuity. It is thus of note that the percentage of children looked after in Wales on 31st March 2004 (who had experienced more than three placements) rose, with some authorities recording more than 25 per cent of their looked after children experiencing three or more placements (SSIW 2004). This does not equate with the summation of responses to the telephone survey of Holland et al. (2005: 33) that claimed:

> The general message from the participants was that looked after children have been receiving a higher priority in recent years and that much of this has been driven by the carrot and stick funding and targets from the *Quality Protcects/Children First* programmes.

There is a sense that whilst agencies and social workers become more familiar both from a research base and a policy base about the importance of stability and continuity and the principles that promote resilience, this knowledge does not always lead to appropriate action.

The findings from this thesis will help to highlight the point that whilst social workers have evidence-informed knowledge in relation to placement stability this does not always transfer into improved practice. Indeed, Holland et al. (2005) observe that the impact and evaluation of initiatives appeared to be limited, with the majority of responding authorities stating that no evaluation tool, apart from the performance indicators, were in place to measure 'what works' with regard to the complexities of placement stability. Respondents identified difficulties in providing interdisciplinary support, as well as the recruitment and retention of foster carers and social workers, as key factors that impact on the ability to promote stability. Notably, working in an interdisciplinary way with education agencies was ranked, after child and adolescent mental health services, as the most problematic, even though 30 out of the 52 respondents recognised education as an important factor that promoted stability (Holland et al.2005). This view is endorsed by Walker (2001: 228) who suggests:

> The education of children is now placed at the heart of professional activity and understood as almost certainly the only means through which corporate aims and objectives for children may be effectively realised.

The research by Holland et al. (2005) while based on a small unrepresentative sample does echo much previous research, that in order to promote stability there needs to be a trained, skilful and durable work force, a responsive and committed fostering and residential sector that can match children to a service most likely to meet their needs and good interdisciplinary and interagency work that is evaluated and assessed. The worry is that achieving performance indicators, rather than offering a lens in which to view looked after children services are seen as the guiding response to the problem of stability, as Ward and Skuse (2001: 345) conclude:

> It is only when data concerning its overall performance leads an agency to ask more specific questions about the circumstances of individual children that such indicators will act as a genuine incentive to improve services.

Recent studies which have looked at the Welsh authorities suggest that agencies do not have a comprehensive system in place for outcome measures (Pithouse et al.2000; Clough et al. 2004; Collis and Butler 2003). There is an over reliance on data collection from the *Children First* initiative and the *Looked after Children* materials as methods of evaluation and

planning but these are weak, inconsistent, un-aggregated and not service developmental. As the *Fit to Foster* research team concluded 'monitoring and evaluation of services needs development to ensure fostered children, their families and foster carers are supported and have adequate input' (Collis and Butler 2003: executive summary p.1)

Connecting stability, continuity and resilience

Promoting children's psychological resilience has attracted some research attention recently. The importance of having an adult (parent, carer, key worker or social worker) who will take an explicit interest in a child's educational needs (Jackson and Martin 1988; Gilligan 2000a) is essential to well-being as are other networks including friends, out of school activities and hobbies and interests (see Gilligan 1998; Jackson 2001; Harker et al.2003; Cashmore and Paxman, 2006). Gilligan (2000b: 42) states:

> School may offer young people in need or in care an escape route from an exclusively 'in need /care identity' or from otherwise consuming effects of loss, separation or abuse.

Therefore, placement stability for looked after children emerges as a significant issue in child welfare and the importance of instability is often understood in relation to attachment theory. Clearly children cannot develop lasting attachments to their birth families and foster carers if they are regularly being moved or are uncertain about the duration of a care placement. Equally, friendship patterns, education and health matters will also be affected by moves that have scant regard for the importance of maintaining continuity. Whilst placement instability may be considered as contributing to 'risk factors', for the outcomes for looked after children, the challenge for researchers, practitioners and policy makers is to make sense of the 'interconnections between risk, resilience and protective factors' (Titterton 2005: 77). Therefore, the next section will explore the notion of resilience and how it develops, or is acquired, and the relevance of the concept when considering the outcomes for children in public care.

Resilience-led perspective in child welfare

This section will explore the concept of resilience, looking at definitions and themes within the framework of attachment theory. Selective findings from recent research with a group of

high achievers will be discussed, followed by a brief reprise of the challenges of a resilience based perspective for professionals working with children and young people in public care.

One of the crucial concerns for policy makers, practitioners and carers working in the area of looked after children, is how can the care system help children who have been in high risk and stressful situations. The consequences of abusive and disruptive childhood experiences are well documented in terms of outcomes for children (Cicchetti and Carlson 1989; Corby 2000; Iwaniec 2000; Iwaniec 2003). Thus, when attempting to ameliorate earlier negative experiences, a number of related themes and factors need to be explored these are: resilience, vulnerability, adversity and characteristics of a protective environment (Daniel et al. 2000). An implicit objective of the child welfare agencies is how to facilitate stress resistant, or resilient children (Garmezy 1994). There are various definitions in the literature about the meaning of resilience stemming from disciplines such as: psychology, sociology, social work, family therapy and mental health. They tend to coalesce around the view that resilience is essentially the ability to spring back or in some way recover from adversity and /or adapt to it as part of reasonably normal development (Fonagy 1994; Garmezy 1994, Fraser et al. 1999). In this sense, a resilience-based perspective is highly relevant when exploring issues for children in the looked after system. As Gilligan (1997: 12) observes:

> Resilience refers to qualities which cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity in whatever form it may take and may help a child or young person to cope, survive and even thrive in the face of great hurt and disadvantage.

There is now increased knowledge about the interconnections and predictive nature of childhood experiences and adult functioning (Gore et al. 1994). To explore this in more depth it is important to draw from the research on stress, coping and resilience and their location within a psychological and sociological approach. As Gore et al. (2004: 376) suggest when describing the interrelated aspects of protective, personal factors and environmental resources:

> The polarisation of nature and nurture now has a distinctly old fashioned and out dated feel to it. The future lies in the study of interplay between the two.

Adverse situations and protective factors

The majority of the children who come into public care have been exposed to a number of potentially stressful and high-risk situations. They may have suffered maltreatment in the form of physical, sexual and emotional abuse or living in neglectful situations, as a result of poor parenting and poverty. Whilst individually these living conditions may not be severely detrimental, the impact of multiple deprivations may contribute to increased vulnerability. These adverse factors, alongside possible difficulties of social and emotional development, behavioural problems, attitudes to learning, instances of bullying as well as poor school attendance and attainment can affect a child's social integration (Nugent et al. 1998). Children and young people who are not, or do not appear to be significantly affected by a particular risk situation, such as maltreatment, and demonstrate coping mechanisms are considered to show resilience. An issue which taxes professionals and carers working with looked after children, is how and why individuals vary in their response to stressful and risk situations (Howe et al. 1999). Some argue, that the presence of protective factors such as an attachment to a dependable care giver can act as a 'buffer' in adverse circumstances (Garmezy 1985; Quinton and Rutter 1988). Personal characteristics may also influence the degree to which a child or young person will develop resilience. Rutter (1985) identifies three characteristics that can be associated with resilience; confidence and self-esteem, a belief in self-efficacy and the skills to deal with change. Other characteristics that could promote resilience or be seen as a feature of a resilient adolescent, include being responsible and achievement orientated; having a positive set of values; belief in own capacity to control fate and have experience of dealing successfully with stressful situations (Werner 1990). This supports the work of Heller et al. (1999: 333) who in addition suggest:

> A structured school environment and involvement in a religious community or extracurricular activities also may be a part of the resilient individual's life.

This has resonance with findings on the importance of promoting out-of-school activities as a way of promoting well-being and self-esteem.

Vulnerability and adaptability in the looked after child

Personal factors and qualities such as attractiveness, a positive attitude and intellect, are also thought to contribute to resilience in children that have been maltreated. Alongside these factors, is the need to live in a secure setting in which the individual can develop a close

relationship and affectionate ties, and can also develop coping mechanisms as well. Learned adaptability is one such mechanism (Empson and Nabuzoka 2004). This is a strategy adopted by some people, in which the person learns from a young age how to avoid difficult or potentially stressful situations. For example, one of the young people interviewed in this study spoke about her early experiences and how she absented herself from the family home when her father came home drunk; a state she knew to be a trigger for family violence. Such a manoeuvre appears to connect well with Empson and Nabuzoka's (2004:43) view that:

> Exposure to a risk may help the individual to learn ways of dealing with it and some children will learn and adjust more quickly than others, and those who are adaptable will build up resistance more easily.

There are some suggestions that the relationship to the perpetuator of abuse, and the type of abuse, can have bearing on the actual impact of abuse. So, for example it may be that sexual abuse between a child and a biological father may have more traumatic consequences for a child than if the abuse had been perpetrated by a step-parent. However, it is essential that issues such as the duration of abuse, nature of abuse, age of the child, context of abuse, the response to detection of abuse are all considered. The vulnerability of a child to a risk situation and their subsequent development following difficult circumstances need to be considered in totality. The response of a child and their ultimate resilience will be a 'combination of factors acting together' (Empson and Nabuzoka 2004: 44).

One may assume that any young person in the looked after system will have faced some kind of adversity; a life event that poses a threat to healthy development. The test for professionals working with young people is to discover their level of vulnerability or particular characteristics that may make them more susceptible to vulnerability. Then they need to consider how resilience, the ability to develop 'normally' can be promoted through the protective environment, such as a good school experience or committed foster carers. Therefore, the degree to which individuals can adapt will be in some way dependent on the risk factors experienced and the presence or development of protective factors (Place et al. 2002).

Promoting resilience in the looked after child

Resilience in children and the exploration of whether this is an individual pre-existing or pre-disposing trait, or whether it can be developed, learned (and supported by others) as a

response to adversity, is an area that is of interest to a variety of professionals in the field of child welfare. It includes not only those working with children in public care, but also, for example those working with children living in poverty and children experiencing divorce. For children in public care one of the roles of the corporate parent will be to assist young people in their care to develop in all aspects of their psychosocial development, to enable them to be and become active participants and citizens in society. In this, government guidance to local authorities in their capacity as a corporate parent is unequivocal:

> The role of corporate parent is to seek for the children in public care the outcomes that every good parent would want for their own children (WAG 2005: 3).

In some cases this will mean attempting to ameliorate those forces that hinder development and promote forces that facilitate or aid development (Howe et al. 1999; Jackson and Sachdev 2001). This will include addressing environmental or external factors, identified as measures to improve stability. In addition individuals, either carers or teachers should take an interest in the young person and actively encourage collaboration between organisations involved in the young person's life, particularly school, where self-esteem can be built and developed (Gilligan 1997; Colton et al. 2001). It would appear that this assumption (and an aspect one might imagine of 'practice wisdom') about the importance of self-esteem and its relationship to a child's experience at school for anchoring resilience is not necessarily understood by professionals working in the field. For example, in research by Christmas (1998), representatives from education and social services were asked to rank various statements in terms of importance and priority. The statement *attending to educational achievement* was positioned much lower than *helping the child to acquire a sense of self-esteem,* suggesting that the respondents might not see the importance of school and its contribution to resilience in the guise of improved self-esteem.

Resilience explored through attachment theory

Although there is an intuitive, if not explicit sense of familiarity and understanding about the requirements and needs of an individual in order to develop resilience, this does not always translate into improved professional intervention and multi-agency work. As has been expressed previously 'it is the complex interactions occurring between these variables that can make the phenomenon of resilience difficult to operationalise and to work towards' (Dent and Cameron 2003: 6). Thus, aspects of attachment and resilience are interwoven, and factors

that are sometimes associated with resilience can be seen in a child that is securely attached (Ainsworth et al.1978; Rutter 1990; Fahlberg 1994; Howe et al. 1999). Hence, Fonagy et al. (1994: 235) argue that 'secure attachment is the mediating process where resilience is observed' and thereby they attempt to examine resilience through an attachment lens. Such a view suggests that children who are neglected or abused are unable to make sense of adult behaviour and emotions; this then affects how they understand their own emotional state. As Howe et al. (1999: 234) note:

> Maltreatment that disturbs children's ability to represent and understand their own and others' emotions and behaviours reduces their ability to make sense of and cope with distress, conflict and social failure.

This perspective suggests that a young person's feelings of blame and negativity can go some way to being remedied if they have an individual not connected with the abusive interaction with whom they can make sense of the maltreatment without misrepresentation. This role has traditionally, to some extent, been met by the social worker through direct casework with children. However, as the emphasis through the 1990s has been more on case management, social workers within children's teams are regarding direct work with children as a 'specialised' or therapeutic role for which they neither have sufficient time nor always the skills to undertake. Fonagy et al. (1994: 241) framed the term *reflective self-function* to encapsulate the process that needs to develop in order to understand how individuals react and interact and to assist understanding of why people may say or do particular things and how they account for the consequences of their actions. This notion of a complex interplay of interpersonal relationships is developed further by Howe et al. (1999: 235) who argue that, 'a high 'reflective self' function appears to confer resilience; it allows people to step back and review what is happening in complex social interactions'. The importance of secure attachments are highlighted by Reder and Lucey (1995) as protecting the child against adversity, whilst the significance of parents or carers engaging with their child in what Fahlberg (1994) calls the 'interaction cycle' has long been acknowledged as a vehicle to build a child's confidence and self-esteem.

Promoting resilience and the wider social context

Attachment theory as a conceptual framework and overarching construct for exploring resilience is very compelling. However, it is of course important that professionals working

in the arena of child welfare identify the needs of children in a wider ecological context. By recognising this broader context they will acknowledge that attachment can be built not only from the relationship within the family (although very important), but also through the external environment. Dowling et al. (2006: 141) are clear that it is the: 'mutual influence between children's development, the circumstances of their families, and the environment and neighbourhood' that appears to impact on resilience and future inclusion. However, the research evidence suggests that the outcomes for looked after young people leaving care in terms of employment prospects, and general healthy integration into adult society are poor. Some would go even further; McParlin (1996: 114) describes the outcomes for looked after children as, 'the consequences of previous decades of prejudice, disadvantage and the most appalling waste'.

There is still a lack of research into the experiences and circumstances of those young people who could be considered resilient, particularly so for those who achieve (in spite of early years experiences and time in the care system) and those that balance their lives through protective factors even though previous high risk situations will have contributed to a level of vulnerability. The research by Jackson and Martin (1998) has attempted to look at a group of looked after young people who have demonstrated educational resilience. Although the sample is small (n=38) and drawn from a particular group of high achievers who had participated in further or higher education, it offers pertinent insights into factors that can contribute to resilience.

The protective factors that were most strongly identified as contributing to educational success were: stability and continuity, learning to read early and fluently, having a parent or carer who valued education and saw it as the route to a good life, having friends outside care who did well at school, developing out-of-school hobbies, meeting a significant adult who offered constant support and encouragement and acted as a mentor and possible role model and attending school regularly (Jackson and Martin, 1998). A smaller sample of this high achievers group (n=26) were matched with a comparison group of ex-care young people (n=25). The outcomes of the comparative analysis suggested that professionals could not be relied on to offer or facilitate and co-ordinate the level of support and encouragement to those in care that contributed to becoming educationally resilient.

Other research has considered the protective value of school and spare time experiences. For example Gilligan (2000b) moves beyond the academic value of schooling and examines the importance of a responsive teacher contributing to a child's sense of attachment, and the social significance of a nurturing classroom, both providing something of a secure base. As he argues:

> Rituals around the start of the day, a regular familiar greeting from the teacher, consistent management of the classroom space, regular patterns around break time and so on can also help to preserve or restore predictability in the child's life, and promote a sense of attachment or secure base (Gilligan 2000b: 40).

Clearly, school has some potential to address the stability and resilience needs of a child's development.

Developing social networks

There is generally agreement about the academic and social value of school attendance and its importance for all children. The additional benefits that a school experience can anchor in terms of psychological and social value is even more important for children in public care (Gilligan 1998). Some suggest that there is a 'reluctance' to acknowledge and accept the impact a school can make, not only to a child's educational achievement but also to self-worth. Dent and Cameron (2003: 11) reinforce the message:

> The influence of the school context as a formative and learning environment has the potential to exert a major influence on the personal and social (as well as academic) development of a pupil.

In addition to school, what is also imperative is an involvement in spare time activities, which can increase a young person's self-efficacy and self-esteem (factors known to contribute to resilience) and can also link young people to a social network that will enhance a sense of community belonging and purpose (Gilligan 2000b). Here the UK–wide *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families* (DoH 2000b; NAFW 2000c) used by social workers addresses an ecological perspective on intervention within its focus on three domains, (the child, the family and the community) and can also be considered

to promote protective and mediating factors (Place et al. 2002). Thus, characteristics of the child, such as self-esteem and self-reliance, need to be addressed alongside family issues, for example, the need for a secure base and significant attachment figures, whilst the benefit of community membership and support can be explored via school and other activities away from the home.

A critical application of a resilience approach

Contemporary social work with children and families and methods of assessment and intervention are grounded in child development and attachment theory. This is not surprising when attachment theory offers a framework for exploring the development and behaviour of both adults and children. Of course, the effective practitioner will operate and engage with a theoretical stance in a context of critical reflection, acknowledging the limitations of any approach (Holland 2004). Such critical reflection has contributed to more discussion, debate and research into the area of resilience, indeed Buchanan (2002: 260), suggests that contemporary 'research has taken some of the mystery out of resilience'. The characteristics of resilience have been given increased importance and significance in the arena of child welfare over the past fifteen years. This emphasis has grown out of an understanding of the ecological perspective, recognising that an individual's development is influenced by the interaction of a number of systems. This perspective acknowledges the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to services and interventions for children, taking into account not only a child's care givers but also family, friends, schools and communities as having a role in contributing to a secure base and the potential to build resilience (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This development, whilst a positive and exciting opportunity for professionals working in public care, also demands that all organisations adopt a resilient-led approach to policy and practice.

Limitations of a resilience approach: the need for a structural view

However, a critical appraisal of the principles and themes of resilience and their adaptation into practice must ensure that developmental psychology and attachment theory are seen as only part of an explanation about why some people do well in public care. It is important that the whole emphasis is not cast as part of some discourse of self-reliance and personal responsibility; such an approach would ignore the fact that many social problems have their roots in structural inequalities (Pithouse et al. 1998). It would be problematic and inappropriate to seek deficits in families as the sole response, or to consider parental

inadequacies and individual pathology as the only explanations for child maltreatment and lack of resilience. What is more useful is the exploration of the complex interaction between biological, economic, social and environmental factors (Fraser et al. 1999; Jack 2001a). Whilst the current discourse on resilience has much to contribute to the debate around a protection and prevention-based perspective in social work, it is important that such an approach does not mask structural inequalities in favour of locating the responsibility with the individual or family. In the area of children's services the emphasis should continue to be on services that reduce risk and provide a protective environment as well as addressing and exploring factors that build resilience. As Pollard et al. (1999: 147) suggest:

> A focus solely on the resilience of young people emphasizes individual characteristics and ignores important social and contextual risk factors that should also be a focus for prevention policies and interventions.

Acknowledging the issues highlighted above, the conceptual positioning of this current study is that any analysis of looked after children and their circumstances needs to take account of wider family, community and social contexts and related aspects of social capital. The correlation between entering the care system, socio-economic deprivation and socially impoverished environments are well-established (Graham et al. 1998; Jack 2001a). One might argue that the ideal approach will be one which identifies structural inequalities, such as poverty and poor housing as potential risk factors in contributing to adversity and identifies these as a target for intervention (Nash and Bowen 1999). Ideally, intervention should look at mapping critical risk areas and develop resilience-based interventions rather than looking at the individual retrospectively and attempting to promote resilience (Smokowski 1998). By embracing solely a resilience-based perspective a reduction in services may be evident as the emphasis is put on the individual or close networks as a solution to difficulties (Kinard 1998). What is needed is a dual approach where a fully developed ecological perspective, that addresses prevention, risk, protection and resilience as a framework for structural as well as individual initiatives of intervention. Such an approach appears to be supported by Jack's (2001b: 192) view that:

> Insufficient attention has in the past been paid to the major influence that environmental factors and structural inequality have upon the lives of children and their families. Official responses have tended to place too narrow an emphasis on the apparent shortcomings of individual parents without recognising the effects of the environment on parenting behaviour.

A concept that builds on the view posed above is that of social capital. Although an elusive concept and variable in its interpretation it does provide 'a conceptual link between the attributes of individual actors and their immediate social context, most notably the household, school and neighbourhood' (Morrow 1999: 748). Therefore, social capital can be a useful term for exploring the interface between psychology and a wider environment in as much as it explores the inter-personal relationship as well as the wider context of neighbourhood and community (Jack and Jordan 1999; Jack 2001b). Of particular relevance is the importance of schools, as this is where children derive much of their social support systems as they interact with friends and peers.

Resilience: a targeted approach for looked after children

Given the emphasis on an ecological and a resilience-led approach to services is a recent development in social work with children and families, it may be necessary to undertake immediate and reparative work with children and young people in the current looked after system. If we accept Fonagy et al. (1994) in their view that the characteristics of resilience can be categorised with some confidence, it follows that the planning and intervention of services for young people, who are not demonstrating resilience traits, can now be targeted by professionals in a pro-active way to enhance or help build their capacities. In doing so, we can be guided by Gilligan's revealing analysis of resilience for intervention which asserts the following key principle:

> The importance of resilience is that it serves to release the natural flow of recovery and development that might otherwise be paralysed or frozen by negative experiences (Gilligan 2001: 6).

Achieving effective inter-agency and multi-disciplinary service systems that acknowledge and actively promote resilience and building this in a systematic or 'joined up' way is very much the contemporary challenge for care providers. As yet, these principles do not appear to be well embedded in practice. Fieldwork undertaken for this thesis will in later chapters highlight inadequacies and lack of 'joined up' services in relation to looked after children and young people.

Summary

This chapter has located a 'sociology of childhood' as the conceptual orientation that has informed this study and specifically a social constructionist approach which emphasises children as active social agents, shaping and being shaped in their own lives, rather than passive recipients of socialisation. This approach seems to be most appropriate as this perspective 'disrupt and challenge modernist humanist perspectives of the universal child' (Robinson and Jones Díaz 2006:6). The experiences of many looked after children are often so 'un-universal' that romanticised ideas of childhood are fractured when faced by the abusive situations to which some children are exposed. They do not always behave within an 'ages' or 'stages' pathway so often associated with normative development. Consequently, a social constructionist ideology can enable a more insightful exploration of how young people negotiate their affiliated identities as 'looked after' within wider category memberships such as age and gender.

The chapter explored aspects of stability in the lives of looked after children and moved away from a simplistic notion that views children staying in the same place and/or with the same people. Instead consideration was given to multi-dimensional aspects whereby children may experience different types of instability impacting upon, for example, relationships, education and personal identity. A distinction was made between the notions of continuity and stability and direct links were made between these concepts and the notion of resilience.

The final part of the chapter critically explored the notion of resilience recognising the importance of not seeing this solely as an aspect of development psychology capable of providing a sufficient explanation of why some children thrive in the face of adversity whilst others flounder. Instead, the section acknowledged the importance of 'social capital' and an ecological approach in promoting resilience. In doing so, the strengths of a nature/nurture dialogue were identified as an unfinished but dynamic theoretical backdrop.

These four opening chapters have set the thesis in an historical, legislative, policy and conceptual context. Overall, the literature review concludes that the main areas of concern for looked after young people and their education collect around: 'inadequate corporate parenting, failure to prioritise education, inappropriate expectation, the care environment, placement instability and disrupted schooling' (Harker et al 2004:5).

These themes will now be examined in more detail in regard to a longitudinal case study of young people looked after who moved through specific key stages of schooling. First however the methods and methodology deployed in the case study will be addressed in the following chapter.

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Chapter 5: The research design, methodology and process

Introduction

This chapter describes and justifies the methods and methodology deployed to capture the perspectives and experiences of a sample of fourteen teenagers who comprised all of the looked after population in the study authority who were in school Year 9 and completing Standard Attainment Tasks and Tests (SATS). The study tracked their progress through school years 9, 10 and 11 and sought additional insights from professionals and carers charged with supporting them through schooling. We now turn to what motivated this enquiry and the practical and conceptual tools used to examine this relatively under-researched world of education and looked after children.

The perceived reliability of a study and the subsequent findings will depend upon the transparency of the methodological approach. In order to present this in a coherent way this chapter is divided into two parts. The first section will outline the origins of the study, its theoretical perspective and its case study approach. It will then go on to discuss some aspects of involving children and young people in participatory research, as France (2004: 175) observes when discussing research with young teenagers:

> Doing social research with this age group is full of methodological and critical tensions that need to be overcome if we are to gain a greater understanding of their lives, attitudes and actions.

Broad ethical issues as well as specific ethical dilemmas will be considered before outlining the research design where the discussion will focus on sample selection and the main sources of data collection: documents, interviews and focus groups.

A research project needs to ensure transparency; it is important that one is explicit about the why, how and what of data analysis (Huberman and Miles 1994: Darlington and Scott 2002; Holliday 2002). Hence, the second section will outline the process of data management and preparation for analysis referring in particular to aspects of memo-writing and a critical discussion of the use of computer software in data analysis. Finally, issues of reliability and validity will be highlighted with an illustrative example of the analytic process.

My interest in the educational outcomes of 'looked after children' was heightened when I was commissioned to undertake some evaluation work in the social care setting where the fieldwork for this thesis was based. In this role I had to observe and monitor residential workers going about their everyday tasks and assess their competencies against a specific set of practice criteria. On a number of occasions I accompanied residential workers to meetings at various high schools where they discussed education matters pertaining to the young person for whom they had a 'key worker' responsibility. As an observer, I also attended inter-agency meetings where key workers discussed plans, time-scales and arrangements for the young people to move from residential care to independent living. During these observational experiences I noted how little the residential workers appeared to know about the educational 'milestones' of the young people including the Key Stage Assessment system, the curriculum they were following, the examination systems and other general aspects of the school culture. I also noted how dismissive some education representatives appeared to be about the care placement difficulties of the young people.

In one memorable meeting with a large voluntary agency, attended by the young person, neither the residential key worker, the local authority social worker or the representative from the school were able to outline to the voluntary agency (offering accommodation) an overview of the young person's achievements, interests, hobbies and future ambitions, let alone their educational achievements in terms of standard attainment tests and tasks (SATS) or general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) results. This very obvious deficit in information sharing raised significant questions about the role and values of key parties regarding their responsibilities towards the young person. This observation gave me some insight into practice and professionalism, it allowed me to develop 'foreshadowed ideas', as described by Salisbury (1994: 22) leading to the more fundamental question of 'how can I understand what is going on?' It was not appropriate however to develop this interest into a research strategy and design without prior consideration of a theoretical perspective.

Part 1: Theoretical perspective: epistemology and ontology

A research method and design is not some neutral activity existing in a bubble but is informed by the researcher's epistemological and ontological perspective. By this I mean how we know what we know (the theory of knowledge) and how we understand reality

(Bryman 2001; D'Cruz and Jones 2004; Gomm 2004). Although this research has not, as Denscombe (2003:23) advises, 'been obsessed with the purity of an ontological or epistemological position' it has recognised that research needs to engage with a theoretical perspective that will aid the research design, the methods of data collection as well as analysis and interpretation (Gray 2004). Whilst there are a baffling array of theories, perspectives and paradigms presented in the literature, often with inconsistent, debatable and even contradictory explanations of their application (Holliday 2002), I found it useful to adopt Crotty's (1998) model when considering the interrelationship between epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology and research methods. Within this model it is clear that the choice of data gathering methods is decided according to an individual's research methodology. However, prior to these choices, the methodology needs to be informed by a theoretical perspective and epistemological stance, or as D'Cruz and Jones (2004: 57) argue:

> The selection of design, methodology, data generation and analysis does not consist of random or ad hoc decisions (or neutral methods or techniques), but in assumptions about reality (ontology) and how this may be known or understood (epistemology).

The importance of 'meaning making'

Thus, whilst a quantitative approach could have been adopted and would have offered a statistical exploration of reality (Gomm 2004) in terms of the educational outcomes for children in public care, this would not have gone far enough in addressing the over arching research aims and objectives as outlined in the introduction. A qualitative approach seemed a much better fit and the preferred option given the emphasis was to be on informants' perceptions and experiences. Therefore, informed by what Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) describe as a generic definition of qualitative research, the research objectives and my own epistemological positioning were met thus:

> Qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.

The qualitative research strategy emphasises the generation of theory through an epistemological approach that is essentially interpretivist, informed by and with insights from symbolic interactionism. Gray (2004) drawing on the work of Mead and Dewey from the

1930s argues that a symbolic interactionist perspective is a way of conceptualizing individual behaviour and society that focuses on 'people's practices and lived realities' (p.21). Individuals interact with the world and go through a process of meaning-making. Thus the central tenets of symbolic interactionism are that there is a flow between the process of social interaction, how individuals interpret that social interaction and then how they act on that social interaction based on 'meaning making' (Bryman 2001; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). The social setting is therefore not fixed but dependent upon the meaning of the world and how it is modified through interaction. Given this, a principle behind social interactionism is that individuals 'develop a sense of identity through their interaction and communication' (Gray 2004: 241), this perspective seemed to fit with the aims of exploring the different social settings of the care and education environment. This approach calls on the researcher to uncover how individuals of a social group interpret the world around them. This will subsequently be informed by not only the researcher's interpretation, but also the body of knowledge including theories and concepts that inform the area of interest. Therefore, the qualitative orientation to the study, located within an interpretivist and social constructionist framework, seemed to offer the most appropriate guiding principles for the topic under investigation. It allows for an exploration of how people experience the world and how they make sense of it (Denscombe 2002; Gomm 2004). Schwandt (1994: 118) confirms the constructivist and interpretivist stance:

> Proponents of these persuasions share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it.

Interpretivist and social constructionist frameworks

This framework in particular lends itself to individual perspectives, perceptions and meaning reconstruction (Holstein and Gubrium 1997). Consequently, the kind of research methodologies that are associated with symbolic interactionism and have been utilised in this study are the case study and grounded theory (Gray 2004). Referring back to Crotty's model this research has (a) constructivism as the epistemological stance informed by (b) symbolic interaction as the theoretical perspective with (c) the case study and grounded theory as the principle research methodology and data gathering methods drawing on a variety of empirical materials including (d) interview, observational and documentary material. With this emphasis on fieldwork, descriptions and perceptions a qualitative approach enabled

informants to 'describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual lives' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994:2). It was this methodological framework and the following guidance from Ruane (2005: 49) that informed the negotiations with the study authority:

> If theory offers ideas (concepts) about how the world works, research is about empirically documenting (showing) whether or not those ideas are correct.

The Case Study Approach

Careful planning and design of a research study is imperative to ensure that enough data of a suitable quality can be generated for analysis of a particular phenomenon (Edwards and Talbot 1999). This study is essentially a qualitative case study that has enabled the exploration of one phenomenon, incorporating data from a variety of sources of evidence. The case study approach has allowed me to explore the issues in some depth, gain insight and develop knowledge and understanding of the lives of young people and their carers, which would not have been achievable with other methods of enquiry (Denscombe 2002). The case study approach lends itself to the study of the unique lives of individuals, whist attempting to address features of 'cause and effect' (Cohen et al. 2001). It has been found to be appropriate for exploring social work organisational issues including decision-making, communication and stress factors (Spath and Pine 2004). The case study, while an effective methodological approach, must ensure that it is not partisan, a criticism sometimes directed at case studies that are not thorough and unbiased in the representation of findings (Yin, 1994). The aim has not been to develop some singular 'idiosyncratic' (Yin 1994; Mason 2002) method of enquiry, but rather add to a body of research in this field. I wanted the research to engage closely with the debate about what is happening to looked after young people in terms of their care and education. Throughout the study I have attempted to adopt a reflective approach as urged by Fook (1996:9) who suggests:

> Any approach to understanding social work should necessarily integrate theorising, researching and practising. A process of reflection of practice might thus involve the potential for theory development, research enquiry and practice involvement.

The case study approach allowed for a process of discovery (Sherman and Reid 1994; Padgett 1998), of finding out from the 'authentic' (see Silverman 1994: 8) views of young people, carers and social workers their perceptions of why some young people who are

looked after fair so poorly in their educational experiences and outcomes. The study attempts to make sense of the fact that we have research, legislation, policy and rhetoric all advocating the need for 'joined up thinking' with regard to this group of young people, but at the point of completing this study, outcomes in education for the sample were still less favourable than the wider population. While there have been many research projects since the 1970s examining the consequences of residential and foster care on young people there is still a gap in the literature on their views of education and how they experience it. Francis (2000:25) puts the point clearly:

> Although a wealth of information has been produced about many aspects of the lives of children who are looked after away from home, educational experiences of such children has usually been given limited attention.

Participatory research with children and young people

A conscious decision was made in the design of the research that young people would be directly involved and their views would be elicited at a number of junctures. I did not attempt to replicate earlier and important research that informs social work practice (see Parker 1966; Rowe et al. 1989; Birchall and Hallett 1995) and whose orientation was *about* children, rather than *with* children. Instead I wanted to research looked after pupils as active participants believing that their participation would not only reinforce their status as individuals with an inherent right to be heard, but also that their contribution would provide data that was personal, meaningful, rich and complex. Grover (2004: 90) sums up the stance I sought to apply:

> Allowing children to be active participants in the research process enhances their status as individuals with inherent rights to participation in society more generally and the right to be heard in their authentic voice.

This conceptualisation of childhood influenced and shaped the methodology as the young people were seen as 'social agents' (Qvortrup 1994) rather than on a developmental course to adulthood. Harden et al. (2000:4) agree thus:

> Interviews can offer unique insights into the experiences of respondents, allowing them to describe and explain their social worlds.

The importance of this participatory approach (see Hill 1997a: 172) is enshrined in the Children Act 1989, so it seemed appropriate that it should be included in my method of data collection.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues such as the worthiness, relevance and benefit of the study were considered at all stages of the research process from research design through to the writing of this thesis (Punch 2001; Mason 2002). As with other qualitative research involving young people I put ethics at the forefront of the process (Roussoul 2004). A number of sources were consulted which considered ethical issues and offered a lens through which I dealt with aspects of confidentiality, boundaries, consent and intrusiveness (Miles and Huberman 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Punch 2001; Denscombe 2002; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). Various frameworks, codes of conduct and protocols informed my understanding and handling of aspects of the methodology, such as anonymity of respondents, research setting and the importance of representing the views of respondents accurately (Butler 2002; Mason 2002; Ruane 2005).

British Sociological Association ethical guidelines (2002) were adhered to, for example, pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis. Punch (2001: 282) advises 'codes of conduct are helpful here in sensitizing researchers to the possible issues'. However, it was difficult to anticipate all of the ethical issues that presented themselves during the research project (Delamont 2002). This is not unusual for as Alderson (2004) notes, when children are in a powerless or vulnerable position various ethical issues are likely to surface. However, those that were not anticipated were dealt with in a responsible way (Mason 2002). Punch (2001: 281) points out that:

> Some qualitative research deals with the most sensitive, intimate and innermost matters in people's lives, and ethical issues inevitably accompany the collection of such information.

Gaining informed consent as well as guarantying anonymity and confidentiality can be considered key principles of research, (David and Sutton 2004) as well as ensuring that an individual is not harmed or exploited by the research procedures (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). I was conscious that for some of the young people I interviewed as well as some

parents and fostercarers, there were aspect of their lives that were definitely 'off limits'. I felt I was aware and competent enough as an interviewer to recognise which aspects were too sensitive and I respected their right to privacy (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). I was conscious that the main subjects of my research, the young people, had often experienced traumatic and troubled lives and for that reason alone the goal of research was not at any costs and the ethical aspects were consistently under review (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

I used Alderson's (2004:108) guide on 'disrespectful methods' to ensure that, for example, I did not talk down to children or assume that could not speak for themselves or reinforce negative stereotypes about young people. My experience in interviewing children as a social worker and in particular as a Guardian ad Litem, representing the wishes and feelings of children in court proceedings, was a particularly relevant and transferable skill in this research context.

All of the participants were made aware of the plans for the storage of the data and how the final report and any dissemination would anonymise their identity and the research setting. Issues of confidentiality and its limitations were also discussed at numerous junctions across the fieldwork phases.

An ethical child centred approach

I considered how, and if, research with young people is very different from that with adults (Punch 2002) and concluded that young people had the right to be consulted, that they needed to be approached in a respectful manner (Morrow and Richards 1996) and have information provided to them in an age appropriate way. I developed the research strategy in the belief that if these basic conditions were in place young people would want to be involved. The research study carried out by Stafford et al. (2003) concluded that children want to be consulted if research is to be done properly and issues of education are often on the top of their list. I was aware of the power imbalance between the young people and myself and ensured I took time to develop rapport, not impose my views, check for validity and reliability, consider the research context and the clarity of the questions (Punch 2002). I had to be aware of my role as a researcher and ensure that my questioning was neither leading or unethical.

The ethical issues of involving children and young people in research is always an area for serious consideration (Morrow and Richards 1996) and where these young people are being looked after by the local authority (and by virtue of this status, they could be considered some of the most vulnerable) the ethical considerations are even more compelling. I did not want them to feel they had to be involved, neither did I want the 'gate keeping' to be so rigid that they were excluded based on the decisions solely of an adult agenda. As with other research (Thomas and O' Kane 1998; Harden et al. 2000), I wanted them to make the decision to be involved, or not, on an informed basis. The process of identifying and approaching looked after children in research is time-consuming and can be highly bureaucratic in relation to gate-keeping by adult professionals and carers and is well documented in other research (Butler and Williamson 1994; Thomas and Kane 1998; Heptinstall 2000; Cree et al. 2002).

D'Cruz and Jones (2004:33) point out that, 'unlike its representation in the textbooks, actual research is not neat orderly and problem free'. A notable example occurred when I made a visit to interview a young person, Leonard (fictitious names are used throughout this thesis), who was living with his grandmother. This was a second interview with Leonard; it took place in the grandmother's home. The focus of the interview was to explore the events around and outcome of Leonard's SATS examinations. Towards the end of the interview, which was tape recorded, Leonard got into a heated argument with his grandmother about his right to have some money that she was looking after for him. This argument escalated resulting in Leonard's behaviour oscillating between that of a young child having a temper tantrum, lying on the ground beating the floor and crying, to more threatening outbursts of shouting, swearing, knocking over furniture and kicking and banging doors. Leonard also physically threatened his grandmother. Whilst Leonard was in this state of high emotion and aggression I did not think I could leave the house, fearing that it might leave the grandmother in a vulnerable position. Leonard stomped around, in and out of the house, shouting and swearing abuse at his grandmother for about half an hour. Eventually, seeming to realise he was not going to get any money from her, he entered the lounge where we were sitting, he carried a litre bottle of vodka saying he was going to drink the vodka, steal some money from someone or somewhere, 'get stoned' and 'end it all'. With this proclamation he stormed out of the house. Given these circumstances, I needed to shelve (temporarily) my role as objective researcher and take action to safeguard these two potentially vulnerable individuals. After further discussion and consultation with the grandmother I decided to phone Leonard's

social worker. Both the grandmother and I spoke to the worker who was able to activate a crisis intervention plan to look for Leonard and mediate between him and his grandmother.

This example demonstrates some of the tensions and dilemmas in this type of research. Afterwards I gave this situation a great deal of thought, considering the possible risks to the young person, the grandmother and indeed myself. This reflexive position allowed me to consider in future interviews the potential for highly charged encounters and to be more conscious in the rapport stage of 'interpersonal relationships and dynamics' (Darlington and Scott 2002:46). Given the circumstances I believe I behaved in a responsible and professional manner. Though as Darlington and Scott (2002: 34) state:

> Ultimately many of the dilemmas require individual judgements based on the characteristics of specific situations.

My overall aim for this study has been to treat all aspects of the process with honesty, professionalism, transparency and rigour. In addition to that I constantly reflected on the words of Ruane (2005:29) and aimed to:

> Safeguard the well-being of research subjects and to treat them with dignity and respect.

Negotiating Access

As I had worked for the social services department as an independent trainer they had prior knowledge of me long before I sought access. As noted elsewhere (Thomas and O'Kane 1998), being seen as something of an 'insider' due to my own professional social work background, gave credibility and was useful for gaining the confidence of the gatekeepers to the study department. I had also worked with some of the senior management team but in different agencies in the past and this too enabled me to gain access and support for the study. I stressed my credentials as a social worker and emulated Salisbury (1994:31), who when discussing access to an education setting went about 'stressing my biography as a teacher over and above my identity as a PhD candidate'. Although I did not need to directly employ the tactics suggested by Bryman (2001) such as seeking a 'champion' to gain entry I still had to engage in detailed discussions with senior managers who acted as 'gate keepers' (Lofland 1971: 95). I followed up these preliminary discussions with a written outline research

proposal. The fact that I was known to the organisation clearly lent some advantage in negotiating the research and gaining access, but as a researcher I had to be conscious of the methodological and ethical issues of being seen as an 'insider' (Coffey, 1999) and the implications of this for the study aims.

