



The educational experiences and reflexive capacities of care leavers in one Local Authority in England.

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a distinctive insight into the educational experiences of recent care leavers in one Local Authority. Policies and practices that enable or constrain the capacity of children in care to fulfil their educational aspirations are examined. This study demonstrates the importance and complexity of trusting peers and key adults, the value of education, the challenges imposed by the prospect of premature independence and the significance of clothing, food and terminology associated with the care system. Findings from this study contribute to the developing body of research that highlights the importance of everyday experiences for young people in care (Mannay *et al*, 2019; 2017; Rees, 2019; Rees and Munro, 2019; Narey and Owers, 2017; Rogers, 2017 and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017).

This study foregrounds the voices of care experienced young people. Insights have been gained from semi-structured interviews with twenty-one young people aged between eighteen and twenty-seven years of age and three key members of Children's Services in one Local Authority. Participants discussed the importance of relationships with key adults and peers, the complexity of disclosing their care status, their commitment to education and concerns regarding the terminology employed in the care system. Participants clearly articulated their educational and career aspirations and modes of reflexivity (Archer, 2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000). This study identifies that generalised teachers appear to offer support far beyond their statutory responsibilities. The Designated Teacher role was less well received by participants and this finding would benefit from further research.

Relevant national policies since 1989 are examined with a particular focus on policies since New Labour came to office in 1997. The impact of these policies is also considered in the context of the selected Local Authority. Analysis of these policies highlighted increased levels of Local Authority accountability and a period of targets for improved social and academic outcomes during Blair's tenure. Subsequent governments removed these targets and reduced tax relief for parents and funding for programmes such as Sure Start. Since 2010 there has been an increase in targeted programmes such as *Troubled Families* (Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government, 2011), *Staying Put* (DfE, 2014) and higher levels of Pupil Premium funding. Literature is also considered with a clear emphasis on the challenges of social and routine aspects of a life in care. Archer's theory of internal conversations and modes of reflexivity is utilised to understand how participants navigate their circumstances and plan in both the shorter and longer term (2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000). Archer's notion of the internal conversation illuminates the decisions, plans and priorities of care experienced young people. An adaption of Archer's modes of reflexivity is suggested. The proposed adaption 'reluctant autonomy' aims to capture the sense of enforced and premature self-reliance which many participants highlighted in their interview.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CAN	Child Abuse and Neglect
CORC	Child Outcomes Research Consortium
DfE	Department for Education
DfEH	Department for Education and Health
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DfHSC	Department for Health and Social Care
DPA	Data Protection Act
DT	Designated Teacher
EHC	Education Health and Care
ECM	Every Child Matters
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IGA	Interview Group A
IGB	Interview Group B
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
KS	Key Stage
LAC	Looked After Children
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NHS	National Health Service
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
OFSTED	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PA	Personal Advisor
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PEP	Personal Education Plan
PP	Pupil Premium

PPP	Pupil Premium Plus
RAPs	Rights and Participation
SATs	Statutory Assessment Testing
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SEN	Special Education Needs
TACT	The Adolescent and Children's Trust
VS	Virtual School
VSH	Virtual School Headteacher
WHO	World Health Organisation

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Back to Basics

The phrase 'back to basics' refers to a political campaign launched by John Major in October 1993. The campaign focused on traditional values such as neighbourliness, decency, courtesy.

Children in Care (Department for Education (DfE), 2017)

Under the Children Act (1989), a child is looked after by a Local Authority if he or she falls into one of the following:

- Is provided with accommodation, for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, [Children Act 1989, Section 20 and 21]
- Is subject to a care order [Children Act 1989, Part IV]
- Is subject to a placement order

Children in Need (DfE, 2019)

Children who have needs identified through a children's social care assessment or because of their disability. Children in need may require services and support in order to have the same health and development opportunities as their peers.

Childhood Poverty

The Childhood Poverty Act (2010:2/3) defined childhood poverty through four measures:

- Relative income: household income less than 60% of current net equivalised household median income (before housing costs).
- Combined low income and material deprivation: children who experience material deprivation and live in households with incomes less than 70% of current median equivalised net household income.
- Absolute income: household income less than 60% of 2010/11 median net equivalised household income adjusted for prices.
- Persistent poverty: household income less than 60% of current median net equivalised household income for at least three out of the previous four years.

Corporate Parent

Councils act as corporate parents for children and young people in care in their Local Authority. This means they are responsible for ensuring those children and young people are kept safe, receive high quality care, education and opportunities.

Designated Teacher (DT)

The Children and Young Persons Act (House of Parliament, 2008) placed a responsibility on all schools to have in place a Designated Teacher (DT). The DT must be a qualified teacher and their role is to work with the Virtual School to oversee the provision for pupils in care. DTs are required to set high expectations for pupils in care and to ensure their voice is heard. DTs also act as a source of information for other colleagues, oversee the pupils' PEPs and ensure pupils receive appropriate one-to-one tuition.

Halal

The literal meaning of Halal is permissible. Halal meat must be killed according to the ritual of Zibah or Zabihah.

Have a Good Day Project 2017

This was a project funded by Public Health England and Forward Thinking [Local Authority]. The project provided funding for young people to invest in their homes, travel or an activity which would support their emotional well-being.

Matching

The term *matching* refers to the process by which a child is placed with suitable foster carer/s or adoptive parent/s.

Personal Advisor

As young people leave the care system they are supported by a personal advisor who offers emotional and practical guidance with a central aim of preparing young people for successful independent living (DfE, 2018).

School's Link Project 2015 – present date

A joint DfE and National Health Service (NHS) project to establish links between named members of staff in schools and health services to improve communication and mental health services for young people.

Virtual Schools (VS) and Virtual Headteachers (VSH)

The VS and VSH are in place specifically to oversee children in care's well-being; the allocation of PP, their provision and progress. Children in care are effectively treated as though they were in one school; their progress, attendance and attainment is tracked by the VSH and his/her team. In September 2010, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked

After Children and Care Leavers recommended that the role of VSH should be placed on a statutory footing.

Vulnerable Children's Project 2016 - 2018

Core Assets Children's Services in the selected Local Authority were commissioned to deliver intensive mentoring to young people in care or care leavers aged between sixteen and nineteen years of age who were not in education, employment or training. Each young person received a twelve week programme to identify and plan for educational, employment or training opportunities, establish existing barriers and potential support.

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.0 Overview

This thesis is a qualitative study in the field of critical realism. It contributes to the existing and developing body of research highlighting the importance of the social and everyday experiences of living within the care system. Specifically this study resonates with the work of Mannay *et al* (2019; 2017); Rees (2019); Rees and Munro (2019); Narey and Owers (2018); Rogers (2017); Hung and Appleton (2015); Samuels and Pryce (2008); Harker (2004) and Ridge and Millar (2000) by discussing the pivotal role of teachers, the importance of education, terminology involved in the care system, difficulties arising from a lack of delegated authority for foster carers, unwelcome concessions from key professionals and decisions around children in care's disclosure of care status to peers.

These issues were identified in the literature review and their importance confirmed and developed through semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty-one care leavers in one Local Authority. A significant challenge of this research has been achieving a balance between providing contextual information about the selected Local Authority and protecting participants from indirect identification (Crow and Wiles, 2008). All participants have been given pseudonyms and distinctive information (including in references) about the Local Authority has been anonymised. Any uniquely identifying factors about professional participants have also been removed. Whilst it is acknowledged that it is possible to identify the location of this research, measures have been taken to ensure the anonymity of individual participants (Clark, 2006).

Care leaver participants recalled detailed examples of the decisions they made to prioritise education, manage friendships and relationships within care. Participants reported their

frustration with key professionals who presented as unsupportive of their commitment to education. The terminology involved in the care system was also discussed in interviews. A preference for the terms 'children in care' and 'young people in care' was evident and these terms are employed in this study.

This thesis has important implications for policy and practice. Interviews suggest a lack of support and guidance for children in care around how and when to disclose their care status. Teachers are highly regarded by participants for the personal care offered. However, participants also reflected that teachers did not always understand the importance of holding them accountable to the same behavioural and educational expectations as their non-cared for peers. It is suggested that a greater focus on child development during initial teacher training would enable more teachers to provide the vital support that was appreciated by participants in this study. A related concern is the role of designated teachers (DT). DTs were either not understood or not well received by participants. This finding would benefit from further research to evaluate the structure and purpose of the role and how teachers are selected for the post.

The decision making processes highlighted by participants is considered through Archer's theoretical framework of the internal conversation and modes of reflexivity (Archer, 2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000). An adaption to Archer's modes of reflexivity is proposed.