The 'gatekeeping' process to young people

In order to gain access to the young people I had to negotiate what is termed a 'hierarchy of consent'. This involved a number of gate keeping processes. Firstly involving the senior managers, middle managers, social workers, parents and then through foster carers or residential carers. It was felt prudent to keep a checklist for each individual case in order to enable the 'tracking' of consent (see appendix1) as this process was multi-layered and time consuming. This was in part to do with the number of people that had a legal parental responsibility for the young people. So for example, a young person who was looked after under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, could have a mother, or a father, or both parents with parental responsibility. In addition the social worker involved with the young person needed to know of the study and give approval so as to ensure being involved in the research would not cause any harm or adverse effects (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Ruane 2005). I also needed to get permission from the care location, either foster or residential care. This involved liaising with foster carers or the residential unit manager and key worker.

When it was agreed in principle that the young person could be involved, I then considered the range of additional ethical issues arising in research with children and young people (Darlington and Scott 2002). These included: informed consent, limits to confidentiality, payment, and the impact on the young person (Hill 2005). Whilst essentially some of these were no different to research involving adults, I customised, put in place and developed a number of research processes to make certain that they were appropriate for young people. I ensured that the information they received was provided in a leaflet that had simple but clearly explained details, a friendly typeface with appropriate and colourful graphics (see appendix 2). I outlined in writing and verbally their 'rights' during the interviews, for example the fact that they could take breaks or terminate the interview. When considering young people's involvement in the research Darlington and Scott's (2002: 101) warning was heeded:

> Older children are in a much better position to vote with their feet - both in terms of whether they agree to be part of the research involved and as it proceeds.

Valuable, feasible and applicable research

A major advantage in gaining access was that the organisation clearly saw my research 'dovetailing' with initiatives they already had in place to improve the outcomes for looked after children. In brief, the research was regarded by gatekeepers as valuable and feasible (Padggett, 1998) as well as applicable to, and informing, an evidence based practice model (Shaw, 1999). I was keen to avoid my study being perceived by others as 'top down' expertise (Dullea and Mullender, 1999) instead I wanted to explore aspects of practice that were of interest across the education and care setting. The research proposal was thus perceived by managers and practitioners as timely and relevant. The proposal underwent in depth scrutiny concerning the time involvement of social workers in interviews and perceived usefulness of the research project and the ethical issues for service users. This close examination is not unexpected (see Heptinstall, 2000) and indeed is appropriate given that the main subjects involved in the research, looked after children, are some of the most vulnerable young people in society.

Fieldwork Relationships

Although negotiating access was relatively straightforward, albeit time consuming, I was aware of the need to maintain relationships in the field. I was entering the domain of social work at a time when people within the profession were feeling particularly demoralised. The inquiry into the highly publicised tragedy of Victoria Climbié was in process; the indications were that the findings would reveal yet another case where key professionals were guilty of poor practice (see Laming 2003). The organisational and practice issues highlighted in the Climbié Report resonated in the local child care team where the study was based. This team too was also depleted, blighted by problems of recruitment and retention of social workers, and in their view chronically under funded. This environment, it was argued, thwarted any preventative work with children and families to reduce neglect and maltreatment - the reason that most came into the profession. Even without the poor morale issue I was aware how social workers are sometimes resistant to their work being viewed by an outsider. As Pithouse (1984: 20) noted in his ethnography of a child care team:

> Social workers cherish their sense of autonomy and would not happily enjoy the presence of an outsider sitting next to them conspicuously making notes of their conversations, phone calls and so forth.

Ongoing relationships with the team needed to be nurtured. A turning point in how I was perceived came about through what Delamont (2002: 147) would call a 'critical incident'. The incident manifested itself when members of the looked after team realised that I was travelling great distances in order to interview young people on their caseloads. News spread within the team that I had conducted a 5-hour round trip to interview a young woman but because of a breakdown in communication between the care placement and social services I had not been notified that the young person had gone home for a visit. When a couple of team members mentioned it to me I said, ''Yes, disappointing, but I have been back since and met with her, so I am pleased about that''. To which the response was, ''What! You went back again. Wow, that is commitment, you meant what you said when you said you wanted the views of young people''. This incident was significant in that I was perceived by the social work team as someone who was committed to involving young people in the research and this in turn meant I was seen as trustworthy and taken seriously.

Informing participants

All of the participants were given information about the research; the purpose was set in a local and national context and the relevance for practitioners in the fields of education, social work and social care were outlined. This information was tailored to the particular interest, roles and responsibilities of each participant, so for example the information given to foster carers had a different emphasis than that given to teachers. This was done in writing at the access stage and again verbally, where questions were invited before an interview. Although the organisation in terms of the social services department and the education department gave consent for the research and allowed access, there was a sense that this negotiated access also committed individuals to be involved. The organisation had in effect given consent on behalf of their employees (Denscombe 2002). However, I was aware of the need to renegotiate their agreement especially as many professionals cited pressure of work and other priorities as a reason not to be involved. I was aware of the need to be gently persuasive and not bullish. Often a discussion about the importance of evidence-based practice and the relevance of the study, as well as promises about fitting in with their time availability convinced them to be involved. Denscombe (2002: 189) warns researchers that:

> Participants are not obliged to go along with research even if they have initially agreed. They are free to withdraw at any time and should be aware of this.

This was useful advice that I kept in mind throughout the study.

Research questions and sampling strategy

With access in place and the over-arching aims and objectives approved, the research questions needed to be feasible, relevant, researchable and ethical. I was aware that the topics of research should be formulated as clearly and unambiguously as possible but also have enough scope to generate interesting lines of enquiry (David and Sutton 2004; D'Cruz and Jones 2004; Flick 2004). The broad research questions were outlined in Chapter One, but to re-cap in brief, they were:

1. How do young people in the looked after system perceive their experiences of school and educational achievement.
2. How do parents, foster carers, residential carers, social workers and teachers explain and support the achievements (or otherwise) of a group of looked after young people.
3. What can we learn from the care and school experiences and outcomes of a sample of looked after young people over a three-year period.

The aims and objectives of the study were addressed by a research design that comprised a longitudinal study mapping the educational trajectories of a group of looked after young people (N=14) through school years 9, 10 and 11. Their educational experiences were captured via a qualitative picture of key events in the young people's lives and the influences of significant individuals including parent's, foster carers, social workers and teachers and the possible effects of policy changes (Children [Leaving Care] Act 2002) and the impact of local initiatives such as the recently implemented Looked After Children and Education Team (LACE), now a feature in many local authorities.

The criterion for selection was to include all the young people in school Year 9 who were being looked after for the foreseeable future in the study authority, termed here as Glendale County Borough Council. This included those young people who were being looked after on a voluntary basis (section 20, Children Act 1989) and those who were the subject of a care order (section 31, Children Act 1989). The sample comprised fourteen teenagers who were

all the relevant children (i.e. all of the young people of that age who were looked after in the study authority) at the start of the research period. They were aged 13-14 years and their educational attainment, at the end of Key Stage 3, was measured via Standard Attainment Tests and Tasks (SATS) in May 2002 and GCSEs in 2004. These young people were tracked through school years 9, 10 and 11. They comprised eight boys and six girls, a full profile is provided in Chapter Six.

Interview sources: children, carers and professionals

I conducted some 126 interviews and transcribed just over 50 hours of tape-recorded material. The interviews were of five types (which I define later) (i) semi-structured interviews that averaged one hour (ii) telephone interviews that averaged thirty minutes (iii) opportunistic interviews that averaged forty five minutes (iv) focus group interviews that averaged one hour and forty five minutes and v) group interviews that averaged one hour and fifteen minutes. The respondents involved in these interviews comprised young people, professionals and carers. The following tables and narrative describe the number and nature of these different types of research encounter.

Interviews with young people 2001-2004

In the sample of fourteen young people, three were unavailable for interviews. Of the remaining, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted in school Year 9. Eight young people in the sample were available for interview in school Year 10. In school Year 11 six young people in the sample plus a telephone interview with one young person was accomplished. All of the semi-structured interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The reasons for attrition in the sample will be discussed in due course.

Table 1: Interviews with young people

June 2001	**School year 2001/2002**	**School year 2002/2003**	**School year 2003/2004**	**Summary of interviews**
Identification of sample· Young people (n=14)	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	1 interview with 11 young people
	Key Stage 3 (SATS)	Key Stage 4	Key Stage 4 (GCSE)	2 interviews with 8 young people
	11 of sample involved	8 of sample involved	7 of sample involved (including 1 telephone interview)	3 interviews with 7 young people

Interviews with social workers

Fourteen social workers including a team manager were interviewed. As it proved difficult to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with all of the social workers who had a young person from the sample on their case load (due to their work pressures) telephone interviews were negotiated. In addition, after agreement with senior managers, 12 days were spent in the social work team collecting secondary data as well as conducting opportunistic interviews (see below). Of the 14 social workers some were interviewed on 1 to 6 occasions because they had more than one child on their case load (see Table 2). Some children had more than one social worker during the study period, thus two different social workers may connect with one child. Six of the semi-structured interviews with social workers were audio taped (one was not) four were transcribed verbatim on the basis that saturation has been achieved by this point (see Bryman 2004: 350).

Table 2: Interviews with social workers (N=14)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
S	O	T	O	T	S	T	O	S	O	O	S	O	S
O				O	O		O		T	T	T	T	
T							T					S	
O							S						
T							O						
O							O						

S = semi-structured interview T= telephone interview O= opportunistic interview

Interviews with teachers

Nine teachers from seven schools were interviewed, including two deputy head teachers, five heads of year and two designated teachers. Where teachers were interviewed more than once this was usually in relation to the particular role they had with looked after children, or in order to discuss examination results as these arose over the three years. The mode of interview is highlighted below. Nine of the semi-structured interviews were audio-taped and seven were transcribed verbatim, two were not for reasons of saturation (Bryman 2004: 350). Pre-arranged telephone interviews were conducted when it proved difficult to arrange semi-structured interviews (due to the teacher's school and classroom commitments). Opportunistic interviews took place during a social services and education training event where the theme was looked after children.

Table 3: Interviews with teachers (N=9)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
S	T	T	S	T	T	S	S	S
		T	S	S				S
		S	T					T
			T					T
			T					O
			O					

S = semi-structured interview
T= telephone interview
O= opportunistic interview

Interviews with carers

Three parents, two grandparents, seven foster carers and five residential workers were interviewed; they were sometimes interviewed more than once. Two parent semi-structured interviews were recorded and one was transcribed verbatim. Ten foster carer semi-structured interviews were recorded and three were transcribed verbatim, one telephone interview was conducted but not recorded. Again, saturation was often soon achieved and partial or non-transcription followed. Four residential workers were interviewed, including the manager of one residential unit, were recorded and three were transcribed verbatim. Two opportunistic interviews were conducted with residential workers.

Table 4: Interviews with carers

Parents			Grand parents		Foster carers							Residential workers				
1	2	3	1	2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5
S	T	T	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	O	S	S	S
S			T	S				S	S	S					T	O
				T						T						

S=semi-structured interview T=telephone interview O= opportunistic interview

Interviews with the LACE team

The LACE team manager was interviewed six times; three semi-structured interviews were recorded and two were transcribed verbatim and three were opportunistic interviews. Semi-structured recorded interviews were conducted with an educational psychologist, education welfare officer and two teachers. Opportunistic interviews were also conducted with two LACE teachers (these occurred when pre-arranged interviews with other members of the team failed to take place).

Table: 5 Interviews with LACE professionals				
LACE manager	**Ed. psyc**	**Ed. welfare officer**	**Teacher 1**	**Teacher 2**
S S S O O O	S	S	S O	S O

S=semi-structured interview O= opportunistic interview

Focus groups, observations and group interviews

Four focus groups were conducted; two in the LACE team and two in the social work team and all were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observation days were carried out in the social work and LACE teams during which time secondary data were collected and opportunistic interviews conducted. Five mixed group interviews were conducted, four in the first two years of the study and one in the final year with management representatives from education, social services and the LACE team.

Table 6: Focus groups and group interviews.	
Focus groups	
LACE team	2
Social work team	2
Group Interviews	5

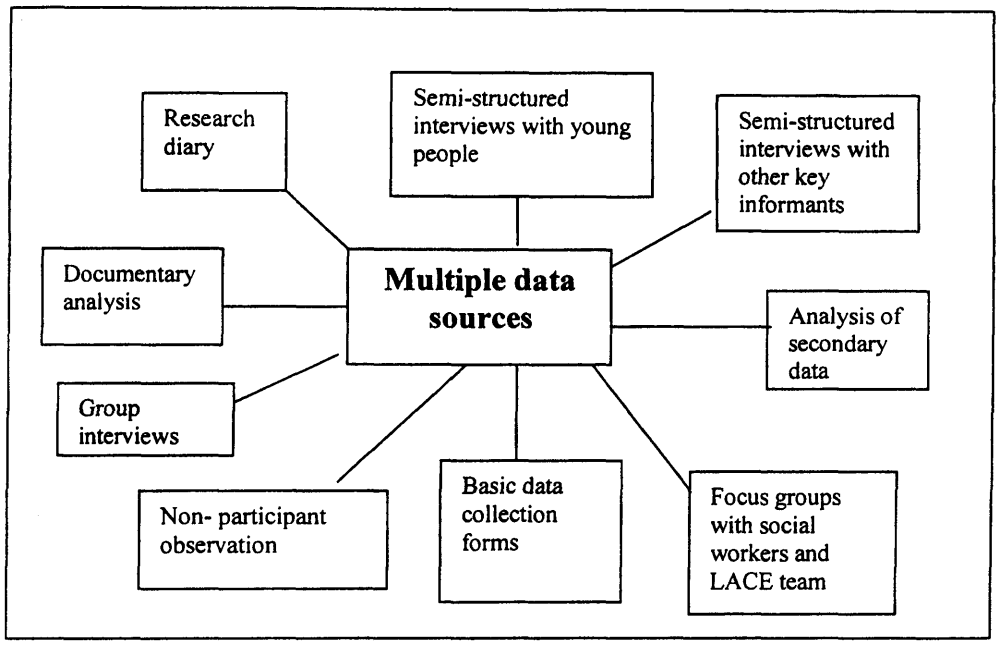
Of the two focus groups with the LACE team there were six participants in each group. The two focus groups with the social work team comprised of ten and eight participants. In the group interviews with professionals from social services and education, there were between eight and four participants in these group interviews. Table 7 overleaf, summarises all interviews and observation periods.

Table 7: Distribution of individual and group interviews and observation periods		
Type	**Number**	**Total all**
Semi-structured interviews with young people	25	
Telephone interview	1	26
Semi-structured interviews with social workers	7	
Telephone interviews with social workers	10	
Opportunistic interviews with social workers	14	31
Semi-structured interviews with teachers	9	
Telephone interviews with teachers	10	
Opportunistic interviews with education representatives	2	21
Semi-structured interviews with parents/ grandparents	5	
Telephone interviews with parents/grandparents	4	9
Semi-structured interviews with foster carers	10	
Telephone interview with foster carers	1	11
Semi-structured interviews with residential workers	4	
Telephone interview with residential worker	1	
Opportunistic interviews with residential workers	2	7
Interviews with LACE manager	3	
Opportunistic interview with LACE manager	3	
Interviews with LACE representative	4	
Opportunistic interviews with LACE representatives	2	12
Focus groups with social workers	2	
Focus group with LACE team	2	4
Group interviews	5	5
Total all		**126**
Observation in social work teams	12 days	
Observation in LACE team	4 days	

There will now be a detailed discussion of the above methods and events and the analyses of the data these generated. To begin with, in order that a case study can be as probing as possible, Yin (1994) suggests the gathering of varied sources of evidence such as: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts. Several of these sources informed this study and offered some elementary corroboration of findings, which helped to promote rigour and to increase confidence in the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Bryman 2001). This data collection method is

evident in other studies of child welfare, Holland (1999) for example, collected data by similar methods; interviewing social workers, reading case recording and observing interactions and conversations in the work place.

Figure 1: Case study data sources



Documentary evidence

Data were collected from the authority's Looked After Children Assessment and Action Records, computer records and from individual social work case files. It was anticipated that this would include a range of relevant information on care status, case history, placement type, length of time looked after, circumstances leading to being looked after, educational attainment prior to being looked after, placement changes, school changes, and exclusions from schools. Data on school attendance, statementing, past SATS achievements, and SATS results were also collected via a pre-tested information form as well as at other key points (e.g. in the event of a school exclusion). Social workers were requested to complete these information forms (see appendix 3) for the specific young people on their caseload. This material was supplemented by information held on case files, to which I was granted access.

Information forms were collected at the end of each term on all of the young people to monitor their attendance at school and record any instances of exclusion. It was intended that these secondary sources would provide a comparative data base and contextual profile on

each young person. It was also hoped that the aggregation of this material would help generate specific characteristics of the authority's looked after population that could assist in strategic planning for the needs of this group. Such secondary data was useful for 'contextualizing' (Gorard, 2003) the lives and experiences of the young people in the study and politeness and persistence was essential in obtaining this material from busy professionals.

Interviews and interviewing

Coming from a social work background where interviewing is a core skill in working with clients I felt I had proven capacity in this method of data collection. As D'Cruz and Jones agree (2004:111):

> This familiarity with interviewing as a 'social work skill' shows how social workers already have some connection with a key ability required for social work research.

Interviews were conducted with key individuals involved in the lives of the sampled young people. These interviews concentrated on perspectives, views, opinions, relationships, settings and practices that are thought to influence decisively the way needs and services are defined and provided to the 'looked after' young person. There was a broad education focus to the questions, but essentially the purpose of the interviews were two-fold, firstly to find out the sorts of knowledge and information shared by professionals about the lives of 'looked after' young people and secondly to gain some understanding of how respondents viewed the issues from their specific professional and individual perspectives. Rubin and Rubin (1995:3) suggest:

> Qualitative interviews listen to people as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live and work.

The plan was to interview 'significant adults' involved with the young people, these were defined as people that the young person lived with; this included foster carers and key workers in residential care. Birth parents were only approached if (a) they exercised active 'parental responsibility' (b) if the young person maintained contact and (c) if in discussion with the young person's social worker, it was felt appropriate. For example, I was actively discouraged from contacting a father who although legally had 'parental responsibility' was serving a prison sentence for the murder of the young person's mother. Sadly, the young

person witnessed this tragedy and this precipitated his reception into care. Thus, ethical decisions to protect all subjects from harm were made regularly. I attempted to interview the young people's social workers, key education representatives, either their form tutor or a designated 'looked after children representative'. I hoped, by involving individuals from different perspectives I would generate data 'representing a wide range of views and situations to build up a broad understanding of the topic' (Darlington and Scott (2002:53).

Process of interviews

Generally, all of the potential interviewees were contacted by letter and given details about the research and this was followed up with a telephone conversation to seek their agreement to become involved. At this stage I reiterated assurances about anonymity, confidentiality and the planned process for ultimate dissemination of the information. Interviews were arranged at mutually convenient times, but always at the work place or in the case of the young person at their foster home or residential home. Interviewees were asked their permission regarding audio recording of the interviews and informed about the process for keeping and storing information. Each interview started with a rapport stage in which I attempted to put the recipient at ease, followed by a semi-structured line of enquiry based on set topics. The aim was to have some structure to the process with a main question, a probe question if necessary, and a follow up question (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Participants were always asked if they would like to hear the recording, or if they would like any more information from me once I had listened to the tape. I always thanked them for their participation and suggested we keep contact open in case something of relevance arose at a later point in time.

Semi-structured interviews with young people

Individual interviews, and specifically semi-structured interviews, are one of the most popular methods of participatory research, particularly with young people as they allow for the young person to be seen in a one-to-one situation that generates rich data. May (2001: 120) reminds researchers that:

> Interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings.

In order to generate such, I felt it was important to ask the question 'person to person' (Fontana and Frey 1994) rather than through a less direct method, such as a questionnaire. This was important for the young people in my sample as some of the information they were sharing was of a personal nature. Given the need to maximise my data gathering in this small study I sought permission from the authority and the young people to audio tape the interviews. Tape recorded interviews have a number of advantages (Yin 1994; Fook 1996; Arksey and Knight 1999) and in this study they allowed me to concentrate on and respond to the often sensitive information given by the young people. A protocol was agreed with the local authority about disclosure of matters that might have a bearing on the safety and well-being of children. This included discussions and deliberations about the ethics of offering the young people a form of payment for their involvement in the research. The local authority funded the payment of five pounds per interview which was given to them by me in the form of a gift voucher. In line with similar research involving young people this acknowledged 'their time and in recognition of their valuable contribution' (Cashmore and Paxman 2006: 234).

The tape recorded, semi-structured interview allowed me and the respondent to 'move' with and probe the issues as they surfaced; it also allowed me to re-visit the interaction (Silverman 2000; Bryman 2001). The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for a fluid and flexibile approach to the discussion with the young people, as Butler and Williamson (1994: 30) note:

> Talking to children and young people does not lend itself to tight structures and defined sequences. Children jump around and researchers have to jump around with them, seizing opportunities to probe and explore issues further.

The focus of the first interview at the beginning of school Year 9 (September/October) was to gauge their attitudes to school, aspirations and hopes for achievement (see appendix 4) and then interview again at the end of the academic year (June/July) when their achievements at Key Stage 3 could be analysed against national averages and peers with similar profiles. At the second and third interview, information was collected about what these young people saw as the presence or absence of factors likely to have influenced their school experience and academic achievements (see also Jackson and Thomas 2000). These interviews elicited retrospective accounts and the data generated at this stage inevitably contained 'post hoc

rationalisations' coloured by the process and outcome of SATS and GCSEs as experienced by respondents.

Reflections on interviewing young people

During these stages of data collection, as with all stages, I considered and reflected on the process of the semi-structured interview. I considered the use of vignettes as discussed by Barter and Renold (2000) in their study of peer violence in children's homes, where vignettes were used when children and young people were unable to discuss sensitive issues. I also drew on Delamont (2002: 172) who advises:

> Read other people's work – for ideas, models, parallels, contrasts, metaphors, etc. Read the methodological literature properly and think about how it can inform your work.

Whilst I did not use techniques such as the written vignette described by Barter and Renold (2000), I occasionally presented verbal hypothetical situations to the young people based on real life examples in order to help create and develop a conducive environment. Methods such as vignettes and 'task centred' activities (Harden et al. 2000) are becoming more common in interviews with children and young people. I was aware of their potential for building rapport and encouraging children to express their views. I believe I was able to develop an approach that built rapport, was flexible, sensitive and if appropriate would incorporate occasional stimuli for discussion. I continued to be reflexive about my role as a researcher rather than a social worker and about the choices and decisions taken in the process of researching the young people (Harden et al. 2000). I was aware of perceived issues of power and status between researcher and participant (Silverman 2000; Mason 2002) and as noted by Scourfield et al. (2006:29) I recognised that 'interviews with children in particular can place heavy demands on children to conform to the social expectations of the adults'. I made every effort in the preamble to the interview to dispel the idea that there were any 'right answers' but that the emphasis was on their experiences and views.

Reflections on interviewing carers and professionals

I was aware that respondents might be cautious about their involvement in the research depending upon their relationship with the study authority, for example whether they were receiving a service (as a parent) or providing a service (as foster a carer). It was important to relinquish my former role as a social worker and emphasise my status as an apprentice-

researcher, this latter identity appeared to be both unthreatening and motivating for the participants. This reflexive stance was adopted throughout the study process (see Fook 2003: 43). Interviewing professionals demanded perseverance, flexibility, patience and negotiation. Whilst with some participants the interviews ran smoothly, I was also faced with a range of difficulties such as participants not turning up. A number of times I had to adapt research plans at a moment's notice (Hallowell et al. 2005). This process of reflection allowed me to examine my impact on the research, as well as adapting the research process to the needs of the participants, without compromising the overall objectives.

Opportunistic research

Opportunistic research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) was utilised in the form of observation whilst visiting the various fieldwork sites. Information gleaned from observations and visits were recorded in field notes. It was intended to undertake interviews with all social workers who had a relevant young person on their personal caseload. However, this proved difficult due to staff vacancies in the looked after team and consequent scarcity of time and opportunity. Indeed, Pithouse (1984: 22) wrote some twenty years ago:

> The would-be apprentice researcher is in no position to enforce his or her research ambitions when dependent on the goodwill of the research subject.

These words remain pertinent today and underpinned my careful approach to potential informants.

Whilst the social workers and managers were in principle very positive about the research I was aware that due to problems of recruitment and retention of social workers there was a culture of 'survival'. Social workers found it difficult to complete data collection tasks and frequently cut short, postponed or cancelled arrangements I had made for interviews. Whilst initially I had not planned to spend long periods of time in the team office this eventually became essential in order to gain the information on individual files as part of my data collection. Social work staff did not have the time to retrieve this data so I had to undertake much of this 'clerking' work myself. In fact these periods proved valuable in gaining the data I needed, and in witnessing the stresses within the depleted team. My presence there also meant that I was privy to discussions between team members, the manager, telephone conversations, and at times I was able to unobtrusively observe meetings between social workers and young people. While David and Sutton (2004:108) argue that 'covert research

involves deception', I would suggest it was 'appropriate, given the purposes of the research and the circumstances in which it is to be carried out' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 74). The participants all knew the purpose of my presence in the team room. May (2001: 174) summarises well how I saw and explained my role:

> By listening and experiencing, impressions are formed and theories considered, reflected upon, developed and modified.

This opportunistic approach paid dividends as social workers who I had difficulty contacting previously were making themselves known to me and using 'windows' of time to converse with me about the young people on their case loads, thereby taking part in an interview as a guided conversation (Rubin and Rubin 1995). These inconspicuous and informative opportunities confirmed and supplemented my understanding of the life and culture of a busy statutory social services child care team room, with about 40 social workers trying to deliberate, negotiate and make plans in some of the most complex and taxing child and family situations.

Focus and group interviews

Social work team meetings and the meetings of the looked after children and education team (LACE) were attended in order to conduct focus groups. For the purpose of these groups I adopted Morgan's (2004:264) definition which locates the interaction in a group discussion as the source of data and acknowledges the researcher's active role in creating the group for data collection purposes. It proved possible to facilitate the session as well as 'hear' the different interests and concerns within the team. I was not only interested in what individuals were saying to me, in terms of knowledge, attitudes and practices (Morgan 2004) but also how they were saying it (Bryman 2001). I was interested to hear their collective perceptions and views around the research topics, as Gomm (2004: 172) suggests 'in the group they may 'talk the talk' of the organisation'. Conducting the focus group allowed for a wide ranging, efficient and effective discussion of some of the resource and organisational difficulties faced by the social workers. Padgett (1998:64) comments on the fitness for purpose of this approach:

> Focus group interviewing in social work research is particularly well suited to the studies of organisations and of professional issues.

The quality of the data produced from a focus group depends very much on how much time the researcher invests in planning the event. Whilst initially focus groups may appear and have the advantage of being cost effective, to be productive they need to be well-planned and take account of quality factors such as appropriate participants, clarity of purpose and appropriate environment (Krueger 1993). Although the optimum number for a focus group is debatable, most suggest between 6 and 10 (Krueger 1994; 1993; Gomm 2004) however, it was not possible for me to dictate attendance at my group. Whilst I may have preferred to facilitate a focus group for the sole purpose of the research, this more 'natural' setting of the team meeting was more favourable to the participants given the work pressures to which the team were exposed.

I planned four focus groups comprising two groups for social workers (a group of 10 and a group of 8, including social workers, the team manager, day support workers and a social work student) and two groups for the LACE team (two groups of 6 including the manager, educational psychologist, education welfare officer, teachers and a volunteer). I was aware that the theme of my research could be interpreted as some covert criticism of them as professionals. Therefore I was keen to create an open and permissive atmosphere (Morgan 1988). Some of the strategies I engaged to create this atmosphere were: building a rapport by offering a preamble that clearly set the issues of the research in a local and national context; framing my questions in a quizzical manner; asking what they would consider to be best practice alongside allowing them to draw on their own practice experience. It is evident from the tapes and the transcripts that members from the four groups felt able to participate. The groups were facilitated at separate times particularly at key stages pre and post examination periods. The approach I adopted acknowledged their experience and expertise. The respondents contributed with honesty, often reflecting on their own professional deficits.

The breadth and depth of debate and the enthusiastic manner in which they engaged with the focus group process would suggest that the discussions avoided pressures to conformity but allowed for 'the participants both to query each other and explain themselves to each other' (Morgan 2004: 272). The focus group allowed for discussion and debate that may not have been elicited in individual interviews or as Cohen et al. (2001: 288) suggest, focus groups 'yield insights that might not otherwise have been available'. Listening to the tape recording

and reading back through the transcripts of the groups it was possible to pick up on the interactions that provided a level of debate and discussion generating rich data. As Bloor et al. (2001: 22) note:

> Research participants who belong to pre-existing social groups may bring to the interaction comments about shared experiences and events and may challenge any discrepancies between expressed beliefs and actual behaviour and generally promote discussion and debate.

Thus the insights afforded through the focus group discussions were powerful and also helped to progress the ongoing work of the research project.

The research design also included meeting twice a year with a steering group, comprising of management representatives from education, social services and the LACE team, (with occasionally other interested individuals attending, such as the team manager from the fostering and adoption team). The purpose of these meetings was to up-date the authority on the progress of the research and if necessary to re-negotiate aspects of the access (such as spending additional days in the social work team). These meetings provided the opportunity for group interviews. These occasions proved to be valuable for discussing issues as they presented themselves in the study, for example the practice of placing children beyond the boundaries of the local authority. Ward (2004: 24) advises that 'researchers meet regularly with managers to explore the research findings as they become available and to assess their implications for the service'. Therefore these meetings provided valuable data as well as demonstrating how apprentice researchers can work in partnership with agencies.

Part 2: Making sense of data: management analysis and theorising

The analysis of data did not start after the data collection but was an ongoing process that allowed for what Okely (1994:21) describes as 'thinking through fieldwork'. This is in contrast to May (2001: 142) who says 'the hard work starts when the data are collected and the analysis begins'. The research design ensured that the data collection and analysis were developed together (D'Cruz and Jones 2004). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 142) advocate:

> The analysis of data is not a distinct stage of the research... to one degree or another, the analysis of data feeds into research design and data collection.

A framework for the analysis of data ensures that as well as a theory being developed out of the data the analysis informs the data collection, they 'proceed in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other' (Bryman 2001: 390). Therefore, after some data collection categories were identified, further data collection was undertaken guided by the emerging direction of the analysis. As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004a: 413) state:

> A grounded theory approach to social research helps researchers read carefully through their data; it helps them to uncover the major categories/concepts lodged deeply within their data, and ultimately brings to light the properties of these categories and their interrelationships.

Applying grounded theory

My qualitative analysis sought to interweave and test developing hypotheses and theorizing from interviews, documentary evidence, focus groups, and observation data. This was achieved via the method of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauus 1967; Orona 1997; Punch 1998; Silverman 2000), which I used in an iterative fashion both as a strategic approach to data collection as well as a method of analysing the data. Using Punch's (1998: 163) definition, 'grounded means that the theory will be generated on the basis of the data; the theory will therefore be grounded in data'. Or, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 205) comment regarding the work of Glaser and Strauss:

> This iterative process is central to the 'grounded theorizing' promoted by Glaser and Strauss, in which the theory is developed out of data analysis, and subsequent data collection is guided strategically by the emergent theory.

This theoretical approach felt most appropriate, comfortable and familiar; most probably because of the connections, parallels and similarities to direct social work practice which Gilgun (1994:115) acknowledges thus:

> Learning how to do this type of research and use the findings may feel natural to social work practitioners, like sliding a hand into a well made glove.

The grounded theory method is one which allows for introspection, intuition, reflection as well as analysis in the 'traditional' mode (Orona 1997: 179). This process continued until

new data confirmed what had already been established. This process of both data collection and theoretical reflection allowed for the findings and theory to be tested again in the field (Punch 1998; Bryman and Burgess 1994).

Data management

The categorisation and sorting of data is a systematic procedure whereby the information can be organised in such a way that allows for identification of themes, patterns, connections, similarities and differences. This coupled with the process of summarising and synthesising thereby enables data management and ongoing analysis to happen simultaneously (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; D'Cruz and Jones 2004). Although data analysis is not about sticking to one set of procedures I did find it useful in terms of data management and organization to build an analytic strategy into the research design at the outset (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

My analytic procedures were informed by a number of sources (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Huberman and Miles 1994; Coffey and Atkinson 1996) and some helpful and often re-visited 'basic rules' (Delamont 2002:171). After experimenting with different organisational arrangements for my data (Edwards and Talbot 1999; Delamont 2002) my eventual procedure is perhaps best described as 'conventional' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) in that it did not use computer software, however I attempted to ensure it was methodical, disciplined, rigorous, comprehensive and consistent.

Preparation for analysis: coding, contrasting, examining and comparing

There is no single, uniform, appropriate or standard way to go about data analysis (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Punch 1998), and as Coffey and Atkinson (1996:6) point out there is not a 'consensus about what the term *analysis* means in this context, let alone about the specific and precise formulation of strategies and techniques'. Whilst it is generally agreed there is not one way of doing analysis, it was important that I did have 'proper analytic procedures..... an important part of ensuring reliability and validity' (Delamont 2002:169). Therefore attempts were made to ensure that the analysis was formulated and that rigour and discipline were evidenced (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). This will be demonstrated by ensuring that the methods used in the analysis are transparent (Huberman and Miles 1994) and to that end, as mentioned earlier, grounded theory principles have been used. This involved organising the data into categories that could be coded, contrasted, examined and compared (Bryman 2001). The process of coding in qualitative research goes beyond just an

organisational procedure. As Charmaz (2004: 506) suggests, it is the 'pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain this data'. Bryman (2001: 392) describes coding as one of the most central processes in grounded theory.

> It entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be particularly salient within the worlds of those being studied.

It is therefore one of the main strategies that researchers will employ to locate key themes, concepts and patterns within their data (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004a).

Analytic memo writing

Whilst my data collection and analysis were intertwined, the writing of memos helped to integrate and highlight ideas, to 'bridge the gap between coding and first draft analysis' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004a: 413). Memos are seen as an aid to the generation of concepts and categories in grounded theory, they are useful in helping researchers to clarify ideas develop and evolve their thinking on aspects of the research (Bryman 2001). Hammersley and Atkins (1995: 191) suggest that these are:

> occasional written notes whereby progress is assessed, emergent ideas are identified, research strategy is sketched, and so on.

Memo writing was an important tool throughout this research project; it was also a progressive tool that often started as hunches, conjecture and ideas, building up to comparisons and links between the data. They were not just written memos but sometimes diagrams, lists and tables that enabled me to think creatively, critically and analytically. As the data collection continued in a systematic and developmental way, several memos were synthesized to incorporate interconnected ideas. I took advice from Strauss and Corbin (1998: 218):

> Writing memos and doing diagrams are important elements of analysis and never should be considered superfluous.....memoing and diagramming should begin with initial analysis and continue throughout the research process.

Software packages

Although it was fully considered, I decided not to use a software package to aid the analysis of the data. It is however increasingly recognised that computer packages such as Nud*ist, NVivo and Atlas/ti can assist the analysis of qualitative data (Coffey et al. 1996; Buston 1997), but it can also be the case that:

> Analytic procedures which appear rooted in standardisation, often mechanistic procedures, are no substitute for genuinely 'grounded' engagement with the data throughout the whole of the research process (Coffey et al. 1996: 11).

I recognise that in certain research methods, such as survey research, separate stages of data collection and analysis using computer packages may be appropriate. Also that qualitative data analysis software is increasingly available. I thought about and grappled with a number of the issues raised when deciding on the appropriateness of using a computer package. The disadvantages are sometimes summarised as creating a sense of distance from the data and the creative process (Coffey et al. 1996; Barry 1998; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004b). The advantages considered by Buston (1997: 15) include the way packages can make 'the management of a huge quantity of data relatively easy'. Whilst the advantages of computer packages are evident, I did not think the volume of data generated in this study made a manual analysis unwieldy. I was influenced by Coffey et al. (1996: 9) who maintain that:

> The underlying logic of coding and searching for coded segments differs little, if at all from manual techniques.

Computer packages are useful for coding, retrieving and mapping large amounts of textual data in a speedy and efficient manner; however, they cannot do the intellectual analysis (David and Sutton 2004). Nonetheless, they do provide, as Barry (1998:4) says, 'one more tool in my analysis armoury'. In brief, I wanted to immerse myself in the data, reading re-reading and becoming familiar with it. I did not want, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 12) point out to, 'make the assumption that computer assisted analysis is the only way to proceed'.

Although a computer assisted package was not used during the data collection and analysis the computer certainly was. Similar to the analysis described by Barry (1998) when using a

word processing package, I often gathered information from the case study into a narrative, developed codes and themes from the data and considered them in a table or diagrammatic format, informed by memos and field notes. Therefore the time spent reading and re reading the transcripts from interviews and focus groups as well as handling the data was part of the reflection. Throughout I remained close to the original material and recognised as do D'Cruz and Jones (2004: 156) that:

> Many qualitative researchers who have used computers for organizing and coding their data still return to the transcripts to conduct the interpretative aspect of analysis that computers cannot do.

Analysis

The data for analysis came from a variety of sources including interview transcripts, documents, field notes, memos. The analytical process was generally one of listening, reading, transcribing, coding for storage and retrieval, coding for analysis, and writing from a thematical perspective. I attempted to read my data on different levels; 'literally, interpretively and reflexively' (Mason 2002:148). And although it was sometimes difficult to separate these different functions it did ensure the data had a thorough reading. These distinct stages ensured that I explored the content of the data, the possible inference drawn from the data and how my role or presence impacted on the data collection and analysis. This process was enhanced by memo writing, that is 'products of analysis or directions for analysis' (Strauss and Corbin 1998; 217). A reflexive position was sought in regard to all aspects of data gathering, analysis and writing.

I disagree with Hallowell et al. (2005:8) who describe data analysis as 'a fairly idiosyncratic skill, which, to a certain extent defies description'. Whilst it is unlikely that an exact replica of my case study would be attempted by another researcher, it is important that I am as transparent as possible in showing the process of my data collection and analysis. Holliday (2002: 119) emphasises the importance of transparency:

> This display of clarity adds to the validity of the written study by revealing to a large extent how subjectivity has been managed.

This process of 'interrogating the data' (Delamont 2002: 177) established patterns and themes and also highlighted aspects of reliability and validity. Triangulation as a test of validity was particularly useful. As Delamont (2002:181) outlines:

> At the analysis stage, triangulation can also be done by scrutinising the data. When a developing idea has emerged from coding the fieldnotes, the researcher can turn to the files of official documents and the transcripts of the formal interviews and so on to see if there are other data that bear on the same issue.

Initially, the organization and analysis of data was to highlight themes and concepts to aid making sense of what was going on. However, as the data collection and memo writing took on more shape the aim was not just about organizing the data, but also to explore it in an analytical way (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Therefore in the same way as data analysis cannot be separated form data collection, theorizing is integral to analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Mason 2002). Whilst theorizing may be considered as a daunting or intimidating process it is useful to consider Coffey and Atkinson's definition of theory as 'having and using ideas' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 140). They go on to claim, 'we have ideas about research all the time, throughout the research process, even if we do not think about creation of these ideas a theorizing' (p.141).

Broadly speaking it was my intention to explore the social settings of care and school and generate some ideas about the relationship between being looked after and the education system. This exploration of a specific setting aimed to generate a substantive theory. It may be that such findings can be generalized into a formal theory applicable to a large number of settings (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Edwards and Talbot (1999: 133) suggest the analysis of case study data ensures a 'coherent and well-substantiated story which weaves together the patterns and themes that have been revealed'. From the point of developing ideas through the research questions to collecting, organizing and interpreting data, scaffolded by a theoretical framework, leads to theorizing about the data and the social setting being studied (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Reliability, validity and reflexivity

The integrity of research can be undermined if issues of reliability and validity are not in place (Silverman 1994). Reliability or consistency examines the way in which a study can be replicated in the future thereby testing if the instrumentation is reliable and 'whether the measures that are devised for concepts in the social sciences are consistent' (Bryman 2001:29). As the instrument is the tool for collecting data it is important that the tool selected is going to produce the best results (Bell 2003). Therefore when a data collection instrument records the same phenomena it is said to be reliable (David and Sutton 2004). Reliability can be tested by the study being replicated by another researcher. Therefore, researchers must document their procedures thoroughly (Silverman 1994). D'Cruz and Jones (2004: 76) confirm this:

> It is essential that you document all research processes and keep a diary of your reflections as you proceed as a way of auditing the trustworthiness of the research.

Triangulation to corroborate the data and going back to the respondent are both examples of how reliability and validity issues can be addressed (Edwards and Talbot 1999; Delamont 2002). Silverman (1994: 156) highlights the respondent validation method as:

> taking one's findings back to the subjects being studied. Where these people verify one's findings, it is argued, one can be more confident about their validity.

Although Delamont (2002:181) identifies three main types of triangulation: 'between methods, between investigators and within the method', this study sought triangulation between methods, by collecting data from a variety of sources, and within the method by looking at a number of similar data.

External validity is the way in which data from the sample can be generalized to a wider population, and internal validity refers to the data generated within the study. When exploring internal validity the researcher needs to be clear about the relationship between different variables. Bryman (2001: 32) describes how some researchers prefer to consider the issues of trustworthiness in terms of credibility (how believable are the findings), transferability (do findings apply to other contexts), dependability (are the findings likely to

apply at other times) and confirmability (has the researcher allowed their values to intrude). All of these issues were important and played a part in the research design criteria and will be addressed later in the presentation of findings.

Reflexivity

What is essential is that researchers adopt a reflexive stance to their work and acknowledge that they are a part of the social world they study (Gray 2004). I have been conscious through this study of the importance of reflexivity as a 'significant feature in social research' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:17). I have adopted a stance of 'critical self-scrutiny' (Mason 2002:7) in all of the research processes. I attempted to be mindful and to keep in check the influence that I may have had on the respondents in terms of my social presentation, and in the interpretation and analysis of data (Letherby 2002). I kept in sharp focus the need to be in touch with the data and ongoing analysis and attempted to engage in what Coffey and Atkinson (1996:190) refer to as 'an internal dialogue of reflection'. I attempted to emulate Delamont's (2002:6) definition of good research:

> Research is a series of interactions, and good research is highly tuned to the interrelationship of the investigator with the respondents. The permeation of all aspects of the research process with reflexivity is essential.

Example of analytic process: showing the workings

Given that 'showing the workings makes a major contribution to the rigour and validity of qualitative research' (Holliday (2002: 123) these will be as explicit as possible. To demonstrate this further, I will outline the process of analysis using interview data with young people from the study as an example. The model I adopted was an inductive approach as suggested by Huberman and Miles (1994: 432):

> In the typical inductive approach, analysis is set in motion with the first site visit. Margin notes are made on the field notes, more reflective passages are reviewed carefully, and some kind of summary sheet is drafted. At the next level are coding and memo writing.

By way of illustration, I gathered qualitative data through interviews with a sample of young people who were in the looked after children system. I conducted 26 interviews with 11 young people. After each interview I made notes in my fieldwork journal describing my

observations during the interview. I recorded in these field notes how the young person related to those around them, as well as issues of rapport in how they related to me and how I related to them (Coffey 1999). Hallowell et al. (2005:42) point out that:

> With all forms of social interaction, research interactions are influenced by who we are, what we are, where we are and how we appear to others.

A physical description of the young person, as well as a note of their demeanour was also recorded and finally an outline reflection was made on both the process and content of the interview. Notes were also made before the interview. For example, I would arrive at the interview location early and record information about the geographical location of the young person. This was important as respondents were placed in a variety of settings: foster homes, remand foster homes and residential homes, sometimes many miles from their families, friends and communities.

From notes to codes and categories

Later these notes were coded manually. This involved writing an identification and retrieval code that consisted of the initials of the young person, the date of the interview and which interview it was (i.e. 1, 2 or 3). At this stage I would attempt to identify ideas and themes, these would be marked in the margins of the script and a further note made either in the form of a memo or on a card to add to a card indexing system. Therefore, this coding process was seen not only as an organisational tool, but a way of thinking and interrogating the data in order to generate ideas, themes and concepts as well being a process for reducing and summarising the data (Atkinson et al. 2003). These notes were then filed in a manual system which was divided and subdivided into interview type and name of respondent. A retrieval note was added to an index at the front of the file.

With regard to the interviews themselves, these were semi-structured and covered topics such as children's understanding if being looked after, contact with birth family, interests at school, interests outside school, peer group networks, past achievements and imagined futures. Most of the respondents discussed their looked after experiences in an open and frank manner, with some sharing information about very sensitive topics including sexual abuse, feeling of rejection from their families, their unhappy childhoods and even the wish to

end their lives. My previous experience as a social worker and a manager of a social work team prepared me in some way for the accounts the young people shared with me, but as Hallowell et al. (2005: 11) warn:

> Emotional issues - for ourselves as well as our research participants - can arise at many different points in the research process (and indeed, beyond it) and in many different guises.

Research can be quite isolating, I found it helpful to record in my field notes the emotional impact on me as well as the perceived impact on the respondents. This written reflection allowed for some acknowledgement of the emotions but also served as preparation for future interviews. I appraised the rapport between myself and the interviewee at the end of each interview. This was done by adopting the model outlined by Rank (2004) whereby self-evaluation was carried out immediately (or as soon as possible) after each interview. Thoughts on the development of rapport were recorded in the field notes. This was followed by a session listening to the taped interview with the sole purpose of assessing rapport as the focus.

After listening to the audiotape notes or 'reflexive memoranda' (Delamont 2002: 171) were written. The audiotape therefore was listened to with a number of different purposes: to assess rapport, for literary meaning, interpretive processes and as a reflective tool. Following the transcribing of the tape the transcript was read and checked against the recording for accuracy. As May (2001:139) observes:

> Writing up notes or transcribing tapes and simple listening to the conversations assists the important analytic stage of becoming familiar with the data.

Thus, themes and categories were identified in the text of the transcript – usually in the margin. Again these themes were then sorted and recorded, either by adding to an already identified category, or by generating a new category on a card index system (Delamont 2002).

This process of coding as well as a procedure for summarising, synthesising and reducing was not 'analytically neutral' (Mason 2002: 148), as the emerging ideas became reinforced

so this process provided a link between data and conceptualisation. Again the transcript would be marked for identification and filed. Further memos were written as points for the coding strategy, theoretical notes, operational notes and occasionally diagrams (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Sometimes memos were just reminders, things to check or aspects of the data collection that might need amending such as particular questions from the research instrument. As the collection and analysis of data developed and more data were generated the themes and emerging ideas became the focus of more memos. Generally the same process of reading, organising, coding and storing of data was followed for other sources of data including documentary evidence and focus group material. I believe this detailed account of the process demonstrates my reliability, validity and reflexivity. Delamont's (2002: 9) emphasis on the importance of reflexivity informed my approach:

> As long as the qualitative researchers are reflexive, making all of their processes explicit, then issues of reliability and validity are served.

Summary

In acknowledging that the perceived validity of research will be judged, in part, by the transparency of the methodological approach, I have attempted to clearly document the process of this study. From the initial idea, through to negotiation of access, data collection, data management and analysis, each stage has been dealt with in a systematic and methodical manner, whilst recording and questioning each development (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). In writing and conducting the research the importance of reliability and validity has been acknowledged and I have dealt with 'ethical not just technical issues' (Huberman and Miles 1994: 440), ensuring these were seen as critical to the process. Reflexivity has underpinned the research as I have attempted to contextualise events whilst appreciating my own positioning *vis a vis* various research relationships and their impact on every aspect. The next chapter, the first of five findings chapters, will introduce, profile and contextualise findings about the young people who are the prime topic of the study.

Chapter 6: Being looked after and educational achievement: profiling the sample

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part will outline certain contextual features and profile details about the young people in the study. This will address information regarding their legal status and details recorded in social work files about the reasons for their reception into the looked after children system. It will go on to outline the type of care placement and issues of stability and continuity in the school experience. Some comments will be offered around the process of collection and quality of data before highlighting the results of the Key Stage testing as presented in the analytical categories developed for this study of 'achiever', 'statemented' and no 'result'.

The second part of the chapter will present data, findings and discussions on a particular sub-group of four young people who left the looked after system during the study period. Attention will be give to some of the anomalies of their circumstances once they left and returned home or moved to relative carers in another authority. While there is recognition that data in this chapter could be considered to be 'filtered through adult perceptions and definitions' (Connolly et al. 2006: 61) the interpretations of data will seek to interpret events from the perspective of respondents and their understanding of their social world.

Part 1: Profile and context of the looked after sample

To reiterate, the study focused on a purposive sample of all young people (n=14) aged between 13 and 16 who were looked after by one local authority in Wales and living in residential or foster care during 2001 and where the plan was for them to remain looked after. The concentration on this particular age group allowed for in-depth exploration of shared and unique circumstances that could be seen to influence their educational experiences and achievements. Secondary data sources included care status, case history, placement type, length of time looked after, circumstances leading to being looked after, educational attainment prior to being looked after, placement changes, school changes and exclusions from schools. The research period straddled school years 9, 10 and 11. By concentrating on this particular period the aim was to identify and explore those circumstances that were likely

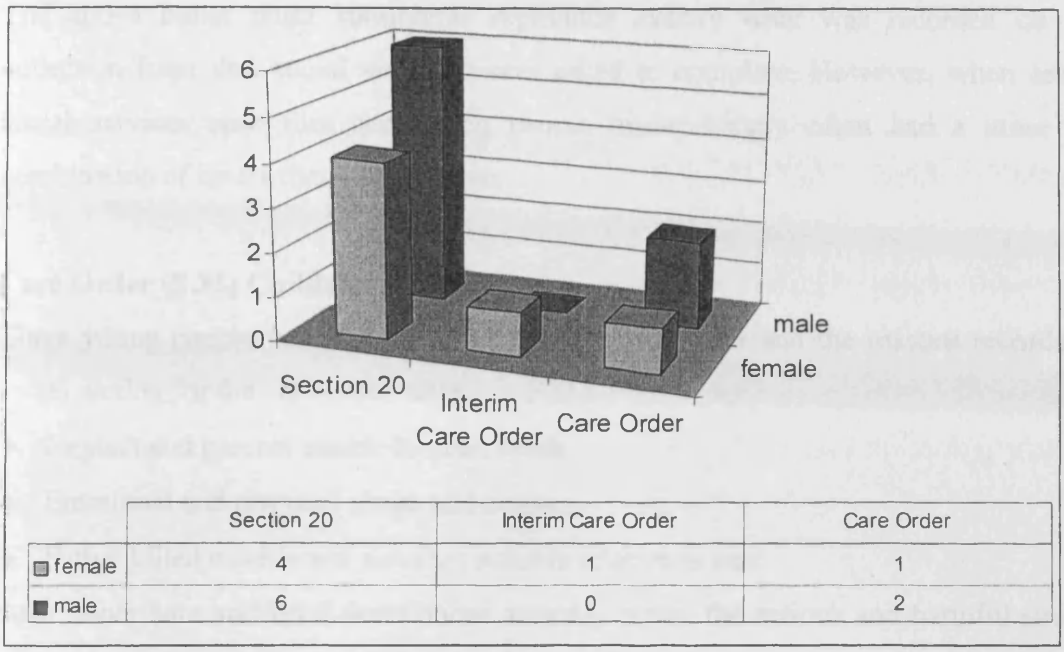
to mediate school experiences and achievements at a critical juncture in the lives of these young people.

In addition to collecting secondary data on this sample of young people, they were also interviewed at key points in their academic careers between school years 9 and 11. This enabled the collection of young people's views before and after their school examinations and generated insights into their perceptions of what might have assisted or impeded their school experience, achievement and educational trajectories. Significant adults associated with the young people were also interviewed in order to develop an understanding of how they viewed their role in promoting the educational interests of looked after children. These adults included social workers, teachers, parents and carers.

Profile of the young people

The study sample as outlined in Chapter Five consisted of fourteen looked after teenagers (8 boys and 6 girls), who at the start of the research period were aged 13-14 years old. Their educational attainment was measured via universal assessment criteria in schools in England and Wales. That is, at the end of Key Stage 3, they were assessed by Standard Attainment Tests and Tasks (SATS) in May 2002, and at the end of Key Stage 4, GCSEs in the summer of 2004.

Chart 1 below shows that at the start of the study the majority of young people were looked after voluntarily under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The duration of the section 20 provision varied, with one young person returning home after one single event of being accommodated, whilst others had several episodes of being 'in and out' of the system. At the beginning of the study period three young people had already been accommodated for over 5 years. Of the three young people who were subject to a care order two had been granted when the young people were aged 9 and the other one when the young person was aged 11. The one young person who was placed in the looked after system on an interim care order was subsequently made the subject of a full care order in summer 2002.



	Section 20	Interim Care Order	Care Order
female	4	1	1
male	6	0	2

Chart 1: Legal Status by Gender

Reasons for becoming looked after

Section 20 Children Act 1989

The data collection form deployed in this study was designed to be completed by social workers in order to gather key biographical material about the young people (see appendix 3). Thus, for 9 out of the 10 young people who were accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, social workers indicated the (verbatim) reasons listed below:

- Family breakdown and bad behaviour at school.
- Long history of extreme behaviour difficulties, parents unable to cope.
- Family relationship difficulties.
- Remanded into care following sex offence, parents unable to cope with behaviour.
- Parents' lifestyle not able to protect and cope with learning difficulties.
- Difficult behaviour and drug abuse.
- Negative behaviour of child, parents unable to manage, appropriately care for or protect from harm.
- Breakdown in relationship between father, mother and grandparent.
- Mother's mental health needs.

The above bullet point summaries reproduce exactly what was recorded on the data collection form that social workers were asked to complete. However, when reading the social services case files the young people unsurprisingly often had a more complex combination of issues than listed above.

Care Order (S.31) Children Act 1989

Three young people were looked after under a care order and the reasons recorded by the social worker for the care order were:

- Neglect and parents unable to meet needs.
- Emotional and physical abuse and neglect.
- Father killed mother and no other suitable relative to care.

Such rather bare and brief descriptions scarcely reveal the serious and harmful situations in which these three children were involved.

Interim Care Order (S.38) Children Act 1989

One young person was 'looked after' under an interim care order. The reason recorded for this order was:

- Neglect and emotional abuse by parents.

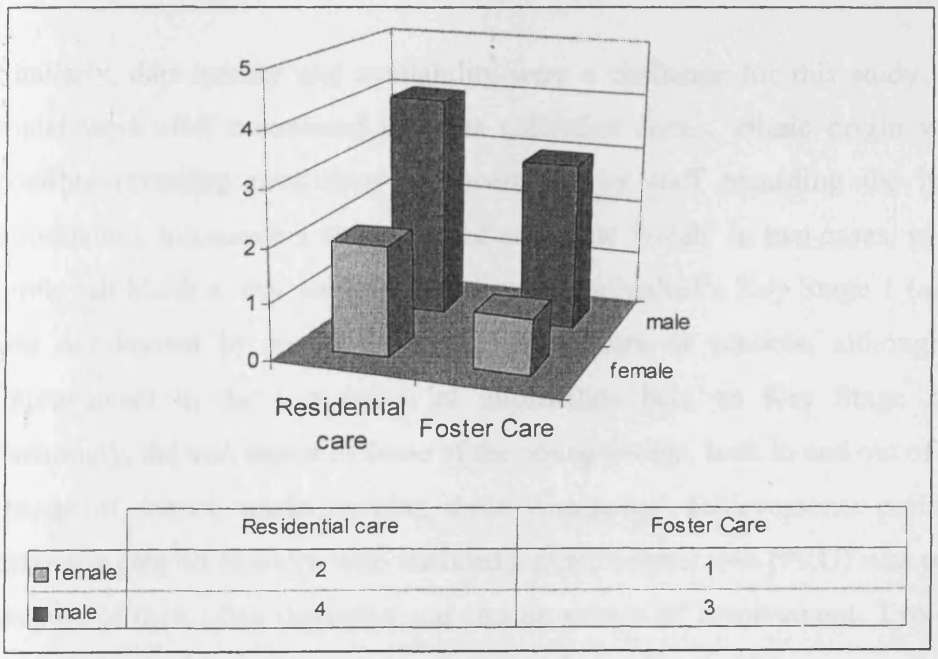
It was clear that neither the data collection form nor the case files could be considered as a necessarily neutral or objective exposition of the lives of these children. Holland (2004:123).) offers advice to practitioners that can be generalised to researchers, in that they should:

> Remain acutely aware of the social construction of documents, what ever their source, and that in their analysis practitioners should maintain a critical and reflective stance towards them.

Clearly these outline statements only briefly denote the 'actual' circumstances they summarise. Brodie (2001: 80) notes in her research that this type of list 'does not pretend to capture the complexity of the circumstances leading to accommodation and care, but is intended to indicate the seriousness of the problems which this group had experienced'. For several young people in this study these situations were layered, repeated and had combined to create aggregations of disadvantage. These are exemplified in the case discussions in later chapters.

Type of placement and ages of the young people

From the total of ten young people accommodated under section 20 (Children Act 1989), six were placed in residential care and four in foster care. Of those young people in residential care four were male and two were female. Of those placed in foster care three were male and one was female. From the total of four young people accommodated under a care or interim care order, one male was placed in residential care and three female in foster care. The number of young people placed in residential care was somewhat unusual as it is generally considered the least preferred option when children cannot live at home. However the study authority considered residential care as part of a range of services for looked after children and young people.



	Residential care	Foster Care
female	2	1
male	4	3

Chart 2: Placement type and gender of respondents looked after under section 20

All of these fourteen young people had dates of birth that fell between 1.8.87 and 31.8.88 and entered school Year 9 in the academic year 2001/ 2002. As explained earlier (see Chapter Five) this age feature of the sample derives from the sample strategy. These fourteen teenagers were all the relevant looked after children who, in principle, would be assessed at the end of Key Stage 3 via Standard Attainment Tests and Tasks (SATS) in May 2002 when aged 14 and GCSEs in 2004 when aged 16.

The methods chapter has already explained how secondary data contextualizing relevant information about the group of fourteen young people was collected at the beginning of the study. Data about their legal status, events leading to and during their time looked after was sought as well as information about their education such as attendance achievement and previous SATS results. Data were collected from local authority paper files, electronic records and Looked after Children Assessment and Action Records. These findings were recorded on a data collection form for each child (see appendix 3). The Social Exclusion Unit (1998: 12) confirmed an issue that soon came to light in the collection of data from children's records:

> There is a great shortage of data about educational circumstances and achievements of children in care, and this in itself is a symptom of the low priority often given to their schooling.

Similarly, data quality and availability were a challenge for this study. In particular when social work staff completed the data collection forms, ethnic origin was under recorded possibly revealing reluctance or uncertainty by staff regarding the importance of such information. Information was recorded as 'White Welsh' in two cases, with the other twelve forms left blank in this category. Data on an individual's Key Stage 1 (age 7) SATS results was not known by many of the social workers or schools, although there was some improvement in the completion of information held on Key Stage 2 (age 11) results. Seemingly, the movement of some of the young people, both in and out of care, together with change of school, made tracking these youngsters' achievements problematic. Similarly, obtaining data on children who attended a pupil referral unit (PRU) was particularly difficult because of their often disrupted and chaotic pattern of involvement. Typically, their records were skeletal with sizable gaps in relation to their education history.

Stability and Instability: care and education moves

Stability in care and education placements has frequently been cited as an important factor in school achievement (Stein 1994; Jackson and Thomas 2000; Jackson 2002b; Berridge 2003). The following tables highlight placement and school moves prior to the first year of the study, demonstrating the transient nature of this population.

Table 8: Placement moves prior to the study
4 young people had 1 move
5 young people had 2 moves
1 young person had 4 moves
3 young people had 5 moves
1 young person had 24 moves

The data returns from social workers on the total number of placement moves prior to the study year indicated that mobility and transfer were common for these young people, and markedly for one young person with 24 moves. In this case the moves were between different foster carers and residential placements. The reasons for the moves were explained as changes in foster carer capacity and the particular demands made of the carers by the young person's behaviour. In the four cases where there was just one move, this was from a short term placement into a long term or permanent placement. Those young people that had between two and five moves did so for a variety of reasons including: closure of children's residential home, change in foster carer circumstances such as retiring from the service, and reasons perceived as foster child factors, for example not getting on with other children in the home or challenging behaviour.

The data from education and social services case files on schooling indicated that the same fourteen young people had a combined total of twenty eight transfers, between schools and pupil referral unit prior to the study. As the young people had been 'looked after' for different periods of time, with some in care for a number of years and others recently accommodated, the picture of school moves was predictably variable. In addition to changes of school, there were other disruptions to schooling, such as not attending, truanting and exclusions.

Table 9: Education moves prior to the study
8 young people had 1 move
3 young people had 2 moves
1 young person had 4 moves
1 young people had 5 moves
1 young person had 24 moves

The tables above serve to demonstrate that a cohort of looked after young people from one local authority can have very different experiences in terms of movement between their care and education placements. Some of the care moves were planned and appropriate and the result of young people being placed in 'preparatory placements' before moving into a permanent placement. Similarly, some of the school moves were linked to planned placement moves and could therefore be considered appropriate.

Care and school placements: appropriate but not always planned

The study was designed to include all looked after young people in Glendale County Borough Council who were entering school Year 9 and where the plan for them was to continue to be looked after. Permission was given for all of the children who fell into the Year 9 category to be contacted and considered. At the start of the study all fourteen of the young people were recorded on file as placed in a care and school placement that was appropriate, although for only nine was this considered to have been organised on a planned basis. Given the appropriateness of the care placements it was interesting to see how many young people had changes in the first year of the study, as seen below.

Table 10: Moves in placement and education during the first year of the study

Placement moves	Education moves
7 young people had no placement change	8 young people had no education change
5 young people had one placement change	4 young people had one education change
2 young people had three placement changes	2 young people had three education changes.

It also noteworthy that a placement change did not necessarily mean a school change. It is known that six of the children changed their schools during Year 9. Changes that were noted in records were due to moves to and from the pupil referral unit, or combinations of placement at the pupil referral unit and school. Moves resulting from placement changes, changes to and from residential and foster care and to youth justice establishments resulted in a change in school. Only six of the of the fourteen young people at the end of school Year 9 were in the same care placement and attending the same school at the end of the first year of study. Only five out of this six were in the same care placement and attending the same

school at the end of the study. Thus, continuity with education, residence and carers existed for less than 50 per cent of the study sample.

Standard assessment tests: type of school and the process of assessment

The fourteen children in the sample attended eight different schools. Although two schools, both comprehensives, provided education for seven of the total. The catchment area for one comprehensive included one of the local authority's larger residential units. Notably, eleven young people at the start of the study were on roll at mainstream comprehensive schools perhaps confirming a commitment to inclusive, community based schooling. It was known that at least one of the children, who was statemented, was being educated in a unit within a comprehensive school designed for children with special needs. Three of the group attended special schools. In addition, a number of the young people attended a pupil referral unit at some stage during the study period.

SATS testing

During school Year 9, (academic year 2001/2002) the majority of the young people had completed Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum and were eligible to be assessed by Teacher Assessment and National Curriculum Tests and Tasks. This formal national assessment is obligatory for all schools in England and Wales and takes place on a set week in May. Of course some of the pupils can be 'disapplied' from the National Curriculum legislation and study the 'alternative curriculum'. Two of the sample who were statemented were recorded by schools as taking this route.

At the end of Key Stage 3 the following level descriptors were used across England and Wales to record and monitor progress across the phases of schooling. The general expectation then was that the majority of 14-year-olds would attain level 5 in each individual subject (NAfW 2001). These national 'bench marks' were used to guide schools, teachers, parents and pupils and as noted below were applied at ages 7, 11 and 14.

Results for 7-year-olds at end of Key Stage 1

Level 1 indicate working towards expected level
Level 2 indicate achieved expected level
Level 3 exceeded expected level

Results for 11-year-olds at end of Key Stage 2

Level 1-3 indicate working towards expected level Level 4 indicate achieved expected level Level 5 exceeded expected level

Results for 14-year-olds at end of Key Stage 3

Level 1-4 indicate working towards expected level Level 5-6 indicate achieved expected level Level 7-8 exceeded expected level

(Source: NAfW 2001d)

SATS results and sub-groups: 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'

Thus, within our sample we can note, in light of these levels, three distinct sub-groupings according to Key Stage 3 results. **Sub-group A** comprised five males and one female (five fostered, one residential) all achieved a result ranging from one level four to two at level 6. **Sub-group B** comprised one male and three females (one residential and three fostered) who did not take SATS due to an educational statement which indicated that they would not be expected to achieve any levels. However, only two were recorded as being 'disapplied'.

Sub-group C comprised two males and two females (three residential care, one fostered) who were not statemented and did not take SATS. One of the four had achieved level 5+ at Key Stage 2 and therefore potentially should have done better than average at Key Stage 3. Two of this group only achieved level 1 at Key Stage 2, therefore were not achieving the expected level even at primary school. No previous results were available for the third young person. The three sub-groups were thus identified and the analysis revealed a chequered assessment profile.

Analysis of school Year 9 SATS data: 'achiever' 'statemented' and 'no result'

The aim of the interviews with young people was to collect information about what they saw as the presence or absence of 'factors' (Jackson and Thomas 2000; Jackson and Sachdev 2001) influencing their school experience and academic achievements. As previously mentioned, looked after children can not be considered as an homogenous group. However

for analytical purposes it was necessary to locate data within categories in order to develop some comparative insight. Obvious and simple categories arising from the findings generated the above three groupings comprising young people who were termed: *achievers, statemented* and *no results*. These groups will now be looked at in more detail.

Year 9: SAT testing status

Those taking SATS and reasons for those that did not (N=14).

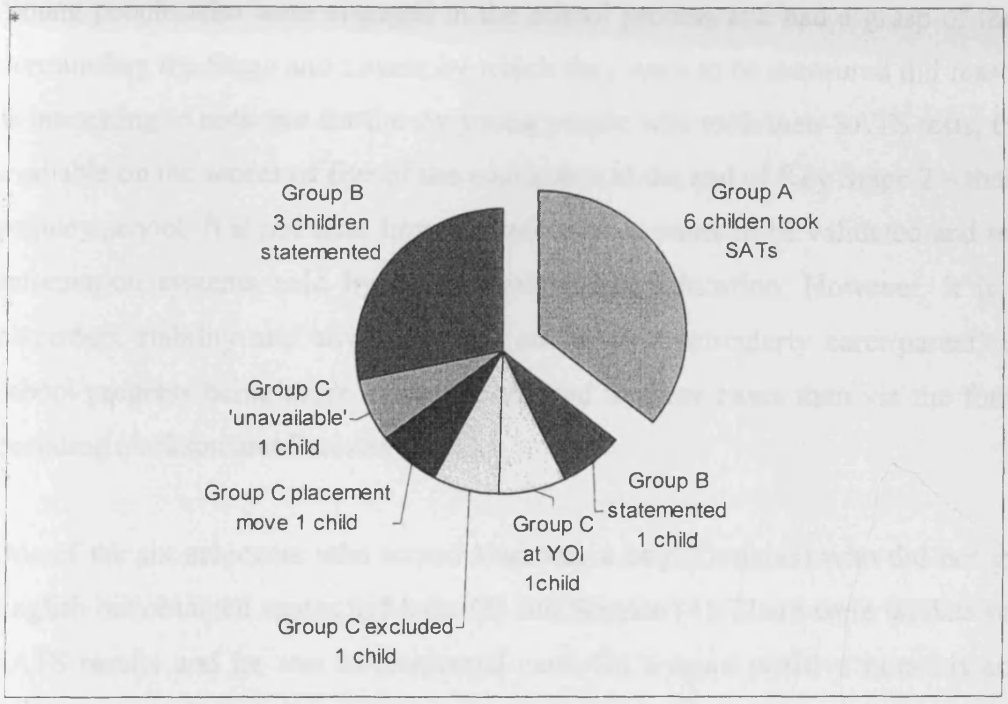


Figure 2: Participation in SATS by 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'

Sub-group A: Young people who achieved

There were six 'achievers' out of the 14 youngsters who obtained an official SAT result in May 2002. Perhaps not surprisingly they were those young people who had a stable care placement and had good attendance at school. An example of this was one young woman (Christy) who stayed in the same foster care home and at the same school over the research year; her attendance at school was 99.77 per cent. Her SATS results were: English 5, Maths 5, Science 4. Similarly, a young man (Declan), who had also been in the same care placement and at the same school during the study year had an attendance of 88.12 per cent. His SATS results were - English 5, Maths 6, Science 6. Five of the young people who achieved at SATS were living in a family placement and one in residential care. It was notable that five out of the six young people stayed in the same school during the academic

year, however three out of the six had care placement moves in this year. Social work agencies have in the past been criticised for ranking the care placement needs over a child's education interests (see Blyth and Milner 1997), however it was not possible to identify from records and interviews how (or if) the balance of needs and interests were determined in relation to these particular children. Continuity as described here does appear to be associated with more successful school outcomes.

Young people who were engaged in the school process and had a grasp of the expectations surrounding the Stage and Levels by which they were to be measured did reasonably well. It is interesting to note that for the six young people who took their SATS tests, there were data available on the scores of five of the youngsters at the end of Key Stage 2 – their final year in primary school. It is not clear how this information came to be validated and recorded on the information systems held by social services and education. However, it is probable that placement stability and advocacy over education (particularly carer/parent) contributed to school progress being more closely monitored in these cases than via the formal system of encoding (Jackson and Sachdev 2001).

One of the six achievers who scored least was a boy (Douglas) who did not gain a score in English but obtained scores in Maths (3) and Science (4). There were no data on his previous SATS results and he was in residential care. On a more positive note his attendance was 91.48 per cent. Douglas' keenness for school was corroborated by his school reports. He was able to grasp and verbalise the social benefits of school as well as having a coherent understanding of expectations in terms of measurable outcomes. He took pride in his achievements, appropriately so given that he had missed the first two years of secondary school. His attendance (and research interviews) revealed an enthusiasm for school and it is disappointing that his progress and interest in school were not a matter of more deliberate involvement by those involved in providing his care.

A shared aspect of all six young people were that they described (and adults corroborated) hobbies and interests in which they were involved outside of school which added to their cultural and educational knowledge and skills (see Gilligan 1999). This capacity for stimulating and creative interests outside of school distinguished them from others in the sub-groups. Thus there would appear to be some 'commonalities' in the individual biographies of the six achievers which might help explain their participation in SATS and outcomes.

Sub-group B: Young people statemented

The relationship between being looked after and having special needs is an interesting one as a disproportionate number of such children have been identified with special needs and have been subject to the statementing process (Hayden et al. 1999). It is suggested that as many as 1 in 5 looked after children had a statement compared to 2.9 per cent of the non-looked after population (SSI/OFSTED 1995; DfEE 1999a). Four out of the fourteen young people did not take SATS because they had been statemented or were exempt due to other special needs. Three out of the four young people were girls who were living in foster care. The average school attendance for this small group of girls in the study year was 91per cent. Two of these young women were described as having severe learning difficulties and the third having a visual impairment. All three stayed in the same care placement and same school during the first year of the study.

For this group of young people, having special needs did not appear to disadvantage them in terms of stability of placements or attendance at school. Two of the young women (Karla and Kim) were interviewed; both were from disruptive and chaotic family backgrounds. They spoke favourably about their current education experience and cited the support of their foster carers as well as their long term plans to stay in their placement and school setting as contributing to their sense of contentment. Both young women were able to describe a full and active social life from which could be noted the acquisition of friends, social skills and self-esteem.

The fourth member of this group was a boy (Bernard) who presented a different picture. He was accommodated in residential care. He was statemented because of his serious behaviour problems. His attendance at special school over the first year of the study was recorded as 24.87 per cent; both his care and education placement had changed during the year. The data reveals that in school years 7 and 8 there were a number of fixed-term exclusions, pointing to a problematic educational trajectory. Brodie (2001:19) suggests a link between statementing and exclusion with between 12 to 18 per cent of those excluded either having been statemented or going through the statementing process. It was evident from this study and from research more generally (Blyth and Milner 1997; Brodie 2001) that children who are statemented with behavioural difficulties in the early years of secondary education need to

experience specialist intervention that can offer consistent and creative planning to avoid a spiral of inactivity that leaves such children educationally and socially excluded.

Sub-group C: Young people with no results

There were four young people with no results (2 girls and 2 boys). All had changes to their placement and education settings during or towards the end of the school year 2001-2002. In the first year of the study, one young woman (Judy) left residential care and returned home in March 2002 to a family member who obtained a residence order. She also left her comprehensive school, which in her first interview she described as "the best school in the world". She did not attend school for the remainder of the academic year. In a later interview she said she wanted to continue at the school but was told by a family member that it was too far to travel.

The second young woman (Natalie) had been placed in 5 different schools from school Year 7 to school Year 9. At the time of the first interview she was placed in residential care and attending a local comprehensive. Her attendance over the first year of the study was 26 per cent and she did not attend for her SATS assessments. During the second interview she claimed that nobody in the residential unit sought to ensure she went to school; and that none of the other children there went to school and she also believed the school to be too strict. The care plan that unfolded during the year was for her to leave residential care, go to foster care and attend the pupil referral unit for 1 hour a day. Interview data and case record sources reveal contrasting if not contradictory perspectives about her educational achievement and conduct.

Within this group there were two young men (Nathan and Stephen). Nathan was in remand foster care at the time of the first interview. He appeared bright, polite and intelligent. He spoke positively about going back to school and 'making something of himself'. The data reveal exclusions in Year 8 and 9. His attendance score for Year 9 was 35.78 per cent and he did not take his SAT assessments as he was in a 'placement out of the area' and thereafter in a secure unit in England. His level of achievement for his SATS at the end of Key Stage 2 was 4, 5+ and 5+. This suggests that he had some academic potential. The second young man in the group (Stephen) had a long history of being looked after. At the time of the first interview he was in residential care. The data records 24 care placement moves between 1989-2001 with a variety of schools and education settings interrupted by a spate of fixed

term exclusions, culminating in a permanent exclusion in January 2001. He was on roll at a local school, but at his first interview in November 2001 he was not attending school or involved in any alternative provision. There was a plan for tutoring within the residential home but this was not in place at the time of interview. School and care placements both changed during the first year of the study making continuity and assessment difficult for this young boy.

Attendance

Data on attendance via school records were gathered at the end of the spring and summer terms. Attendance at the end of Year 9 show clearly that there were several looked after children with nearly complete attendance records as can be seen from the table below. Not surprisingly, those young people that did not have changes to their education, as marked by an asterisk, had the best attendance.

Table 11: Attendance at the end of school Year 9

Achievers		Statemented		No result	
Christy F	*99.72	Kim F	*97.80	Judy R	No longer on roll
Anthony F	*95.88	Laura F	*96.61	Stephen R	Excluded
Douglas R	*91.48	Karla F	*79.36	Nathan F	35.78
Ben R	*88.43	Bernard R	24.87	Natalie R	25.93
Declan F	*88.12				
Leonard F	No longer on roll				

(* No school change, F-fostering placement, R-residential placement)

Data analysis also identified three young people who were in effect largely disengaged from mainstream education and whose attendance was well under 50 per cent. A third grouping were those young people who were either excluded from school or no longer on roll. In the case of Leonard, he was no longer on school roll but was having short periods of time in the pupil referral unit. Two other young people, Judy and Stephen, were in effect not involved in any educational provision. Some of the low attendance scores were because young people left during the school year, for example Nathan went to a young offender's institution. It was noticeable that some of the young people had high rates of authorised absence. For example, for one young person this was due to attending a work experience placement out of school

and a two-week family holiday. In other cases the reasons for authorised absences were not clear. Incomplete recording suggest that school systems for logging absences were not always reliable. Neither were there any additional measures put in place to ensure that closer monitoring was observed for looked after children.

Different care placements: different outcomes

Whilst the inherent problems of attempting to compare residential care and foster care have been addressed, the findings in this study do allow some exploration of possible issues arising from the different care arrangements whilst recognising any claims can only be tentative. As can be seen from the table above, in the first year of study, young people in foster care generally had better attendance at school than those in residential care. While the size of the sample allows no generalisation it did seem that those in residential care had less success in school compared to those in family settings. Of course, we should not overlook the pre-care experiences of some young people in residential placements as well as their ongoing circumstances and problems, which may well militate against stability and school achievement. That said, residential care should not become some 'last resort' or 'warehouse' but rather a valid and purposeful aspect of a service system that provides as a responsible parent (Hayden et al. 1999; Colton et al. 2001). Several respondents who were or had been in residential care commented that they were not always clear who would be their 'champion' or advocate *vis a vis* school and education. They also believed that some residential workers either did not or could not help with their homework and that workers did not ''know about what was going on at school''. The need for clarity over role and responsibility was a prominent if implicit theme within interview material, particularly the need for an effective and durable advocate in relation to school matters.

A summary of the key characteristics and SATS results of the sample will be offered through two tables. Table 12 summarises by sub-group shared and different circumstances in terms of placement type, legal status and formal Key Stage assessment outcomes. Table 13 also summarises legal status and placement type but does so in connection with school attendance, education placement change and care placement change. The various categories that collect around young people's educational backgrounds and achievements will then be explored in more detail in this and Chapter Seven.

Table 12: School Year 9: key characteristics and SATS results for Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 (NRIA= no recorded information available)

NAME	LEGAL STATUS	PLACEMENT TYPE	KEY STAGE 1 RESULTS	KEY STAGE 2 RESULTS	KEY STAGE 3 RESULTS	RANKING BY GROUP
Christy	Section 20	Foster care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 3 Maths 3 Science 3	English 5 Maths 5 Science 4	**ACHIEVER**
Anthony	Section 20	Foster care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 3 Maths 3 Science 4	English Maths 5 Science 5	**ACHIEVER**
Douglas	Section 20	Residential care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English Maths 3 Science 4	**ACHIEVER**
Ben	Section 20	Residential care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 4 Maths 4 Science 4	**ACHIEVER**
Declan	Care order	Foster care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 4 Maths 4 Science 4	English 5 Maths 6 Science 6	**ACHIEVER**
Leonard	Section 20	Foster care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 4 Maths 4 Science 5	English 5 Maths 5 Science 5	**ACHIEVER**
Kim	Care order	Foster care	**S**	**S**	**S**	**STATEMENTED**
Laura	Section 20	Foster care	**S**	**S**	**S**	**STATEMENTED**
Karla	Interim care order	Foster care	English Maths Science **'Did not achieve at key stage 1'**	English Maths Science **'Did not attend for key stage 2'**	English Maths Science **S**	**STATEMENTED**
Bernard	Section 20	Residential care	**S**	**S**		**STATEMENTED**
Judy	Section 20	Residential care	English 2 Maths 1 Science 2	English 3 Maths 2 Science 2	English Maths Science	**NO RESULT**
Stephen	Care order	Residential care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 3 Maths 2 Science 2	English Maths Science	**NO RESULT**
Nathan	Section 20	Foster care	English Maths Science **NRIA**	English 4 Maths 5+ Science 5+	English Maths Science	**NO RESULT**
Natalie	Section20	Residential care	**NRIA**	**NRIA**		**NO RESULT**

Table 13: Summary of attendance and changes over school Year 9

NAME	LEGAL STATUS	PLACEMENT TYPE	SCHOOL ATTENDANCE	EDUCATION PLACEMENT	CARE PLACEMENT
Ben	Section 20	Residential care	86.40	Same	Change
Christy	Section 20	Foster care	99.72	Same	Same
Kim	Care order	Foster care	97.80	Same	Same
Leonard	Section 20	Foster care	No longer on roll left mid June	Change	Change
Karla	Interim care order	Foster care	79.36	Same	Same
Judy	Section 20	Residential care	No longer on roll	Change	Change
Anthony	Section 20	Foster care	95.88	Same	Same
Douglas	Section 20	Residential care	91.48	Same	Change
Stephen	Care order	Residential care	Excluded	Change	Change
Laura	Section 20	Foster care	96.61	Same	Same
Declan	Care order	Foster care	88.12	Same	Same
Nathan	Section 20	Foster care	35.78	Change	Change
Bernard	Section 20	Residential care	24.87	Change	Change
Natalie	Section 20	Residential care	25.93	Change	Same

This section of the chapter has attempted to profile and contextualise brief details about the cohort of fourteen young people at age 13-14 years in Year 9 at school in the first year of study. It must be remembered that when these young people were identified for the sample it was envisaged that they would remain in the looked after system within the local authority for the foreseeable future. However, as has been seen, this is a transient group who often experience changes on an unplanned basis. For example, these changes included returning home, being placed with kinship carers, leaving the care of the study authority returning home only to be re-accommodated by a neighbouring authority, being placed in residential care miles away from the study authority. These issues will now be discussed in more detail.

Part 2: Making visible the varieties of experience: the leavers group

Over the three year study period four young people (Ben, Judy, Nathan, Bernard) ceased to be looked after within the study authority and went to live at home or with family members. The outcomes for these young people will not therefore be officially recorded in looked after

children statistics, neither will they be targeted for services that might aid achievement and reduce the possibilities of exclusion. A return home for young people may be seen as a positive outcome, but can in fact disguise circumstances that are problematic and cause for concern. There is a good case to be made for social services and researchers to track the outcomes of returners.

One case that could be considered a success is Ben. He was looked after under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. It was recorded in his case file that the reasons for being looked after were 'family breakdown and bad behaviour at school'. It is also recorded that he had a 'number of fixed term exclusions'. Ben was accommodated for a single period in residential care and returned home before the end of the study period. Both Ben and his mother were very positive about his care experience, as his mother stated:

> *The children's home did the best work.....the key workers there were brilliant and it is such a shame the place is going to shut down. Ben would not be where he is now if not for them.*

He was interviewed whilst in residential care and before his SATS examinations in Year 9 and again at home after these examination results. From interviews with Ben, his mother and the documentary evidence including SATS results and attendance details from his school, he would appear to have had a positive experience from his period in the looked after system, perhaps reinforcing Thomas's (2005: 123) view that:

> There remains an important place for good, purposeful, residential care with proper standards and safeguards

Ben fell into the category of 'achiever' at the end of Key Stage 3 as he obtained English 4, Maths 4 and Science 4. Whilst he may have been working to his potential and towards expected levels these grades are below set targets. His GCSE achievements are not known or officially recorded. It is also unclear and difficult to disentangle how his looked after experience facilitated (or otherwise) these results.