Participants in this study demonstrate a strong ability to operate in an autonomous mode of reflexivity; that is they are able to make decisions based on their internal conversations with little need for external guidance or validation. However, participants also conveyed a strong sense of disappointment that they did not have a trusted key adult with whom they could discuss their plans. Participants stated that they had learned not to trust and had learned

that they must rely on themselves. This presents as a rather different rationale for, and route towards, autonomy and therefore an alternative mode: *reluctant autonomy* is proposed as this captures both the independence and disappointment relayed by participants in this study.

This chapter provides an overview of the structure and focus of the study. I start by explaining my own perspective and then outline the aims and objectives of the research questions underpinning this project. This is followed by an overview of each chapter.

1.1 Researcher's experience and perspective

I have a long-standing interest in education. I studied Education Studies as part of my undergraduate degree and began teaching in 1998. I have worked in a variety of educational institutes including primary and secondary schools and one university. Like most teachers, I have taught children from a wide range of circumstances and gained an understanding of the challenges encountered by many families.

I adopted my son from Local Authority care in 2013. This has been pivotal for me in terms of developing my understanding of the issues involved in the care system and some of the difficulties encountered in school education by care experienced children. My son and my developing relationship with his two elder half-siblings (who remain in long-term foster care) have been a continual source of motivation at times when thesis writing has proved difficult. My own perspective supported by the interviews and research within this thesis is that the educational and personal challenges faced by those who have experienced neglect and loss are not widely understood in practice. It is my own perspective that the terminology used around care should be reconsidered. Hearing my son repeatedly referred to as 'a LAC child' confirmed my view that such labels are reductive and ill-conceived. I have

used the terms young people in care and children in care (always written in full form) throughout my work and I hope this more accurately describes the experience of being in care. My positionality and the importance of reflecting on the impact of my experiences on my research is discussed in the methodology chapter.

1.2 Introduction and rationale

1.2a Definition of children in care

The term 'children in care' is taken to include all children referred to as looked after by a Local Authority, including those subject to care orders under section 31 of the Children Act (1989) and those looked after on a voluntary basis through an agreement with their parents. Children in care may be living with foster parents, in a residential unit or with family as part of a kinship placement.

1.2b Background to the study

The DfE (2019) reported that the number of children in care in England aged nought to sixteen years of age has increased steadily over the last eight years. There were 78,150 children in care at the end of March 2019, an increase of 4% compared to the same period in 2018. Increases in recent years have been largely attributed to the significant rise of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and lower numbers of children leaving care through adoption (DfE, 2019).

There are three types of care; foster care, kinship care and residential care. At the end of March 2019, 56,268 children (72% of all children in care) were cared for in foster placements (DfE, 2019:6). Many of the changes seen in the characteristics of the care

population as a whole have been influenced by the increase of unaccompanied asylum seekers, for example a rise in the number of children aged sixteen and over, and a rise in the number of children with an ethnic background of 'Any other Asian', 'African' or 'Any other ethnic group'. At the end of March 2019, 56% of children in care were male, 44% female and these proportions have remained steady over recent years. However, the age profile has continued to change with an increase in the number of older children, 63% of children in care were aged ten years and over in 2019 compared with 56% in 2012. The proportion of children in care due to abuse or neglect has fallen in recent years with the figure reported as 60% in 2016. However this rose to 63% in 2019 (DfE, 2019:5). There may be a causal link between periods of economic austerity and increased incidents of neglect (Bywaters *et al*, 2016). Voluntary agreements, whereby parents agree to their children entering foster care under Section 20 of the Children Act (1989), have declined over recent years, from 28% in 2015 to 18% in 2019 (DfE, 2019).

1.2c Financial aspects of foster care

The National Audit Office (2014) reported that foster care costs the State £2.5 billion per year: costing around £30,000 per year to keep a child in a foster placement and over £100,000 per year for a residential placement.

The DfE (2017) reported that Local Authority spending on education, children and young people's services has increased by 28% since 2010-2011 although this figure included a 25% reduction in spending on schools as more become academies.

1.2d Educational outcomes for children in care

At the end of Key Stage Two (KS2) (pupils aged seven to eleven) in 2018, 35% of children in care obtained the expected level in Mathematics, Reading and Writing which contrasted with 65% of children not in care. Of the general population, those pupils with no special educational needs (SEN) performed at the highest level with 74% obtaining the expected level in Mathematics, Reading and Writing (DfE, 2018). At the end of Key Stage Four (KS4) (pupils aged 13 to 16) in 2018, the average Attainment Eight score for children in care was 18.8 which compared to 44.4 for children not in care, 49.8 for pupils with no SEN and 34.4 for pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM). A high proportion of children in care also have a SEN, 52% of children in care in KS2 have a SEN identified, compared to approximately 14% of those children not in care. The DfE (2019) stated that children in care with an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan make less progress than children with similar needs who are not in care. However, the DfE (2019) reported that children in care fare slightly better than those identified as 'in need'. It is clear that these statistics are complex and require careful, tentative interpretation (DfE, 2019).

1.2e Personal outcomes

Data about the longer term personal outcomes for care leavers is not routinely recorded (Timpson, 2018). The most recent available records (DfE, 2013) suggest that whilst approximately 2% of the general population spend time in prison 27% of the prison population have spent time in the care system; this figure rises to 40% when looking at prisoners under the age of 21. The DfE (2013) also stated that 25% of young women leaving care are pregnant or are already mothers and this rises to 50% by the age of 25. One third of all care leavers are not in further education, employment or training which

compares to 13% of the wider population. Clearly it is a concern that so many young people growing up in the care system spend time in prison; not only because we might generally accept prison to be a difficult experience in itself but also because of the impact on future employment prospects. These troubling statistics and the issues underpinning them gave rise to this study.

1.3 Research aims and questions

Twenty-one care leavers aged between eighteen and twenty-seven years of age have been interviewed. Three professional interviews were also conducted. Care leaver participants discussed their educational journeys and aspirations. They identified experiences in care and education which had been enabling and constraining.

Participants also gave clear recommendations for change and improvement. Archer's (2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000) theory of the internal conversation and modes of reflexivity has been utilised to consider how participants understood the structures of education and care, developed and exercised agency to *make their way* towards young adulthood. The selection of Archer's theoretical framework is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three.

This study aims to prioritise the voices of young people in care. It is crucial to honour the contributions of participants by accurately representing their experiences and taking any possible actions to expedite their recommendations (Mannay *et al*, 2019).

By discussing how children in care experience education and the broader experiences associated with school, this study aims to identify how children in care might be supported

further to achieve their educational aspirations. To achieve this aim four sub-questions have been considered:

1. What are the current educational and family policies and legislation relevant to children in care?
2. What key relationships for children and young people in care are significant for them?
3. To what extent are children and young people in care able to exercise agency?
4. What are the educational experiences of children and young people who have experienced care?

1.4 Outline of chapters

This study begins in Chapter Two with an evaluation of recent and current policy related to families, children in care, education and teachers. Three governmental administrations are considered: New Labour Government (1997-2010), The Coalition Government (2010-2015) and the Conservative Government (2015-present date). Changes to national policy and funding are highlighted and further contextual information is offered through an examination of Children's Services in the selected Local Authority.

Chapter Three discusses relevant theory and literature with a focus on relationships, personal identity, education and agency. Additionally this chapter highlights the importance of the daily social experiences of children in care and examines Archer's notion of reflexive internal conversations to plan in both the shorter and longer term (Archer, 2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000). Archer's theory is utilised to analyse the findings of the interviews.

The methodology employed in this study is discussed in Chapter Four. This chapter details the ethical considerations involved in this research, the rationale and justification for the

chosen research methodology: the theoretical underpinning for sampling, data generation and analysis. The trustworthiness and generalisability of the research are explored.

The findings of the interviews are examined in depth in Chapters Five and Six. Chapter Five focuses on children and family whilst Chapter Six considers school – although there is interplay between these chapters. Extended extracts from participant interviews are foregrounded and analysed in relationship to the policies, literature and theory highlighted in Chapters Two and Three.

The thesis concludes by revisiting the research questions, highlighting the strengths and acknowledging the limitations of the study. Recommendations for future research, policy and practice are also reported in the conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO – POLICY CONTEXT FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of policies and legislation which determined and influenced educational and care provision during the period participants in this study were in care and at school. Government priorities for children in care are discussed and in the second part of the chapter, the context of the selected Local Authority is examined.