Kinship placement

The three other cases suggest a return to home is no guarantee to educational achievement. Judy was living in residential care at the start of the study period and accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. It is noteworthy that during her time in residential care

her case was not allocated to a social worker. The explanation for this was a shortage of social workers; an issue highlighted in previous government reports (SSIW/Estyn 2001:11). During Year 9 she was temporarily excluded for two days on two separate occasions for 'behaviour problems'. She moved from the study area in March 2002 to return to live with her maternal grandmother. Judy was interviewed whilst in residential care and also once she had returned home. Her first interview was marked by her enthusiasm for the school she attended. It is noteworthy that she moved school two months before taking her Year 9 SATS assessments. In the attendance data returned at the end of the school Year 9 a hand written note read

> Judy left us on 8.3.02 to move to the Briggon area (out of the study authority) we have not been contacted by her new school yet. I assume she sat her SATS tests there. (Source: school attendance data from head of year).

There was clearly some uncertainty as to whose responsibility it was to ensure Judy's educational continuity was not jeopardised by a placement move. The hand written comment and interview with Judy and her grandmother would suggest there was a gap in the sharing of information and in maintaining continuity in education. Even though she had moved out of the study authority, it was felt important, and of interest to interview her again after her GCSEs. This interview was illuminating and revealing. For example, it could be considered positive that Judy had returned to live with a family member, as there are many favourable indicators for children in terms of stability, contact with family, a sense of belonging, community support and 'less likelihood of disruption of schooling and neighbourhood links' (Broad and Skinner 2005: 27). However, in this case the placement with grandmother was volatile and both led a chaotic lifestyle. Consequently, Judy did not return to full time education. Whilst there is increasing evidence of the benefits of kinship care it is vital that education issues are addressed in the formulation of a care plan. Judy fell into the 'no result' group as she left before SATS at the end of Key Stage 3 and did not achieve at GCSE, although this will not appear on the LAC data for the study authority as she was no longer looked after by them. Since returning to her grandmother, Judy had a long period of instability, being accommodated again (section 20 Children Act 1989) and moving to various residential and foster homes both within and outside the authority of Briggon. After leaving the study authority she did not complete school Year 9. The remainder of her

compulsory school years were turbulent with no settled period. Judy's difficulties became compounded by drug and alcohol misuse. This decline stands in stark contrast to her positive and enthusiastic comments about education at the start of the study.

Looked after and youth offending

Nathan was interviewed whilst placed with remand foster carers. The reasons for being accommodated were recorded as 'Nathan's behaviour, drugs and stealing from family'. At the start of the study period the plan for Nathan was for a 'gradual move back home and full time school in order to complete his SATS in May 2002'. Nathan achieved good results at the end of Key Stage 2: English 4, Maths 5+ and Science 5+ which would suggest he had the potential to achieve both at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. However, he was placed in two different secure units in England. He therefore did not achieve a SATS result at the end of Key Stage 3 and is part of the 'no result' group. Nathan ceased being looked after in June 2003. He did not achieve at GCSE and continued to spend time in young offenders units, where education would stem largely from a citizenship curriculum and training for employment.

Bernard was placed in residential care at the start of the study period; he was accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The reasons for being looked after are recorded in his case file as 'negative behaviour, parents unable to manage or appropriately care for/or protect him'. Bernard had a number of care episodes with a range of placements in both residential care and foster care. The limited data from the school recorded Year 7 as a turbulent one with 'unmanageable behaviour at school, a number of fixed term exclusions' Year 8 also recorded a number of fixed term exclusions. In Year 9 although placed in a special school following a statement of special educational needs the data highlights a 'complete non attendance' for part of this school year. The looked after children team closed the case when Bernard returned home. Although Bernard at this point was no longer looked after, he was subject to a two year supervision order and seen weekly via the local Youth Offending Team. Bernard was categorised within the statemented group for the purpose of this research study.

Anomalies in inter-agency arrangements for children who are no longer looked after

With the emphasis in the Children Act 1989 on supporting families to retain their child rearing responsibility, section 20 offers accommodation to children in need and is clearly

seen as a support service. As such, parents who agree to their child accessing this service can arrange for their child to be returned home at any time. It is evident that for some young people who leave care to return home before their sixteenth birthday, they do not appear appropriately supported by social services and education. Schofield and Beek (2005) agree that a return home often happens very quickly with few support services in place. In this study there were examples of children returning home with what appeared to be minimal planning. Thomas (2005: 154) explains clearly what needs to be considered:

> *All* (author's emphasis) children leaving the care system surely have a right to do so in a way that improves their chances of a healthy and happy life. This means ensuring the arrangements for their care, by parents or whoever has parental responsibility, are satisfactory.

Delays in school placements

A number of young people in the study also experienced long delays before being found a school placement even though guidance to local authorities from Welsh government (NAfW 2001a: 21) is explicit about a time limit of 20 days needed to deal with transitions between schools. It was not clear that the same criteria would be used if a young person was leaving the looked after system to return home or to a family member. Neither was it clear whose responsibility it was to manage this transition. Recognising from previous research that continuity of schooling is a protective factor and a poorly managed transition between schools can seriously disadvantage young people, it is disappointing that a young person can leave care without the provision of an education placement. This was evident in two out of the four young people who left the study authority during the research. What is also of note is that two of the young people subsequently came back into the looked after system in a relatively short period of time entering into what has been termed a 'revolving door' whereby sustained progress cannot be achieved without ongoing support (Thoburn et al. 2000). Two young people, from this group of four (Judy and Nathan) were situated at the end of school Year 9 in the 'no result' group'. They both remained in the no result group for GCSE outcomes. One young man (Ben) was in the achiever group at the end of his Level 3 SATS but it is unknown what his GCSE results were. A fourth young person (Bernard) was categorised in the statemented group and did not achieve at GCSE.

Table 14: The leavers group: achievements and destinations

Name	Legal status	Key Stage 3	Key Stage 4 GCSE	Looked after status	Outcome
Ben	Section 20	Achieved	Unknown	Returned home	Unknown
Bernard	Section 20	Statemented	Statemented	Ceased being looked after by the authority	Jurisdiction of the youth offending team
Judy	Section 20	No result	No result	Ceased being looked after by study authority during Year 9. Became looked after by a different authority during school Year 10	Multiple placements drug and alcohol difficulties.
Nathan	Section 20	No result	No result	Ceased being looked after by the authority	Detained in a young offenders institution.

The above summary of SAT and GCSE results is important in highlighting the young people's situations and outcomes. The individual destinations for this group of young people would appear to demonstrate why there is concern about the well-being of children leaving the looked after system. In addition to not achieving academically there are characteristics within this group that have been associated with later social exclusion. These include instability due to the misuse of drugs and alcohol and involvement in criminal activity. It is worth noting that the majority of children are looked after because of distressing or damaging family experiences, including abuse and neglect with less than 1.5 per cent looked after because of offences they have committed (Thomas 2005). For some of the young people in this study we might surmise that agencies have not been successful in directing them from offending:

> Those who work with looked after children, whether from a SSD or an education discipline, need to ensure that looked after children are protected from any risk of exposure to or involvement in criminal activity (NAfW 2001a: 8).

Summary of educational outcomes for the study sample

Tables 15 and 16 below offer an overview of where the young people were placed (fostering or residential care) at the start of the study, their academic achievement from SATS through to GCSEs and their post 16 destination. The categories of 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result' have continued to be used as a framework for locating their outcomes. It is of note that although Anthony is categorised as an achiever his results did not meet the national benchmark of five GCSEs at grades A* to C or the modest ambition set by the Assembly Government for looked after children of two or more GCSEs grades A to C (NAfW 2001a).

Table 15: School examination participation SATS, GCSE and post 16 plans
At the start of the study all young people were placed in foster care

	SATS	GCSE	POST 16
Declan*	**Achieved**	**Achieved** (2xA; 4xB; 2xC;1xD)	**A levels**
Christy*	**Achieved**	**Achieved** (2xA;3xB;2xC;3xD)	**A levels**
Anthony*	**Achieved**	**Achieved** (4xD;4xE;1xF)	Course at local college
Leonard	**Achieved**	No result	Left vocational course
Kim*	Statemented	Statemented	Course at local college
Karla	Statemented	Statemented	Left vocational course
Laura*	Statemented	Statemented	Severe learning difficulties, attending day centre
Nathan	No result	No result	Two periods in youth offending institutions

*Christy, Kim, Anthony, Laura and Declan remained in the same care and education placement through school Year 9, 10 and 11.

Table 16: School examination and participation in SATS, GCSE and post 16 plans **At the start of the study all young people were placed in residential care**			
	SATS	GCSE	POST 16
Ben	**Achieved**	Not looked after during this time	No longer looked after
Douglas	**Achieved**	**No result**	Young offenders
Bernard	**Statemented**	**Statemented**	Youth Justice
Stephen	**No result**	**No result**	Youth Justice
Judy	**No result**	**No result**	Left and returned to LAC system. Drug and alcohol difficulties
Natalie	No result	No result	Had 2 children both in care.

The limits of an unproblematic construction of looked after children

In this chapter the young people were categorised through their formal records as constructed in the adult professional world. The data were presented in a relatively unproblematic way and document the officially recorded material available in organisations (Parton and O'Byrne 2000). Data presented in this way does not convey the less visible world of the child's experiences at school and in care. The construction of young people presented in relation to their legal status and aggregated features as captured in statistical codes, cannot describe the lived human experience and the embodied social world and affiliated identities of the 'looked after child'. It is important therefore that researchers and practitioners recognise that there is not just one way of grasping the lived world of others. As Powell (2005: 115) suggests 'there are several 'truths' present in any situation, so that the emphasis on practitioners discovering 'the truth' becomes a fool's errand'. It is clear when exploring aspects of child welfare that the issues are complex and intricate and there cannot be a definitive way of knowing. For example, this chapter could be considered as one way in which adult professionals and the researcher have colluded to construct children as 'achievers', as ' statemented' and with 'no result'.

Conceptually, it is important to keep questioning the different ways in which children have been and are understood, as Holmes and Barron argue (2005: 151) 'beliefs that are held do not have the same status of 'truths' as might at first appear'. Drawing on the work of

Foucault (1997), Holmes (2005: 170) points out that child welfare organisations can unwittingly construct children in particular ways and that documents should be seen as 'representative of multiple 'truths'..... and one cannot know by isolating one phrase from a paragraph'. In the same way, presenting a statistical analysis of outcomes and results linked to educational targets does not provide the full picture. It is of course not possible to simply assume the voice of the young people when writing this thesis, however the next chapter seeks a more authentic representation of respondents in order to 'open up what could otherwise be perceived as a neatly configured conceptual quilt of 'knowing' about children and childhood' (Holmes 2005: 178). In short, the conventional views of looked after children need to be expressed through 'children's meaning-making rather than relying on adult-defined perceptions' (Connolly et al. 2006: 61). Chapter Seven will now present findings that contribute to our understanding of the lived experiences of young people and their navigation of the education system as a child in public care. The chapter will present shared and also different perceptions of the school experience contained in interviews with the young people. Their views will also be contrasted with accounts from key professionals involved in their education.

Chapter 7: What the children bring to school: the social and emotional needs of being looked after

Introduction

The study set out to understand young people's experiences as they negotiated their way through the education system as a looked after child. This chapter, drawing primarily on data from the first year of the study, seeks to offer insights into a number of factors that might help mitigate the difficult circumstances in which young people find themselves. The data were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) through open coding whereby issues were categorised and emerging patterns were ordered into themes. The analysis highlights those areas in which the views of the young people converge and where they are different.

In this chapter, shared issues, features and similarities across the social world of respondents will be presented whilst ensuring that assumptions are not made of them as an homogenous group 'as such an approach fails to identify the areas where problems are shared and those where there are important differences' (Brodie 2001: 164). This chapter will be divided into two sections, looking first at the shared issues and then moving on to explore key differences. In both sections the findings draw on the voices of the young people and the views of relevant professionals and carers. Shared views converged around a number of areas including: active participation for young people and the importance of 'developing a notion of competence, consultation and children's voice' (Wyness 2006:106). This conceptualisation of children as active determining subjects thereafter connects with accounts of how young people make sense of their past and the impact of separation and loss. This will be discussed in the light of the need to reconcile past experiences and the implications of this for confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Aspects of stability and instability will be highlighted through the voices of the young people; a range of uncertainties will be described that contribute to their concerns about the future but notably this did not include a negative attitude towards school. The section will conclude with young people's perspectives on the importance of ongoing family relationships, in particular their contact with siblings.

The second section will examine areas where there was a divergence in views, for example around the support young people received for their education as well as comments from other key individuals including foster carers, residential workers and teachers. There will be comment on how young people recount their experiences of being looked after, this will be further explored in the light of gendered, social and welfare constructions of identity.

One of the key themes arising from interview data is how important notions of individuality are for respondents. Harker et al. (2003:98) acknowledge the same point:

> Young people want others to recognise their individuality and avoid attaching generalised stereotypes to all children looked after.

With this in mind the initial interview explored with the young people (then aged 14) their experience of education including: interests outside school, support with school work, understanding of their looked after status and their plans and ambitions for the future. As with other studies with looked after young people, 'the interests and agendas of the participants strongly influenced the structure and content of the interviews' (Dominelli et al. 2005: 1129). There was however an occasional steer to ensure the same topics were covered with all participants, there was also an attempt to allow some fluidity so as the participants could decide 'what issues are important to a looked after child and therefore give a more vivid picture of the world as children experience it' (Munro 2001; 129).

Participation and citizenship: a changing view of childhood

The level of engagement in the interviews by the young people was variable. This appeared to be based on a number of factors including their interest in the research, their willingness to comment on personal information and other pressing issues currently going on in their lives, and also how articulate they were. However, what was shared amongst them was that all felt their views were important and that they had a particular perspective to share. The interview process was informed by the view that young people should be seen as 'active participants in social life, rather than as human becomings, passive recipients of socialization' (Lee 2003:47). In this sense the interviews recognised the importance of participation, a principle enshrined in the Children Act 1989 and evident in the current citizenship discourse on childhood and youth (Roche 2004), and policy initiatives such as the *Children First*

Programme (Welsh Office 1999a) and in the advocacy movement (Pithouse et al. 2005). Thomas (2005:27) gives weight to this new emphasis on rights and participation:

> Taking the time to explain things properly to children, giving them a chance to express their own thoughts and feelings, and creating opportunities for them to influence what happens, can give them a feeling of being in control.

Changing images of childhood and the emphasis on participation is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the involvement of the young people in this study recognised this shift in culture and practice. As with Munroe (2001:135) who interviewed looked after young people and found they 'are able and willing to articulate their views'. So the respondents in this study were keen to participate. Indeed, the majority of the young people in this study commented on the appropriateness of their views being sought and were able to respond to the questions and develop their answers, confirming the view of Gilbertson and Barber (2002: 253) that 'young people themselves, when given the opportunity to participate in research, are clear that they want a chance to speak about their experiences'. For example, Ben's view was corroborated by a number of the young people:

> *I wasn't sure at first as it's private stuff, but Ken (residential worker) said it would be good, probably 'cos I've got something to say about most things! I wanna hear my voice on the tape it'll be like on the radio. I'm going home soon, but for* (names another boy in the residential unit) *who knows what will happen to him, I'll make sure I still see him..... it is right I tell you my views for his sake.*
> (Aged 14, residential care)

Only one young man had difficulty in engaging in the interview process and appeared to be distracted, unable to sit for long and flitting between responding, switching the television off and on and making himself a sandwich. His presentation in the interview and his response seemed to mirror his disconnected experiences of care and school placements. At the time of interview (aged 14) he had been placed in 24 different care placements. With regard to education, most of the young people commented on how important it was that their views should be sought when addressing issues of schooling, which again has been noted elsewhere (DoH 2001: 35):

> Understanding children's feelings and perceptions about positive and negative experiences of school is a necessary part of responding to and enhancing their potential for educational attainment.

None of the young people thought that it was inappropriate for them to be involved in the research and none of them refused to engage in a further interview.

Making sense of the past

All of the young people used the terms 'in care' and 'looked after' interchangeably. None of them were able to explain the nature of their looked after status in terms of being subject to a care order or whether they were accommodated on a voluntary arrangement. Whilst it has long been recognised that young people 'need to find a way to account for their circumstance' (Daniel and Taylor 2001: 186), the majority of the young people cited their own behaviour as a key reason for not living at home. Comments like '*I just tell'em straight, I've been badly behaved since I was three and my mum and dad had enough,*' typified responses, rather than any reference to parental factors or deficits. Mallon (2005) in his study of care leavers who had accessed higher education found that perceived rejection by interviewees was the most frequently cited risk factor that contributed to outcomes. Those that had not progressed to higher education were reported to have this feeling most acutely, whilst those that had progressed to higher education rationalised parental behaviour as 'not coping' (p.90) rather than rejection. The young people in this study appeared to blame themselves for being looked after and within this may not have possessed a full picture of the circumstances around their family experiences. Indeed, their version of events could possibly impact on their well-being and sense of blame.

Baldry and Kemmis (1998) found that nearly all of the young people in their survey study of over 70 young people in foster or residential care 'understood clearly the reasons why they were looked after' (1998: 37). This does not resonate with the findings in this thesis where only one young man appeared to understand and was able to give a considered and informed explanation for his 'looked after' status. He distinguished between what he called ''the real reason'' and ''what people need to know''. He distinguished ''the real reason'' as strictly private (fatal domestic violence) and what ''people need to know'' as the public explanation, ''just family stuff means I need to live with foster carers''. From access to his files and records both explanations would appear to be an accurate reflection of his circumstances. In sharp contrast another respondent was asked why he was looked after and he said he didn't know. An attempt was made to present a scenario whereby somebody he had just met was expressing some interest in him and asked why he didn't live with his parents. This young man gave what he described as his usual response to such a question which was, '*none of*

your business, fuck off you smelly bastard'. It was evident from interviews that young people developed a range of conversational strategies for explaining their circumstances that would allow some sense of self-esteem. Such strategies may generate some degree of resilience, 'in particular self-esteem emerges as a critical element underlying children's ability to develop successful coping strategies' (Mullender et al. 2004:118).

The impact of separation and loss

Social work wisdom underpinned by evidence based practice would support the view that children who are fostered or living for periods away from home will experience the trauma of separation and loss (Archer 2004). In addition it has long been established within the foster and adoptive care arena that for children and young people to move on in terms of their attachment and stability in alternative placements (when they cannot live at home) they need to be able to make sense of their previous experiences. Natalie's view of the past for example included a negative view of her parents:

> *I don't care about them, they don't give a shit..... don't believe me ever. My dad has got a new wife and that is him sorted..... I just don't get on with her, she can't stand me.... I don't know why that is just how it is....who knows, there you go, my life.*
> (Natalie aged 14, residential care).

Interviews would suggest that little work had been undertaken with them by professionals to help them make sense of any loss they experienced through the various stages of their looked after experiences. Although one boy did make reference to the role of his foster carers in aiding his understanding of past events. Fahlberg (1994; 167) drew attention to this issue, 'the child's feelings of loss are frequently ignored or glossed over'. Whilst this was an observation when Fahlberg was writing over a decade ago, this lack of direct work with children may be even more striking in contemporary practice as social workers juggle heavy case loads and respond to performance indicators rather than the more time consuming, specialist intensive direct work (Thomas and O' Kane 1999; Munro 2001). Good practice would suggest that children placed in permanent arrangements (and many of these respondents were at the start of the study) need to be involved in direct work. However, life story work and the production and collection of tangible material including, letters, photographs and other explanatory documents did not appear to be completed for these children (see also Biehal 2005) .

Jackson et al. (2005) in their five year study of three successive groups of young people entering higher education from a background in English local authority care noted 'social workers had not been assiduous in constructing life story books' (p.9). Equally, Biehal (2005:209) in her study of over 2000 young people across eight English local authorities found that adolescents constitute 40 per cent of children admitted to care or accommodation and that very little direct work was being undertaken:

> Social workers mentioned their frustration at not being able to make greater use of their professional skills ...much of their time was spent on tasks they viewed as bureaucratic.

Without this important therapeutic input and a process of reconciling mixed emotions whereby young people can build a supportive and trusting relationship they may be hindered in making sense of their experiences (Hart 2004). This coherent sense of identity and knowledge of the circumstances of 'becoming looked after' is generally associated with helping young people form relationships, develop self-esteem, promote resilience and thereby help reduce psychological problems such as depression (Walker 2002). To repeat, evidence of this work being undertaken was limited.

Living with uncertainty

All of the young people discussed the future and for most it was with an air of uncertainty in relation to where they would be living. Even those young people who had been in the same placement for some time (and where there was no suggestion of any change) could not say with any certainty that they would be remaining with the same carers, even though they hoped they would. Leonard summed up some of these concerns:

> *Well I should be here for a while that is the plan. But I'm not sure how long I will be staying. It might be short term, but if I like it and* (names foster carer) *says it's all right I can stay permanent..... I do it's wicked 'ere.*
> (Leonard aged 14, foster care)

Thus for most respondents they appeared to be 'bearing the burden of uncertainty' (Lee 2003: 68). This may not be not surprising. Whilst long term foster care is seen as a 'permanent' option it has in fact considerable uncertainties. Sinclair et al. (2005a: 11) explain the difficulties:

> On the face of it, it is a 'limbo' placement. Difficult to define, but nevertheless ubiquitous, it offers not a 'forever family' but rather a recognition that a return home is no longer planned. On the surface the commitment is ambiguous and tentative - a home while the child behaves or as 'long as is needed' or until they take the initiative and go home in their teens.

Interestingly, those young people, who were in school and attending regularly, appeared to be more confident about the continuity of their education placement than the certainty of their care placement. One young person explained her position thus:

> *Well they've* (the residential home) *had some trouble with me trashing my room so I might be going in the year to a foster carer or a new home. If I change to foster care, even if I move to the other side of the country I know I will still go to this school. I love that school ...it's the one for me.*
> (Judy aged 14, residential care)

Some of the young people discussed their futures and in particular their academic futures in terms of "new starts", "making up for lost time" and "turning over new leaf". It is of note that all of the young people interviewed claimed they had more worries than other young people their age. Some young people appeared resigned to the circumstances in which they found themselves and responded to the topic with an air of resignation:

> *Well it is obvious I would have more worries; I'm only 14 and look what's gone on.*
> (Anthony aged 14, foster care)

> *Oh yeah ..... Loads of different things really* (Douglas aged 14, residential care).

One young woman was able to describe her worries in some detail:

> *Sometimes people say my father does this and my father does that. I've got three sisters and they all live with my Mam I used to have a brother but he died ...5 years ago. So with all of that and other stuff, yeh I think I have more worries than other young people my age, I think I have more worries than anybody else here.*
> (Judy aged 14, residential care)

Indeed, their concerns and worries (see also DoH 2001) were a prominent feature of interview data and not simply an artefact of the interview schedule.

Attitudes to school and achievement

One might have assumed, given what we know from previous research about looked after children and their limited attainment in school, that the study population would have presented as disaffected and with little enthusiasm for education (see Pommeroy 1999). The opposite was the case. The group on the whole was neither 'anti-school' nor reluctant to return and re-engage if they were 'out of school'. There was only one young man who expressed antipathy to school. It appeared that he had, as Fletcher-Campbell et al. put it (2003:3) 'developed attitudes and behaviour which were incompatible with learning in school'. Far from being disengaged from school as in other research (Baldry and Kemmis 1998) many of the young people in this study said they were worried about their educational achievement and saw the importance of doing well and welcomed additional support. Some of the young people, mainly the girls, talked about being bullied at school and the fear of being teased or 'gossiped' about. It was sometimes the sharing of information by peers about the young person's looked after status that was perceived by the girls as bullying, particularly if they felt confidential information such as issues that had brought them into the looked after system had been shared with other pupils.

A small number of young people (three) complained about attending the pupil referral unit (PRU) and felt concerned that when they returned to mainstream education they would be labelled as 'thick'.

> *It's* (PRU) *OK but we don't do anything* (Nathan, 14, remand foster care)

> *Being out of school seems great at first, but I cannot go back* (to school) *I don't know anybody or anything, I'd look a right dick 'ed and I'm not thick, they all tell me that* (Leonard aged 14, residential care)

As with other research (Harker et al. 2003:96) there were complaints from those young people who were outside mainstream education that the provision was minimal, not flexible and lacked continuity in relation to what the young people were studying in school.

Family Relationships: a sense of identity as a protective factor

Attachment theory has been fundamental to our understanding of child development and is a key element in social work theory and practice. Attachment theory claims that 'there is a biological imperative for infants to form attachments' (Daniel et al. 2000: 14). When children

experience separation from a significant individual with whom they have an attachment it can contribute to feelings of insecurity. Also, if children and young people live in an atmosphere of unpredictability and uncertainty this can in turn contribute to their feelings of low self-esteem and worthlessness (Schofield et al. 2000; Jackson 2002b). Young people build their identity through change (life and age transitions) but also continuity and stability. Belonging and having a shared history offers a sense of connectedness. Greeff and Stuart (1999: 35) give further weight to this perspective:

> Much of our sense of identity is not so much about individual characteristics and achievements, as about the groupings of people we belong to - the most significant for most of us is the family.

The young people in this study universally gave the message that their family (or members of it) were important to them, even in some cases when there was limited or no contact. The young people also discussed and referred to their family in the broadest sense, including parents, grand-parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and half-siblings. One young girl even commented that her favourite thing about school was '*seeing my cousin, he's in the same class as me, but 'cos of everything that has gone on we are not talking*'. Two young people also made reference to family members living some distance away who they had not seen or had contact with for some time (in one case over two years) but who they considered as offering indirect support through letters, birthday cards and Christmas cards. There was also a view from these two young people that the knowledge of these family members implied 'potential' for support if they needed it. One boy commented on the reassurance he felt from an aunt and uncle in England:

> *I don't seem 'em much but there pretty good to me. I get the odd letter, I'm hopeless at contacting them, but I know they'd be pretty pleased with me.*
> (Declan age 14, foster care)

For some of the young people it was not always clear that they understood the agreed arrangements for contact with the birth family:

> *I know my social worker doesn't like it when I see my mother, not sure why. But I see her anyway and my social worker doesn't say anything.*
> (Karla age 14, foster care)

> *I don't even speak to my social worker about it, my brother's in a flat and I just visit whenever. Don't care what she thinks about it.*
> (Natalie age 14, residential care)

It appeared that both Karla and Natalie in different ways infringed the recommended care plan and arrangements for family contact. Their accounts suggested some family contacts were made covertly, resisting the constraints on their inter-personal relationships. It appeared that in this example, some young people negotiated there own contact, thereby asserting their identity and sense of belonging to their birth family over their categorisation as a 'looked after child' (Smart et al. 2001). As Wilson et al. (2004: 54) acknowledge, and as the above two extracts illustrate, 'in general most children want contact, they have a right to it and this presumption should remain'. But as Moyers et al. (2006: 543) point out 'contact for looked after children is a complex phenomenon', and it can be unhelpful to young people as it may impact negatively on placement stability.

The importance (or not) of family contact

The young people's often fractured family contact, as with other research, suggests that when young people retained family links, even with some ambivalence, they seemed better able to make sense of their lives. Although some relationships could be described as 'poor', maintaining family links offered a symbolic reassurance to young people and engendered a sense of belonging and connectedness that appeared to aid well-being (see Biehal et al. 1995; Daniel and Taylor 2001; Mallon 2005). While a number of the young people in the study did not have contact with their parents, they nonetheless described memories of them as very important:

> *Your Mam's your Mam; she just couldn't hack it and I don't blame her, I know I've been trouble from the day I was born. But she will always be my Mam.*
> (Stephen aged 14, residential care)

It was not always their parents that the young people felt were important but in a few cases it was grandparents, in particular grand-mothers. Siblings too were significant to the young people in this study. In the sample only one young woman was placed with her younger siblings, this was exceptional and this shared placement was not sustained. What was more common, as with children in the looked after system generally, was placement apart from siblings (Sanders 2004) for example, lack of contact with his siblings was cited by one respondent as his biggest worry:

I don't see any of them but I would like to. I've got one brother and four sisters and they are all in care. (Douglas age 14, residential care)

Research in this area is relatively limited but what is available suggests that those working in child welfare must develop a more nuanced understanding of the effects of separation. Accounts from adults who spent time in care reveal that, 'separation from siblings is one of the most painful experiences' (Thomas 2005:101). There is a growing awareness of how sibling attachments can promote and foster a sense of connectedness, promote resilience in children, and be central to their identity (Daniel at al 2000; Sanders 2004). Although sibling relationships were not an explicit focus of this study it became increasingly evident that this complex, important relationship had much potential to mitigate the impact of separation for looked after children. Sanders (2004: 179) emphasises the importance of the relationship:

> Our identity, our notion of who we are, develops in relation to the social interchanges we have with significant others in our social world, and removing them, or being removed from them, is like losing a part of one's self.

The general assumption is that, wherever possible, when sibling groups come into the looked after system they should be placed together as long as there is not a conflict with the best interests of each individual child. However, with a finite number of foster carers that can accommodate groups of children with different needs, this puts a strain on the options. In order that looked after children can benefit from the potential of this source of continuity and support, it is vital that consideration is given to kinship placements as well as the recruitment, training and remuneration of foster carers with this capability (Maclean 1999). In cases where siblings have to be placed separately, it is important that every effort is made to nurture these important relationships to ensure they do not 'drift into permanent estrangement' (Fahlberg, 1994: 167). Most respondents emphasised the importance of sibling contact, even in some cases where it was likely that it would be indirect contact in the form of letters. In two cases the young people had old photographs of siblings who had been adopted some years previously that they took pride in showing. Other young people differentiated between family members they wished to have contact with:

I don't want to see John (stepfather) *my Mam, Natalie or Stephanie, but I do want to see Jenny, Siân and Jack* (siblings).
(Douglas aged 15, residential care)

Overall, the interview material on sibling contact finds support from Hill (1997b: 26) who notes that, 'children themselves highlight the importance of child-child relationships. They point to the importance of sustaining contacts among siblings or with friends'. Sinclair et al. (2005a) in their study of nearly 600 children in foster care reveal that where children were quite settled in a foster placement there remained a desire for increased contact with siblings. The authors suggest that for some children there is still a feeling that foster care is not like a family of their own and therefore contact with siblings might offer 'a greater sense of being part of a real family' (p152).

Divergence of views: a social ecological approach

Along with the many shared views already outlined there were also some notable differences in the views of the young people as a whole. If one takes a social ecological perspective, the young people's views could be located in a systemic framework whereby children are seen in a range of social contexts (Jack 2000; Colton et al. 2001). Thomas (2005:17) summarises this model as (a) the microsystem, the immediate settings where families live and develop (such as family, school and peer group) (b) the mesosystem, which is the interaction between these settings (c) the exosystem, defined as the wider institiutions such as neighbourhood and communities and (d) the macrosystem which are the broader social and economic systems. Using this framework we can note that children's views tended to converge around emotional, attachment and security issues, that is, the micro world. However, differences in their views tended to cluster around their experiences and perceptions of individuals and organisation in their mesosystem, such as their relationship with their social worker; how understanding they felt their teachers were along with the practical and emotional support they received for their education. There was a clear sense that the young people were 'knowers in their everyday worlds' (Alanen 2005: 44) and were able to comment on how certain aspects of their lives were shaped and influenced, however, this did not stretch to a broader 'agency' within the exosystem and macrosystem. Morrow (2005) whilst welcoming this conceptual link between individuals and their social context argues that, children are constrained in negotiating these broader systems as these 'are completely beyond the control of individual actors, particularly children' (p.155). This may be especially relevant for looked after children who do not have family members who will encourage and support them to shape, influence and promote involvement in these wider social settings. In addition to these

areas there were gender-specific themes that appeared to be particularly pertinent for the young women in the sample and their specific identity as 'looked after'.

How young people viewed support: social workers and teachers

There were varied views from the young people about the relationship they had with significant professionals in their lives and different perspectives about the extent to which these workers supported their educational progress. Views about social workers have been classified into three sub-groups, (a) some young people thought (uncritically), that social workers were indifferent to education issues (b) others said that it was not part of a social worker's job to know about education matters (c) some were explicitly critical of their social worker. These views find some congruence with other studies revealing how young people looked after believe social workers were likely to hinder their educational progress and that children were 'disappointed with the level of interest social workers exhibited towards their education' (Harker et al. 2003:91). In interviews with over 100 young people who were accessing services to reduce social exclusion, McNeish and Newman (2002) found that whilst some young people were positive about social workers, most of them came in for criticisms about being unreliable. Other studies of adults growing up in care reveal views that cast 'social workers and social work departments in almost universal contempt' (Mallon 2005: 100).

Teachers-a lack of study support

The young people's views about teachers ranged from those that were very enthusiastic and positive to those that felt teachers were 'too strict', 'too bossy' and 'unfair', although their views converged around the issue of support. None of the young people identified an individual teacher who they felt was particularly supportive, this is in contrast to other studies that have 'reported that teachers had provided both study-specific and educational support' (Fletcher-Campbell et al. 2003: 15). Harker et al. (2003:97) found that the 'main individuals perceived as assisting educational progress were teachers'. Other research (Borland et. al 1998; Jackson and Thomas 2000) reveals the expressed view of many young people looked after to be not treated differently in class, preferring that any extra support be provided on an individual basis. There was, however, very little reported evidence of this happening for the respondents in this study. Whilst the 'designated teacher' role has been introduced in England and Wales (DoH 2000a; NAfW 2001a) the specific duties appear to concentrate on the co-ordination of information and the drawing up of education plans rather than addressing

a pupil's additional needs (Fletcher-Campbell et al. 2003; Hibbert 2003). The manager of the LACE team within the study authority expressed similar concerns:

> *Well the designated teacher are there or thereabouts, it is laid out in the guidance, but to try and get them to training, or to really work with our kids is a different matter. There are always more pressing issues and it is often just tacked onto another role.*

The degree to which young people would have liked extra support varied across the sample in this study. It was notable at the first interview that those young people who had experienced the most turbulent and unsettled school experience claimed they were not resistant to additional support if it had been forthcoming. That these young people perceived it as not available found some support in the findings gained from teachers and deputy head teachers in this study who acknowledged that there was not an effective system in place for schools to highlight the particular needs of looked after children:

> *Off the top of my head I would say we have about four or five in the school* (looked after young people) *at any one time, but I couldn't be sure. We would only really know that information when there is an issue on an individual basis.*
> (Mrs Peters, Year 9 teacher, Glynbryn school)

Neither, therefore, was consideration given to the appropriateness of additional support and how this might be delivered most effectively. The complexities of meeting the educational needs of this challenging group of young people were highlighted by one teacher who said about looked after children placed in a local residential home:

> *The young people are out of control and not attending school.*
> (Mrs Cox, designated teacher, Beeches senior school)

Although there were the usual monitoring and assessment processes in line with the National Curriculum, the SAT and GCSE results were not disaggregated for looked after children. As one deputy head teacher said:

> *When our results are analysed the proportion of our looked after children are not separated out and therefore are not really specifically targeted for additional support.* (Mr. White, Deputy head teacher, Longcross school)

This is surprising when clearly:

> Specialist learning support and individual programmes have been found to be effective in enabling some youngsters to turn around established patterns of under achievement (Borland 1998: 2).

Interestingly the reason given for not doing this (and echoed by other teachers) was the relatively few looked after children at any one time and who were deemed a transient population and hence not easily targeted or retained.

> *Because of our catchment we potentially get a lot of them, but then last year we hardly had any. This year they were on roll, but they were here one minute not the next....you know what I mean?*
> (Mrs Smith, head of Year 8, Beeches senior school)

Support from care placements: the residential care experience

In the study authority residential services are seen by professionals as part of a continuum of care. At the start of the study in 2001 six young people in the sample were located in residential care and were placed in one of the authority's four establishments. There were differing reports from the young people regarding practical support that made their studying easier such as a quiet place to work, books, computers and individual and additional tutoring. While there appeared to be recognition in the residential homes that certain requirements were essential (for example, computers were available) it was evident that, as in the study by Gallagher et al. (2004: 1133) that residential staff were unlikely to meet their corporate parent responsibilities without a 'radical transformation' in the authority's resources, attitudes to and support for the workforce. They go on to argue that for children in residential care to have good outcomes the following key initiatives need to be developed: inculcate children with a sense of value and expectations in regard to education, an incremental education re-integration programme, prepare children for educational placements, support educational placements and develop a learning culture (Gallagher 2004: 1146). This list of imperatives highlights the diverse ways in which 'looked after' pupils might have their 'educational trajectories' scaffolded more effectively and thus lead to improved outcomes (Lindsay and Foley 1999). With regard to this study, based on what the majority of the young people said, as well as the views of teachers, social workers and residential workers, such a

supportive culture did not yet seem to be in evidence. Rather, there were counter indications of residential provision as under-resourced, struggling with a lack of clarity over purpose, low morale and prospects of closure. One residential worker observed thus:

> *Well we are closing in January, moving to outreach and support work what ever that will mean. Madness really, there will always be need for this type of place and we've done some good work. It is all work* ***in the community*** (his emphasis) *and finances that drives everything. Residential care is considered old hat.*
> (Senior residential worker, male, Meadowbank children's home)

It is noteworthy that Meadow Bank Children's Home was viewed by two parents as very positive in terms of the help offered to young people. However, the home closed during the study period.

The respondents in residential care typically felt they were not appropriately supported in their education. They were negative about the level of encouragement received; one young person could only recall a single example of limited support for her schooling from residential staff:

> *Well I suppose the staff did try their best. They pulled the blanket off you in the morning, opened your curtains and put the light on. But that just really pissed me off.*
> (Natalie aged 15, residential care)

None of the sample were able to recall residential staff going to school events (parents evenings, social occasions or fund-raising). Nor did they think staff were motivational in terms of encouraging young people and having knowledge of the school curriculum or key assessment events (see Lindsay and Foley 1999). While a small number of young people in residential care thought that residential staff would attend school events in the future their responses appeared to be based more on hope than experience:

> *Well somebody would go, I know they would. Perhaps it would be (*names worker*) or (*names another worker*). Not sure really, but if they know about it they would want to go.* (Judy aged 14, residential care)

None of the respondents were able to identify a specific key worker or adult they felt they had a particular relationship with who would attend such events but rather it would be 'who ever is on duty'. Their views find support in other studies that residential workers although responsible for this aspect of corporate responsibility, do not have the skills or capacities to undertake such tasks (Morris 2000; Brodie 2001). This was confirmed by a young person in residential care:

No-one goes to school here so why bother. (Natalie, aged 14, residential care)

Within this context (and similar to the findings of Horwath 2000: 189) residential care as a complex and challenging task was delivered by largely unqualified staff and very much the poor relation in social service. On a more positive note, within the study authority there was a commitment to improving the training and support for residential social workers in the authority's strategic plan. Strategic emphasis appeared to be centred around maintaining a service where staff development was the core aim arguably leaving less opportunity for re-thinking and improving the quality of the provision to young people (see also Horwath 2000).

Part of the study authority's response to meeting the needs of the young people was the setting up of a Looked After Children and Education Team (LACE) which was fully staffed and resourced a year into the study. The aims and remit of this team will be discussed in Chapter Nine.

The foster care experience

The views about foster carers and the extent to which they were able to support education were mixed amongst the respondents. Nevertheless, the majority of young people felt that their foster carers were interested in their education and this was evidenced by their recollection of carers positive feedback when they did well, attending school events, helping with home work and projects and as one young person put it, "*always asking me questions and then finding stuff out from the teachers*". Such findings resonate with a larger study by Maclean and Gunion (2003: 25), who sampled a group of fifty children and young people in foster care, residential care and relative care. They found without exception, for those children in foster and relative care 'carers tried to provide children with a positive learning environment'. In this thesis however, there were a small minority of young people who gave opposing views which connect with other research (Harker et al. 2003) about foster carers

who showed little interest in the young person and school, not showing an interest in school reports or attending parents evening and other school events. Their lack of interest or support for homework and a general indifference with regard to education echoed previous research about foster carers who do not see it as part of their role to give education a high priority.

In some cases (as in other research) there appeared to be a lack of clarity, training and support to enable foster carers to undertake this responsibility confidently (see Jackson and Thomas 2000). Lipscombe et al. (2003) in their study of nearly seventy foster carers who were parenting adolescents, aimed to assess parenting approaches and strategies. The foster carers were interviewed at two points in time, at the start of an adolescent placement and following a year of placement. Their analysis finds similarity with the tentative findings from the small sample in this study in that there are a 'number of omissions in foster care practice, particularly relating to the facilitation of education' (Lipscombe et al. 2003: 250). The words of one respondent, an experienced social worker, indicates the sort of support that young people might receive when fostered in the study authority:

> *It's a poor indictment of the situation but complete histories of the children's education do not exist and I do not think the majority of foster carers either understand or consider it as part of their role. I know when it's your own child you live and breathe every stage, but as soon as they move on through the school system you lose touch. I don't think foster carers generally keep abreast of the changes and how they could.... Take reading for example, there is a real lack of encouragement to read, I'm not sure foster carers understand the importance of even the basics, or at least going back to basics with the older one's.*
> (Kate, social worker, looked after children team).

Issues of gender

Young women looked after and experiences of bullying

There were six young women in the study, data in respect of school achievement, education and placement moves were collected for all of them over the three school years. Two young women did not want to be interviewed; one because she was very settled in a family member placement and did not consider herself looked after. For the other young woman, because of severe learning difficulties, her social worker considered it inappropriate for her to be involved in an interview. Interviews were therefore carried out with four of the young women, on three separate occasions. Likewise interviews were conducted with seven young men, on a number of occasions over the three year time period of the research project.

Three out of the eleven young people interviewed claimed that bullying had hampered their educational progress, outcomes and achievements. It was notable that all three were female. At the time of this first interview two were living in residential care and one in foster care. At the end of the first year of the study (the end of Key Stage 3, school Year 9), the two young women in residential care were categorised in the 'no result' group and the young woman in foster care fell into the 'statemented' category. All three young women had several changes to their care and education placements between school year nine and school year eleven.

A number of other studies (Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Harker et al.2004) cite examples of bullying as an experience reported by young people looked after. Borland et al. (1998: 54) note the following:

> The impact of bullying should not be overlooked. We know from children's accounts that being admitted to care can result in persistent teasing, name calling and questioning.

In this study, Judy described what appeared to be part of her everyday experience:

> *Living here is hard – four girls live here and you can hear shouting, I am 14 and B* (names girl*) is 14 and R* (names girl) is *15 and she is a bully. T* (names girl) *she keeps calling me a fat slag and that my Granpy is dying.*
> (Judy aged 14, residential care)

Studies tend not to differentiate in detail the experiences of boys and girls, perhaps giving weight to the view that the relevance of gender is often under-researched (see Lees 2002; Harris 2004). Lipscombe et al. (2003) in their study of adolescents in foster care raise particular issues in the parenting of teenage girls. For example, they found that carers were 'significantly less sensitive to the needs and anxieties of girls than boys' (2003:252) and this was evident in the levels of communication between carer and young person. It may be that some young women may be less willing or able to discuss instances of bullying. It is clear from other studies that foster carers and residential staff state a preference for working with males rather than females (Farmer et al. 2004). Hudson (2002:302) observes that:

> Certainly many social workers, take for granted the assumption that girls are 'more difficult to work with'; their apparent mood swings, non-rationality, outbursts of aggression and internalization of emotional discontent often act to make welfare professionals feel impotent, uncertain of their skills and at a loss of what to do.

This would seem to 'fit' with the views of one respondent in this study:

> *The only option we had for her was a semi-secure residential placement out of county. She exhausted our local provision and she certainly exhausted me! She appeared to be going along with plans that we made and then whoosh she'd be on the road again. The situation was unsafe to say the least.* (Lee-anne, female social worker)

The above preferences and implicit assumptions pose a challenge, particularly if the needs of young people are to be paramount. The current climate in many authorities is one where there is a lack of foster carers, residential services are undervalued and social workers are working in an atmosphere of crisis as a consequence of poor retention and recruitment of staff. Lees (2002) analysed social work records to identify interventions carried out with 124 young girls over the age of 12 during a designated period. She concluded that 'girls' routes into care and their needs in care are significantly different to those of boys' (p. 907) citing sexual abuse, acting as a young carer or neglect as reasons for being looked after. In contrast, behaviour difficulties and criminality are the most common reasons for boys to come into the care system. Scourfield (2003:25) points out that the different routes into care with boys being more subjected to physical abuse, neglect and emotional abuse and girls more likely to be sexually abused reflects wider cultural influences:

> Most of those who sexually abuse children are men, and a dominant construction of heterosexuality in most societies has arguably been the sexual possession of women (and therefore girls in the context of child abuse) by men.

That said, there did not appear to be any clear distinctions to be drawn within the data in this study between the needs of the girls and the boys in terms of making sense of what brought them into the looked after system, or how these experiences might impact on subsequent care or specialist needs. Although gender and practice has been the focus of research in the area of adults in child protection cases (Farmer and Owen 1995; Turney 2000; Scourfield 2003) there does not appear to be the same gender dimension to work with children and young people. Scourfield, for example, notes that boys and girls are 'constructed as equally vulnerable, whereas adult men and women are strongly differentiated by social workers' (2003: 5). There is a sense that children tend to be seen as a unified concept with neutral terms such as 'the needs of the child', 'the best interest of the child' as common language

with insufficient consideration of what that might mean for the individual girl or boy concerned.

Older children and particularly young people in the looked after system are often socially constructed within a juvenile justice perspective. Dominelli (2002) argues that this construction, where gendered perspectives are in evidence, can lead to a misrepresentation of young women's social identity and is acutely damaging. For example, young men are expected to grow out of crime 'once they acquire girlfriends, a home and a family' (Dominelli 2002: 156) whereas young women are not allowed the same assumption. For young women such behaviour is deemed more likely to call into question issues of morality, appropriateness and vulnerability. As such, young women are thought likely to be processed in the looked after system in a way young men are not (Dominelli and McLeod 1994). A more feminist approach to work with these young women would suggest that a gender sensitive stance needs to be adopted that acknowledges the circumstances looked after young women find themselves in and that there are links made to their gender position in society and attention given to their particular needs (Dominelli and McCloud 1994; Dominelli 2002). The relevance and importance of such an approach to work with young women became more apparent as the thesis progressed and data were analysed, as will be discussed further in Chapter Eight.

Summary

The views of the young people in the initial interviews converged around the following main categories: importance of participation, making sense of and understanding their past experiences, imagined futures, attitudes to school and achievement and family relationships. Where relevant their views have been presented in regard to the role of social workers and teachers and residential workers. The differences presented were, in the main, in terms of the support they received from adults in aiding and progressing their educational experiences and issues of gender. These findings have been connected to other empirical work and informed by a sociology of childhood and more specifically to themes of stability and resilience. Chapter Eight will now look at the patterns that emerged for the young people as they negotiated their way through the school experience over time, thereby drawing upon the longitudinal nature of the study design.

Chapter 8: Schooling for the looked after child: variable clusters and outcomes

Introduction

As outlined in Chapter Six, the study focused primarily upon the educational attainment of a sample of fourteen young people as measured at the end of Key Stage 3 via Standard Attainment Tests and Tasks (SATS) in May 2002 and at the end of Key Stage 4 via GCSEs in summer 2004. After the Key Stage 3 results and for analytical purposes it was useful to locate data within sub-groups and categories in order to develop a comparative approach. Obvious and simple categories arising from the findings generated three groupings comprising young people who were: *achievers, statemented* and *no results*. These categories will continue to be used in this chapter to locate a wider range of data and to develop new areas for discussion.

In seeking second and third interviews with the sample the intention was to collect information about what the young people saw as the presence or absence of 'factors' such as placement stability and education continuity (Jackson and Thomas 2000; Harker et al. 2004) influencing their school experience and academic achievements. The second interview with the young people (8 of the 14 available for second interview) was conducted in school Year 10, the results of the Year 9 SATS tests were discussed as well as aspirations for the future including GCSE choices and ambitions. The third interview (7 of the 14 available for a third interview) took place after the GCSE results some two years later. These second and third interviews were less structured and more free flowing. Following the guidance of Dominelli et al. (2005:1126) on research with young people the study concentrated on:

> The lived experiences of participants and start where they are, rather than imposing an external frame.

These interviews therefore elicited retrospective accounts that focused in large part on the young people's perception of the process and outcome of SATS and GCSEs throughout a three year period.

The 'achievers' group: accounting for achievement

This group was made up of six young people: one girl (Christy) and five boys, (Ben, Declan, Anthony, Leonard and Douglas). It is of note that whilst attendance and achievement data were collected for the one girl, Christy, she was, by her own choice, not included in the interviews. The view was taken by social work staff during the study that she was securely located in a kinship placement and would not consider herself 'looked after' and for them to actively seek her involvement would undermine her wishes. Her omission from interviews therefore allowed no insights into her care and education stability, nor into her placement with relatives which were two significant factors likely to contribute to school achievement (Jackson and Sachdev 2001; Ritchie 2005). Approaches were made to re-engage Christy in the research at various later stages but her social worker was unwilling to approach the young person in this matter. Such a response might well be seen as 'over-protective' and not conducive to finding out 'what worked' and how we might learn from this – a position that Mullender et al. (2004: 9) view with some concern:

> Adults end up intervening in their lives in ways which adults have established to be best, without understanding how children and young people themselves perceive or experience these well-intentioned but perhaps misguided efforts.

Kinship placement: a positive experience

On a more positive note, Christy's attendance, results and changes in placement and school circumstances were charted in the early stages of the study on the data collection form and the LACE team continued to make this information available to me. Unusually, Christy had experienced only one placement since coming into care at the age of seven and that was with a family member. As has been highlighted in other studies (Bebbington and Miles 1989) a child's pre-care experiences cannot be overlooked when discussing outcomes. It was officially recorded as 'mother's mental health' that precipitated Christy becoming looked after. It was unclear from the social work file or from her social worker how the mother's mental health issues impacted upon her parenting. One can only surmise that the impact on the child of a parent who is 'well meaning but unable to function effectively due to mental illness' may be very different from the 'young woman who had spent six months in hospital as a four-year-old after being dropped into a hot bath by her mother as punishment' (Jackson et al. 2005: 9). Furthermore, there is some evidence that children and young people who are able to attribute their maltreatment to environmental or adult factors, rather than taking the

responsibility on themselves, have better outcomes (Iwaniec et al. 2006). Christy's legal status has stayed as a child voluntarily accommodated (section 20, Children Act 1989), suggesting that the family arrangement is akin to that of long-term fostering in nature. Family arrangements with 'permanency' have long been an ambition for children who cannot live at home and by 2000 the 'government had already started to press for specific improvements in the rate at which adoption was recommended for looked after children' (Monck et al. 2004: 322). The intended impact of this recommendation was not noted in this study and even for those young people with seemingly secure family placements, such as Christy, their care status had not changed. What is apparent is that in the Year 9 SATS tests, Christy achieved the expected level of a grade 5 in English and Maths and a grade 4 in Science indicating that she was 'working towards the expected level'. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from this, but in the light of other research it would seem that a single family placement with relative carers can be positive. The stability and continuity in schooling as well as the opportunity to develop hobbies and interests and sustain friendships will mean that for some young people who are looked after 'their educational attainment can be positive' (Harker et al. 2003: 90).

The experiences of Ben go some way in supporting the view of Harker et al. (2003). Ben became looked after because of difficult family relationships which social work records indicated impacted on his behaviour in school. Ben became looked after during school Year 8 after a 'number of fixed term exclusions'. It was not possible to explore the circumstances surrounding these exclusions due to a lack of school records. In interview the head of school year nine explained the extent of the difficulty:

> *We are unable to locate school records from primary and records from previous comprehensive school. Issues around the exclusions are a bit hazy, probably usual bad behaviour.... it's not easy to exclude.*
> (Mrs Cox, designated teacher, the Beeches School)

Ben became looked after in February of school Year 8 and was placed in residential care. His experience of school at that time was similar to the views expressed by some of the other young people in residential care:

> *I did go to the PRU* (his use of term) *for an hour a day for about 3 months but I didn't do much, I didn't really go to school at all, I didn't want to go and they didn't make me go. I am in a different school now, it's*

better than the old one and I'm going home ....things are sorted thanks to (names residential unit).
(Ben, residential care, aged 13)

Although Ben left care during Year 9 (after nine months in residential care), it was possible to interview Ben and his mother again after the SATS results to explore with them aspects of Ben's experiences that might have impacted on his achievements. At the end of school Year 9, Ben (now categorised in the achievers group) offered the following account:

Well it's me, I've got my head together, we're sorted (looks a Mum) *and* (names residential unit) *were good .. but I think social services are rubbish to be honest with you I think social workers are lazy.*
(Ben, living at home, aged 15).

Ben was not present for the interview with his Mum and although she endorsed some of his comments she was more temperate in her view, although critical of the time it took to find an alternative school placement for Ben between being excluded from one school in Year 8 and joining another in school Year 9:

I know that they are busy and under staffed but we would go to a meeting and nothing would progress from one meeting to another .. we were the one's that did all of the work....which is OK. If things had been sorted sooner ... (names member of LACE team*) tried her hardest but education were very slow. He had the opportunity of going back to* (names school excluded from in Year 8*) but the head teacher was extremely rude about him* ***to me*** *(*her emphasis*). So we stuck it out to get another school ... things could have been sorted sooner but unfortunately it took as long as it did.*

The fact that Ben had a single care episode in one placement, in a setting that was perceived to be helpful and staff that were 'brilliant', as well as a parent that took an active interest in promoting and advocating his interests would all appear, as is evidenced through other research, to have mitigated the lack of education continuity (Jackson and Martin 1998; Ajayi and Quigley 2006).

Resilient in the face of adversity

It was notable that Declan, a young man who achieved SATS (Key Stage 3) grades 5 and 6 at the expected level in English, Maths and Science, had also been placed in one durable placement, although there were two planned moves over 21 months before that placement

was secured. His reception into care, at the age of 11, was not characterised by 'traditional' turmoil, upheaval and ongoing social work intervention but by a significant event. As recorded in his social work file 'father killed mother and there were no other suitable relatives'. Such a catastrophe might also suggest that domestic violence was prevalent in the family home before the fatality (Gorin 2004; Mullender et al. 2004). Over three interviews Declan appeared able to compartmentalise the event that led him to become looked after and (as with Christy's case) saw these to do with adult behaviour rather than as a consequence of something he did.

Declan put great store in the fact that he had not experienced a number of placement moves and also emphasised the absence of unplanned school moves as even more important to his educational success.

> *It happened, no one in my family could look after me then 'cos they couldn't, so I had to carry on with what I do but with foster carers. As I said before I am not like a social services kids, so I wanted to carry on with my friends, with people who knew me in my junior school and on to secondary school. To be like them carry on.....I got good foster carers and didn't have to change schools, that was all part of it.*
> (Declan aged 15, foster care)

This may equate with Parson's et al. (2002: 105) who suggest that every time a young person in care moves placement this effect is 'likely to lead to approximately six months loss of educational attainment'. Declan confirmed that he was settled in his placement, in school, had his friends around him and saw his SATS achievements as almost predictable:

> *They're pretty much what I expected, they're pretty much what I told you I would get. I don't see why my GCSE's will be much different if I put the work in....if I don't I won't get them... but I will.*
> (Declan aged 15, foster care)

Achieving-but how much?

Anthony, the fourth young person whose attainments put him into the 'achievers' group shared some key similarities with Christy and Declan. He too had one significant placement from the point when he came into care under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 at the age of 10. (He had one brief period of care lasting one month when aged 4). The reason for him being accommodated is recorded as 'mother's drinking and a break down in family relationships between Anthony and his step-father'. Unlike Declan and Christy, Anthony

was placed in a very busy foster home with other children where both his foster carers and Anthony had an ambivalent attitude towards school:

> *I remember the SATS in the last year of primary school they were really hard tests. They were hard this time too.. mind I don't like English; my English had to go back to be re-marked, not sure what all that is about. I don't like Welsh but I got a 5 in Maths and a 5 in Science. You would have to ask my teachers what they think of how I am doin' in school but they would probably say poor.*
> (Anthony aged 15, foster care)

While Anthony was categorised as an achiever, unlike Declan, he didn't hold positive prospects about his future academic achievements:

> *Well I know I have to be in school, but I am not sure about GCSEs. But it is all up to me really, I think the teachers have got it right.*
> (Anthony aged 15, foster care)

While in school Year 10, Anthony's attendance was recorded as 90 per cent however there were indications that significant adults in his life were not monitoring, supporting and encouraging his achievements at school. Anthony stated that his birth parents did not have enough information about him to support his education and that Julie, his foster carer was rather out of her depth:

> *She is sort of interested but she don't know enough about it really, it's all changed since her day. She has been up the school for me and the other kids but leaves us pretty much to get on with it.*
> (Anthony aged 15, foster care)

Indeed, Anthony's view of his foster carer was to some extent corroborated by Julie herself when interviewed:

> *I say to him, 'have you done your lessons?' well I say that to all the kids and you know what they are like- 'Ain't got any or yeh!'.... Well what can you do? They clear off upstairs, come down say, 'done my homework.' Off out and then you don't see them again 'til 10 o'clock – who knows what they are up to!*
> (Julie, foster carer)

Differing dispositions to learning and expectations

As has been evidenced in other research (SEU 2003; Farmer et al. 2004) some foster carers in this study lacked an understanding of contemporary schooling or there was a sense that, like Julie, they put their trust in the school and the teachers to *''keep on that side of things''*. It is difficult to conclude whether foster carers' educational level, in itself, is a determinant in how they subsequently support educational achievement. Neither Declan's nor Anthony's foster carers had any O levels, GCSEs or higher qualifications. However, Declan's foster mother put great store in her progression through the local authority training programme, whereas Anthony's foster carer saw the training programme as both an imposition and in some way an implicit criticism of her level of care:

> *I've been doin' this for years, kids of my own and if I havn't got enough to do they want to train me now!* (Julie, foster carer).

As with other research there appeared to be some ambivalence in the way in which local authority training was viewed by carers as a pre-requisite for maintaining their status and approval as foster carers (Macdonald and Turner 2005).

It was notable that these two foster carers had different dispositions to learning. Their individual orientation to education, and their attitudes to 'lifelong learning' (NAfW 2001c: 8) may have been significant in shaping a young person's attitude to schooling and achievement. Other research has found that in about 40-45 per cent of foster placements the carers did not have GCSEs and only a small number were educated to degree level (Farmer et al. 2004; Sinclair et al. 2004). The findings of Sinclair and colleagues based on questionnaire responses from a thousand foster carers across seven local authorities found that less than one in seven cases had a professional or degree level qualification (Sinclair et al. 2004). Similarly, Farmer et al. (2004) collected data on a sample of 68 newly placed young people aged between 11 and 17, including case file material, semi-structured interviews with social workers and carers. They cite a figure of 12 per cent having a degree or professional qualification (Farmer et al. 2004). Research commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government (Collis and Butler 2003) to provide a profile of foster carers in Wales identified 34 per cent with no qualifications, whilst the number with GCSEs was 30 per cent, A levels 21 per cent, undergraduate degree 9 per cent and post graduate 6 per cent. This postal questionnaire of 2,170 with a return rate of 37 per cent (just over 800) concluded that:

> The educational profile of newly approved foster carers does not appear to have changed in the last 20 years, despite the emphasis on professionalism and education over the last few years (Collis and Butler 2003:27).

The role of adults in preventing young people from becoming disconnected from school

We can note that 'children intending to take GCSEs will often not have carers able to give them much direct help with their homework' (Sinclair et al. 2004: 20). Thus, there was a sense that whilst the foster carer Julie (above) ''did her best'' and did not actively discourage Anthony, she was not able to be proactive in the sort of support, interest and encouragement that is known to contribute to success (Martin and Jackson 2002; Harker et al. 2004). Although Anthony's attendance at school and his achievement at Year 9 SATS could be viewed as reaching the expected level, his view and enthusiasm for school appeared to deteriorate between the first and second interview. It is of note also, that during this later stage of the research, his case remained 'unallocated' to a social worker, a factor that has been highlighted in other research as a source of dissatisfaction and frustration for foster carers (Macdonald and Turner 2005) as well as for young people themselves. Schofield and Beek (2005: 1293) advocate:

> All children should be entitled to at least the statutory minimum service provided by a consistent social worker with whom they could develop a relationship.

This lack of social work support raises the question of how his motivation for school and the belief that he could achieve was sustained (Jackson and Sachdev 2001). He did not believe he was performing particularly well, his birth family were not engaged enough in his life to take on a supportive role, his foster carers did not see it as their responsibility, nor did they have the capacity to actively support him. To compound these issues it was around this time his social worker retired and his case remained unallocated in the looked after children team for over a year until it was eventually prematurely activated by the leaving care team. These factors would seem likely to undermine motivation in any young person. Young people are more likely to engage with school if they feel supported and valued by adults:

> Parental goals and values might also motivate students to pursue goals that are valued by adults at school (Wentzel 1997: 417).

There was a sense that in a passive way Anthony (see Jackson and Sachdev 2001: 91) was becoming 'disconnected from education' (Cook 2005: 90). Because this was not in a dramatic or risky way it was occurring almost without the adults around him noticing. Although his case was discussed by the relevant social work team his situation was seen in the context of a number of other cases that were then unallocated. As the Looked After Children Team Manager commented:

> *The placement is OK and he's going to school, yes we would like to allocate* (a social worker), *but that just isn't going to happen. How we would like to work with these young people, and the reality, are poles apart. There is a huge prioritising exercise going on and some of these kids miss out.*
> (Diane, Looked After Children Team Manager).

Thus, Anthony might be seen as a casualty of limited resources in this local authority. Had his case been allocated swiftly to a proactive social worker interested in education his later outcomes may well have been different.

"If this were my child"- the pushy parent

The Welsh Assembly Government in collaboration with the Welsh Local Government Association, the Department of Education and Skills and the Local Government Information Unit produces guidance for local authorities on being a good corporate parent (see *If This Were My Child*, WAG 2005). The sentiments implied within the title of this document are laudable yet the example of Anthony demonstrates how legislation, policy and practice may be insufficient without some mechanism to keep an overview of the young person and to follow up concerns to probe and advocate. Anthony was not a runaway nor involved in criminal activity and as such not as 'noticeable' as some of the other young people in the study who made more pressing demands on the local authority. He was a young person, who, to all intents and purposes, seemed to be surviving whilst in fact he was struggling, and as Morris (2000: 220) argues:

> Many children in the public care system will not have the resources or the resilience and therefore have a particular need for a 'pushy parent'.

The concept of the 'pushy parent' has been highlighted in the literature as differentiating between middle and working class parents and attitudes to parenting (Lucey and Walkerdine 2000; Jackson and Sachdev 2001). Walkerdine et al. (2001) in their study of working-class

and middle-class girls, concluded that working class parents were emotionally and materially ill-equipped and felt a lack of entitlement to negotiate on behalf of their children. Drawing on the theoretical work of Bourdieu, Walkerdine et al. (2001: 127) relate this to the parent's perceived lack of both social and cultural capital:

> A persistent theme in the working-class narratives was impotence in what they viewed as the teacher's authority.

While class related issues influence, there is the additional matter of how local authorities view the role of foster care. Jackson and Sachdev (2001: 70) conclude that this responsibility is not given enough prominence:

> Local authority foster care is still seen as primarily in terms of helping children to form relationships, to maintain links with their birth families and to overcome emotional and behavioural problems. It is very rare for promoting school success to be highlighted as an important aim in fostering.

Even though the number of individuals involved in the corporate parent activity can be multiple (one commentator has estimated that as many as 15 different individuals from a range of agencies can be involved, Firth and Fletcher, 2001), there did not appear in the case of Anthony to be a single individual who took on the parenting role of monitoring, assessing, scrutinizing the information from school, engaging the views of Anthony and acting as a 'champion' of his interests. Perhaps, therefore fulfilling the prophecy of Rees (2001: 278):

> If expectations and interest in education are low, it is likely that outcomes will also be poor.

Achieving, but only just: the need for a pro-active approach

Leonard, the fifth young person whose profile placed him into the achievers category, was looked after under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. His reception into care was recorded by the social workers as a 'history of behaviour difficulties, mum and dad are unable to cope, and relationship difficulties within the family'. Leonard lived with his Grandmother for a brief period but that broke down as his behaviour became more difficult, with drug and alcohol misuse and bouts of running away a regular feature. Leonard first became looked after just before his thirteenth birthday and was placed for four months in residential care, next he was placed in foster care, where he was first interviewed. The interview indicated

some hope and optimism on the part of Leonard who was enthusiastic about his foster placement:

> *I want to change my life I used to run away and everything. I have not run away for ages now. I used to run away to my friends caravan at Seabreeze* (local holiday park) *my older friends would look after me. I am really going to try now. I want to stay here with Polly* (foster carer), *and the social workers will make a decision about that.*

Leonard was less enthusiastic about his education placement, his case as with other research revealed that more emphasis was placed on care aspects and less on continuity of education. (see Blyth and Milner 1997; Fletcher-Campbell, 1997).

> *I would have liked to continue at the same school but they've said it is too far away it's 23 miles so I am waiting for them to sort something out. I am not in school, I watch TV, have some food and go for a skateboarding practice.* (Leonard aged 14, foster care)

At this stage Leonard presented as self motivated and confident about his abilities and achievements, he was able to re-count a number of successes, including previous SATS results concluding:

> *I'm quite brainy in school, it's just my behaviour, I've got mad people in my school and I play up with them.*

Maintaining education continuity

Although Leonard was anticipating a school change he viewed this new opportunity with enthusiasm, such a stance of looking forward to a 'fresh start' has been highlighted in other research (Farmer et al. 2004: 106). Whilst he spoke positively about ambitions for the future linked to further education training there appeared to be complications in securing an educational placement as he (like others in care) was placed outside his 'home' authority (see Walker et al. 2002). Consequently he was out of school for a number of weeks whilst the necessary interagency agreements were secured. During this period there did not appear to be any contingency plans in place for tutoring even though continuity of education has been highlighted as a significant feature in maintaining a young person's motivation for education, keeping up with the curriculum as well as aiding their re-integration into a new school. Jackson and Thomas (2000: 71) emphasise the importance of attention to these matters:

> Education is the aspect of children's lives where it is most vital to preserve continuity, in relationships with teachers and friends, attendance at lessons, keeping up with the curriculum content, ensuring understanding of important elements of each subject.

As is evident in other research, the government guidance and the expectation that a time scale of 20 school days should be in place to identify an education placement was not adhered to (NAfW 2001a; Harker et al. 2004).

The roles and responsibilities of significant adults

There were similarities between Leonard's case and that of Anthony in as much as his foster carer did not seem to consider it her responsibility to promote his education. Whilst she commented that Leonard should be in school there did not appear to be any urgency in her desire for him to be placed, indeed there was more a weary acceptance of events based on previous experience:

> *Oh I've had this before....tooing and frowing, who's doing what, social services and education; I leave it to them to get on with it 'til it gets sorted out. Mind he is settling in and that takes a while. Then we've got the October holiday coming if he gets in this side of Christmas it will be a miracle.* (Polly, foster carer)

Polly (as with Anthony's foster carer), did not seem clear about her role and responsibility and the need to take some initiative. Thus Sinclair notes in his review of sixteen research projects primarily concerned with fostered children, 'proactive carers were likely to fight the child's corner over school' (Sinclair 2005: 98).

Leonard's hope for permanence with Polly and his 'fresh start' in his new school was short lived. Although he was in school to take his Year 9 SATS in English and Science and achieved a grade 5 and was anticipated a grade 5 for Maths he left the school in mid-June of the same year. His care placement had lasted 10 months but was characterised by long periods when he went missing. It was ultimately the disruption in the care placement that meant he left the school. Notably, it was the school's head of year who was critical of the disruption to Leonard's education in what he saw as the prominence given to the care placement:

> *Well it all happened last week, I was away. There were a couple of high powered meetings and the decision was made that he should leave. It is*

such a shame I had a good relationship with him. When he first came there was a re-integration package that meant he just attended lessons to try and minimise getting into other difficulties. There was a phenomenal amount of pastoral influence. He then went down hill very quickly ....he broke the school drinks machine and then after that kept making the wrong choices. I am not sure leaving school was the right decision and if I had been here I may have been able to influence that, a bright boy... but the decision was taken last week. He wasn't excluded; it was the emphasis put on his care move.
(Mr Rowlands, head of Year 9, Oakfield Comprehensive)

The above extract highlights how the involvement of a significant individual can potentially impact on decision-making, the ongoing plans and possibly ultimate outcomes for looked after children.

Push and pull factors in the care placement

Leonard then spent five days in a fostering placement back in the care of his home authority before going back to live with his Grandmother and thereby leaving the looked after system. Whilst this type of placement can be very positive in terms of providing family continuity and individual identity there is also concern that:

> Kinship care placements will be engineered in response to placement crises, bringing crises of their own (Broad and Skinner 2005: 8).

Leonard initially came into the looked after system because of difficult and complicated family relationships, where boundaries and the relationship between the family systems were problematic. It appeared that in many ways the entrenched family patterns had not changed. Consequently, Leonard lived for four months over the summer with his grandmother, this made great demands on her physically, emotionally and financially. The arrangement brought few rewards to the grandmother who said she was bullied and threatened by Leonard who regularly stole from her and stayed out all night. Although Leonard agreed to be interviewed a second time this interview was dominated by his lengthy account of his offending, drinking, drug misuse and fractious relationship with his Grandmother and other family members. He did engage with the discussion about education but spoke negatively about school. Although contradicting himself, he spoke favourably about the head of year (a "good bloke", "trying for me") citing characteristics that might be considered as evidence of a 'perceived availability of a supportive adult' (Wentzel: 1997: 417). Leonard acknowledged that he thought things may have been different if that particular head of year

teacher had been at the various meetings alluded to above. Whilst it is difficult to estimate the importance of this particular professional we may note from other studies how one person, teacher, carer or social worker can advocate and impact decisively on decision making at critical stages (Gilligan 2000a; Harker 2004; Dominelli et al. 2005). McAuley (2002: 93) adds weight to this point:

> Even one positive relationship or experience in childhood or adulthood may do much to counter the harm of negative relationships or experiences. As carers we know this is true - for example (one) young person said 'When I left here, I remembered the things you told me and what you did for me and it's helped me learn what I have to do. I thought you were just hassling me but you weren't - thanks'.

Young people running away: an indicator of detachment

Similar to one other young person in the 'achievers' group, Leonard's adolescence (both whilst he was living with his family and in the looked after system) was marked by periods of running away. Biehal and Wade (2000) in their three year study of young people who go missing from residential and foster care found that a sizeable proportion of young people were aged between the ages of 13 - 15 years. However the full scale of the problem was not clear as 'foster carers were not required to record absences and recording by social workers was hit and miss'(Biehal and Wade 2000: 214). The findings by Biehal and Wade, which appear to concur with the aspects of this study, reveal that running away is linked to a repertoire of problem behaviours moving towards a 'detachment from some of the important centres of adult authority for teenagers' (Biehal and Wade 2000: 222). Leonard offered some explanation for his running away:

> When it just all gets too much and does my head in, I just take off.....
> (Leonard aged 15, placed with Grandmother)

Once the patterns of running away were established they were hard to break and it may be that aspects of the culture in residential care may contribute to the problem, this will be explored later with regard to young people in this study who lived in group homes in the local authority.

Achiever to offender: the rapid decline

Leonard's experiences between the second interview and the third featured periods of insecurity and instability while placed in and out of the home authority as well as a lack of educational continuity. He lived for one month in residential care in the authority, followed by three months in private residential care some 100 miles away from the home authority. Following this he spent four months in an independent fostering placement which disrupted and resulted in him being placed back in residential care in the home authority for one night, before being moved to another independent fostering placement, again outside the home authority. He was then placed again with another independent foster carer and this was a relatively stable placement that lasted almost a year and allowed him to engage with education, albeit on a fairly *ad hoc* basis. Whilst the evidence from his Key Stage 2 and 3 SATS results suggested he was achieving the expected level and in some subjects excelling (an outcome shared by others who are looked after, see Evans 2000).

Leonard's early achievements challenge the view that children's pre-care experiences may be a reason for poor outcomes in education for looked after children. However, as a consequence (or a cause) of a variety of factors including background events, family circumstances, and continuity problems such as: non school attendance, placement moves, running away, detachment from authority figures, Leonard became further involved in drug and alcohol misuse and criminal activity (see Biehal and Wade 2000). So between the ages 14 and 16 (Key Stage 4) his behaviour deteriorated dramatically and thereby he did not achieve the appropriate government specified targets for GCSEs for looked after children.

Achieving below the expected level but who cares?

The case of Douglas reflects themes arising within the 'achievers' group. For example, by the second interview Douglas was still expressing a real enthusiasm for school and confidence in his achievements and motivation, albeit he was performing at below the expected level:

> Students' perception of competence do not necessarily reflect their real capacities (Bouffard 2003: 172).

Douglas was categorised as a candidate for the 'achievers' group by virtue of completing SATS tests in school Year 9, even though his results were poor and below the expected level. What does seem to be remarkable that after being out of education and having a fairly minimum curriculum exposure for 18 months, Douglas managed to relocate himself into the

school environment in Year 9 and maintain his attendance, resulting in a school report that described his positive social and academic progress.

> Douglas' reading, spelling and Maths have improved enormously. Douglas is well liked, popular with teachers and pupils. Douglas has done extremely well and made much progress. Attendance has been excellent.
> (Glynbryn, summary at end of year report, Mrs Peters, Year 9 teacher).

He too expressed enthusiasm and a recognition of his achievements:

> *It's good getting on tidy - meeting friends, doing my work, getting things done and I only started in Year 9. In my SATS I done really well. I did really well in Science that was my best 'cos I went up a set in Science. I was the best in the class in Science... so when I go back I'll be in set 5. I'm pleased with my progress. My teachers would say I am doing really well.*

Douglas was vehement that this achievement was due to his own determination helped by some support from school. The residential unit he was placed in not only, in Douglas' view, failed to encourage and support him but appeared to demonstrate a culture of some indifference:

> *They don't go to school here* (in the unit), *they are naughty they don't bother going to school and nobody seems to do anything. But I want to be an electrician and go to (*names local college*) so the only way is to do it myself. It's good and I'm getting on tidy.*

Douglas' account of residential care was corroborated in interviews with a teacher, residential staff and the manager of the residential unit. There were also comments recorded in LAC review documents that: 'Sunny View Children's home is not conducive to homework'. Also, two letters on file from the school to the social services department acknowledged that Douglas had made 'good progress, but we are worried about losing him', added weight to concern about the unit's negative effect regards schooling.

These concerns were explored with the unit manager and with residential staff who spoke about the problems of recruiting workers. The manager believed her role and accompanying tasks to be undervalued, particularly in light of personal training needs being unmet:

> *I would have liked to have done (*qualifying training programme*) but oh no residential care managers have to go the NVQ route. I don't want to do NVQ. How many years have I given to this work to this department ten-twelve? It's alright to second or send somebody off who's been in field work for two minutes, but not us .....not the ressies. I'd like to see some of those field worker's deal with what we have to and then see? Let them try and get these kids to school, keep tabs on them and put up with what we do when they kick off. The kids are here and it's out of sight out of mind and next thing is they're asking us why they are not in school.*
> (Sally, officer-in-charge, Sunny View, residential unit)

Such views seemed to mirror those that Biehal and Wade (2000: 217) identified in their research into residential practice:

> Senior management within the units failed to offer clear leadership, staff morale was low, and staff appeared over-whelmed by a sense of fatalism about their ability to protect residents or control behaviour.

The relatively successful Year Nine and the positive second interview with Douglas contrasted sharply with the way schooling progressed thereafter. As with Leonard, he appeared to gradually become detached from school and his placement, running away for significant periods of time from the residential unit. Biehal and Wade (2000: 217) note a high incidence of running away from residential care and attribute this to the young people's pre-care experiences as well as contributing factors from residential care:

> Pull factors deriving from young people's histories, family relationship and peer networks outside the placement and push factors originating in placements often re-inforced one another (Biehal and Wade 2000: 217).

The impact of push factors

Push factors in residential care are seen as bullying, non school attendance, involvement in offending behaviour. When young people are not in school, running away can actually be seen as something to occupy their time. Not surprisingly when young people run away this can impact even further on the likelihood of them not getting back into school. In Douglas' case he got into a negative spiral of absenting himself from the residential unit and engaging in criminality and substance misuse. In consequence he never returned to full time education. In both the cases of Leonard and Douglas there were points where they appeared to be academically motivated and interested, but between school years 9 and 10 this enthusiasm

became markedly dissipated. During the time between the second and the third interview Douglas began to acquire the identity of a young offender rather than that of a looked after child and, institutionally, became constructed accordingly and no longer seen as a child in need. We can note that this 'offender' identity may be prioritized and amplified by professionals as dominant characteristics, that are part of, and important to the individual (Drakeford and McCarthy 2000). Indeed in terms of institutional responses to need Goldson (2000: 256) argues that the move to Youth Offending Teams from the previously known Youth Justice Teams or Juvenile Justice Teams marked a substantial change:

> Such a shift represents a deeper ideological and conceptual current which has steadily gathered momentum throughout the last decade, and within which children in trouble have increasingly been regarded, and thus treated, as 'offenders' first, and 'children' (or more specifically children in need') second, if at all.

The notion that young people are cast as young offenders and denied the identity of children in need (Goldson 2000) runs counter to principles asserted by Haines and Drakeford (1998:89) who insist that a central tenet of the youth justice system is 'to see all young people under the age of 18 years treated as children first'. Although this may be a principle enshrined in the Children Act 1989 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Hendrick (2003: 227) observes that youth offending teams and the courts have not been given a directive by government that 'the welfare of children should be of primary consideration'.

Summary of achievers group

The 'achievers' (Christy, Ben, Declan, Anthony, Leonard and Douglas) came into the looked after system with a variety of pre-care experiences and were placed in both foster care and residential care. Perhaps unsurprisingly the young people who enjoyed some stability in their care and education placement achieved at the SATS level and continued on to GCSEs, although with varying success. More surprisingly, two young people Douglas and Leonard achieved at SATS in spite of being placed in what they perceived to be an unsupportive system. Their situations revealed a lack of timely planning from the adults around them in securing educational continuity or in addressing situations that could be seen to hamper success. During school Year 9, aged 14, they appeared to be confident and motivated, a state they were unable to sustain. Thus while they were categorised as achievers at the end of their Year 9, during Year 10 they were verbalising and signalling some behaviours, attitudes and

needs that suggested they were at risk of becoming disengaged from education and adult authority. It was not always clear that these signals were being read or acted upon by the professionals and carers involved in their lives.

The 'statemented' group: a variety of experiences

Although the statemented group of four young people, Laura, Kim, Karla and Bernard were not eligible to take GCSEs it is important to note the educational experiences within this group over the three year duration of the study. By the end of the study period two young women, Laura and Kim, had maintained their care and education placement, both were described as having severe learning difficulties. Laura was not interviewed as it was considered by her social worker that her learning difficulties were so complex she would not be able to make her views known.

The foster carer of the other young woman, Kim, described her as 'being a member of the family and responding to all they had done for her'. Although Kim was placed with them on a fostering arrangement the carers gave the impression they would continue caring for Kim into adulthood:

> *Although she's a teenager she's not like other young people her age. She is going to need help and support for some time to come. She is fourteen, but she is more like an eight year old. She likes the one- to- one.* (Eileen, foster carer)

Kim had severe learning difficulties but was able to engage in an interview. She was placed in care (care order) after what her social worker termed ''an accumulation of years of neglect''. Kim was the eldest of six children and all lived away from their birth parents. Kim had one foster placement since coming into care and case files and interview data suggested the school and the family had worked tirelessly to develop interests in and outside of the school as well as monitoring and encouraging her academic progress:

> Kim has made excellent progress this year and her achievements are, in part, due to the commitment and encouragement offered by her carers. (Extract from social services report of review meeting, September 2003)

Disruption and resources

By contrast, Karla who had a visual impairment, after initially settling in quite well to a foster placement and school went on to experience a difficult period. The interview extract that

follows with Karla's social worker raised not only some of the demands made upon foster carers but, implicitly indicates the limited capacity of some practitioners to move beyond a 'problem' oriented approach to behaviour difficulties and engage more therapeutically in their analysis and practice:

Social worker:	Well things went well for Karla initially. We were all delighted, school were pleased, we had sorted out equipment for her, funding had been made available for a computer all was going really well. The twins (her siblings) had clearly settled in the placement (same) and plans were afoot for adoption. Then Karla's behaviour just went, well really weird. It started with her wanting to be with her foster mum more and more, like she wanted to be close, kisses and cuddles and stuff.
Interviewer:	What sort of sense did the foster mother make of that?
Social worker:	Well exactly no sense at all.
Interviewer:	What sense did you make of it? How did you explain what might be happening for Karla?
Social worker:	Well it was just too much for the foster carer. She would go from the lounge to the kitchen and Karla could hardly bear to have her out of her sight, it was like she was on her back the whole time. Then it became even worse and Karla would cry into the evening and wanted to stay up all night and started wandering around the house in the night. She went from going out all of the time to not going anywhere, just being around.
Interviewer:	How would you describe the behaviour? Was it like the behaviour of any other young people you work with?
Social worker:	Well the going out yes, but it was as if she became absolutely obsessive about the foster mother. I had to tell Karla eventually that the placement had to end. Well of course it was the other two too (siblings) - they were going to be adopted but this was putting an enormous strain on the family, it couldn't go on.
Interviewer:	Were you able to draw any parallels with the behaviour of younger children and the possible stages that children might go through in the process bonding and securing their attachment?

Social worker: In the end it was clear that she couldn't stay and this was really terrible, I had to get a police escort to physically remove her from the home. There was no way she wanted to go but she couldn't continue there.