This chapter will discuss significant national policies in two main areas: children and families and education and teachers. These policies will be considered over three administrations: New Labour (under the leadership of Tony Blair 1997 – 2007 and Gordon Brown 2007-2010), The Coalition Government (2010-2015) and The Conservative Party (2015-present date). The final part of the chapter will explore how these policies have impacted on regional issues within the selected Local Authority. From 1997 to the present date a reduction in universal support to more targeted intervention is evident. This potentially marginalises families and removes the universal support which may have benefitted families and enabled some children to remain in their family homes.

Whilst this section will focus primarily on policies concerning family, children, education and teachers since New Labour came to office in 1997, it is important to note the significance of the 1989 *Children's Act* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DCSF) 1989) and its vital role in setting out provision for children in care. Two central tenets of the Act were that children are best looked after within the family home wherever possible but that they should also be protected from harm within that home. The Act stated that although support should be given to enable families to stay together there should be as little intrusion into family life as possible. The Act increased demands on Local Authorities to act as corporate

parents and highlighted the importance of taking children's wishes into consideration when making decisions about their futures. The term 'Looked-After Children' was defined and given legal meaning in this Act. A child is defined as looked after by a Local Authority if he or she falls into one of the following categories:

- is provided with accommodation, for a continuous period of more than 24 hours
 - is subject to a care order
 - is subject to a placement order
- (DfE, 2017:4)

The full term employed in the Act was 'children looked after by the Local Authority' which has since been abbreviated to 'looked-after child' or 'LAC' – terms which will be addressed later in this study. This Act and John Major's *Back to Basics* campaign in the 1990s provide some evidence that the Conservative Party recognised the importance of supporting families shortly before New Labour took office. However the *Back to Basics* campaign was primarily understood as a response to increased social fragmentation caused by economic recession rather than a commitment to supporting family relationships (Henricson, 2012).

2.1 Introduction and background to New Labour

Blair's tenure is taken as the base for this section as it oversaw radical development in policies relating to families, children and education (Straker and Foster, 2009). This period marked a significant philosophical change from previous Conservative governments (1979-1997) which were characterised by a *laissez faire* approach with evidence of social liberalism and economic neo-liberalism. Blair's government came to power at a time when three important policy drivers co-existed: data comparing provision in the United Kingdom (UK)

with other European Union countries, pressure from lobby groups and increasingly liberal views within society.

When Blair took office in 1997 approximately one third of all children in the UK lived in poverty, nearly 20% of children lived in households where no adult worked and 53% of lone parents were unemployed. These statistics fared poorly when compared with other developed nations. For example, in all other European Union (EU) countries fewer children lived (approximately 11%) in households where no adults worked and investment in education stood at 4.6% of gross domestic product (GDP) leaving England ranked 10th out of 15 EU countries. Data of this nature was influential as the public sector increasingly drew on private sector practice which prioritised targets and outcomes (Henricson, 2012; Bradshaw, 2010; Berridge, 2007; Brewer and Gregg, 2001.) Further to this, significant pressure was applied by The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) and lobby groups such as Children's Rights Alliance for England who advocated for children and called on the government to emulate Scandinavian countries by establishing a children's commissioner. At the same time, society was becoming more technologically advanced. Methods of communication increased and new, diverse networks developed. Alongside this was the increased willingness of individuals to accept external help for personal and relationship issues (Henricson, 2012).

New Labour aimed to reduce childhood poverty and improve the expectations of children living in areas of socio-economic deprivation. Indeed, Blair famously pledged to eradicate childhood poverty within twenty years, with Gordon Brown giving this pledge legal status in *The Poverty Act* (The Stationery Office, 2010). Whilst this aspiration proved to be unachievable, childhood poverty was reduced during New Labour's time in office and the

target of ending child poverty can be seen as indicative of their commitment to enhance provision for children and families in need (Henricson, 2012; Berridge, 2007).

2.2 Children, Families and Early Interventions

2.2a New Labour Government (1997-2010)

New Labour reinforced the Conservative view that the optimal environment for children is within their biological family unit. However New Labour took a far more interventionist approach to support by offering services and benefits for families and young children (Henricson, 2012). Many policies aimed to improve children's early years' provision and support for families:

The early years of a child's life are critical to future success and happiness. We are determined to invest in better opportunities for the youngest children and to support parents in preparing them to succeed at school and in life. (Home Office, 1998: 15/16)

Key examples of investment in families and young children centred on the development of child care availability and Sure Start centres. Sure Start centres were located in areas of socio-economic deprivation but were available to all families. The centres acted as a source of information – offering multi-agency support for parents as well as childcare. The number of registered childcare places more than doubled between 1997 and 2008 rising to 1,300,000. The expansion of early years' provision aimed to achieve two primary objectives: to ensure children were school-ready and, crucially, to enable more parents to work (Baldock *et al*, 2013; Henricson, 2012).

The principal aim of reducing childhood poverty was also addressed through the introduction of a range of financial benefits. In 2002 Gordon Brown, in his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer, introduced Child Trust Funds of at least £250 for children which were

followed in 2003 by the introduction of child tax credits and working tax credits. These credits were increased by approximately 13% in 2008. At the same time the Sure Start maternity grant increased from £300 in 2000 to £500 in 2002 payable for each child born into a family (Kennedy, 2011).

The importance of supporting families through early interventions and of ensuring a multi-agency approach to child protection was forcefully illustrated by the *Victoria Climbié Enquiry* (Laming, 2003). Laming's influential report highlighted the lack of co-ordination and communication between services which Laming claimed contributed to Victoria's vulnerable situation. Laming states that early support for families is crucial:

It is not possible to separate the protection of children from wider support to families. Indeed, often the best protection for a child is achieved by the timely intervention of family support services. (Laming, 2003:12)

Supportive, early intervention programmes such as those offered at Sure Start Centres could help identify families simply in need of guidance or financial assistance and those where children were at risk. Laming highlighted a lack of systematic assessment which often saw the needs of children and families misunderstood.

However alongside these supportive mechanisms were powerful elements of control. The maternity grant was only payable once professional health advice was obtained and further grants were available to those who took up antenatal care offers (Henricson, 2012). Parents were held increasingly accountable for the actions of their children and *The Crime and Disorder Act* (The Stationery Office Limited, 1998) included a *Parenting Order* which enabled magistrates dealing with young offenders to direct parents towards family counselling or parenting guidance courses. Additionally, whilst tax credits and child care provision offered

parents valuable practical support, Blair's policies can be viewed as 'family focused but not necessarily child focused' (Ridge and Millar, 2000:161). Children were regarded largely through concerns about their futures: how much they might contribute as adults or how much they might cost the State. Policies could be viewed as instrumental, seeking specific and measurable outcomes with insufficient consideration for the experience of childhood (Baker, 2019; Berridge, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2000).

2.2b Coalition Government (2010-2015)

The Coalition Government comprised of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats with David Cameron serving as Leader and Nick Clegg as Deputy Leader. The Coalition Government came to office at a time of economic recession. Cameron and Clegg stated they would continue to work towards the target of ending child poverty but significant and immediate reductions were made in funding for children and families. In 2010, the Coalition Government announced that the Child Trust Fund would be abolished in the following year. The budget of 2011 saw further cuts: financial benefits for families such as tax credits and family benefit were frozen or reduced; the health and pregnancy grant was abolished and the Sure Start maternity grant restricted to the first child (Henricson, 2012 and Berridge, 2007).

It is perhaps unsurprising that these cuts in support and benefits led to levels of child poverty increasing. Where poverty levels within vulnerable families such as lone parent families fell during the New Labour administration, they rose again under the Coalition Government. For example, between 1997 and 2010, the child poverty rate in lone parent families halved from 46% to 23% and rose again to 38% by 2015. Poverty among single earner couples fell to 29% in 1997 but rose to 38% by 2015 (Barnard *et al*, 2017:83).

Whilst the budget cuts outlined above marked a departure from Blair's interventionist approach some commitment to early years' education, intervention and support continued. Early years' education was increasingly understood as important and an opportunity to ensure children were school-ready. Tickell (2011) led a review of the early years' foundation stage - a continuation of a review established by New Labour in 2008. The recommendations of this review were to work closely with parents, simplify the goals in assessment of early years and to improve training of the workforce. In 2011 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extension to free early learning nursery facilities for up to 40% of children aged two. It is important to note that these extended hours largely facilitated parental employment rather than offering the universal and multi-agency support seen through Sure Start Centres. Indeed, family services contracted. Sure Start centres began to close as their funding was no longer ring fenced-therefore they were vulnerable to cuts by councils (Henricson, 2012).