This interview extract might suggest the social worker was either unable to 'read' the distress being exhibited by Karla and did not have a conceptual framework to draw upon in order to locate difficult and demanding behaviour within regressive tendencies associated with establishing secure attachments. Aldgate (2006: 18) identifies what is needed (but which appeared to be lacking in this case):

> It is important that professionals not only have an understanding of child development but also are ready to use the evidence from knowledge to promote the optimal development of each child with whom they are working.

It appeared that the foster carers and the social worker expected Karla to behave in a particular way, arguably with limited regard for her emotional capacities and needs. Howe (2005: 236) observes that:

> Many severely abused and neglected children suffer core development impairments in their social cognition. Chronological age is therefore not a guide to the child's socio-emotional age. Interventions have to be pitched at the child's development age if they are to be effective.

The result of the disruption to her foster placement meant that Karla spent a long period of time in a specialist residential unit outside of the study authority, but eventually being returned to a local residential unit. It is not clear from her records and interviews with Karla and other professionals what, if any, was the positive impact of that period of disruption and change of placement on Karla and speaks more to the limited facilities and skills within the local care system.

'All possibilities exhausted, best he goes home': a social worker's view

The fourth statemented young person, Bernard was, according to his case history looked after under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, as his 'parents were unable to manage his behaviour or protect him from harm'. He clearly had complex needs and was recorded as

having a statement because of his serious behaviour problems. He attended a special school where the case notes record him as having a number of fixed term exclusions in Year 7 and 8 and complete non-attendance during Year 9. He returned home towards the end of the first year of the study having had a number of placements, including short periods of time in three of the four residential homes in the study authority and in foster care. His particular needs, as captured in the above quote from his social worker, seemed to tax the professionals involved in his care. There was a suggestion during the first year of the study that he might be placed in a residential school but once he left the looked after system it is not clear what happened to those plans. Although he returned home it was considered that he might be subject to child protection procedures under the category of neglect as it appeared that there was insufficient parental supervision to prevent him from getting involved in drugs and crime. Bernard removed himself from the study by virtue of the fact that he ceased to be looked after. He did however soon become the subject of a two year supervision order with the Youth Offending Team.

Summary of statemented group

In educational terms, children with learning difficulties, physical disabilities as well as emotional and behavioural difficulties are all regarded as having special educational needs. The four young people in this study were all recorded in the social work case files as having a 'statement' and in some ways represented the broad section of children whose needs are met through the statementing process. For example, Laura had multiple and complex needs regarding physical and learning difficulties, Kim was recorded as having severe learning difficulties, Karla had a visual impairment. Bernard was categorised as having emotional and behavioural difficulties that led to what Hayden et al. (1999:117) would describe as 'a vicious circle of low achievement, low motivation and disruptive behaviour'. There is some evidence that a disproportionate number of looked after children have a statement of special educational needs and in turn a high proportion of those looked after with a 'statement' are excluded from school (Hayden et al. 1999; Brodie 2001). However comprehensive and definitive data on these aspects of a child's educational experience are difficult to establish. Although statemented children are exempt from the assessment task and government target setting the evidence from this small sub-group would suggest that it is imperative that their views and experiences of education as a looked after child are not overlooked due to an over-emphasis on 'results' rather than progress more generally. Two of the young women with particular needs due to their learning difficulties appeared to have had the necessary support

stability and continuity to make good progress. However, for the other two time in the looked after system did not appear to compensate for their earlier negative childhood experiences, nor enhance their capacities for the future.

The 'no result group': some individual and collective issues

There were four young people in this group; two girls (Judy and Natalie) and two boys (Stephen and Nathan). Three of them, Judy, Stephen and Natalie were in residential care at the start of the study and one boy, Nathan was placed with remand foster carers whilst waiting the outcome of court hearings. None of the young people who were in the no result group for SATS in school Year 9 were able to improve on their performance nor would they later meet the government targets for GCSEs. For the two boys in the no result group their lives took a downward spiral into criminal activity and the two young women also became more troubled with drugs, alcohol and early pregnancy.

Two of this group (Judy and Nathan) experienced kinship care for part of the study. Judy was recorded in the social work file as coming into the looked after system because of 'family relationship difficulties' with some (unsubstantiated) suggestions that sexual abuse may have occurred. It is noteworthy that at the start of the study when Judy was in residential care she did not have an allocated social worker. She left the study authority (in March 2002) to go and live with her maternal grandparents, but rather than this signalling a period of security and stability there developed a more protracted and 'disengaged' phase characterised by non-school attendance and drug and alcohol misuse. There were some similarities between her placement with her grandmother and Leonard (from the achievers group) being placed with his grandmother, not least the lack of ongoing support post placement and the drift and troublesome conduct. Sinclair et al. (2005a: 86) in their study of nearly 600 children who were placed in foster care and followed up over three years found that of those children who went home:

> Systematic help from social services was rarely given, and hardly ever intensive. We failed to find any form of help that statistically affected outcome.

Both these young people effectively left the care system when they went to live with a family member, there was no further statutory involvement, guidance, support or planned assistance. Yet, the move towards placing children and young people in a kinship arrangement is

increasingly considered as promoting stability and is identified by Ritchie (2005: 765) as very positive:

> The advantages of remaining with the family, with appropriate support are clear: the child's sense of identity, self-esteem and cultural heritage is affirmed; the child remains in touch with wider family.

However as also noted by Richie and others (Broad and Skinner 2005), the outcomes of kinship care for some young people can be inconclusive and inconsistent. There can be particular issues if the family member where the child is placed was part of the immediate family structure when the young person was accommodated and where little work has been carried out to eradicate the conflicts or difficulties that led to the care episode.

Possibility of educational flexibility

Data from across the study sample suggest that more flexibility in terms of schooling provision would improve adaptation for many looked after children. For example, whilst Judy was in residential care she spoke in her first interview about the school she was attending in glowing terms:

> *I love this school no matter where else I may live I need to be in this school this is where I have been my happiest.* (Judy aged 13, residential care)

Judy was reminded of her views of the school (which she had left) during the second interview and she still maintained she would have liked to have continued going there, but (as with Leonard), the travel distance to and from school (35 plus miles) was considered too far once she was placed with her grandparent. Her grandmother summed up her own frustration:

> *Well I'm disgusted with education and social workers. Judy left the children's home to come and live with me, but I was not prepared to let her go back to* (names nearby school*) to be bullied. They have no idea how to deal with bullying. So Judy has not been educated since she was thirteen, 'cos there was literally no-where for her to go they told me. I would have liked her to continue going to (*school previously referred to by Judy*) but I just couldn't afford it and social services were not prepared to do it. So of course she did go back to* (nearby school) *but it all started over again, bullied 'cos she was living with an old women-which was me-and also because she was backward.*

After a period of living with her grandmother Judy described 'going through a bad patch' which involved her being accommodated by the local authority where her grandmother resided. Judy described this phase as particularly unsettling as she moved between foster and residential care. At this point she was abusing alcohol, drugs and self harming.

> *It was a really bad time for me. I should have stayed in* (names childen's home) *or come back to Nan's and gone to* (names school) *that really was the best. It's all been shit since then 'scuse my language.....*
> (Judy, aged 16)

Thus, whilst kinship care may be viewed as a preferred option it may in fact repeat or compound problems for child and carers. In Judy's case as in others, it is difficult to see how the young people who move between authorities have their need effectively co-ordinated nor how the needs of kinship carers are met. Indeed, the circumstance of both Judy and Leonard illuminates a number of pitfalls for children in kinship care.

Instability and disengagement: the extent of placement instability

Within the 'no result' group Natalie, had a variety of care placements (as did others across the sample) over the study period. Natalie became looked after aged 14, following a breakdown in the relationship between father/stepmother and paternal grandparents. Her mother died when Natalie was young but the social work record is unclear about Natalie's age at that time. Over the first two years of the study period she was placed in a variety of settings including three different residential units within the authority, relative fostering, local authority foster care, independent fostering outside of the study authority, residential care outside the study authority and a mother and baby unit outside the study authority.

At the time of the first interview Natalie had recently moved into a residential home having been placed in various different settings for periods of time ranging from two months to two weeks, and in one situation for two days. This meant that she was starting a new school mid-way through the academic year. Neither her social worker nor residential worker highlighted any particular concerns about this process or identified any specific plans to aide the transition.

Data across the study sample indicates that young people in the achievers group (such as Leonard), and similarly the 'no result' group appeared to be disengaging from adult

authority. Natalie described her situation and the boundaries she infringed along with her peers:

> *I haven't been to school for two months. I haven't been excluded but they don't want to have me back. I stay in the unit in the day and go on the computer and that. You're grounded in the day but still allowed out at 4 o'clock after a while you are not allowed out at all, but we all just walk out.*

As with Judy, Natalie had an impression that things could have been different if she had been in a different school:

> *I would like to go back to* (names school)*. I would like to go by bus. There were no bullies there. It was a Catholic school. If I had been in* (names school) *I would still be there.*

Reflecting on her life she appears to believe that her schooling would have been different had she not left a Catholic comprehensive. Also, that being placed in a residential unit meant that she was exposed to the idea of running away, which appeared to be something of an established practice within the culture of the unit:

> *Oh I've run away loads of times, can't remember how many. I've been to Cardiff, London...just jumped a train. I wanted to see London, I'd heard so much about it. It's big, I left as soon as I got there. I can't remember who I went with; I met them at the train station in Cardiff.*
> (Natalie, aged 15, residential care)

Working with young people: recognising different needs

In respect of Natalie there did not appear, for example, to be any recognition that gendered practice be it individual or group based interventions might need to be considered for her and for others in the residential unit who were not attending school. One residential worker was asked about the unit's response to young women not attending:

> *Well, we obviously try and get them in but you try hulking some nearly six foot girl or boy who doesn't want to know, it's no joke. If they don't go they should get up and if they have got a meeting they must get up for it, or they must be up by 12 noon. But they are not allowed out, well not 'til 4 o'clock..... We don't do group work as such, nor any thing specifically for the girls. Sex education and the like the school would do; mind you they could teach us a thing or two these days.*
> (Amanda, residential worker, Sunny View)

This extract might suggest a missed opportunity for staff and residents to utilise time effectively on life skills work. Yet, as Morrow (2006) argues there is a need for more analysis and debate about gender differences and for more sophisticated contextual notions of gender identities based on children's and young people's experiences. There is some suggestion that for young people leaving residential care the outcomes may on average be worse for girls than boys. For example, Kelly has identified that in relation to mental health females were 'significantly more likely to score highly for depression' (Kelly 2002: 150), whereas men appear more likely to develop depression as they grew older. Daniel et al. (2005: 1352) reiterate the need for a gender sensitive child welfare that:

> recognize the often differing needs of boys and girls, as well as recognizing that they share common concerns. We are particularly concerned that the services which are developed are rooted in ongoing discussions with boys and girls, thus recognizing fully their rights to provision, protection and participation.

This more gendered approach could be informed by sociological and feminist perspectives that recognise the less visible forces that shape girls lives and in particular the identity of the looked after girl (Taft 2004; Kehily 2004b). Perhaps this is most sharply brought into focus when the issue of teenage pregnancy and young parenthood is considered.

'No result' girls and teen-age pregnancy

Whilst young women disadvantaged in childhood are more likely to become pregnant, those who have been in the looked after system are even more vulnerable (Tyrer et al. 2005). Young people who 'experience state parenting and go on to parent face many challenges in launching their adult lives' (Dominelli at al 2005: 1124).

Natalie had two babies as a teenager, one whilst in residential care and one soon after leaving the care system. For Natalie, becoming a parent did not offer her focus, purpose or stability and her first baby soon came into care. Research by the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) on teenage pregnancies notes that the probability of a care leaver's child coming into the looked after system is higher than for a non care leaver. Natalie did not have a positive relationship with the father of her first baby and was unable to provide any information about him to the social services department once the baby came into care. The outcome of a number of legal proceedings was that the first baby would be adopted. Natalie became pregnant again by the

time she was seventeen. The prospect of her parenting the second child was viewed as bleak according to her social worker.

It has been noted that 'young people who have been in care are two and a half times more likely to be teenage parents' (SEU 2003:3). The challenge may be in meeting the needs of young people within what has been argued is a child welfare service, based on a construction of childhood that promotes protection and regulation. Rather than the emphasis on a 'rights' perspective which Haydon and Scraton (2002: 167) argue relates directly to aspects of teenage pregnancy as young people:

> consistently demonstrated an overwhelming demand for sex and sexuality education, help and advice.

'No result' boys: failure and crime

Stephen came into the looked after system following emotional and physical abuse and neglect. Nathan entered as a young teenager due to his behaviour and drug misuse. Stephen's first period in care was for two months when he was two years old. He had short periods in care when he was aged three, five and six. These episodes were for between one and seven months. He was usually placed with the same carers, but not always. A full care order was granted in 1996 when he was nine. He was placed with foster carers but never settled in any care placement and did not sustain an uninterrupted pattern of school attendance. In school years seven and eight his records reveal a number of fixed term exclusions and in Year Nine permanent exclusion. His case notes contain little evidence of any inter-agency plan to re-introduce him to education, in fact the social work case notes highlight that 'all school records have been lost-probably due to the number of moves he has experienced'. The case notes indicate that towards the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school, Stephen had five different care placements including a short period at home with parents. There is little narrative evidence in his social work records to explain events and decision making or that underlay this period of flux.

In the first year of the study Stephen was excluded from two schools and although living in residential care in the study authority was involved in criminal activity. The plan was for him to attend the PRU have tuition in the residential unit and eventually be reintegrated into a local school. He was interviewed at this stage where he confirmed he ''didn't do home tuition'' and ''I should go to the PRU (his use of term) but I don't I just hang around where I

am living''. It was not possible to interview him again as he received a three year supervision order with which he did not comply and as a consequence was placed in a semi-secure unit beyond the local authority area

It is notable that Stephen was one of the few young people in the sample who was subject to a care order. This had been granted on the grounds of significant harm and on the basis that his parents could not meet his needs. However, it is evident that whilst he had complex needs, the agencies responsible for his parenting and well-being from the age of nine were not able to secure a stable care and education career nor prevent him from offending. By 2003, aged sixteen, Stephen had experienced thirty five different placement moves and his life had become entrenched in a culture of crime and drug misuse. Although the issues are complex, Ritchie (2005: 762) opens the debate about state parenting claiming, 'children who enter public care are themselves at risk of significant harm'.

Nathan too was located in the 'no result' group after Year Nine SATS and similarly by the age of sixteen had spent a good deal of time in young offenders institutions. Nathan in contrast was interested in the study and wanted to have his voice heard. During his interview (he was only interviewed once) he indicated he was awaiting court cases for criminal damage, theft and burglary. Nathan had come into the looked after system at the age of fourteen as his family was unable to cope with his behaviour and drug taking. Nathan spent short periods of time in remand foster care and in two residential units in the study authority. Prior to coming into the looked after system he attended one secondary school from which he was excluded in school Year eight. Again, it was not possible to get a detailed picture of his education history as his school records were sent to a pupil referral unit but 'were lost in transit' according to the staff who forwarded them. The following extract from Nathan's first interview comprise a narrative of hopeless and aimless events involving placement instability, sporadic tuition, and offending that seem to typify many care careers:

> *I know I can be quite bright, I am in the top sets for Maths and English* (which he was). *But with one hour a day at the pupil referral unit I have gone a bit thick, I will need help when I go back but I am not sure I will get it...*
>
> *I should have been goin' to fostering in* (study authority) *but then I offended. I was on welfare when I was up there* (study authority). *I'm on remand here. But it's too far away from friends and everybody....*

The night before my fourteenth birthday I got kicked out of my house, mother had a massive fight..... to do with drugs and stuff.....

Well I have been excluded, then I get bored and then I get into more trouble, it's just the way it goes.....

Nathan did return home and his education plan was for an integrated package between a local comprehensive school and the pupil referral unit. This was not sustained as he received a custodial sentence and was placed in a young offender's institution in England (two plans were made to interview him there, but both were cancelled because of staffing difficulties). His life continued in a downward spiral in terms of involvement in crime and at the end of the study, although no longer looked after, was back in a young offenders institution. He did not achieve GCSEs at the age of sixteen.

Youth as trouble or youth in trouble

Services for children and young people have developed separately, thus while welfare has focused on the needs of socially excluded young people, the youth justice system has pursued a more punitive approach (Thomson et al. 2004). It is of note that within this small sample of four young people there were different but overlapping themes in how young people are viewed and socially constructed. On the one hand there is Judy seen as a child in need who responded to the support of the state and then returned to her family of origin, whereas Nathan was viewed as 'youth as trouble, rather than 'youth in trouble' (Griffin 2004: 14). Maybe this is not surprising when, at age 10, the UK has the lowest age for criminal responsibility in Europe (Haydon and Scraton 2002). Those involved in the lives of young people have to make sense of a system that attempt to simultaneously deliver welfare and punishment and will be aware that 'England and Wales now lock up more young people than any other country in Europe' (Muncie 2004:140).

What is of note from this study is that the needs and outcomes of young people in their early teenage years (who are looked after), as well as those who have spent time in the looked after system but return home, may be going unnoticed and unreported whilst official reporting and the gaze of professionals may focus on those who are classified as 'care leavers'. Even from the small numbers involved in this study it is evident that being looked provides no robust protection from a career of criminal involvements and a seemingly unavoidable transfer to the criminal justice system.

SATS as a predictor for inclusion

Whilst caution needs to be exercised given the small scale of this qualitative study, there seems to be some intimation from the data that when pupils did not achieve in SATS because of being disengaged from school, then it was unlikely there would be a positive outcome at GCSE level. All of the young people who were categorised in the 'No result group' for SATS continued into the 'No result group' for GCSEs. This group of young people also possess key characteristics (criminal activity and teenage parenthood) that predict likely social exclusion (SEU 2003).

Summary

The categories of 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result' have been used here as a framework to identify different care histories and school experiences. These were connected to other empirical sources in order to demonstrate their salience, similarity and sometimes differences to other UK research. All of the young people, who at the start of the study were living in residential care, experienced a transient and difficult period between school years 9 and 11, with limited stability in their care placements and a lack of continuity in their education. Half of the young people who at the start of the study were in foster care, left that placement and went on to experience specialist (out of authority) residential care or custodial care. Those young people who had poor school attendance in Year 9, or were changing school or care placements typically did not re-establish a secure care placement and engage effectively in education. Of the six achievers it is known that two, gained results above the national targets for GCSEs and both went on to undertake A level studies. Both had a secure care and school placement from the beginning of the study as well as good school attendance. Neither of the two other achievers gained GCSEs within the national or looked after children target, however they both started college courses post 16, although one young person subsequently withdrew. Of the two remaining achievers, one young man did not achieve GCSEs and has spent periods of time in a youth offending institution and the outcomes for the other young person are unclear as he left the looked after system.

The next chapter will allow for a closer look at the individual and varied circumstances of the young people, whilst ensuring their voices are heard clearly through direct quotations from multiple interviews over three years.

Chapter 9: Private lives and public care: exploring difference through biography and achievement at school

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide biographical data about the sample that will also give 'voice' to the young people; it is important that careful analysis does not 'take precedence over the original words of the young people themselves' (Ince 2004: 215). Therefore their contribution to the study will be developed by analysing in greater depth a selection of unique biographies. Before this, a brief justification for the selection of particular cases will be outlined highlighting the data collection methods and analytical processes that led to this rationale. Three cases: Declan, Karla and Natalie will be discussed in more detail as representatives of the education sub groups; 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'. Whilst the aim is to explore the issues raised in these cases to illustrate their category characteristics and relatedness, the discussion will seek connectedness with other research on looked after young people. Where relevant the findings will be viewed through a sociological lens and in addition conceptual themes of stability and resilience will continue to locate the discussion.

Selection justification: ensuring an individualised view

To repeat an earlier but essential point, children looked after are not the 'same'; to assume otherwise would negate the circumstances, often traumatic and painful, that brought them into the looked after system in the first place (Greene and Hill 2005). Axford et al. (2005: 75) observe when discussing children in state care that there is a:

> significant difference between the needs of a child whose lone parent will be hospitalized for a few days and one whose behaviour is beyond the control of parents.

The young people is this study, and particularly those that have been selected for more detailed discussion here, have had very different experiences and as such we might expect that their needs would be responded to on an individual basis. However, as we shall see, there sometimes appears to be a uniform response to what are very different needs, that is at times inadequate, inflexible and often quite misjudged.

Representatives of the larger group

When selecting the three case studies for closer analysis consideration was given to the legal status of the young person, their care location and to gender. In addition, whilst data was collected on all fourteen young people over a three year period (such as school attendance and placement locations), interview data was generated for eleven of them (three were not available for interview). Of the remaining eleven respondents, three young people (Ben, Judy and Nathan) had returned to their homes, leaving eight 'looked after' cases. From these, three cases were identified, one young woman was in residential care and one boy and one girl in foster care. It was not the intention to directly compare foster and residential care placements; albeit there is some suggestion that differences in educational outcomes between residential and fostering are not that significant (Berridge 1997). However, it was decided that cases displaying different care arrangements might highlight some interesting contrasts. Also, it was decided to exclude what might be termed outlying or atypical cases, such as the young person who by the end of the study had experienced 35 care placement moves. Instead there would be a selection of young people who might have some of the characteristics of the general looked after children population, insofar as they had experienced a range of pre-care difficulties, were looked after under different sections of the legislation and had been placed in different settings and with the challenges to stability and continuity this presented. Once these factors had been considered a further criteria was that the cases should be chosen from each of the categories of 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'.

Case analysis led to a selection of Declan, Karla and Natalie each of whom would yield illuminating and important insights into care, education stability, resilience and variable supportive networks. This selection was informed by David and Sutton's (2004; 107) view that cases 'can be studied for their own sake without the intention to generalise'. However, whilst each case was interesting in its own right there was also the expectation that the cases would find some wider relevance in their contextualisation in other UK research. Also, as all of the young people were looked after there was the possibility of seeing them as 'collective cases' (David and Sutton 2004: 107) which might thereby allow some tentative comments of wider relevance.

Changes over time: a longitudinal perspective

In the analysis of interviews with the young people a number of themes have been identified through focused coding. Through transcription and the process of inductive categorisation of each interview with the same participant at different points in time, data has been compared within and across cases (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004a). This approach has allowed for connections to be made to the initial research topics and unfolding themes arising from emerging analysis (Charmaz 2004; Ruane 2005). For example, it became evident that some written information was missing in social services files (such as statement of educational need or Personal Education Plans) therefore questions were asked about file content and its relevance to practice in focus groups and interviews with social workers and teachers. This 'progressive focussing' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 207) enabled data collection and analysis to inform each other (see David and Sutton 2004:79).

The following data on respondents' biographies demonstrate some of the key themes identified through an iterative cycle of fieldwork, data collection, and analysis. In presenting these themes it has been important that the voice of the young person is represented as fully as possible. As Darlington and Scott (2002: 161) advise the approach should ensure that the participants' voices are not 'lost or overshadowed'.

It is equally important that data and analysis are located within a conceptual framework and methodological positioning of the study, hence there will be reference to a sociological approach to understanding the social worlds of children and reference also to notions of stability and resilience.

The case studies - 'achiever', 'statemented' and 'no result'.

The 'achiever': Declan-profile at the start of the study

Ethnicity	Legal status	Care placement	School placement
White Welsh	Care order	Foster care	Local comprehensive

Declan came into foster care in late 1999 aged eleven. Following an episode of profoundly traumatising domestic violence. There were no suitable kin to care for Declan and his older brother and so he was placed in the care of the local authority. Declan had three placements

by May 2001 before being placed with his long term foster carers. He attended the same secondary school since 1999 this being a natural progression from primary school.

One of the themes (and challenges) that has arisen from the data analysis in a case such as this, is how to untangle the influence of early year's experiences and the events that precipitated reception into care from the looked after experience and the subsequent level of achievement in education. In the selection of cases for analysis it has been important to look at a variety of biographies and their shared and unique features. Declan's history is informative and challenges the view that foster carers and teachers sometimes have low expectations of children who have spent time in care (see Hayden et al. 1999).

At the first interview Declan had been living in his foster placement for four and a half months. Declan engaged in the interview in a relaxed and helpful manner. He appeared confident and educationally motivated. The interview was conducted in the presence of his foster carer and he looked to her for confirmation of the information he presented. For example when asked who would go to school to discuss progress he named her ..... and then added – "you will won't you?" The quizzical nature of this response raises the question of whether Declan and other young people know as a matter of course who will support them in education matters, even if they have this information they may still need to have the message reinforced.

Connectedness, belonging and identity: social capital

Declan enjoyed a positive experience of secondary school and had been there from Year 7 (age 11), after making the usual progression from primary school. The principle of keeping young people in their own community and wherever possible in their school when a care placement has to be found seems to be successful in Declan's case. As the statement below reveals, he appeared re-assured that his history was known prior to admission to secondary school:

> *The good thing is they know me at this school..... I came from primary to this school.... So they know all about me.*

I like Maths, IT, Science... all of them really. The good thing is everybody gets to be in the team, so at rugby, I'm not that good but I still get to play in a team.. I play fullback.

The positive comments above reveal Declan's view that school provided a framework of fairness, support and inclusion that, like other schools, may well have supported him through a difficult time (see Blyth and Milner 1997).

The concept of social capital, stemming from the work of Bourdieu, is according to Hendrick (2005: 56) used increasingly in child welfare and 'shares some of the same characteristics of the eco-perspective' in that it seeks to define an individual's social cohesion. This conceptualisation refers broadly to an individual's social support, social networks, trust, community belonging and citizenship. Although the use of the concept is not without criticism. Morrow (2005) describes it as a 'pathologising discourse' (p.148) that undervalues children's agency. However there is some evidence that the notion of social capital and the building of social cohesion within communities is an approach that has been adopted within a family support framework

This concept of social capital can help to grasp Declan's sense of self, as 'being known' locally came up a number of times in his first interview. Declan enjoyed strong connections to his community and a sense of belonging. These aspects of a young person's life have become more recognised in social work whereby a social network and ecological approach has ensured that a broader perspective is taken of a child's environment (Daniel et al. 2000). There has been what Thomas (2005:71) describes as a:

> ...re-growth of interest in the wider community and its impact on children's welfare, and in 'ecological' approaches that attempt to integrate individual, family, community and sometimes wider society perspectives into our understanding.

At each of the three interviews Declan implicated his school and his friends as significant supports in his community. The importance of such support is noted by Daniel and Wassell (2004: 45):

> It is known that having friends can help buffer the effects of stress, prevent stress, mediate stress and provide information to deal with stress.

Friends, friendships and peer-groups

When asked about how he explained to others that he lived with foster carers Declan's comments reveal the importance of friendships as a source of support (see also Daniel et al. 2000: 239).

> *Well your friends just know. Because of what happened they know I cannot live at home. It doesn't bother me them knowing, they're friends. One of my mates- we were separated, I would have liked to be in the same class as him, we're both in top sets..... I knew him from primary school ... from nursery. I've known him all my life.....*

Harker et al. (2004) identified the influence that peers can have on children in positive and negative ways. Academic attainment can be influenced by peer groups, that is, if friends are all achievers then it is more likely to lead to success than if peers are part of a low attainment group. Similarly, when young people do not succeed it may be friends that hinder progress. Harker at al (2004: 199) found:

> Young people described themselves as members of friendship circles that did not value education and there appeared to be an element of peer pressure in promoting disruptive behaviour.

When Declan was asked who would help him make subject choices for the future, friends were again referred to. As the extract below demonstrates, Declan's peers offer fun and companionship and are a source of support, they are also an aid in decision making (see also Daniel and Wassell 2004). Declan, in his comment about a class 'with head cases', might suggest some discernment about his preferred friendship group and the potential for negative peer pressure.

> *I'll talk to my mates. I'd like to be in the same class as them. We were in the same class but we got separated. But I wouldn't want to go into a class with head cases.*

Farmer et al. (2004) observe that when young people become disengaged from school and have few activities and hobbies the opportunity to retain and make friends is diminished.

Yet, the evidence about the effect of peer relationships in foster placements is mixed. There is some evidence (Biehal 2005) that those young people who had experienced deterioration in their peer relationship due to being looked after were more likely to have a placement disruption. However, Farmer et al. (2004: 110) conclude from their study of young people (aged 11-17) placed in foster care that:

> Young people who, at the outset, had difficulties in making and maintaining adequate relationships with peers had *fewer* disruptions and *more* successful placements (author's emphasis).

Possible explanations for this were that they were less likely to get into trouble without peers and likely to depend upon and value their relationships within the foster family.

Resilience and disposition to learning

At the second interview Declan had not lost his enthusiasm for school and was pleased with his Year 9 SATS results: 5 for English, 6 for Science and 5 for Maths. When asked what had contributed to these results and if anything could have been put in place to help him do better he answered:

> *The only way I could do better is if I put a bit more work in. It's all down to me. I've got to want it bad enough.*

Declan had clearly been able to sustain determination and commitment to his education that he believed was aided by the continuity and stability of his care and education placement:

> *Just knowing where I'm gonna be, who I'm gonna be living with and that things stay the same is good enough for me.*

By the third interview Declan appeared as motivated and self-determined as before and again the importance of friends and family dominated much of what he had to say. When asked about his recent exams Declan matter-of-factly recounted the following sequence of his GCSE results:

Technology	*A*
I.T.	*A*

Geography	*B*
R.E.	*B*
Maths	*B*
Science	*B*
English language	*C*
English literature	*C*

And then added: *'yeah, but the annoying thing is I was only 3 marks off an A for geography and I'm doing geography, technology and IT for A levels'.* Declan was then asked about the sort of educational and placement support that might be offered to young people who are looked after. He promptly acknowledged his own effort and the help offered by his foster carer:

> *I did all the work myself, course work and homework, but* (names male foster carer*) he's good, he helped me with the tech.....*

In the extract above Declan refers to a positive relationship with the male foster carer (who he refered to as his ''foster father''). Such a relationship can be seen as important to Declan in his acquisition of male identity particularly in seeing men in a non-violent context (Mullender et al. 2004). Such experiences in a foster family can help inform positive gender roles and model alternatives to the abuse of power in the family structure and transgenerational transmission of violence (Stanley 1997; Mullender et al. 2004).

The pivotal role of foster carers in regard to education was evident in Declan's case and in research on school achievers by Jackson et al. (2005:15) Their study of 129 young people who entered higher education from a local authority background indicated a range of support and encouragement from foster carers:

> Foster carers were said to have provided consistent support and encouragement for education. They insisted on regular school attendance, advocated for the young person if trouble arose, provided congenial study conditions, supervised and helped with homework and often contributed to purchase or upgrading of computers and other equipment.

Individual agency

In his third interview, Declan reflected upon what assistance he felt was useful as a looked after young person and where he saw his future:

> *Yeah I've been thinking about this.... You see I don't see* (name) *my social worker much. I don't go to them review things. I don't see myself in social services. I don't see social services at all and that suits me. I'm not grouped with them. I'm grateful that social services wanted to give me something for passing my GCSEs but I don't need it. It was just one thing that happened in my life, a family matter and that's it!*

The extract above revealed Declan's interpretation of events. His statement about his non-involvement in the review process may indicate a notion of empowerment (Oliver 2006). Declan wished to distance himself from social services and being seen as a looked after young person. His circumstances were not typical of many of the young people who come into the looked after system where there are often stressors such as, 'poverty, poor housing, homelessness, long-term unemployment, inequality, racism and other forms of exclusion and discrimination' (Gorin: 2004 6). Declan's negative and stereotypical perception of what it means to be part of the looked after children population suggests some view that he is not like others, not part of some homogenous group. Yet in this and other studies, every child looked after is different from every other (Jackson et al. 2005: 59), a point that was shared with Declan by the researcher.

Identity

Declan was concerned to construct a sense of self not to be defined by his looked after status. Instead, Declan implicitly invoked an identity aligned with his school success and peers. He spoke approvingly about the quality of the teaching, his view of individual staff, and the discipline in some detail:

> *I like my Maths teacher, he was a good teacher. In fact they were all pretty good teachers. It's a pretty good school; they get it about right. My English teacher he was a laugh... 'Of Mice and Men' that was good ...not so much 'Macbeth'. It was an all boy's class, it looks like it worked 'cos they're doing it again this year. Girls didn't do so well though...ha ha ha.*

The extract above taken from Declan's third interview suggests the appropriateness of the semi-structured interview as a method of data collection in this type of study, particularly in regard to notions of 'self' and identity as May (2001: 141) points out:

> The analysis of interviews focuses not only on motivations and reasons, but also on social identities and how these are constructed within the social settings in which people live and work.

It is interesting that whilst most 'looked after' children are discussed in terms of their 'needs' or their 'outcomes', Declan's own identity was not to be located near this adult positioning. He had sought social contexts in which he felt safe and had refused to be categorised as looked after, maybe even masking from himself and other aspects of his looked after identity, not unlike other people in care (Wyness 2006). When asked what the most important memory of school was Declan rehearsed a theme from earlier interviews:

> *My mates are the most important memory of school....if you've got mates you've got to keep them.*

A number of the interviews with young people emphasised the importance of friends, but perhaps none so consistently over the duration of the study as Declan. Whilst the study has sought the views of the young people themselves and other significant adults in their lives, it has not been possible to seek the views of siblings and peers. However, interviews typically revealed young people valuing the role of peers and siblings supporting them in difficult times. Indeed professionals, carers and others may not always grasp the importance and potential of these relationships:

> There is a tendency in professional thinking to regard child-to-adult relationships as the only important ones, particularly when a child needs help, this is very far from the case. Children's links with their friends and peers can be crucially important to them (Mullender et al. 2004:213).

In this interview with Declan as with other respondents additional questions were asked in order to seek 'elaboration and clarification' (May 2001:123), and also discuss themes generated from earlier the data. D'Cruz and Jones (2004: 138) explain:

> Additional questions are a form of immediate analysis in the context of the activity of the interview, so data generated and data analysis are closely linked.

An example of this is the importance of family members, a theme that had surfaced in a number of the interviews. Where possible a question was added to elicit from the young people the importance of family even when, in most cases, they were neither physically nor emotionally available to them. Daniel et al. (2000: 37) make the point as follows:

> Existing relationships are important and must be treated with respect. Even in abusive situations children are likely to have made attachments which have to be taken seriously. Children can always surprise social workers with the extent of their attachment to people who have apparently treated them with extreme cruelty.

Hence, the interview with Declan had to be handled sensitively, albeit it could be gauged from his demeanour and his interest in the research and the tone and pace of his responses that he would feel confident enough to refuse to answer unwelcome questions if that was his wish. Thus, while not wanting to ask directly about the domestic violence that precipitated his care career, it was important to offer him an opportunity to acknowledge past events and achievements so far. The extract below came after some gentle probing around the area of his expectations and achievements at school and more generally:

> *I've done it 'cos I want to do it. I want to do myself proud - to meet some other people's hopes, I've got to believe in myself.*

Interviewer: And who are those other people?

Declan: *My Mum. I want to do it for my Mum*

Later in the interview one of the anomalies for looked after children (they typically leave the foster family home at an earlier age than other children) was brought sharply into focus when Declan was asked about the future:

> *I don't know what the plans are for the future I'm settled here but I suppose I will get a house or a social services flat. I would like to teach IT or do an apprenticeship or go to university.....my Mum went to university. I'll just have to wait and see where I am living and who I am living with.*

A care order which is the legal status that Declan is accommodated under comes to an end when he is 18; at this stage he would be expected to move from foster care into independent living. There was a real sense from Declan that school offered him a normalising environment where he was valued. However this and the foster home will no longer be available when he is eighteen. Again, the pivotal role of education is well noted by Jackson and Sachdev (2001: 96) in offering a platform to escape from disadvantage, but without the ongoing support of a family the challenge for young people can be hard indeed:

> Education success is the most important escape route for disadvantaged children but also offers a respite from the care identity and the effects of loss and abuse

Summary

The interviews with Declan would seem to evidence much resilience in the face of significant adversity. His determination to succeed supports the view that highly traumatic events do not necessarily culminate in a poor prognosis for vulnerable children and young people if they experience a 'protective environment' to make sense of and overcome adversity (Daniel et al. 2000:61). That protective environment should include systems that support placement stability and continuity, schooling that is perceived as fair and inclusive and friendships or peer networks that value the membership of that child or young person. Declan's account of his experience could lead us to conclude that promoting a sense of connectedness and belonging through an understanding of past experiences whilst promoting and sustaining friendships can contribute to young people believing in their role as effective social agents.

The 'statemented': Karla-profile at the start of the study

Ethnicity	Legal status	Care placement	School placement
White/Welsh	Interim care order	Foster care	Local comprehensive

At the start of the study Karla (then aged 14) was living in foster care with her younger twin brothers aged 5; they had been in the placement for 7 months. At that time all were subject to an Interim Care Order. The case file suggested that the placement was planned and appropriate. Karla was attending her local comprehensive school and was having fortnightly contact with her mother and other family members. The social work case notes stated that Karla was one of ten siblings and was placed in foster care as a result of neglect and emotional abuse by her parents. The case history identified Karla as having a statement of special educational needs due to learning difficulties and some visual impairment. A copy of the statement was not on file, therefore the detail about her needs and their implications for Karla as a learner was lacking. Her social worker was unable to clarify the likely impact of her visual impairment on her social and educational development.

The construction of a 'new me'

In the first interview Karla presented as a young women who had settled into her foster placement and was keen to make up for what she described as ''lost time'' at school caused by her history of family instability and neglect. The case file described her as 'a chronic non-attender whilst living with parents'. There was a sense from Karla that she wanted to 'set the record straight' and thereby establish an 'alternative and coherent pro-social identity' (Connolly et al. 2006: 97). She wanted to make the point that she was not 'anti school' and conveyed some frustration that her father, who was her main carer, had not been reprimanded and /or fined by the courts for her non-school attendance:

> *No, they only sorted it now 'cos my father was not fit enough to look after us. I wanted to be in school with my friends to learn but it wasn't possible. I like being with other people and having friends. No they didn't even give my father a fine...they normally do that if kids are not in school. It makes me feel cross that they did not do more for me during the 3 years.....From Year 6 to Year 9 I was hardly in school at all. Because my father was in the club drinking all of the time and I would be home watching the little ones.*

The need for ordinariness: striving for rights

In this extract Karla suggests a positive view of schooling and to be, and be seen, as an 'ordinary' child with aspirations and friends (see also Sinclair et al. 2001; 2005b). Other research, for example Triseliotis et al. (1995), notes that young people who were involved with social services identified friends, and the significance of developing friendships as important to them. In her description of past experiences, Karla's family would seem to be defined by gender stereotyping and male dominance premised on an exploitive division of roles (see Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2001). Karla from a very young age had responsibilities that were clearly delineated in terms of domestic and 'mothering' responsibilities. The family mores as such would not likely endorse a view of Karla with rights, both in a moral and legal sense, to attend school. Mayall (2005) comments that while children are frequently considered morally subordinate to adults they also are expected to take moral and practical responsibility in the social constructing of households:

> Children work within, towards and as restructurers of, their own social identity. They carry out work in maintaining the social order of the household through participating in housework and child-care.

Karla expressed the unfairness of the circumstances in which she found herself and her inability to influence events:

> *I wanted to be in school, but what could I do. Mam had gone and he* (father) *said I had to be home with the little ones 'til she came back, there was no arguing about it, no point.*

Karla's rights versus parent's power and self-interest resulted in neither her welfare nor her rights being met. The power of her father (and therefore her powerlessness) within the parent-child dyad were further reinforced when 'they didn't even give my father a fine'. Such experiences of adult dominance are of course to be anticipated, yet it is the 'difference' between her family and others that Karla also learns when dealing with the injustice she perceives over the disruption at school:

> The literature indicates that children may be expected to encounter differences of opinion concerning the weight given to their views and wishes, as compared with those of their parents Oliver (2006: 145).

The experience of being looked after

Karla's case, like others (see Moyers et al. 2006) reveals her strong bonds to parents and family despite the neglect and upset she has experienced:

> *I worry about contact with my family, I see my mother, my 11 year old brother my little sister* (names sister) *who is 3 and my 16 year old sister* (names sister). *I do see them every two weeks on a Thursday.... so I will see them tomorrow. It does worry me and I spend a lot of time thinking about it. Sometimes my friends do ask me if I've seen my mother and the last time somebody asked was the day after she didn't turn up. So I got a bit upset then. So that worries me. Sometimes, people say like my father does this and my father does that like .....and then I worry about where I am going to live.....*

While Karla's family continues to be very important to her there remains uncertainty and doubt about seeing her parents and what the future holds. Karla expresses concern about the permanency of her placement, even though at this stage there was every intention that the long-term arrangements with her foster carers were secure. We should not seek to grasp Karla's uncertainty through some wholly individualistic perspective such as 'psychological spectacles' (Mayall 2005:80). Rather, we need to grasp the broader conceptual field of family, culture and welfare, interwoven in their effects (see Wyness 2006) yet experienced through the mind and emotions of a teenage girl. Hence, here as elsewhere in the thesis, we need to draw on both a psychological and sociological framework (see Prout and James 1990) to appreciate the contingent and worrisome experience of being looked after.

Establishing stability in an unclear world

By the second interview (eight months later) Karla appeared well integrated into her foster family. She spoke about being happy and settled and being in a class for other visually impaired children:

> *It's good now 'cos there are other people in the same class as me, so I don't feel so different any more.*

Her foster carers appeared supportive and instrumental in getting extra tuition for core subjects. Karla enthusiastically outlined what additional school work she had undertaken:

> *I've been having tutoring with Maths and English and that has helped me to catch up - I have it on a Sunday and two hours in school. The LACE team sorted it. I've started to like games and I like being with my friends.*

As with the first interview, Karla puts great store in not feeling different from other young people. However, her status as a looked after child, and as a young person with additional needs often made her feel set apart from other young people. As the placement continued and as she started to make progress in school, her sense of being 'different' lessened once she was able to participate with peers in school and leisure activities. Participating in shared interests and developing skills has been linked to self-esteem, levels of self-efficacy and associated with resilience (Daniel and Wassel 2004).

Uncertain Future

While Karla enjoyed the stability of her foster placement there were still important legal decisions concerning relationships with her birth family. As the extract below demonstrates, a continuing theme for Karla and others looked after is the uncertain future over family reunification and children's participation in the decision making about this. For Karla, this appeared to her as lacking her full involvement. This is of concern as there is evidence that for looked after children 'participation in decision-making can contribute to enhanced coping and decision making skills' (Oliver 2006:149).

> *Decisions will be made at the end of the month and I want to stay here. They're going to make a decision about my brother too.....I've seen my father once and I bumped into my mother once when I was coming back to the bus stop for about ten minutes. But I want to see my mother and my father a lot more.....*

Karla, like other children has aspirations about work and a career (Sinclair et al. 2004). Yet, Karla is only too aware of time lost at school due to family circumstance and the need for support, motivation and encouragement to catch up. While she believes she has achieved at school it seems disquieting for her (and should also be for professionals) that she had few

interests, this being a key area for promoting inclusion and development for all children but critically so for those looked after (see Gilligan 2000b; Daniel and Wassell 2002).

> *I want to do an animal course and then I want to work in an office and with computers. My teachers have said I've caught up a lot and I'm doin' well. But it's hard all the time trying to catch up ... my exams were rubbish, I didn't get the right levels ... I can only do so much..... I don't have that many interests.... walking around, going to the cinema. I realise now what I have been missing.*

In this interview Karla acknowledged her lack of interests and comments on sense of loss regarding what she has ''been missing''. Whilst it is clear that a range of interests can help build a young person's confidence and self-esteem, it is not evident in Karla's case that any intervention has enabled her to address potential feelings of loss at a number of different levels. For example, Kroll (2002: 117) describes children's experience of separation and divorce and how it 'will have all the hallmarks associated with a bereavement'. Although the circumstances of looked after children may be different, they may well experience something akin to this through the process of becoming looked after, this point is developed by Romaine (2002: 126):

> Moving away from our parents, our brothers and sisters, our friends, familiar environments at home and school, family pets, daily routines, and accepted ways of relating to others can profoundly affect our sense of identity, security and self-esteem, our readiness to trust others and the optimism with which we view our futures.

Becoming established

By the second interview Karla had established herself in school and with the foster family. There was even some preliminary discussion about the family adopting her and her twin siblings, but while happy with the family Karla did not wish to be adopted:

> *I can understand it for the little ones and it is good. It'll mean they are sure and will be looked after and be together. But me ... well, I want to stay..... but to adopt three of us..... no it's only for little 'uns really.*

Karla's comments demonstrate a 'common-sense' construction based on a particular set of assumptions about what is the 'good' family (see Wilton 2000; Wyness 2006). Despite her

own poor experiences, she conceptualises this around families as a good place and something that all young children deserve. Karla states that a 'family' will result in her siblings being "sure", perhaps meaning some security whereby their needs will be met, while not explicitly contrasting this ideal with her own early year experiences she clearly invokes the family as a concept that means something potent (Jones 2002). Karla places emphasis on her siblings staying together, arguably demonstrating insight into the significance of such relationships when families break-up and re-configure (see Sanders 2004:195).

When considering her own future as one of permanence through adoption her response suggests that she might almost feel undeserving, like other adolescents she might see adoption as a desirable outcome only after a lengthy period with foster carers, or perhaps not see it as an option at all due to a sense of loyalty to birth parents (Sinclair et al. 2005a). Karla's 'common-sense' theorising gives some support to Mayall's (2005: 87) view that:

> Children think sociologically. They are concerned with the social status of children and of childhood now; with the present tense of childhood in its social relations, not with childhood as a pre-social becoming.

Disengagement, instability and abuse

By the third interview (a year later) Karla's placement with foster carers and school had disrupted. The extract below summarises Karla's view of events highlighting her own behaviour as the reason for a breakdown in the placement:

> *I was going out, I was not going to school, it was all me.. Family (*foster) *could not give me any more than (*they were*) giving……*

Her placement with the foster carers and her young siblings came to an end. Social services concluded that Karla's needs could not be met within the local authority and after a brief period of considerable instability, "*they moved me 7 times in 4 days*", *Karla* was placed in an independent residential setting some 200 miles away from her home area. This placement lasted for 10 months. During which time, Karla aged 15 described having a relationship lasting seven months with a male member of staff aged 37.

> *They blame me 'cos I had a crush on him. He would bring me down here on home visits, we stayed in a hotel in the area……*

Karla did not acknowledge the inappropriateness of this relationship, which became the subject of an official enquiry:

> *He was a carer yes, but he really did care for me……*

Her need for affection at a time when she was developing her own sexuality is implicated in the above extract as her vulnerability was exploited by an adult carer for sexual purposes. The relationship was deemed abusive and premised on the corruption of trust and dominance by the male carer. Daniel et al. (2000: 29) identify aspects of such relationships that find some resonance with this case:

> A child may thus form an attachment to an adult who abuses him or her in the absence of alternative attachment figures and because the abusive relationship also contains elements of warmth, responsiveness and support which the child desperately craves.

Back to the study authority: experiencing depression

Karla returned to the study authority and was placed in independent lodgings that lasted three months. She then entered residential care in the authority where she described herself as:

> *having panic attacks, unhappy, not ready for independent living, and on anti-depressants.*

By this third interview her unhappiness was almost tangible. She had been traumatised in her view by family break-down, school bullying in earlier years, and an inappropriate relationship with a care worker. Karla referred positively to services of the LACE team (a specialist team to support looked after children in education) however, the scheme was not flexible enough to meet her complex needs. As she commented:

> *I wish they had listened about the bullying and let me go to the LACE,*
> I'm *too old for that now and they haven't got a place.*

Ultimately, there was little in the way of specialist provision that could be tailored to help Karla develop her skills and interests and promote some resilience:

I don't do anythin', nothin at all.....

This comment was made by Karla in the presence of her key worker in the residential unit who raised her eyes when hearing this. In later discussions the worker claimed some difficulty in engaging Karla in activities, stating negatively that Karla was ''enjoying the panic attacks and the one-to-one attention''. Karla's current circumstances together with the above comment from her key worker contrasted starkly with my field notes made earlier in the study when I observed the 14 year old at her local school:

> While waiting in the reception for Deputy Head to return from lunch saw Karla in the corridor. Struck how neat tidy and 'school girl' like she was-school uniform, appropriate shoes, hair tied back with ribbon in the school colours, 'sensible satchel'. She was with a friend, arms entwined, heads close together, appearing to be sharing a tale, gossip, what ever ... but having fun. Saw her make some enquiry to the secretary. Karla turns around, ''Oh hi..... you said you were going to meet up with some of the teachers.....nice school isn't it? See you again'' .....
> Field note diary 30.11.2001.

This observation and field note reveal how 'ordinary' and happy Karla seemed in the context of the school, gossiping with friends, uniformed, in most ways indistinguishable from the other young people in the school. However the emotional turmoil and difficulties carried by this young girl were later to thwart her (then) modest success at school and undermine stability in a family placement.

Summary

Over the three year study Karla experienced a number of moves and changes to both her care and school placement. It is noteworthy that after a long period of instability and several placements, with one some distance away, that her final interview took place in a residential unit within the study authority. One can only reflect with hindsight on the wisdom of moving her such a distance from her family, community, friends and culture to eventually return her home no happier, resilient or skilled than before. It can only be conjecture, but her needs may have been better served by keeping her within the authority and working intensively with her to make sense of her early attachment difficulties, and providing an education programme that was individually tailored to meet her additional albeit challenging needs.

The 'no result': Natalie-profile at the start of the study

Ethnicity	Legal status	Care placement	School placement
White/Welsh	Section 20 Children Act 1989	Residential Care	Local comprehensive

At the start of the study period Natalie was 14 and living in residential care. She had been 'looked after' by the local authority for the previous five months. The reason for her being looked after was recorded as the breakdown of relationship between her father and step-mother. Natalie's birth mother died when she was around seven years old; Natalie has a brother five years older. Comment within the file from the social worker claims that Natalie alleged she was sexually abused by her step-grandfather. Her record reveals that the allegation was not substantiated and there is some suspicion about the validity of the accusation. Natalie (at 13) was placed for short periods with relatives, paternal grandparents and an aunt before entering a residential unit in the authority for three months care. She then was returned to live briefly with an aunt for two weeks before being placed in another residential home run by the authority. It is recorded that her placement at Sunny View was 'planned and appropriate', and that intervention was to focus upon her vulnerability and low self-esteem. At the time of the first interview Natalie had just joined Year 9 of her local comprehensive school. Natalie claimed that since Year 7 she had been in 5 different secondary schools, a point confirmed in her school record.

New school: fresh start

Natalie's first interview took place soon after she was placed in residential care and as with other young people (Farmer et al. 2004) she viewed her new placement as a fresh opportunity to make progress at school as well as a sense of trepidation:

> *I know it is a good school and that will be good for me, but it is very big and I'm not so sure about that and I know they are very strict.....*

It was not evident that her social worker or the residential staff had given sufficient consideration to the impact upon Natalie of starting a new school. For example, little deliberation seemed given to her absence from any school for some time and that she would

be unfamiliar with the curriculum, in a strange environment without friends and starting mid-way through a term. Although there is advice on how to develop links between looked after children and schools, thereby anchoring a sense of belonging and security, this opportunity appeared to be missed in Natalie's case (see Gallagher et al. 2004; Daniel and Wassell 2004). Thus while the emphasis of intervention with Natalie was to concentrate on her vulnerability and self-esteem this objective had not adequately embraced her schooling within this ambition, even though 'access to education is a key to social inclusion in many different ways' (Haines and Drakeford 1998: 161).

Professional supports to help develop resilience

At the fist interview Natalie expressed anxieties about joining her new school but did not seem to glean any message from her social worker or residential key worker that they understood her concerns and would be actively supporting her. Indeed her social worker commented to me in front of Natalie:

> Social worker: Well, yes it is tricky starting a new school, I remember that and I'm sure we all do. We'll do all we can to help Natalie. But I'm an agency worker and so will not have the case for long, but we are lucky in this authority we have the LACE team so they are the experts.
>
> Interviewer: How will you liaise and work with the LACE team and the key worker here to monitor how Natalie copes?
>
> Social worker: Well LACE know all about Natalie so it will be up to them to speak to the unit.

It was difficult to establish the exact mechanisms by which this communication would be monitored and the roles and responsibilities assigned. It could have been anticipated that settling Natalie in a large community comprehensive school was going to demand a co-ordinated approach with some thought to contingencies arising from a troubled youngster's transition into a new secondary school.

The extract above suggests there was limited regard for the emotional and social support that Natalie would need when starting her new school, as well as the essential practical support that she and other such young people may require to ensure they arrive on time, equipped, and with a rehearsed approach to deal with what the first days have to offer (see Walker et al.

2002). There were some indications at the first interview that Natalie found school demanding but had developed other interests:

> *I find school quite boring, I find them difficult as well, teachers sometimes help me out with the questions and if there was more help I would take it up……I have swimming as a hobby but I do not do that much… I would like to go more and take my badges……I love reading –Goosebumps, I like Jacqueline Wilson and I've started reading the Harry Potter books- there are books here* (residential unit*) but I do not know if they are the type I want to read……*

Natalie's disjointed secondary school record would suggest that establishing regular school attendance would be challenging. However, what the above extract demonstrates is her positive interest in various activities at school and outside. Gilligan (1999: 194) argues that social workers should take note of such signs and promote such interests:

> In their contact with the young person they must be alert to any hints of interests, talents or hobbies which might be usefully encouraged.

It did not appear that the benefits of developing these activities which can help strengthen assertiveness, rebuild confidence and nurture a range of other skills and qualities necessary for adult life (see Gilligan 1999) were given much attention by professionals. It appeared that enhancing the resilience of young people by promoting their talents and interests was not much on the radar of everyday practice of the staff involved with her care. This may be somewhat surprising as a key principle of working with children and young people is to consider the 'ordinary' aspects of their lives within their communities that may provide routine, security, structure and affirmation. Daniel et al. (2000: 299) confirm this point:

> We would suggest that social workers and other professionals should be more ready to search out naturally occurring supports in a child's wider social habitat.

Promoting friendships

At this first interview there were no indications that Natalie was 'anti-school,' although it was clear that her looked after status, her uncertainty about school and a sense of uncertainty about contact with friends and other aspects of her life troubled her:

I see a few friends that live on the estate here. I would like to keep in touch with my friends from other areas but I am not allowed to. I haven't really told anybody why I do not live at home I just say it's a long story, not sure what else to say. In Year 7 I had friends, I went on a geography field trip with Year 7. There has been a trip to France, but was not allowed to go as you are not allowed to sleep out because I am looked after……

Within this extract there are a number of issues that connect with the theme of resilience such as, sustainable peer relationships, making sense of the past and developing self-confidence through new experiences. That said, while friendships are to be encouraged and sustained when young people move out of the area it is the case that 'having antisocial friends can be unhelpful' (Daniel and Wassell 2004: 47). Biehal (2005: 26) makes the point thus:

> A pro-social peer group may moderate the negative effects of poor parenting on children's behaviour while anti-social peers and school failure may intensify these effects.

Farmer et al. (2004) found that many looked after young people had problematic peer relationships, although in their study only just over a quarter of the foster carers saw it as their responsibility to help and encourage young people to make friendships. Daniel and Wassell (2004: 47) consider this as unsurprising as friendships in adolescence become more independent of parents. Adolescent friendships can be summarized as being more extensive, exclusive (involving intimacy and loyalty), multidimensional (mix of friendships and sexually intimate relationships) and important for reducing, mediating or preventing stress. This process of developing and nurturing friendships based on loyalty and commitment may be more difficult for young people in residential care. Petrie and Simon (2006) in their comparative study of residential care in England, Germany and Denmark found that in England, encouraging young people to invite friends back to the unit was discouraged by some units, possibly contributing to a sense of isolation.

Making sense of the past: the need for a coherent story

It is possible that Natalie and other young people looked after could have difficulty in establishing adolescent friendships founded on the principles outlined above because they have not developed what Daniel et al. (2000; 42) refer to as a 'coherent story'. In order for young people to start the process of establishing a secure base they need to be able to make

sense of what has happened to them. Natalie experienced 'loss' including the death of her mother, becoming accommodated due to a breakdown in family relationships and highly damaging (if true) the claim that she was sexually abused by her grandfather. The allegation while not proven, remained an accusation that was claimed frequently by Natalie. From a child's view point being sexually abused by a close family member 'is likely to have specifically complex implications' (Daniel and Taylor 2001: 157). Professionals need to be able to help young people make sense of different types of loss 'recognising that loss is a broad concept and does not solely relate to losses brought about by death' (Thompson 2002:1). Such an approach did not occur in Natalie's plan.

Responding to loss

Children and young people respond to aspects of loss differently from adults depending on a number of factors including: the loss experience, the young person's developmental stage, how established and secure they feel and the opportunity they have to discuss, explore and make sense of their loss. Loss may 'show itself in the form of behavioural or emotional difficulties' (Sanders 2004: 201). In order for young people to develop a strong identity and develop understanding about their own responses and coping mechanisms professionals must assist them to make sense of their past and the possible consequences of this for the future. Daniel et al. (2000: 301) emphasise the importance of this:

> A coherent account and understanding of what has happened will help the child more effectively to have a command of the experience. A firm grasp of a coherent story pulls fragments of experience into a more integrated whole and helps a child to make more sense of what has happened and what is happening.

It was not apparent that Natalie, her social worker or the residential key worker had the understanding or skills to undertake this work. Natalie did not have an academically successful school Year Nine. Her attendance was 26 per cent and she was not in school to take her SATS tests; not because she was excluded but because she was missing. She was living in the same residential unit as Douglas (see page 197) and appeared to be exposed to a similar cultural malaise around schooling. Although Natalie was said not to pose a problem to the residential unit regarding her behaviour, she did however fall into the 'difficult' adolescent category as defined by Berridge et al. (2003) on the basis that she regularly went

missing from the residential unit. It was estimated by staff that this was in excess of 20 times in a period of a 'few months'. However, as highlighted in other studies, information about such events was not systematically collected (Biehal and Wade 2000). Her running away highlighted an increasing detachment from the residential unit, school, family and to some extent her local friends. Thus, as well as missing out on the educational building blocks that could lead to further qualifications, she also did not benefit from other aspects of school including social inclusion, friendships and a strengthening of confidence and self-worth (Tyrer et al. 2005).

A sense of agency: acknowledging Natalie's assessment of events

At the second interview after her Year 9 SATS, Natalie was still living in the same children's home but was due to be moved to foster care. She explained why in her view her outcomes at school were relatively poor:

> *I just can't get on with it. I don't like big schools I really need a smaller school, it's too crowded. The kids there are bitches and bullies they're scary and spread rumours. You tell 'em something and they tell everyone. Another person who lives here got kicked out. I was suspended once for telling a teacher to 'fuck off'. I was back in then. I haven't been excluded. They didn't want to have me back. I would like smaller classes like the PRU* (her use of term)*. I will go there for one hour a day –that's great for me.*

The extract above illustrates a number of themes, particularly about how the wishes and feelings of young people can be accommodated and how much credence to give these. In particular, what weight there should be in their influencing decisions such as attending a mainstream school. For example, Natalie clearly indicated her worries to staff about the size of the school at the start of Year 9. Given her low self-esteem and lack of confidence, it is perhaps not surprising that without the assiduous efforts of a caring 'champion' she would have difficulties over motivation and have few skills to deal with the challenging atmosphere of a large secondary school. It is notable that Natalie attempts to qualify the circumstances of her departure from the school, seeking to dispel any suggestion of misconduct and notoriety. Whether a different school should have been sought at the outset or whether she would have succeeded with more help or whether her conduct would have been highly problematic in any event are of course imponderables. But the limited response and planning regarding her

transition to a new school remains of some note given the evidence about preparing for such a critical phase (see Walker et al. 2002; Gallagher et al 2004).

On the run, but responsible?

When discussing her running way from the residential unit Natalie sought to demonstrate some defence of her conduct:

> *I do stay away over-night but I ring 'em here to let them know where I am..... something to do, a bit exciting, and to be with friends.*

These behaviours and justifications find congruence with the work of Daniel and Wassesll (2004) who suggest that young people with a poor sense of security may involve themselves in risk taking to a dangerous level. Natalie's running away was more opportunistic and to do with boredom. Biehal and Wade (2000:217 from their research on young runaways offer interpretations which find some congruence with this study and Natalie's circumstances in particular:

> In certain children's homes, the culture of non-attendance at school also made young people with little to occupy them more amenable to being drawn into going missing with others.

Although Natalie did run away with other young people from the children's home she gave the impression of her friendships within the unit as being often strained. The quality of peer relationships can deteriorate when living in the looked after system (Triseliotis et al. 1995; Farmer et al. 2004), for example, she ran away to London with another young women from the residential unit but fell out with her on the way to the station. So, as Natalie explained she ended up:

> *Jumping a train to London with people I met at the train station.....*

Seeking this type of 'bright light' excitement was noted in the Biehal and Wade (2000: 217) study linked with a background of 'rejection, neglect, abuse or past instability in life at home or in substitute care'.

Searching for stability: on the move again

Natalie left the residential unit and soon after the second interview she was placed in two separate local authority foster placements for eight and two months, neither met her needs. She was then placed some hundred miles away in an independent fostering arrangement that disrupted after two weeks. She was then placed in an independent semi-secure unit in Wales for four months although she continued to run away. During this placement Natalie discovered she was pregnant (she claims she conceived during a runaway episode) and was returned to the study authority. After a two night foster placement she was placed back in residential care until her baby was born. Natalie was 16 years old and did not know who the father was, claiming she had a number of sexual partners around the time of conception. After the birth Natalie went to a Mother and Baby Unit so that her capacity as a parent could be assessed. Natalie found this experience difficult:

> *It started to break down..... You're only allowed out four hours a day, it's like loads of rules there and you have to do what they tell you. One staff would tell you to do something, then another would tell you it's wrong. I just couldn't cope there so I put my baby in care then. I'm hoping to get her back in February.*

Natalie left the mother and baby unit after two months and started to live with a new partner aged 30. Natalie, at this stage 17, was having supervised contact with her baby three times a week and this was where her main interests lay. Natalie did not attend school, college or employment, observing:

> *I spend most of the time in the house, I don't mind, but I would prefer to be doing something.....*

Natalie acknowledged that the emphasis of the professional help she received was now centred on the needs of the new baby. This has been noted in other research where young parents 'felt their own needs were overlooked or dismissed, with the sole focus being on the child' (Chase and Knight 2006: 99). Natalie's comments find some similarity with this view:

> *When they realised I was pregnant they brought me back. I had been asking to come back well ... forever, that's why I kept running. But as soon as I was pregnant they couldn't get me back quick enough.*

Summary

Natalie experienced an unsettled time in terms of her care placement and schooling during Key Stage 3 and effectively did not return to school or any other educational alternative from the age of fourteen onwards.

By the third interview, her protracted, unsettled and chaotic experiences culminated in her living in poor circumstances in a privately rented house in an area of severe social, economic and environmental disadvantage – a well worn route for other looked after children (SEU 2003; Stein 2006). She had lost one baby to the care system and very soon after the third interview became pregnant again. Her future looked all too predictable and bleak.

Within this chapter a more detailed exploration of the case studies of three young people has been offered. These cases were chosen from the sub-groups 'achiever' 'statemented' and 'no result'. This exposition has allowed for links to be made to aspects of stability and resilience. Particular issues of teenage vulnerability will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 10: Organisational responses to looked after children- whose agenda?

Introduction

The preceding chapters have attempted to demonstrate the complicated worlds inhabited by the looked after children in this study. Their pressing human stories need to be viewed and contrasted against the adult professional world that attempts to scaffold and support their complex and intricate lives. It is clear that these young people had many demanding and complex needs and the task of sustaining their care and education placements, ensuring that they did not become further excluded, self-evidently demands a coherent multi-agency approach that is well resourced and committed. In developing this point this chapter will draw together organisational and practice issues from the data that appear to impact positively and negatively on the educational experiences and outcomes of the young people in this study. First however, it is worth reflecting briefly on broad aspects of background context that configure significantly the experiences of many looked after young people and can be seen as prominent in the sample of this current study. These are issues of social place and identity and concerns around criminality and teenage parenthood. Such issues profoundly challenge policy and practice and resist simple solution, and arguably set the bar for discussions about what effective looked after services should be able to tackle successfully.

Young people's social place and identity

Almost universally the young people in this study were defined by adults and professionals by their looked after identity. But there were other identities that impacted on them and which became more complex by the very nature of being looked after. These were the offender identity and the teenage parent identity, both of which are known to contribute to social exclusion. The point has been made a number of times throughout this study that looked after young people have very unique and distinctive histories. Thomson et al. (2004: xviii) expand on this point:

> While they are unified by the fact of their age they are differently located socially on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity impairment and sexuality. Any serious study of the lives of young people must deal with the politics of their social place and identity.

It is noteworthy that by the end of this three year study, five out of the eight boys had become involved in criminal activity while being looked after. Also, two of the six girls were reported in social work case files to be involved in 'inappropriate sexual relationships with older men'. As we have seen in the previous chapter one of these girls, Natalie, gave birth to two babies by the time she was 17. One child was subsequently taken into care and placed with foster carers and the possibility of Natalie continuing to care for the other child was viewed by professionals as unlikely.

Risk and resilience

Risk as a contemporary discourse may contribute to our understanding of the vulnerability of looked after children (Titterton 2005). There is a certain irony in the fact that much emphasis and energy goes into assessing the negative risks to a child whilst living with their birth families. However, the same enthusiasm for identifying risk once a child becomes looked after seems much less in evidence. Children's services have deployed a number of assessment tools over recent decades that provide 'a systematic way of analysing, understanding and recording' (Rose 2001: 29) events in the lives of families where children are considered to be 'in need' or where there are child protection issues, but this focus seems to lessen once the child is placed in a care setting. Professional concerns are centred on protecting the child, but this in turn can result in a child being removed from one risk situation and placed in another, particularly when the outcome measures for looked after children and the links to aspects of social exclusion are considered. Essentially there is a major emphasis on the circumstances that bring children into public care but less attention to their career in care and their capacities when leaving the care system, in particular the 'interconnections between risk, resilience and protective factors' (Titterton 2005: 77). Thus criminality and teenage pregnancy while being looked after is a risk that needs tackling from different angles not least via stability in placement and continuity in education. There is increasing evidence to suggest that:

> Education is the single most important protective factor in preventing offending and re-offending (WAG 2006: 13).

To meet these challenges, is in large measure the responsibility of agencies and professionals in their capacity of corporate parent to focus on reducing the chances of exclusion through crime and unplanned parenthood. In this context, 'social exclusion, then, does not simply

happen - it is produced, mainly by forces beyond the control of any single individual' Hendrick (2003: 217). As such, the organisations charged with a responsibility for looked after children may 'constitute as much a part of the problem as the answer' (Tunstill 1999: 133). With this in mind some of the agency and organisation responses to the young people in this study and the links to education will now be reviewed.

Agency co-ordination and monitoring

The co-ordination and monitoring of educational inputs and outcomes for young people in care often appeared weak and lacking in impact in the study authority. As a researcher, it was at times difficult to get reliable documented information about a young person's academic history and progress. The extracts below were written by different social workers on data collection forms they were asked to complete about the educational achievements of a young person on their caseload:

> *Unable to locate school records from primary and previous comprehensive school* (Name of school). *No primary records available.*
> (Jane, social worker)
>
> *All of school records sent in the post to Education - never arrived.*
> (Lynne, social worker)
>
> *All school records have been lost - probably due to number of moves he has experienced.*
> (Kate, social worker).

Linked to these comments, one of the main findings from joint Education and Social Services Inspectorate visits across Wales was that local education authorities and social services departments did not have the procedures for analysing educational progress and achievements and this in turn would make it difficult to 'respond robustly to the challenges of Children First' (SSIW/Estyn 2001:5). Other reports and inquiries have identified the key message that 'significant improvement in the educational outcomes can only be achieved through truly collaborative working between education and social services' (Jackson and Sachdev 2001: 20). In the current study it appeared that social services and education departments were not always familiar with each others mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating. The principle of 'joined up' working and planning for children looked after was not widely entrenched.

Enabling a shared system-local and national problems

The looked after children materials discussed in Chapter Three (see Parker 1991 et al.), a system of age-related, assessment and action records, where education was given a high profile, were thought to be a shared system by which to address some of the previous deficits in protocols for collecting, sharing, tracking and monitoring a child's progress between key agencies. Whilst all of the authorities in England and Wales adopted the system as part of their *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need* (DoH 2000b; NAfW 2000c) the study authority appeared at that time unable to embrace the system and develop its potential. The view of one social worker typifies some of the difficulties her team mates shared:

> *All that key stage stuff, I have no idea about that for my children. There was very little information if anything on their LAC file and even when you tried to contact the school it was very difficult to get any information at all.*

Such a response finds similarity in the study by Jackson and Sachdev (2001: 19) who note:

> Even when the information was recorded and serious gaps and deficiencies were identified, the crucial questions 'What further action is needed?' and 'Who will take it?' were often left blank. But too often it seemed the person completing the record, usually a social worker or carer, did not have the information and had not taken the trouble to obtain it.

A key message from Social Services Inspectorate Wales (SSIW/Estyn 2001) was that the looked after children materials were being completed superficially and thereby hindering the process of evaluating progress and informing future objectives for children and young people. There is some evidence however that the sharing of information between professionals has improved slightly since the introduction of Personal Education Plans and related guidance for looked after children (see NAfW 2001a). Personal Education Plans (PEPs) were introduced as a method of ensuring access to services, contributing to stability, minimising disruption, signalling particular needs, establishing clear goals as well as acting as a record of progress and achievement.

The Looked after Children and Education (LACE) team manager, although positive about the usefulness of the PEP also had some reservations:

> *Yes they are a good idea and could be very useful...but if* ***I*** (her emphasis) *don't do them they don't get done. The guidance is clear; the social worker should initiate them. We've had two training days planned with education and we can't get social workers there, so I've had to cancel them - it's embarrassing but what can I do?* (Barbara, manager, LACE team)

Similar findings were noted by Hayden (2005: 351) who reported on research examining the usefulness of personal education plans from one English local authority:

> There are problems in social work teams in taking on their expected role in respect of PEPS. Lack of confidence in dealing with the education system is compounded by staff turnover and pressure of work when teams do not have their full complement of staff.

The problem of getting social workers and teachers to routinely share up to date and accurate information on achievements, progress in school and care related matters was an issue in the study authority and has been highlighted in other research (Harker et al. 2004). It is imperative that there is a more coherent and systematic way of collecting and sharing information on young people and their educational requirements. There needs to be clear data that can offer a diagnostic, formative and summative account of a young person's educational progress. Too often the Key Stages data were not systematically recorded and there did not appear to be clear protocols to establish whose responsibility it was to track, record and act on information. Each comprehensive and special school within the authority had an identified member of staff for looked after children. But the large number of schools that the children attended and the frequent moves of some, combined with the fluctuating nature of the looked after group, provided challenges in maintaining good communication between some social workers, some carers and some education establishments. A lack of communication and understanding of the roles between social services and education was apparent and remains a problem elsewhere in the UK (Borland et al. 1998; Harker et al. 2004).

One example of such problems is that social workers did not seem able to find the time to prioritise educational needs or indeed the more general needs of looked after children. One social worker summarised how she prioritised her work:

> *It's the case that looked after children are on the back burner of your caseload.....if you have child protection. Once the child is safe.....I mean*

the looked after child.....well the protection of others and well .....court reports take precedence. (Anna, social worker)

These views were echoed by team and senior managers who commented also upon the different priorities of staff:

Instability in the social work teams means that important preventative and therapeutic work with looked after children just isn't happening.
(Alan, senior social services manager)

We are just swimming against the tide and sadly some areas like education issues are just not a priority. Some kids looked after are not getting the service they deserve.
(Diane, team manager)

When examining organisational and individual perceptions held by key participants in the study, it could be suggested that there are competing if not countervailing expectations. Thus, whilst social workers stated that they wanted the best educational opportunities for the young people in their care, the problems of recruiting to depleted staff teams meant that there was a culture of 'survival' and limited activity around looked after children and their education. There were mechanisms set in place for the recording and monitoring of young people's educational achievement through the LAC Assessment and Action records and the PEP. Social workers however, stated that these were unwieldy and time consuming, yet neither they, nor the agency sought to enhance the system to make it more user-friendly.

A shared understanding of the corporate role

Children First (Welsh Office 1999) identified clear targets for the educational achievements of the looked after population to ensure that they benefited from schooling and gained what would be expected of other young people from a similar background. The targets set were that 50% of looked after children should achieve at least one GCSE or GNVQ qualification by 2001, increasing to 75% of looked after children by 2003. These targets were extended even further in Welsh government guidance (NAfW 2002) which advocated that looked after children should achieve five GCSEs by the year 2010. However theses earlier targets have still not been met, and in 2005 only 35 per cent of looked after children achieved one GCSE, in fact down from 37 per cent the previous year (Care Data 2006). Although setting of targets was generally welcomed as offering a benchmark of achievement, it could also be considered

as a crude and rudimentary tool that set the expectations for looked after children much lower than the expected five GCSEs at grade A*-C for other children. The Welsh Assembly Government now appear to be moving away from a single national target, relying on local authorities to set individual targets based on the numbers of young people leaving care (Estyn 2003: 7). This approach seems to sidestep putting clear mechanisms in place to improve and monitor the previously mentioned poor results; this lack of specific targets may appear to some as somewhat defeatist.

However at the centre of government guidance (NAfW 2001a) are clear messages about more joined up working and collaborative arrangements between education and social services that extol the importance of the corporate parent. Concern over a lack of corporate commitment and energy in promoting better outcomes and achievements for this vulnerable group of young people has been a prominent message of several reports over the last decade (DoH 1995a; Utting1997; Ministerial Taskforce on Children's Safeguard 1998; SEU 2003; Barnardo's 2006). However, in this study there is some evidence that this is not high on the agenda of individual schools.

School and teacher issues: professional 'othering'

When asked what systems and initiatives were in place to meet the Children First targets for looked after children one deputy head teacher of a secondary school replied:

> *Can you say that..... explain that again, what targets?*

And then went on to say:

> *To be honest, if you want a frank answer we haven't considered how we will meet targets. At the moment, and the problem with most schools, we must reach our own school targets. Targets for particular children would not be considered.*
> (Mr. Reynolds, deputy head teacher)

This response is not untypical of schools under pressure to perform well in relation to several prevailing targets. As well as some schools not being able to respond to targets set for looked after young people some teachers were not always aware of the complex domestic circumstances of children looked after. A study by McNeish and Newman (2002) led them to

suggest that teachers sometimes lacked sensitivity and held negative attitudes towards children in care. Teachers also felt their relationship with social services depended very much on the personality and competence of individual workers. Similarly, in the study authority one teacher summed up what she claimed to be a view shared by colleagues:

> *Effective relationships with social services, well.....*(long pause) *this varies enormously depending on the individual, the range of people is very inconsistent, the quality of people very variable.*
> (Mrs Anderson, Year 10 tutor, Pontymill secondary school)

By contrast social workers claimed that they were 'cut out of the loop' when information passed between schools and foster parents or residential care. One social worker, giving an example of a looked after child he was working with, suggested that the principle of working together with schools was far from easy:

> *I have been to meetings and my agenda is to keep him* (looked after teenager) *in and their agenda is to get him out.*
> (Stuart, social worker)

It would seem clear from the above that joined up thinking, collaborative working and joint protocols require frequent revisiting and motivating to become operational on a day-to-day basis. Accounts on both sides suggest a rather 'them and us' mentality. There appeared to be an 'othering' of each professional group towards each other and a binary opposition was apparent (Holmes 2005: 164). For example teachers commented that the presence of social workers at school events including parents evening, information events or social sports event was practically non-existent. Whilst social workers were not overly familiar with the Key Stage system in operation within the school, teachers were often unaware of the circumstances, legal status and disadvantage that might have been experienced by the young people looked after. One designated teacher highlighted her confusion in an interview:

> *In care and accommodated .... Umm... I find them* (legal definitions) *a bit difficult.* (Mrs Cox, designated teacher, secondary school)

In summary, social workers were sometimes unable to prioritise education as a care issue and schools had limited comprehension of the complex circumstances and related aspects of disadvantage that often accompanied looked after children.

Working together, foster carers

Although it appeared that the majority of foster carers engaged with a young person's formal education by attending school for particular events, they did not always see themselves as the person to help with home work or to facilitate this in terms of extra tuition. There was a sense from some carers that young people do enough in school and that there was too much emphasis on course work and projects. One foster carer felt it was neither her role to assist with course work nor to monitor the deadlines and submission dates.

> *Look, I've got four kids here. Anthony is a good kid don't get me wrong.... And he goes to school, by the time I get sorted out here with them all ...well, you saw what it was like tonight with Jake going missing for two hours* (another foster child, aged 5, who, when I arrived for an interview at six o'clock had only just been found) *that's as much as I can do. You say have you got homework and all they say is ''Na'' Not much else you can do, that's the school's job.*
> (Julie, foster carer)

Julie's response was pragmatic and she perceived herself as looking after the basic needs of her four charges and not required to give consideration to all aspects of a parental role such as getting on at school.

As well as placement stability promoting psychological resilience and educational achievement, more attention has been given recently to the importance to having an adult (parent, carer, key worker or social worker) who will take an explicit interest in a child's educational needs (Jackson and Martin 1988; Gilligan 2000a). In addition, the importance of other networks including friends, out of school activities and hobbies and interests has gained the attention of researchers and policy makers (Gilligan 2001). However, there appears to be considerably more effort and resources needed to reinforce this message to the agencies that provide services to looked after children.

Achievements, interests and hobbies: who knows what, who goes where?

Social workers, for example, were generally unable to identify the ways in which young people looked after had achieved at school. Similarly, there appeared to be little consideration given to the young people's achievements, interests and hobbies and the

possible importance of such activities for promoting confidence, resilience and self-esteem. When social workers linked to the sample of looked after children were asked explicit question via a data collection form: 'Has the young person achieved in sport, music or drama? Please give details', five social workers responded with *'no'*, five left the question blank, one said *'don't know'* and three answered with the following minimum responses:

Likes cricket and is good at it

Likes rugby and cross country

Played rugby for school team

The brevity of responses from those with the corporate parent responsibility suggests not much is known about the young people's successes and achievements. This was placed in sharp focus when conducting an interview with Kim. The social worker who held case responsibility for Kim for a number of years did not enter a response to the question above in the data collection from. Yet, the interview extract that follows highlights Kim's enthusiasm for sharing her achievements:

> *I like swimming, judo... I used to do gymnastics.... I do athletics with the school gymnastics with the school. I've got loads of medals upstairs. I've got about 11 of them shall I go and show you.* (Kim collects her medals from upstairs). *I've got gymnastics- two of them, that one is for athletics, I came third in that one, I came first in the running...I've given up gymnastics now I don't want to do it any more. I've got loads of gymnastics ones. I've also got judo ...I'm on the yellow belt. I've given up gymnastics but I do judo, athletics and swimming.* (Kim lays out all of the medals on the floor and counts them 1-11) *I want to get a medal for swimming. I won two trophies for judo. I do it after school. I've got two trophies upstairs one for most improved girl and one for entering.....*

Clearly Kim took pride in showing and describing her sporting prowess, it was perhaps surprising that her social worker chose not to respond to this question but like others she may have little knowledge of a young person's out of school interests or achievements. It was not clear that young people were encouraged to have out of school leisure activities and hobbies. In particular, young people in residential care appeared to have fewer hobbies and interests than those who resided in foster care. This may well have been a result of the foster carer's facilitation (Gilligan 1999; Sinclair et al. 2005b).

Who attends parents evening?

Young people were not always aware if there was some specific person who would liaise with the school on their behalf. For young people in residential care in response to the question, 'who goes to parents evening and other school events'? there was usually the stock answer of: ''Whoever is on duty''. A casual association between staff and wider caring duties seemed apparent. One young man even went further and was more critical of the staff in residential care comparing it to his foster placement:

> *Nobody in Windermere House helped me with my homework 'cos it was a children's home. I know if I needed help here* (foster home) *Isabelle would help me or her daughter Carol. But it didn't happen in Windermere they never helped anyone with their homework …… and there was one kid he needed help, I helped him a little but he is dumb.*
>
> (Leonard aged 15, foster care)

Some young people were not able to say with confidence which adults and /or professionals would attend school to discuss their progress or would help them with their homework. It was not evident that they had (or knew they had) an individual who would value their education and act as a mentor and advocate. There was no sense that key workers or shift patterns would take account of events happening at school in terms of parent's evenings, concerts, sporting fixtures or fund raising events. It was most evident from those young people in residential care that they did not appear to identify with a significant individual who would act as a champion for them and support and encourage them in their education. This was disappointing as other research has lent support to the importance of such a person (Gilligan 1999; Martin and Jackson 2002). Young people did not think that residential workers, social workers and to some extent carers understood the school system of Key Stages or when and where demands would arise in regards to academic monitoring such as the SATS assessments or requirements of course work for GCSEs. However, the young people looked after generally understood the systems in operation and the importance of educational achievement for realising their ambitions.