In place of universal support for families through tax relief and grants, focus returned to the most disadvantaged groups in society which served to increase their marginalisation (Baldock *et al*, 2013). The '*Troubled Families*' programme was introduced and centred on four aims:

- getting children back into school
 - reducing youth crime and anti-social behaviour
 - putting adults on a path back to work
 - reducing the high costs these families place on the public sector each year
- (Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government, 2011, updated 2015)

The programme was established after, and in response to, the 2011 riots in England (Bonnell, 2012). Cameron stated that there were approximately 120,000 'troubled' families

in the UK who cost the State £8 billion per annum although these figures were widely disputed (Crossley, 2018; 2016 and Levitas, 2012). Cameron (2011) suggested:

Officialdom might call them 'families with multiple disadvantages'. Some in the press might call them 'neighbours from hell.'

To 'qualify' as 'troubled' in 2011 a family needed to meet at least five of the following criteria:

- No parent in the family in work
- Family lived in overcrowded housing
- No parent had any qualifications
- Mother had mental health problems
- At least one parent had a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity
- Family had low income (below 60% of median income)
- Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items
(Levitas, 2012:5)

Here Cameron appeared to conflate families with troubles with those who are troublesome.

Cameron's rhetoric and the language associated with this policy were regarded as an attempt to further marginalise vulnerable families (Crossley, 2018 and Levitas, 2012). The description of 'troubled families' changed in subsequent revisions of this policy stating that families may also be engaged in anti-social behaviour or have children who are persistently absent from school (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2017).

The Coalition Government made significant reductions to the benefits which supported families, leaving more families vulnerable to poverty and the associated experiences of poverty highlighted by Bywaters *et al* (2016). *The Troubled Families Programme* focused funding on families who met specific criteria rather than making a universal and pre-emptive attempt to support. This instrumental policy could be understood as an attempt to portray poverty as an outcome of dysfunction within families rather than accepting poverty as the cause (Baker, 2019 and Berridge, 2012). Indeed when evaluated the programme was

found to have had a limited impact in terms of improving outcomes for the families involved (Day *et al*, 2016).

2.2c Conservative Government (2015-present date)

When the Conservative Party came to power in 2015 Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne pledged that the party would make £12 billion worth of savings from the welfare budget. A series of benefit reductions were announced including a cap on the benefits that any family could receive and it is important to note that the Child Poverty targets of 2010 were abolished in 2015 (McGuinness, 2017).

During this administration the most significant change to benefits was perhaps the introduction of Universal Credit which replaced all other tax benefits for families. Whilst this policy is still being fully implemented, there are numerous media reports concerning the length of time taken to apply for Universal Credit which has led to evictions and record use of food banks (Savage, 2019 and Butler, 2018a; 2018b). An indication of this problem is reported by The Trussell Trust which, in the year April 2019 to September 2019, distributed 823,145 three day emergency food supplies which represented a 23% increase from the same period in 2018; 301,653 of the food supplies went to children (The Trussell Trust, 2019). There are currently 4.5 million children living in poverty in the UK (Stroud, 2018). A causal link between poverty and neglect has been established (Bywaters *et al*, 2017) and it is, therefore, unsurprising that the number of children entering the care system reached record levels in 2019 (DfE, 2019).

Whilst early years' provision has continued to develop since 1997, a reduction in universal and financial support for families initiated by Blair's government is evident after 2010. In place of a universal offer of support policies such as *The Troubled Families Programme*

(2011) targeted specific groups who were portrayed by Cameron as being involved in anti-social behaviour. Targets to eliminate child poverty were established by New Labour but removed by the Conservatives in 2015 and 4.5 million children are currently living in poverty (Stroud, 2018), which Bywaters *et al* (2016) suggest exacerbates the risk of childhood abuse and neglect. However whilst measures introduced by New Labour offered practical support for families they have been criticised for demonstrating a lack of consideration for the experience of childhood (Baker, 2019 and Ridge and Millar, 2000).

2.3 Children and Families: The Care System

2.3a New Labour Government (1997-2010)

In 1997, the number of children in care stood at approximately 51,000 and the social and academic outcomes for these children were of concern to Blair's government. At this time approximately 7% of children in care achieved five GCSE grades A* to C – falling to 4% when including passes (at C or above) in Mathematics and English which compared to 46.4% of the general population. One quarter to one third of rough sleepers and one quarter of the prison population had spent time in care. Blair understood that early intervention programmes could ameliorate the prospects of young people in care and, he estimated, save the state £300 million over three years (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003).

A number of policies, programmes and Acts were produced under New Labour. The *Quality Protects* programme (1998) set mandatory national objectives for regional Children's Services with the aim of improving prospects for children in care. This was shortly followed by *The Children Leaving Care Act* (2000) which was the first framework for care leavers. This Act introduced Personal Advisors for care leavers aged 18 to 21 years of age, support with

education, employment and training and placed a responsibility on Local Authorities to remain in contact with care leavers, provide suitable accommodation and financial support. The focus of this Act was to strengthen support for care leavers until the age of 21 years old however the Act placed particular emphasis on supporting young people until at least 18 years of age.

Two significant Green Papers focusing on improving the outcomes of children in care were published in 2003 and 2006 before a White Paper in 2007. The first Green Paper: *A Better Education for Children in Care* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) highlighted the need for greater stability of care placements with less time out of school whilst the second Green Paper, *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Young People in Care* (Department for Education and Skills (DFES), 2006) aimed to develop the role of Local Authorities as corporate parents by highlighting key and consistent adults for each child as a priority. Another priority in *Care Matters* was to ensure children in care attended a good quality school as too many children in care were attending poorly achieving schools. Additionally, stability of care placements and Local Authority accountability were highlighted. As with many of Blair's family policies, *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Young People in Care* was notable for its scope and ambition. The opinions of children in care were noted within the paper and there is a suggestion that foster children and foster carers should have access to support twenty-four hours a day. The Paper also outlined plans to support young people in care as they transition into independence, proposing that those in a foster care placement should be able to stay in foster care until their early twenties, a plan which was realised by the *Staying Put Policy* (DfE) in 2014. The Paper also calls for children in care to have a guaranteed entitlement to four hours of sport per week, a chance to take part in volunteering, the right

to voice an opinion when deciding on placements and the chance to have their voice heard through a Children in Care Council.

Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Young People in Care was followed by *The White Paper, Care Matters: Time for Change* (DfES, 2007) highlighted the lack of progress as exemplified by this opening statement:

Despite high ambitions and a shared commitment for change, outcomes for children and young people in care have not sufficiently improved. There remains a significant gap between the quality of their lives and those of all children. (DfES, 2007:2)

Indeed, in terms of academic outcomes there had been little improvement. In 2006, 5.9% of young people in care achieved five GCSEs A* to C including Mathematics and English compared to 45.9% of all children (DCSF, 2008). This represented an increase of just 1.9% in the outcomes of children in care since 1997. To address this situation, *Care Matters: Time for Change* asked more of Local Authorities: to establish Children in Care Councils which would have direct links to the Director of Children's Services and the Children's Services Lead Member. Local Authorities were required to set out their 'Pledge' to children in care covering the services those in care would receive. The White Paper called for Authorities to make clear that the Director of Children's Services and the elected Lead Member for Children Services should be responsible for leading improvements in corporate parenting. It also introduced a three year programme of Ofsted inspections with a focus on improving outcomes for children in care. Additionally, Local Authorities were to revise the minimum standards for foster carers which could benefit young people in care who continued to study at Advanced Level (A Level) and university (Rees and Munro, 2019). Many foster care agencies such as Barnardo's were concerned that the introduction of minimum academic requirements would deter potential carers. It could be argued that personal qualities such

as compassion, patience and resilience are more important (Hibbert, 2007) and certainly the plan to introduce minimum qualifications did not come to fruition. By the time New Labour left office, attempts to significantly improve the educational outcomes of children in care had failed. In 2010, 11.6% of young people in care achieved five GCSEs A* to C including Mathematics and English which compared to 58.3% of the general population (DfE, 2011).

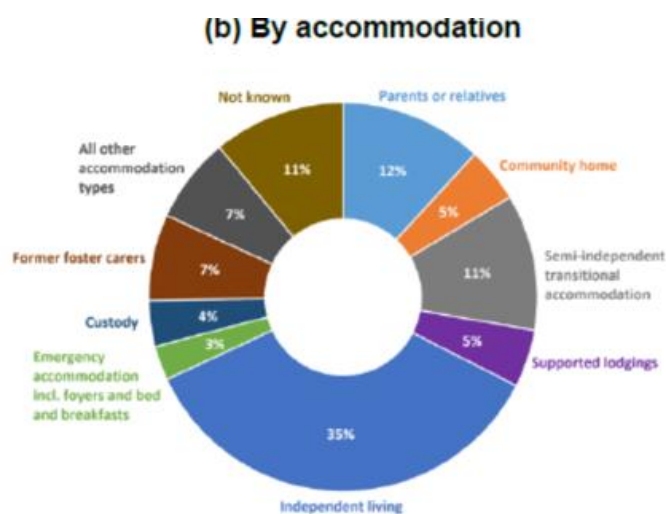
2.3b Coalition Government (2010-2015)

The most significant policy relating to care in children during this period was the *Staying Put* policy (2014) which formed part of the *Children and Families Act* (DfE, 2014). It is worth noting that the policy originated with New Labour with its pilot beginning in 2008. The *Staying Put* policy allows young people to stay in their foster placement or an alternative placement until the age of twenty-one years of age. As young people over the age of eighteen are no longer officially in care, the continuation of foster care is referred to as an arrangement where the carer effectively becomes the young person's landlord. Whilst the *Staying Put* policy affects young people over the age of eighteen, it is relevant to this study as potentially it allows children to focus on their compulsory education with less anxiety about the prospect of premature independence. The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2016) also highlighted that the stability offered by this policy is a crucial and protective factor in terms of mental health. It may also allow young people in care to consider a broader range of higher education programmes as the arrangement can be extended beyond the age of twenty-one if the young person is completing an educational course. Therefore this policy has the potential to allow young people in care the scope to plan for a wider range of educational possibilities. The central aim underpinning this policy

was that young people in care should be supported into early adulthood and enjoy an experience more in line with their peers (Munro *et al*, 2012).

However whilst *Staying Put* may offer extended security for young people in care, it is a complex policy. The young people themselves may be required to claim housing benefit in order to remain in the placement. *Staying Put* involves a distinct change from a foster care placement in terms of the support offered. For example, there is no requirement for the adult in the *Staying Put* arrangement to provide any meals for the young person. There are also issues to consider around council tax, benefits and contributions from any salary the young person may receive. Indeed, the definition of what is meant by *Staying Put* is rather opaque with the DfE, the Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue and Customs all employing slightly different terminology when explaining the arrangement. The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2016) stated that whilst the policy has much potential, its implementation had been poor and sporadic. At this stage it was too early to evaluate the general impact of the *Staying Put* policy and it was possible that those young people most likely to benefit from the *Staying Put* agreement are those in stable foster placements which can continue (DfE, 2017 and Morse, 2015). The DfE (2018) reported the following information which demonstrates the variety of living situations for those leaving care:

Chart 2.1 Care leavers now aged 19 to 21 years old, England 2018.



Source: DfE (2018)

Table 2.1 Number and percentage of care leavers aged 18, 19 and 20 years who remained living with their former foster carers: England 2015 to 2017

Age at 31 March 2017	Number living with former foster carers			Total number who ceased care who had been in a foster placement at age 18			Percentage of young people remaining with former foster carers		
	2015	2016	2017	2015	2016	2017	2015	2016	2017
Aged 18 years ⁸	1,580	1,440	1,630	3,230	2,660	3,170	49%	54%	51%
Aged 19 years	560	820	940	2,560	2,740	3,170	22%	30%	30%
Aged 20 years	330	410	550	2,500	2,560	2,740	13%	16%	20%

Source: DfE (2017)

Whilst table 2.1 shows an increase in the number of eighteen year olds remaining with foster carers, this drops sharply as young people reach nineteen and again at twenty. Chart 2.1 shows that only 7% of care leavers across the age band nineteen to twenty-one years old remain with foster carers in the *Staying Put* arrangement. The quality of provision and financial support varies significantly between Local Authorities (Morse, 2015). Furthermore the statistics may not be reliable (DfE, 2017), however they do indicate that only a very small number of young people are supported by the *Staying Put* policy with approximately 80% of care leavers living independently or semi-independently (DfE, 2018). Indeed, the

most vulnerable care leavers are unlikely to benefit from the *Staying Put* policy relying as it does on a stable foster placement.

The *Staying Put* policy relies on foster carers' willingness and ability to continue to offer a placement. Given the extended commitment involved in *Staying Put* for foster carers, it is interesting to consider the motivations of those choosing to be foster carers. No formal qualifications are required to become a foster carer; the criteria for approval rest more on commitment and personal capacity. Blackburn (2015) indicated a range of motivations for those considering foster care: whilst many (56.5% of Blackburn's respondents) are motivated by a desire to improve the outcomes for vulnerable children, others have relevant personal or professional experiences and a smaller number are motivated by financial benefits. The evaluation of the *Staying Put* policy carried out by Munro *et al* (2012) identified that most foster carers (31 out of the 36 interviewed) were willing and able to continue placements past the age of eighteen. Foster carers frequently explained that the young person was a member of the family and very welcome to stay (Munro *et al*, 2012). In the five cases where foster carers were not willing or able to extend placements, breakdowns in relationships were given as the most common reason with two carers also stating that they felt the young person would benefit from a move into independent living. As Munro *et al* (2012) observed, the decision whether to stay beyond the age of eighteen years of age depends largely on the quality of the relationships within the placement. Therefore it is crucial to ensure the initial *matching* process is as careful and accurate as possible and that foster carers are supported in developing a secure relationship with the young person throughout the placement.

2.3c Conservative Government (2015-present date)

Since the Conservative Party took office there have been fewer policies directly concerning children in care although there has been a focus on improving the transition into adulthood. Academic outcomes for children in care have remained low. In 2018, approximately 17% of young people in care achieved five GCSE passes grade four or above including Mathematics and English which compared to 58.9% of the general population (DfE, 2019). The Conservative Party significantly increased Pupil Premium (PP) funding for those in care and this will be discussed in the next section.

In 2015 England experienced a 54% increase in number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors arriving in England. Private foster care is not a recent development but prior to 2015 this was generally small scale. Many asylum-seeking children arriving in England required specialist support and this forced Local Authorities to use agencies they would not normally use (Armitage, 2017). Small private foster agencies have been purchased by larger companies. In 2016 eight private fostering agencies reported combined profits of over £40 million. Additionally in 2016 The National Fostering Network (NFN), a fostering charity, bought Acorn Care Education Group – an organisation worth an estimated £400 million – a move that was referred to the Competition and Markets Authority. Large private agencies such as NFN are accused in the media of monopolising tendering application processes, avoiding payment of tax and monetising vulnerability by charging Local Authorities disproportionate fees for foster care (Bawden, 2018).

During the Conservatives' time in office there has been a significant focus on supporting mental health which is particularly relevant for young people in care. Statistics clearly demonstrate that young people who have lived in the care system experience a higher level

of mental health difficulties than young people not in care. Although the government does not record data about suicide rates amongst care leavers it is suggested that care leavers are four to five times more likely to self-harm as adults and five times more likely to attempt suicide than those who are not care experienced (The Education Committee, House of Commons, 2016 and DfE, 2015).

In the 2015 budget, £1.25 billion was pledged to children's mental health services to be allocated over the following five years. In 2016, a further £290 million was pledged to support new and expectant mothers with mental health difficulties. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are the main providers of mental health support for young people. Despite increased and pledged funding, CAMHS provision remains uneven. Parkin *et al* (2018) raised the concern that funding does not appear to have reached front line services. The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2016) found evidence of significant budget cuts in many mental health services, including CAMHS, despite reported increases in spending. The Committee also found that there were 'serious and deeply ingrained problems with the commissioning and provision of CAMHS' (2016:4) with young people in care too frequently refused access. It is worth noting Lamb's observation (2014) that only 6% of the mental health budget is allocated to children and young people.

The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2016) and Milich *et al* (2018) found that, contrary to statutory guidance, young people in care were often refused access to tier one services for one of two reasons: they were not in a stable placement and/or that their difficulties did not meet the required threshold for an assessment. The Education Committee argued that not only should young people in care be guaranteed an initial assessment by CAMHS where needed but that the young people themselves should be

involved in the design of their mental health support and provision, that CAMHS should be part of a multi-agency approach and that this provision should be available until the age of twenty-five. The participants in Milich *et al's* (2018) research stated that they would value a more flexible mental health service, one that allowed them to receive help on their terms at a time of their choice.

Potentially, the current government's Green Paper: *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision* (Department for Health and Social Care (DfHSC) and DfE, 2018) addresses some of the difficulties and limitations identified by The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2016). The Green Paper pledges an extra £1.4 billion to young people by 2020 centred around three core principles:

1. To incentivise and support all schools and colleges to identify and train a Designated Senior Lead for mental health.
2. To fund new Mental Health Support Teams, which will be supervised by staff from the NHS children and young people's mental health team.
3. To pilot a four week waiting time for access to specialist NHS children and young people's mental health services. (2018:7)

It is stated that the implementation of this approach will cover between a fifth and a quarter of the country by the end of 2022/23; leaving a minimum of 75% of the country potentially without improved resources. The proposals also appear to suggest a school-centred approach with designated lead teachers and mental health support teams based in schools. Whilst this may echo the ethos of *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (DfE, 2003) using schools as hubs for inter-disciplinary working, it does also raise concerns – particularly for the most vulnerable children in care who may find themselves without a stable school placement. Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield (2018) expressed her concern that thousands of children in care are not attending any school regularly. Another potential limitation of

school-based support is that it will end when young people finish school which appears to be contrary to other legislation securing support until young people are twenty-five years of age.

In 2016 the DfE published two policies: *Putting Children First – Delivering our vision for excellent children’s social care* and *Keep on Caring – Supporting young people from care to independence*. *Putting Children First* focused on reforming social care through three priorities: people and leadership, practice and systems and governance and accountability. Changes in the recruitment, training and supervision of social workers were proposed and parallels to changes made in the teaching profession can be seen. For example, the policy anticipated that increasingly social workers will be recruited through fast-track programmes, Ofsted inspections will be expanded and a new regulatory body will establish new professional standards. *Keep on Caring* recognised the challenges associated with leaving care and highlighted the loneliness many care leavers experienced as they forge an independent life without access to ‘a strong and stable network’ (DfE, 2016:18). *Keep on Caring* aimed to support young people as they transition out of care and increase the age of entitlement to support from twenty-one to twenty-five years of age. This included access to a personal advisor, greater provision of apprenticeships, the publication of local offers of support and enhanced housing benefits. A key component of *Keeping on Caring* was a proposal for a *Care Leaver Covenant* (DfE) which came to fruition in 2018. The Covenant involved twelve governmental departments, private and public sector employers and aimed to support care leavers through high quality apprenticeships and enabling access to higher education. Each government department and employer published their pledge to care leavers and the DfE’s pledge is organised into seven sections:

- Children's Social Care
- Schools
- SEN and disability
- Careers Guidance
- Post-16 Education
- Apprenticeships
- Higher Education

However very little of this pledge is new. For example, in the *Schools* section four of the five commitments focus on school admissions, PP, DTs and the VSH all of which were established by the preceding Labour Government through the *Children and Young Persons Act* (House of Parliament, 2008). The higher education pledge seeks to 'encourage' universities to engage in widening participation activities and to offer year-round accommodation to care leavers. Again, neither of these proposals is new and importantly there is no legal requirement for universities to develop their offer for care leavers.

In 2018, Narey and Owers conducted a review of the foster care system in England. This review prioritised the importance of daily human experiences in care over the measurable outcomes prioritised since 1997 (Berridge, 2007). For example, they highlighted situations where foster carers were required to seek permission for the child in their care to have their hair cut or visit friends. Narey and Owers recognised the impact such situations may have on a foster child's ability to develop friendship or enjoy a sense of normality and recommended that foster carers should be allowed higher levels of delegated authority. The importance of physical affection was given prominence in this review, the authors commended The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) for promoting physical affection and were critical of the stance taken by other foster agencies which frequently caution against physical contact especially by male carers. The crucial nature of physical affection during childhood and the enduring impact of its absence has been powerfully expressed by author and care leaver

Lemn Sissay. He recalled that the lack of affection rendered him invisible within his placements (Sissay, 2019).

To support the development of secure and nurturing relationships within care Narey and Owers recommended that initial *matching* between children in care and potential carers should be more rigorous, ensuring that carers can fully support the needs of any child placed with them. The authors also identified the importance of involving children in decisions about their foster placements. To support this, Narey and Owers recommended a national database of foster carers with a full analysis of their skills and experiences and that children should be given more information before entering the care system.

The authors of this review considered research by Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017); Sebba *et al* (2015) and Jackson *et al* (2005). However their key findings resonate strongly with the work of researchers of foster care such as Mannay *et al* (2019; 2017) and Rogers (2017) who are considered in the following chapter. There are also some omissions in this review, the terminology involved in the care system is not considered and although the authors recommend that children should be provided with more information this does not extend to issues surrounding disclosure of care status to friends. A response to Narey and Owers' review has been published by the Minister for Children and Families (DfE, 2018) which appeared to largely endorse their findings. However the response does not offer specific details of how existing policies or guidance might be altered.

Academic outcomes for children in care improved over the course of the three administrations discussed above however they remain low. In 1997 4% of children in care achieved five GCSEs (including passes in Mathematics and English at either grade C or above) which has risen to 17.4% in 2018. This compares to 46.4% and 58.9% of the general population respectively (DfE, 2019). The Labour government acknowledged that academic

outcomes had not improved sufficiently and produced three papers from 2003 to 2007 which placed greater responsibility on Local Authorities to develop their corporate parenting provision. The role of OfSTED was increased to monitor the outcomes of children in care. The Coalition Government and the subsequent Conservative Government have developed policies initiated by the Labour Government such as *The Staying Put* policy (DfE, 2014) and aspects of the *Care Leavers' Covenant* (DfE, 2018). A recent significant development is Nayers' and Owers' (2018) review of foster care which highlighted many routine but important aspects of care which are discussed further in the literature and findings chapters.

2.4 Educational Policy

Educational provision has become increasingly regulated during the last thirty years. Significant changes to the education landscape developed immediately prior to the three administrations discussed below. For example, the first statutory national curriculum was introduced in 1988, standard assessment tests began in Key Stage One (KS1) in 1990 and were expanded in 1994 and 1997. Ofsted was established in 1992 with a remit of 'improving the lives of children and learners', their role has expanded in subsequent years to cover childcare, social care and further education (Ofsted, 2014). The following section examines relevant reviews, key educational policies and their financial implications from 1997 to the present day.

2.4a New Labour Government (1997-2010)

On election, Blair pledged to invest in education and health. Indeed, when seeking re-election in 2001, he stated: 'Our top priority was, is and always will be education, education,

education', clearly signalling a specific commitment to education. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that his administration oversaw significant changes and increased investment in state education. Spending on public services under Labour increased by 4.4% a year (between 1997 and 2007) which compared to 0.7% under the previous Conservative government (1979 to 1997) and spending on education increased by 3.9% (Chote *et al*, 2010).

Blair understood education to be a mechanism to lift children out of poverty. He recognised that low numeracy and literacy skills were closely connected to low skill employment and poverty during adulthood. In 1997, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked the English education system as 35th in the world reporting far higher levels of functional illiteracy than in other European countries (Glennerster, 2001). In line with the early intervention policies discussed previously, Blair focused spending on primary schools which saw a reduction in class sizes between 1997 and 2001. Class sizes in secondary schools were not reduced during this time (Glennerster, 2001).

In Blair's second term there was a clear focus on supporting vulnerable children in education. Heavily influenced by Lord Laming's report (2003) ECM (DfE, 2003) marked a significant step towards inter-disciplinary working: bringing together education, health and social services with the aim of ensuring more effective communication of any concerns regarding children's safety and well-being. ECM identified five key outcomes perceived to contribute most to children's long-term development:

- being healthy: enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle, staying safe: being protected from harm and neglect
- enjoying and achieving: getting the most out of life
- developing the skills for adulthood
- making a positive contribution: being involved with the community and society and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour and economic well-being

- not being prevented by economic disadvantage from achieving their full potential in life. (2003:6/7)

ECM also sought to identify measures to address recruitment and retention challenges in foster care. It also promised increased investment in CAMHS which would deliver a 10% increase in CAMHS capacity each year for the following three years. Additionally, ECM recommended that every Local Authority appoint a Director of Children's Services and again this was given legal force by the Children's Act in 2004. Importantly, these policies placed increased responsibility on Authorities and their Children's Services to support the children in their immediate locality. Although this policy was archived by the Coalition Government in 2010, a commitment to interdisciplinary working can be seen to influence subsequent policies such as the 2015 *SEN Code of Practice* (Department of Education and Health, 2015) (DfEH).

In terms of children in care, the *Green Paper: A Better Education for Children in Care* (2003) prioritised the importance of remaining in education beyond GCSE level and supporting access to individual support tailored to the child. Better training for all key and involved adults - teachers, social workers and carers was pledged to ensure collaborative working. The report also identified targets for increased funding, the move to a more localised approach which can also be seen in ECM and The Children's Act. *A Better Education for Children in Care* also highlighted targets for educational performance, stating that by 2006 and in all Authorities at least 15% of young people in care should achieve five GCSEs (A* to C). It was not stated these GCSEs must include Mathematics and English and therefore could be seen as a rather unambitious target which was in the event, not met. However, it is important to recognise that in 2003, the DfES (2004) stated that only 6% of children in care left school with five GCSEs (A* to C). It is interesting that the DfES also reported the

percentage of children in care who achieved (just) one GCSE (51% - female and 38% - male) in the same time period. This demonstrates two points, firstly that 62% of male pupils in care left school with no formal qualifications and that in 2003, achieving one GCSE was deemed sufficiently significant to report.

There were recommendations for schools too, made statutory by *The Children and Young Persons Act (2008)* such as giving children in care the highest priority in school admission arrangements. Importantly this means schools are now obliged to offer a place to a child in care even if they are over-subscribed. It is worth noting that free schools and academies are not legally obliged to follow suit as they set their own admission criteria. This exemption is particularly important as, at the time of writing, 46.8% of pupils in England attended an academy or free school (DfE, 2018). *The Children and Young Persons Act (2008)* stipulated that the role of DT should become statutory. This Act also saw the piloting of the role of the Virtual School Headteacher (VSH) in eleven Local Authorities (the role was made statutory in 2013) and the beginnings of PP. Schools were provided with £500 per annum for each child in care deemed at risk of not reaching the expected standards of achievement. In the Act, there is also a requirement to reduce disruption by introducing a new requirement that the Local Authority must ensure that care planning decisions do not interrupt a child's education.

Virtual Schools (VS) and VSH were established specifically to oversee the well-being of children in care; their provision and progress and the allocation of PPP. Through this system children in care are effectively treated as though they are in one school; their progress, attendance and attainment tracked by the VSH and his/her team. However, whilst it is now

statutory for every Local Authority to employ a VSH, he/she does not have to be employed on a full-time basis and may hold additional responsibilities.

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) also placed a responsibility on all schools to appoint a DT. The Act stipulates that the DT must be a qualified teacher and that their role is to work with the VS to oversee provision for pupils in care. DTs are required to set high expectations for pupils in care and to ensure their voice is heard. DTs also act as a source of information for other colleagues, oversee pupils' Personal Education Plans (PEP) and ensure pupils receive appropriate one-to-one tuition where necessary. The DCSF, (2009) also called on governing bodies to ensure that DTs have sufficient time, training and funding to complete their duties effectively. Governing bodies are required to receive, as a minimum, an annual report from the DT outlining the attainment and attendance of any pupil in care, any special educational needs or requirements they may have and any issues preventing the DT from carrying out their role satisfactorily. However much as with the role of VSH, whilst there is a statutory requirement for schools to have a DT, there is no requirement that this is the only additional responsibility the member of staff holds. For example, in a small school the Head or Deputy Headteacher may be the DT. This may create a range of problems which are considered in Chapter Six.

2.4b The Coalition Government (2010-2015)

Many education policies developed by New Labour were archived with immediate effect by the Coalition Government. This included ECM and a proposal for a new national curriculum. It is interesting that policies aimed at supporting children in care were maintained and even developed. As previously stated VS and VSH became statutory in 2013, this followed an Ofsted evaluation of their impact in 2012. This evaluation found considerable variation

across the Authorities examined in terms of how the role was being implemented, the allocation and understanding of PP varied considerably. Ofsted's report (2012) identified that children who were underachieving academically were offered a good level of support, however, those pupils who were at least 'on track' were not sufficiently supported to achieve at a higher level, the report also highlighted frequent delays in arranging support for children's education and emotional well-being. It is important to note that this was an evaluation of just nine Local Authorities who piloted VS and VSH, no evaluation has taken place since the post became statutory.

However, the key piece of relevant legislation during this term was *The Children and Families Act (2014)*. Two sections (out of 141) focused specifically on children in care and developed policies piloted by New Labour. Sections 98 and 99 detailed the extension of PP, the increased accountability of the VS system, part three of the *Children and Families Act* introduced the new *SEN Code of Practice* (DfEH, 2015) and these will be considered below.

2.5 Pupil Premium and Virtual Schools

PP was, and continues to be, paid directly to schools to support a range of children who are described by policies as economically disadvantaged. However children in care receive a higher level of funding than those who attract PP based on family income (in receipt of FSM) and therefore funding for those in care is known as Pupil Premium Plus (PPP or PP+). When the premium was introduced in April 2011, the schools attended by children who had been in the care system for six months received £430 per child per annum. In 2014, this was increased to £1,900. Additionally the range of children eligible for funding increased in 2014 to include any child who had been in the looked after system for more than one day,

children adopted from care and those who have left care under a special guardianship order, a residence order or a child arrangements order. Care experienced children are the only pupils who have their PPP funding ring-fenced; the allocation of their funding is overseen by the VS and can be spent on one-to-one tuition, facilitating school trips and/or attendance at clubs or to purchase equipment or other material resources. The allocation should be guided by the information in the young person's PEP.

The allocation of PP and PPP has become an additional mechanism for tracking the education attainment of vulnerable pupils. A central element of Ofsted inspections is reporting on the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils who attract PP. Each inspection report contains a summary of how well pupils eligible for PP have attained and how this compared to their non-eligible peers. Where pupils receiving PP have not fared well, the school is likely to be 'downgraded' from for example, Outstanding to Good which Ofsted (2014) stated has happened in a number of cases.

Hutchinson *et al* (2016); Morse (2015) and Ofsted (2014) found that PP and PPP have the potential to bring about significant change:

Pupil premium is making a difference in many schools. Overall, school leaders are spending pupil premium funding more effectively, tracking the progress of eligible pupils more closely and reporting outcomes more precisely than before. (Ofsted, 2014:6)

However, it is also evident from Ofsted (2014) that disadvantaged children in strong schools with strong teaching and leadership do well and that disadvantaged children in weaker schools with inconsistent teaching and leadership do not do well and here, in these weaker schools, the gap between children in receipt of PP and other children is far wider. This is significant for this study as too often children in care attend schools which are

undersubscribed which can lead to significant reductions in funding, performing poorly and offering less consistent support to disadvantaged pupils (Longfield, 2018).

The Sutton Trust undertook a review of PP (2014) and as part of this, advised Ofsted to encourage schools to work more collaboratively to improve outcomes by sharing resources, good practice and evaluation processes. The Sutton Trust highlighted the importance of school leaders' understanding of how best to invest PP to have most impact on academic progress. Focusing on strategies with the most secure evidence base, the Sutton Trust produced a Toolkit which identified the following strategies as the most useful for increasing pupil attainment:

- Collaborative learning - pupils work together on activities or learning tasks in a group small enough for everyone to participate.
- Feedback - information given to the learner or teacher about the learner's performance relative to learning goals or outcomes.
- Mastery learning - learning outcomes remain constant but pupils may be given more or less time to become proficient or competent at these objectives.
- Meta-cognition and self-regulation - this approach aims to help pupils think about their own learning more explicitly, often by teaching them specific strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning.
- Peer mentoring – this involves a range of approaches in which learners work in pairs or small groups to provide each other with explicit teaching support.
- Oral language interventions - this emphasizes the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction in the classroom.

It is suggested that these strategies can be implemented at little cost. The only high-cost intervention reported to have a moderate or higher impact on attainment was one-to-one tuition. This could suggest that whilst additional funding is important, of potentially greater significance is teachers' and school leaders' understanding of the specific learning

needs of young people who have been in care (and of all other disadvantaged groups) and the most effective and appropriate teaching strategies. Indeed, The Sutton Trust's review states as a recommendation that teacher training should be improved to ensure that classroom teachers know how to use data and research effectively.

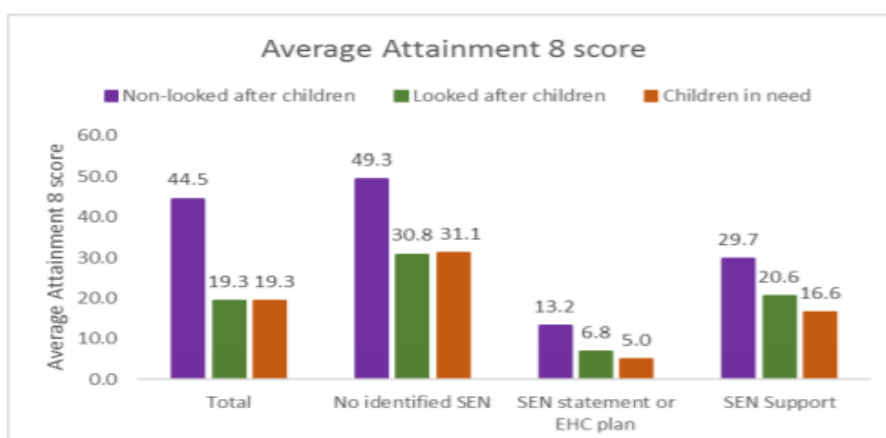
2.6 The Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice

A school aged child or young person is considered to have a SEN if they meet one of the following criteria:

- Has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.
- Has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age.
- Has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions. (SEN Code of Practice, 2015:16)

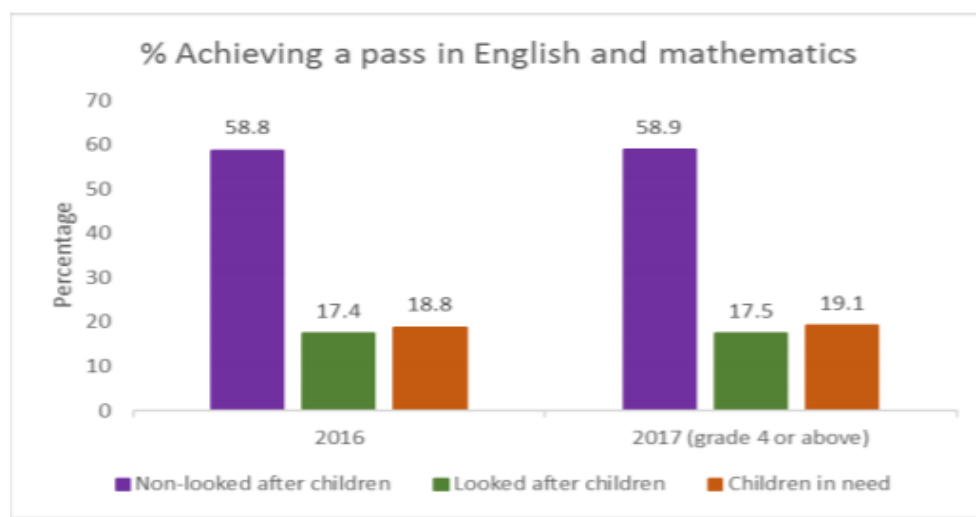
Approximately 70% of all children in care have a SEN, this is nine times higher than those children who are not in care (DfE, 2015). Chart 2.2 (below) clearly illustrates that those pupils with a SEN who are not in care perform significantly better at GCSE than those in care. However those children with a SEN who are in need but not in care fare worse than those in care. This is a complex situation and when considering those achieving a pass in both Mathematics and English (Chart 2.2), there is an observable gap of 1.6% between those in care and those in need but not in care with 19.1% of young people in need but not in care, achieving these passes compared to 17.5% of those in care.

Chart 2.2 Attainment of children with a SEN in care, in need and not in care.



Source: DfE (2017:13)

Chart 2.3 GCSE Passes in English and Mathematics – Children in care, in need and not in care



Source: DfE (2017:12)

Given the number of children in care with a SEN and their low achievement at GCSE compared to those children with comparable SENs who are not in care, it is important to consider the *SEN Code of Practice* (DfEH, 2015) and the impact on children in care. The key aspects of this revised policy were the importance of identifying educational needs at the earliest opportunity and the involvement of parents/carers and, wherever possible, the

child in any decisions made. The policy also required integration of all support services: education, health and social care. The revised Code of Practice established four categories of SEN, namely:

1. Communication and interactional difficulties
2. Cognition and learning needs
3. Social, emotional and mental health difficulties
4. Sensory and/or physical needs

The DfE report SEN prevalence in twelve categories rather than the four broader categories outlined in the SEN Code of Practice (DfEH, 2015). However mental health and emotional well-being feature in both the DfE and The SEN Code of Practice's (DfEH) definitions and this is a significant issue for young people in care. Chapter ten of the Code of Practice gives consideration to children in specific contexts including those in care. It states that the VSH and the DT must advocate on behalf of the child; again, wherever possible involving the child and foster carers in decision making and planning. Alongside the *Staying Put* policy, the revised *SEN Code of Practice* (DfEH, 2015) covers young people until the age of twenty-five, acknowledging that support is needed as vulnerable young people transition into adulthood. It is interesting that the *SEN Code of Practice* foregrounds listening to children and young people which contrasts with the 2018 guidance for DTs discussed below. However it is noted that targets set out in the Code of Practice largely prioritise school performance over concerns around relationships, resilience and personal growth highlighted by children interviewed in research related to SEN provision (Castro and Palikara, 2016).

2.6a Conservative Government (2015 - present date)

During a time of substantial reductions to education and per-pupil funding (Andrews *et al*, 2017) funding for PPP has increased. In 2018 the figure was increased from £1,900 to £2,300 per child per school year. Additionally, ten years after the role was made statutory, the DfE released revised guidance for DTs. The guidance for DTs emphasized the importance of the person in the role holding:

Appropriate seniority and professional experience to provide leadership, training, information, challenge and advice to others. (DfE, 2018: 9)

‘Appropriate seniority’ may allow the DT sufficient managerial influence but from the child’s perspective seniority within schools can present difficulties in terms of building an effective relationship. Relationships cannot be manufactured and often develop through ‘moment-to-moment interactions’ between teachers and pupils - requiring regular and informal contact repeated over a sustained period of time (Claessens *et al*, 2017). This can be challenging for a senior member of staff with limited teaching commitments to achieve.

The DfE review (2018) also stated that, as a minimum, DTs should have two days a year for training opportunities specific to factors that impact on the attainment of children in care.

These factors include: academic progress and attendance and broader concerns such as mental health and the practicalities of trips and visits. The priorities for the role are given as:

- Working directly with looked-after and previously looked-after children and their carers, parents or guardians;
- Support progress by paying particular attention to effective communication with carers, parents or guardians;
- Ensure carers, parents or guardians understand the potential value of one-to-one tuition and are equipped to engage with it at home;
- Ensure carers, parents or guardians are aware of how the school teaches key skills such as reading and numeracy; and

- Encourage high aspirations and working with the child to plan for their future success and fulfilment. (DfE, 2018: 13)

It is worth noting that there are only two direct references to working with children in the priorities outlined above. The importance of the child's voice is recognised in one case study of a Staffordshire VS where the children in care stated that having a good relationship with the DT was one of the most important factors in supporting them at school. It is interesting then that listening to the children at the centre of this policy is dealt with in a discrete chapter rather than threaded throughout the policy. For example when considering the allocation of PPP no mention is made of discussion with the young person in care:

For looked-after children, PP+ funding is managed by the Virtual School Head (VSH) for the purpose of supporting their educational achievement. The VSH and schools, including the designated teacher, should work together to agree how this funding can most effectively be used to improve looked-after children's attainment. All PEPs should include information about how that looked-after child is benefitting from the use of PP+ funding to improve their attainment. (DfE, 2018: 22)

The above may be seen as 'child-centred' and there are many other examples in the guidance, such as the recognition that children in care may have experienced trauma and/or attachment difficulties which can impact on learning. The guidance also highlights that children in care are individuals, not one homogenous group and that respect and sensitivity should be shown towards their care status. However, it is not clear in this guidance that the child or young person is actually heard (Mannay *et al*, 2019). It is interesting to note the influence of the *SEN Code of Practice* (DfEH, 2015) in this document as the child's voice is more consistently foregrounded in sections around SEN provision. The guidance ends with a series of questions that governing bodies could use to evaluate the effectiveness of the DT role within their school. Twelve areas are covered in this section and there is only one reference to the direct involvement of the child or young person which is on page 39 under

the SEN section. There is an assumption running throughout that the adults involved will make decisions about what is best for the child. Lewis (2010) and Berridge (2007) warn against a tokenistic approach to involving children in research and policy design which is perhaps evident in the DT guidance. Lewis cautions against this simplistic version of hearing the child's 'voice' and argues that when children are involved in policy design in particular, the child's voice is often utilised to support the expectations of the adults shaping the policy.

During the three administrations since 1997 there has been an intensification of statutory assessments and Ofsted inspections. Blair's tenure saw a focus on improving academic outcomes for children in care. A target was set for 15% of children in care to achieve five or more GCSE passes at grade C or above by 2006. This target did not include passes