The importance of expectation

There is some debate (and disagreement) about the expectations held by professionals (teachers and social workers for example) over the educational capacities of looked after

children that are either too low or too high (Heath et al. 1994; Stein 1994; Sinclair 1997). A number of studies have identified the relative absence of educational qualifications amongst some residential staff and the apparent lack of priority they place on the educational interests of the young people they care for (Jackson 1987; Berridge & Brodie 1998). Conversely, there are examples of many good initiatives and establishments that have a proper awareness of the needs of young people going through the education system. Jackson (1998b) in her study of high achievers identified a number of stability factors that made a difference to a young person's attainment including learning to read fluently, having access to books, having friends outside care who did well at school, attending school regularly. Jackson also identified the importance of a significant adult who both valued education and offered support and encouragement. Although it is the social worker who will likely hold the statutory duties and responsibilities towards looked after children, research suggests that they do not always see the education of children as a priority and therefore are not, *prima facie*, going to be an effective 'significant adult' (see Aldgate et al. 1999; Francis 2000). In this study, foster carers were more likely to be seen as the significant adult as these two young people confirm:

> *My foster carers come to school; they come to see how good I do in school.*
> (Kim aged 14, foster care)

> *I think I am doing well at school, so do my teachers. My foster carers are pleased with me that I am doing well at school.*
> (Karla aged 14, foster care)

Anchoring children when they are not 'anti-school'

The young people in this study could not be regarded as an homogenous group who, just because they were 'looked after' would thereby share a common view about their circumstances past or present. They did however share in some characteristics and there were themes that were often raised and supported by the majority of the young people. One might have assumed, given what we know from previous research about looked after children and limited attainment in school, that the study population might have presented as disaffected and with little enthusiasm for education. In the early stages of the study when they were in school Year 9 the opposite was the case. The group on the whole was neither 'anti-school' (see Pomeroy 1999) nor reluctant to return and re-engage if they were 'out of school'. Some young people complained about attending the pupil referral unit and felt concerned that when

they returned to mainstream education they might be labelled as 'thick' because they would have missed so much of the formal curriculum. What did become apparent however, was how important it was to grasp Year 9 (and earlier) in terms of anchoring their enthusiasm, as behaviour, attendance and attainment often began to deteriorate in school years 10 and 11. Other research (Evans 2000) has noted how looked after children may be achieving, or be working towards the expected level in their primary school, but performance falls dramatically in secondary school and in particular in years 10 and 11.

Teachers in the study authority were particularly keen to emphasise school years 7 and 8 as a crucial time for anchoring a young person's interest and enthusiasm for school. One head of year, who had quite a number of looked after children in her school by virtue of the fact that one residential home was in the school catchment area, summarised what was considered important by a number of respondents from education:

> Those early secondary years are so important for all children. But if life has been difficult, and I know some of these children have had unthinkable things happen to them..... ... things that even adults would find hard, then we have to keep an eye early.
> (Mrs Cox, designated teacher, secondary school)

Mrs Cox, who appeared to have insight into the complex world and fragmented experiences of the looked after children, was a rare commodity amongst most education respondents. The fact that generally looked after young people were not 'anti' school, meant that some achieved good school attendance and those settled in a placement appeared to do reasonably well. However, a number of young people experienced changes related to placement or home life during a school year. In Year 9 there were a small number of looked after young people not receiving full time education and their attendance at school appeared to deteriorate in years 10 and 11. Only half of the young people who had what might be classified as a successful Year 9, in terms of attendance and taking their SATS assessments continued into Year 10 and 11. For example there were six young people located in the achievers group, three young people carried on to achieve at GCSE and at the end of the study were taking A levels or appropriate courses. All three of these young people were living in foster care and attending the same school at the beginning and at the end of the study. Of the other three, the

outcomes for one are unknown and the other two, both boys, were disengaged from education with one having two periods in a young offender institution.

Organisational responses to exclusions

Schools were asked specifically to list exclusions of the pupils' both temporary and permanent on attendance-data forms that were returned to the researcher on a regular basis. Only one boy was recorded as permanently excluded, however this may be an underestimate due to several pupils moving schools and care placements. As noted elsewhere there can be some reluctance by some schools to trigger formal exclusion procedures (Brodie 2001; Harker et al. 2003). As one teacher noted:

> *A meeting decided he would be better off going to the PRU so we didn't have to exclude.* (Mr Rowland, Year 10, Oakfield Comprehensive)

Similarly another stated:

> *She moved to her Nan's before we had to go the exclusion route.* (Mrs Lewis, Year 9 teacher, Nant Cwm School)

Formal exclusion are thus not an indicator of pupil-related difficulties but more an organisational artefact depending on multiple factors and options available at the local level. Such contingent and negotiable factors made predication about their operation unclear, potentially so from a pupil viewpoint. Young people were not clear about the process for fixed period or permanent exclusion, one boy put his point of view thoughtfully thus:

> *I'm excluded if I go to school ..... And I'm excluded if I miss ..... so if you miss long enough they tell you not to go. But when I'm excluded I get into trouble 'cos I'm bored.* (Nathan aged 15, foster care)

Another young woman expressed confusion about the 'criteria' that would determine exclusion:

> *I was on the way to being excluded the other day I think..... I keep getting referrals for back chatting that sort of thing... But I've no idea how many referrals make an exclusion.* (Judy aged 14, residential care)

It is imperative that children understand the process and causes of exclusion and that the individuals who are advocating on behalf of the young person are clear about their role within that process. Research into foster care services in England and Wales revealed that 25% of 16 year olds (Key Stage 4) were excluded or not attending school (SSI/OFSTED 1995). More recently Farmer et al. (2004:105) in their study of 68 young people aged between 11 and 17 placed in foster care found that 'almost half had been excluded from school on at least one occasion'. The difficulty with making any definite correlation between looked after populations and school exclusions are the lack of reliable date. Berridge and Brodie (1985, 1998) in their longitudinal study of children's homes in the 1980s and 1990s found that non school attendance and exclusion was a major problem that emerged within the 10 year span of their study. The prevalence of the problem is probably understated as there are many young people who do not attend but have not been excluded. Furthermore, school statistics about non-attendance may not be calculated in the same way as schools in England are required to meet a range of performance indicators and targets that will influence their position in league tables, so the potential link between exclusions and looked after children becomes more prominent as a local issue. Of course in Wales schools are not required by the Welsh Assembly government to participate in publishing annual school performance tables as in England.

Responding to young people's agenda

All of the young people interviewed (see Chapter Eight and Nine) said they had more worries than other young people their age. This view is corroborated in Department of Health research (DoH 2001: 33) which draws together the findings from 24 research projects and notes 'these children were continually worried about the future'. Most of the young people commented on how important it was that their views should be sought when addressing issues of education, which again has been noted elsewhere (DoH 2001: 35):

> Understanding children's feelings and perceptions about positive and negative experiences of school is a necessary part of responding to and enhancing their potential for educational attainment.

In the study authority there did not appear to be effective 'life story' work undertaken with this group of young people. Therefore it may be possible that some of their worries may in part be due to a lack of understanding about their circumstances. For example, some young

people may feel disengaged or isolated from their families and unable to understand how their emotions and anxieties precipitate behaviour problems and low self-esteem that may contribute to poor outcomes (Tyrer et al. 2005).

Who will be the champion?

Neither foster carers nor residential workers appeared to regularly use the information provided by school as the basis for monitoring or improving education outcomes. So for example when Douglas was in residential care he attained grades 3 and 4 in Year 9 SATS (which was below the expected level) this was not acted upon by either the school or the residential establishment. It was as if neither was aware of whose responsibility it was to address the matter, so nothing happened. This was particularly disappointing as Douglas had been out of school for a long period of time but managed to maintain his attendance during Year 9 to over 90 per cent. During an interview with the manager of the residential unit this example was raised and her response about liaising with the school was not positive but illuminating in respect of challenges to the idea of corporate parenting:

> *Well it's only a matter of time before he'll be* out (excluded from school), *the writing is on the wall with that one.* (Sally, Officer-in- charge, Sunny View residential unit)

The negative tone above was in contrast to Douglas' social worker who did not label him or have low expectations, but recognised the crucial importance of school for the young man:

> *For one young person I am working with school is the only thing that gives him an identity..... if that goes he has absolutely nothing.* (Kate, social worker)

Clearly, cases such as this, which is unlikely to be an isolated instance, call for some significant adult to act as a champion and fulfil the expectations of the corporate parent.

Anti-discriminatory practice: a response to gender sensitive approach

Social work with the young people in the sample failed to be 'gender sensitive' (see Scourfield 2002: 3). Social workers, it could be argued, failed to consider the effects of being looked after and the possibilities of discrimination and how this could impact upon the social identity of young people. Thus, social workers need to consider individual and structural dimensions:

> Each individual needs to be understood as socially constructed, but that social construction is contingent on individual social situations (Scourfield 2002: 12).

New Labour's policy agenda on social exclusion has seen much emphasis upon better services for young people but Steward is critical of a lack of gender sensitivity 'young women are still rarely profiled within such policy directions' (Steward 2001: 34). A lack of gender analysis is problematic particularly for those young people in the looked after system. As discussed earlier, girls may be more likely to come into the care system through an 'abuse route' rather than a 'difficult behaviour route' and hence their levels of vulnerability in relation to their experiences and consequences for the future will likely be very different. Whilst the offender identity may be most relevant to the young men in the study and while the lack of a gendered approach may impact more significantly on young women, the phenomenon of teenage parenthood and aspects of sex education is an issue for both. In this context there appeared to be an absence of a feminist perspective amongst the professionals involved with the young women in this study and the importance of making the experiences of the young women visible (see Heidensohn 1996; Walkate 2004). This seems somewhat at odds with the theoretical basis underpinning current social work practice particularly as Payne (2005: 254) would argue that 'a well-developed feminist social work analysis exists'.

The construction of gendered identities is (or should be) an important conceptual theme within twenty-first century welfare. Whilst a move away from traditional roles may offer new opportunities this will very much be dependent upon an individual's circumstances in terms of their social positioning and related acquisitions of social and cultural capital. For looked after children, as with many others that receive the help of social services, these are roles they are less likely to enjoy (Harris 2004; Taft 2004).

The main issues for the young people in this study were that apart from completing basic statutory requirements around reviewing, the staff most likely to work with young people on aspects of their identity, increasing their confidence and self-esteem, were either unwilling, unable or ill-equipped to undertake these tasks. For example, as can be seen from the extract below aspects of gender were often merged with other issues (see Green 2005: 453). The manager of the looked after children team summarised views that were commonly held:

Young people come into the looked after system at different times with different needs with a whole array of work that needs completing-making sense of abuse, life story work, preparation for placement. Each young person, boy, girl, black, white will need something different. But when you manage a service that is under- resourced anyway and then under-staffed by a third most of the time and a half 'cos of sickness and holidays, with the best will in the world it 'aint gonna happen.
(Diane, team manager, looked after children team)

The looked after children and education team

There have been significant attempts to tackle the issues of education of looked after children through policy initiatives however there still appears to be a gap between policy and practice. In the study authority an initiative that developed during the course of this study was the Looked After Children Education Team (LACE). The LACE team emanated from a multi-agency partnership involving public and private agencies. It was jointly funded by partner agencies and from the Objective One European Social Fund (ESF). The funding was granted with specific objectives to target young people at serious risk of social exclusion and would aim to:

- enhance educational attainment, training potential and employability
- enhance welfare and familial support structures
- enhance the opportunities to pursue healthy lifestyles
- enhance the pathways into training and employment, and routes into active citizenship

The focus of the funded partnership was to work with a variety of young people aged between 14-18, including those who were at risk of social exclusion, teenage parents, and young carers. The partnership identified fourteen different groups amongst which looked after children were included. The ambitious plan included a range of proposed interventions co-ordinated by a central team. The interventions, a list of 25 in total, included a drop in centre for young people, detached youth worker, an advocacy and mediation service and again a looked after children initiative, with a focus on education, i.e. the LACE team.

The LACE team had a brief to work with looked after children aged 11-18, with a broad aim of 'addressing educational underachievement'. The team, housed in newly refurbished and well equipped premises, consisted of a project leader, educational psychologist, education

welfare officer, teacher, two sessional workers and an administrator. Welsh government guidance (NAfW 2001a) informed the project and the following quote, reproduced on a number of LACE publicity documents highlighted the ambitions of their corporate focus:

> Children in public care are our children. We hold their future in our hands, and education is the key to the future. We aim to ensure that these children get the education they deserve (LACE Report 2002-2003).

In line with government directives and targets the specific aims of the team were to focus on Key Stage 4 and GCSE pupils, reduce exclusions and improve attendance for underachieving pupils. In addition, in line with guidance, there was particular emphasis on securing a school placement within 20 days, following the change of a care placement. The project recognised that this was particularly difficult when children were placed out of the local authority area. They had limited focus on pupils in school years 8 and 9 (second and third year of secondary school) although recognising this as a critical period in laying the foundations for school and educational achievement. The scheme offered a range of creative educational and recreational support services to the young people within the authority. These included: homework and support sessions, GCSE course work groups, and residential outward bound activities with the aim of developing co-operation, resilience and confidence. They also organised educational visits including college open days and regularly hosted 'recognition of achievement' events. As well as direct support and encouragement work with young people, the staff in the project had a training focus within the authority and jointly planned and delivered training to designated teachers, social workers, foster carers, residential workers and multi-agency teams.

The project was perceived by partner agencies to be a 'good thing' but its short term and uncertain funding meant that initiatives were delivered in what appeared to be a less than committed climate. Whilst the team, and others, spoke of much good work it was felt that the specialist and separate nature of the work, coupled with precarious funding arrangements meant that it was not well placed to promote the educational needs of children and act as a champion to get the best from the corporate parent. Firth and Fletcher (2001: 161) outline explicitly what is needed:

> A Champion for looked after children at local level has to have sufficient authority and corporate support to persistently challenge attitudes and practice, and effect change and sustained improvements.

A specialist team or a retrograde step?

Interviews with the LACE team suggested that the joint working between social services and education had, unintentionally, been weakened in that the LACE team were now seen as the 'experts' and therefore it was deemed less necessary for other professionals to take more proactive responsibility. It was felt that such attitudes diluted the overall impact of the LACE initiative. As with similar projects there was evidence of barriers that hampered joint working, including the workloads of social workers and teachers and other pressing agendas (Harker et al. 2004). Although at an operational level there was statutory guidance (NAfW 2001a) that intended to improve aspects of inter-professional work, such as the completion of Personal Education Plans (PEPs), however this was not evident in most cases in this study. Likewise, attendance at jointly planned (education and social services) inter-professional training was not well embedded. As elsewhere, there were competing demands and long term vacancies in teams that prevented 'internal cohesion' and therefore hampered joint working (Hibbert 20003; Harker et al. 2004).

The project staff of the LACE team presented their work at an all Wales forum and opened their presentation with the following quote:

> Valuing and supporting the education of children in public care is the single most important contribution a corporate parent can make to their lives, because it is about investing in and caring about their future, and recognising that education is their passport to better chances in life (DoH 2000).

The project was unsuccessful in attracting further funding but managed to continue with a reduced service and terminated as a project after 3-4 years. The career of the LACE team is best summarised by Blyth and Milner (1997:43) who note that in this aspect of child welfare there is 'a tendency to rely on short-term project funding which has little impact on broad trends'.

Summary

This chapter first explored briefly aspects of vulnerability for some of the study sample in regard to problems of criminality and teenage parenthood. In doing so, this helped to underscore issues of social exclusion before looking more specifically at organisational responses that need to be in place in order to promote the education of young people through their looked after experiences. The organisational responses in the study authority, like others, did not make much of an impact in the outcomes of complex and multi-layered issues. We shall in the next and final chapter give further consideration as how to tackle the pressing and challenging issues of giving looked after children the same opportunities as other children.

Chapter 11: Conclusion: Learning the lessons from young people

Introduction

This concluding chapter will rehearse briefly some of the key features of this study and their relevance for policy development and inter-professional working. It will emphasise the importance of attitudes, beliefs and principles for all of those involved with children and young people in the looked after system. These themes will be summarised under the broad heading of (a) children's rights and (b) adult responsibilities as a corporate parent looking after children within a 'needs' and 'risk' framework. National and local authority duties towards looked after children in regards to target setting and data management will also be discussed as well as the particular challenges posed by residential care and school exclusions. Finally, the relevance of this study will be outlined in relation to the current legislative framework and recent government initiatives and reports.

Legislative and policy developments

The educational achievement and outcomes for looked after children is clearly on the legislative agenda where the issues have been given prominence through specific guidance within the Children Act (1989), the Children [Leaving Care] Act (2000) and the Children Act (2004). There is a new duty on local authorities to 'promote the educational achievement of looked after children', as part of the Children Act (2004). Nonetheless, in the case of looked after children and their educational outcomes we may agree with Hendrick (2005: 475) that 'legislative activity is not in itself a sign of progress'. However, in addition to this legislative interest, looked after children are likely to be included in policy initiatives designed to tackle social exclusion and promote positive outcomes (Hayden 2005). Yet, at the point of completing this thesis a highly publicised report by Barnardo's (2006) *Failed by the System* documented the educational experiences and achievements of sixty-six UK care leavers and concluded that 'despite the long standing recognition of this issue, there appears to have been no substantial improvement in recent years' (p.3). This, despite the raised profile of this vulnerable group, a plethora of initiatives, guidance, advice and protocols linked to evidenced-based practice. Thus, even with the educational achievements of looked after children as a core aim of government policy some 58 per cent of looked after children failed to achieve a single GCSE or equivalent compared to 95 per cent of children from the general population (Barnardo's 2006). The challenge to improving outcomes cannot be overlooked

given the complex needs and histories of some looked after children and given the limited capacities and commitment of some professionals, as identified in this thesis. Indeed, Gallagher et al. (2004: 1113) make the point thus:

> It is important not to underestimate the formidable challenges inherent in this work especially in terms of attitudes towards, and resources invested in this sector. Central to this is the establishment of a qualified and properly supported workforce.

The UK government in its most recent initiative, not unaware of these challenges and needs (see, *Reaching Out: An Action Plan On Social Exclusion* SEU 2006) calls for a 'renewed approach' and 'radical revision' (p.9) of methods for tackling social exclusion. Such methods are to be informed by five key principles: better identification and earlier intervention; systematically identifying what works; promoting multi-agency working; personalisation approach to rights and responsibilities and supporting achievement and managing underperformance. The document is seen as building on the *Every Child Matters* (2003) agenda and a pre-cursor to the Green Paper, *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care* (DfES 2006) that sets out the UK Government's proposals to transform outcomes for children in care. There is no doubt that there is renewed government and professional interest. In Wales this concern is represented by the Assembly Government's introduction of a new programme that works towards Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education (RAISE). The RAISE programme for 2006/7, provides £16 million, part of which will be targeted for supporting looked after children and education (WAG 2006). However, insights gathered from this thesis would suggest that whilst a reiteration of policy commitment and statement of new guiding principles is to be welcomed, the rhetoric will not become a reality unless full attention is given to a number of inter-related factors as outlined below.

Rights, responsibilities and the corporate parent

The data gathered in this study challenges a commonly held perception that young people in care are not interested in being in school, or knowledgeable about the processes and structures of the education system. Most of the sample had much the same ambitions and aspirations as other young people and against the odds some did very well. For some, their intricate and complex lives were normalised through the education setting. It is essential therefore that their voice and their accounts of their experiences, must enter policy discourse

and development. It is not acceptable or sensible for adults to speak on behalf of children and young people on the basis of what they think or imagine children's situations to be like (Smart et al. 2001). The guiding principle should be to move away from a 'cultural predisposition to discount the views of children and young people that is built on a deficit model of childhood' (Butler and Williamson 1994: 127). Children and young people should be viewed as consultants, if not experts, in their own social situations. Indeed, a distinctive feature of this study is that whilst many research projects draw on retrospective accounts or are designed to offer a snap-shot of events, the young people in this study were commenting and reflecting on their lived experiences over three years covering a critical period in growing up and in education.

Of course, placing children centre stage and hearing their views does not absent adults of their responsibilities. Research by Fletcher (1993) and Shaw (1998) concluded that effective, committed adult support and advocacy was needed if young people were to do well. That level of support appeared to be fairly *ad hoc* in the view of children in this study. Although there were a small number of foster carers who stood out as providing 'good parenting' there did not seem to be anything extraordinary or exceptional in what they were offering, but rather a level of engagement and encouragement that one would expect of any parent. Whilst foster carers, and in one case a birth parent, were identified by the young people as aiding their achievements it was notable that no teacher, social worker or residential staff were viewed as offering this vital support. Thus, it was rare that the young people could give the name of an individual who would value their education and act as a mentor and advocate. That said, those looked after young people who had placement stability and attended school regularly and participated in the assessment process achieved as much as other young people nationally and locally. It follows that more attention needs to be given to the transfer of knowledge and practice from these services that aid stability and continuity, in particular successful models of fostering and residential care. Here, a re-examination of the role of residential care, a service that has much potential would be valuable in order to avoid the pitfalls identified in the study authority whereby a lack of direction, poorly qualified staff and low morale helped create a chaotic and disorganised environment with little regard for promoting educational aspirations.

Being a corporate parent

A good working relationship between social services and education, based on a common understanding of the philosophy of corporate parenting is a pivotal component of good practice. Working with children in public care demands much from key adults such as, foster carers, social workers, residential workers, teachers and those that manage and support them. The importance of an ethos, that helps promote an inclusive and positive environment was sometimes apparent in the activities of individuals in the study authority rather than at a system level. Thus, within each of the separate, but interrelated disciplines that support looked after children, the endorsement of such an approach appeared to depend on significant individuals who could to some extent 'champion' or shape the co-ordination and delivery of necessary services. This occurred through individuals aspiring to the same opportunities and chances for looked after children as most parents would for their own children rather than because they were responding to the duties of a corporate parent.

When this stance was lacking, professionals did not appear to be able to prioritise the educational needs of young people, nor familiarise themselves with the school curriculum and systems for assessment. Equally there did not appear to be an appreciation of the importance of promoting resilience in all its many guises (both in and out of school) and the benefits of this for developing a young person's social and cultural capital. Examples of this could be seen in the way some teachers, social workers, foster carers and residential workers appeared to give scant regard to encouraging and applauding young people's interests, hobbies, talents and leisure activities.

There was some evidence that the study authority was unable to offer a working environment that enabled social workers to pro-actively engage with the young people (at least two out of the fourteen cases were not allocated to a social worker for periods of time during the study). This would support the view of Tunstill (1999: 137) that for a variety of organisational and ideological reasons there may be an 'ambivalent commitment to meeting the needs of children and young people'. There was some evidence that key professionals tended to take a rather pessimistic view of the education potential of the young people and did not vigorously promote their inclusion or achievement. Young people looked after clearly need to know who will liaise and advocate on their behalf and this was not always apparent in the study authority. Equally, social workers and teachers need to understand their respective roles in a

young person's life and here respondents in both professions often expressed ambiguity in this regard.

National and local authority responsibility to looked after children

By focusing policy and interventions on leaving care outcomes and supporting young people in Year 10 and 11 and around GCSE such activities may ultimately be too little too late. Jackson and Simon (2006: 51) are clear that 'the seeds of success or failure in GCSE are sown at least four years earlier'. The views of the participants in this study would suggest that there needs to be revision or reform of the systems for monitoring, encouraging and supporting young people much earlier in their school careers. There needs to be more emphasis on providing the early educational building blocks for later outcomes, stressing in particular the importance of reading. There must also be an understanding of a child's learning style as well as learning from what underlies their good school attendance – which usually occurs in the younger age group. In addition, support needs to be enhanced during the transition to secondary education. When young people become looked after during the senior school years this focus needs to be especially strengthened in order to sustain interest and enthusiasm.

Children coming into the looked after system should be understood within a 'needs' and 'risk' framework. Being in care is known to be a 'high risk' activity with outcomes for some children becoming predictable in the absence of essential structures of support. A resilience perspective should be deployed as a way for social workers 'to make sense of children's histories, predict developmental trajectories and intervene more appropriately' (Schofield and Beek, 2005: 1298). One way of doing this would be to ensure that older children who arrive in the looked after system with poor self-esteem and who are disengaged from school should receive services that are creative, flexible and designed to meet their individual needs. Young people in this study referred to services or activities that they felt would have benefited them, but for various reasons (they were 'too old' or 'it was too far to travel') they could not access these and effective alternatives were not found.

Collaboration

Government and local authorities have been generating new initiatives that address many of the issues raised in this research. There is now an increasing emphasis on collaboration between education and social services which is critical in managing the experiences of

looked after children in school (Vernon and Sinclair 1998). However, these developments appear to be threatened by a culture of 'survival' in some social services teams and a narrow focus on achieving exam-linked targets in some schools, to the extent that the complex needs of some looked after children became overlooked. This can lead to the most vulnerable of young people being a minority left with less support, sometimes excluded with little hope of achieving:

> A minority of children, usually ones with greatest need, are not receiving full-time education. The quality of the provision made for them is often unsatisfactory. They are underachieving significantly and their prospects are poor. This is a major cause for concern (SSIW/Estyn report 2001:5).

Tackling their needs requires constant dialogue and ongoing joint action with clear aims and shared commitments. There still appears to be reluctance in some authorities to collect adequate data and monitor the educational achievements of their looked after population. Two large surveys by Fletcher-Campbell (1990; 1997) revealed service monitoring and delivery to be patchy, albeit there was growing recognition of the need to generate a detailed picture to inform practice. Routine and systematic data collection did not feature in the study authority and this in turn made it difficult to assess whether outcomes were improving, staying the same or deteriorating. As with other UK provision:

> When it came to use of the information on a more collective basis for monitoring and strategic planning, the authorities had hardly left the starting blocks (Wheelaghan and Hill 2000:153).

Target setting and data management

In Wales, the move away from national education targets for looked after children may mean that statistics are collected from individual authorities but may no longer be considered as a tool for improving services and outcomes (Simon and Owen 2006). This may lead to variation in the services local authorities offer, as well as variable ways of calculating outcomes and success. It may be increasingly difficult to build a local and national picture or to see the benefits of investment and initiatives. It will therefore be imperative that any new initiatives are designed with a rigorous evaluation and dissemination strategy.

It is also imperative that there is a more coherent and systematic way of collecting and sharing information on young people and their educational needs. The findings from this

study indicated that too often the Key Stages attainment data were not systematically encoded and there did not appear to be clear protocols to establish whose responsibility it was to track, record and act on information. Also, there was some uncertainty between social services and education as to whose duty it was to check the destination of the data, such as when records were passed between school and the pupil referral unit, or when a child moved schools. There was no clear accountability about whose duty it was to check on educational continuity and progression. At a strategic level more needs to be done to ensure the aggregation and scrutiny of such data so that interventions, services and care outcomes can be appraised. The administrative and information technology systems to do this were not fit for purpose in the study authority. The looked after children materials (DoH 1995b) (designed to be a comprehensive record of key information to aid performance monitoring at individual and strategic levels within and across authorities) had not been embraced by the study authority nor any alternative system.

Unique and shared concerns

In this study and elsewhere (Borland et al.1998) policy and practice did not sufficiently take account of the unique and shared educational needs of young people looked after. This variegated population tends to be seen as an homogenous group with the attendant risks of inflexible approaches. More needs to be done to help these young people to make sense of their pre-care experiences and how these impact on the way they negotiate their care and education careers as well as their adolescent identities. Aldgate and Seden (2006: 229) make the case for professionals:

> working directly with children to help make sense of events and relationships that may be affecting their emotional and social development.

Of particular importance here will be gender differences in light of what is known about how boys and girls typically enter the care system, often through behavioural or family dysfunction for boys and neglect and abuse concerns for girls. More consideration needs to be given to the unique biographical experiences of young people and how gender and ethnicity, as well as pre-care experiences both positive and negative, need to be processed, understood and an ongoing focus of the reparation process.

Ongoing challenges: residential care and school exclusions

Within the sample attendance at school appeared to deteriorate in Years 10 and 11. However, incomplete recording suggested that school systems for logging absences were not always reliable. Neither were there any additional measures put in place to ensure closer monitoring of looked after children. The experiences of young people in residential care appeared to reveal exacting challenges for reform. There needs to be particular emphasis on initiatives to improve school attendance of the older age group, in particular those in residential care. Also, young people in residential care appeared to have less interests and hobbies than those in foster care, again this needs to be the focus of attention. In regard to school exclusion, young people suggested they were not clear about the process for fixed period or permanent exclusion. While the emphasis should be on taking sensitive and practicable means to keep a child in school they should nonetheless understand the process for and definitions of exclusion and the individual role of professionals. The recording of exclusions should be reliable and consistent in order to build a picture of individual and shared features both locally and nationally. When young people are not in school every effort should be made to provide continuity of education that is responsive, creative and flexible and allows the young person to engage with the curriculum within the Key Stage they are working towards.

Rhetoric and procrastination or a transformation for high risk groups?

Whilst the most recent UK government agenda (SEU 2006) advocates a number of initiatives including treatment foster care (p.67) more needs to be done within existing services and without delay to focus on what is already known about how children are supported and encouraged in education. It is not acceptable to wait for another round of system reforms that can take decades to materialise into tangible change. Authorities know who their looked after children are, they know of their pre-care experiences, where they are living, where they are educated and have some knowledge about their likely educational trajectory. They should also have knowledge about activities and hobbies they are engaged in that can build self-esteem and resilience. Equally they should be aware of the young person's emotional well-being and how they cope with their attachment disruptions, providing specialist services if needed. Their unique circumstances need to be scrutinised so that pro-active, decisive and individually focused, but inter-agency services, provide a child-centred response. One might assume this to be the basic groundwork addressed by any authority which acts as a corporate parent. However, the reality in many of the cases in this study and elsewhere is that a systematic, co-ordinated, flexible and diagnostic approach informed by regular information

and dialogue with young people, carers and professionals is erratic at best. No matter how initiatives are re-framed and packaged, the foundational work of systems and commitment to generate a pro-active and holistic view of the young person needs to be in place before sustained improvements will become visible.

Summary

Although there has been an increase in research and debate about educational achievements of young people looked after this has not yet been translated into improved results or a decisive shift in practice from key professionals. The Welsh Assembly Government's *Children First* programme (Welsh Office 1999a) specified the improvement of educational achievements as a core policy aim. This aim has not been realised. The educational outcome of children looked after *vis a vis* children not in public care is a critical aspect of comparison which challenges our aspirations that those looked after should do at least as well as the majority of other children.

If this aim is to be achieved those individuals and organisations with corporate parent responsibilities will need to be much more proactive with the young people and from an early age. The level of commitment needed by those involved in planning, implementing and supporting the education of the looked after population requires much invigorating to ensure that children looked after can optimise the benefits of educational opportunities. It is important that all those involved in the lives of children in public care maintain a positive and optimistic approach and a belief that 'children can recover from events that have interrupted their development' (Aldgate et al. 2006: 313) and that improving the educational experiences and outcomes for looked after children 'though awesome, is solvable' (Fletcher-Campbell 1998: 4). Part of the solution will be to ensure that any new innovative practices arising from the recent influx of government initiatives are systematically and rigorously evaluated; with longitudinal qualitative research, that seeks the views of young people, as part of any research strategy. Hopefully this thesis has drawn attention to a number of individual and operational insights and issues that will help inform a better future for children and young people looked after.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The 'gatekeeping' process: a checklist

Name of young person:

Social worker:

Legal status:

			Notes/Dates
Discussion with senior management	Agree	Not agree	
Discussion with middle management	Agree	Not agree	
Discussion with social worker	Agree	Not agree	
Letter to parents for permission	Agree	Not agree	
Letter to foster carers/residential workers Followed up by telephone call	Agree	Not agree	
Information to young people (via care placement)			
Contact young person via care placement	Agree	Not agree	
Contact care placement to agree time and date for Interview			

confidential

Everything you tell me about your views on school will be confidential. I will not tell anyone your name when I write down your views.

Nothing that you say will affect the service you receive from professionals.

how do I get involved?

Easy. I will then get in touch with you and arrange to meet up. Simple as that!

Produced from an idea by Sean O'Neill, Research Associate, University of Wales Cardiff

Get your voice heard!

Your chance 2 have your say about school

Dolores Davey
Cardiff University

029 – 2087 5261

Some of your Questions answered...

what's it all about?

My name is Dolores, and with your help, I hope to find out about your experiences at school, in particular what helps you to do well.

why ask me?

Young people like you have a lot of important things to say and whose thoughts and opinions are often ignored.

This is your chance to have **your say** and let the adults know your views of school.

what do you want to know?

Whatever you want to tell me about school and how you see your future. In particular you may want to tell me what you like, what you dislike, what issues in your life make school difficult.

You are free to tell me as much or as little as you wish. You're the boss!

what will it be like?

I will try and make it as fun and enjoyable as possible. There will be no nasty forms to fill in, no long sentences to write and definitely no long list of boring questions to answer.

what's in it for me?

Well, if you agree to get involved, apart from having your say, you will also receive a **gift token** for the store of your choice. This is as a thank you for giving up some of your time.

You will also be helping to improve the service for other young people.

where will we meet?

This will most probably be in your home or residential unit. If you want you can also have a friend or family member with you while we talk.

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN: BASIC DATA FORM I

Social Worker	Keyworker

Please write or circle answers as appropriate

1	**Young Person: Name**				
2	**Ethnicity**	**D.O.B.**	**Gender**	**M**	**F**
3	**Care Address**		Is this in GCBC	**Y**	**N**
4	**Current Carer: Name**				
5	**Current Carer: Tel. No.**				
6, 7	**Family: Address**		Is this in GCBC?	**Y**	**N**
8	**Family: Tel. No.**				
9	**Principal carer at this address: Name**				
10	**Relationship to the young person**				

11,12	**Is the young person on the CPR?**	**Y**	**N**	**Category:** a. Physical abuse	c. Sexual abuse
				b. Neglect	d. Emotional abuse

13	**What is their legal status?**	a. Section 20	c. I.C.O.	e. Remand
14	Date this order began	b. E.P.O.	d. Care order	f. Other

	Provide details of care episodes and placements		
15	*Details????*		
16	**Current placement type**	a. Foster Home	b. Residential Unit	c. Placed with parents/relatives
17	Date this placement began		d. Other (please state type) ……
18	Was this Placement?	a. Planned	b. Unplanned	
19	Is this Placement?	a. Appropriate	b. Inappropriate	

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN: BASIC DATA FORM II

20 **Why is the young person being looked after?**

Please be more specific than order e.g. significant harm - physical abuse

Provide details of current education

21, 22 **School name** Start date .....

23 **Headteacher name** **Class Teacher Year**
LAC teacher **teacher**

24 **School address**

25 **Individual Education Plan agreed?** Y N **Currently excluded?** Y N

26 **School type** a. Comprehensive b. Special School c. P.R.U.
d. Other (please state type) .....

27 Was this school arrangement? a. Planned b. Unplanned

28 Is this school arrangement? a. Appropriate b. Inappropriate

29 **Has the young person been referred for a statementing assessment?** Y N

30 If yes, dates? .....

31 **Has the young person been made subject to a statement?** Y N

32 **Level?** If yes, dates? .....

33 **Reasons for the statement**

What are the future plans for the young person over the next twelve months regarding:

34	**Looked after /legal status?**	a. Likely to stay same c.Unknown	b. Likely to alter	Details?
35	**Placement location and type?**	a. Likely to stay same c.Unknown	b. Likely to alter	Details?
36	**Education Placement?**	a. Likely to stay same c.Unknown	b. Likely to alter	Details?
37	**Contact with birth family?**	a. Likely to stay same c.Unknown	b. Likely to alter	Details?

38 **Please describe any other significant plans for the next twelve months.**

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN: BASIC DATA FORM III

39	**Has the young person any achievements in sport, music or drama?**	**Y**	**N**
40	**If yes, details?**		

	S.A.T.s results								
	English								
41	**Key Stage 1**	Yr 2	Level achieved?	1	2	3			na
42	**Key Stage 2**	Yr 6	Level achieved?	1	2	3	4	5+	na
42	**Key Stage 3**	Yr 9	Level achieved?	2	3	4	5	6	7+	na
	Welsh								
43	**Key Stage 1**	Yr 2	Level achieved?	1	2	3			na
44	**Key Stage 2**	Yr 6	Level achieved?	1	2	3	4	5+	na
45	**Key Stage 3**	Yr 9	Level achieved?	2	3	4	5	6	7+	na
	Maths								
46	**Key Stage 1**	Yr 2	Level achieved?	1	2	3			na
47	**Key Stage 2**	Yr 6	Level achieved?	1	2	3	4	5+	na
48	**Key Stage 3**	Yr 9	Level achieved?	2	3	4	5	6	7+	na
	Science								
49	**Key Stage 1**	Yr 2	Level achieved?	1	2	3			na
50	**Key Stage 2**	Yr 6	Level achieved?	1	2	3	4	5+	na
51	**Key Stage 3**	Yr 9	Level achieved?	2	3	4	5	6	7+	na

Please provide any available information or circle 'na' if not applicable

PLACEMENT HISTORY

Young Person's Name:

			Placement									Legal Status						
School Year(s) eg Yr 7-9	Date from	Date to	LA Foster home	Residential Unit	With Parents	With Other Relatives	Independent Foster Home	Other	Pl'ment change planned?	Placement appropriate?	School changed?	Sec 20	EPO	ICO	Care Orderr	Remand	Name & Address of Carers	Reasons for leaving

Please tick school type

Total number of periods of being looked after [ ]

Approximate total time looked after ..... years .....months

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND LAC PLACEMENTS

Young Person's Name:

			In GlendaleCBC					Out of Area						
School Year(s) eg Yr 7-9	Date From	Date To	Foster home	Residential Unit	With Parents	With Other Relatives	Other	GCBC Foster home	Independent Foster Home	Other LA Residential Unit	Independent Residential Unit	Other	Name & Address of Carers	Reasons for leaving

Please tick school type

Total number of periods of being looked after [ ]

Approximate total time looked after ..... years .....months

Appendix 4

Aide Memoire for semi-structured interviews with young people (An example)

Preamble

Brief explanation in 'accessible terms' of research project
Stress confidentiality
Tape recorder to remember what you say and allow me to listen carefully etc.

Section A
Education

1. Can you describe the type of school you go to?
   Probe- big, small, mixed, mainstream, 'special' PRU, etc
   Near where you live at a distance etc
   How do you get there each day?

   Link

2. Is it an okay school for you? Do you think it suits you?
   Probe – What would you change about it if you could (humour/wish list)
   What would you improve?

3. Lets talk about your day to day experience then :
   A) What do you most enjoy about school?
   Probe curriculum areas, specific teachers, friends and social opportunities, etc

   b) (in contrast) what do you least like about school?
   Probe – have you always felt like that? / Or is this recent to this particular stage.
   Probe (prior schooling) What about infant and junior schools.
   Do you have positive happy memories as well as unhappy negative ones?
   Tell me a little about them (elicit egs. and narrative).

4. Would you say your attendance was good, poor or average?
   Probe do you attend regularly at the present time? (last school year/new)
   How many days off have you had other than official days –
   Can you estimate for me…?

5. Have you ever been temporarily excluded from school?
   (Probe reasons, outcomes, when, how many times, how many days)

6. What actually happened when you were excluded?
   For example, what did you do with all that time?
   Probe /elicit the action plans that followed.

7. Permanent exclusion case.
   Why were you excluded? Do you think the staff and head teacher were worried about you, your learning, and the ability of others to learn?

   (Try to elicit child's sense of own deviance in relation to learning or preventing others from learning)
   (Maybe a child's sense of agency or learner identity etc)

Section B
Interests outside School and Supports

1. Tell me about your free time and things you get up to outside school?

   a) are you interested in any after school or lunch time activities
   Probe – clubs, sports teams, activities, hobbies etc.

   Probe – approx times per week or hours

   b) are you involved in any non-school leisure?
   Probe now or in the past.

   c) Can you swim, ride a bike, use a computer

   d) Are you part of any clubs/ sports activities/ hobbies?

2. Do you read when you are not in school?
   (probe what books, comics, magazines, newspapers)

   a) How many books do you have?

   b) How often do you borrow books from the school library?

3. Who reminds you about you homework and supports you to do it
   (computer, dictionary, encyclopaedia)

   b) Where do you do your homework?

   c) Which adults go to school to talk about progress?

4. What school trips have you been on?
   recently and in the last few years

Social Life

5. Who do you hang around with at school?
special friend, group of friends- lads/girls in a gang.

b) do you go for tea/sleepovers/meet school friends in town?

Section C
Understanding 'looked after' status

1. What do you say to people about not living at home-how do you explain it?
2. How do people react to this (probe adults, friends)
3. Do you ever think you have been treated differently because you do not live at home?
   (probe unfairly, different expectations)
4. Are there things in your life that you think might effect how you actually do at school?

5. Do you think you have more worries than other young people of your age?
(Probe can you say any more on what those worries are.)

6. If I asked your teachers how you are doing in school what would they say?
b) If I asked your carers how you are doing in school what would they say?
c) If I asked your family how you are doing in school what would they say?
d) Finally, how do you yourself think you are doing at school?

7. Can you think of anything that would/ might help you do better than you are currently doing at school?
Probe for expansion why do you think that is?

Section D
Ambitions/Ideas for the future
Let us talk about your ideas for the future and a good place to begin is your current subjects at school

1. What courses or subjects are you taking currently?
(probe do you like these?)

2. Do you know about the National Curriculum?
All pupils follow it with some choice at 14.

3. a) Do you remember tests or SATs that you took in English, Maths Science?
b) How did you feel about these?
c) Do you remember /know how you did?

Averages
(level 2 by age 7 (yr.2)
(level 4 by age11 (yr.6)
(level 6 by age14 (yr.9)
(level 7 by age16 (yr.11)

4. GCSE options are chosen in YR.9 and taught in YRs 10 and 11
a) What do you think your options may be have you thought about it yet?
b) Who have you discussed them with?
c) What do you want to do when you leave school?
5 a). What GCSEs would you like to get at the end of year 11?
b) What grade would you hope to get?
c) do you want to go on to college or university (probe what would you like to study)

6. And let's close on how do you think you are going to do over the next year in school?

Thanks, confidentiality, anything to say, meet again, contact number, gift voucher.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD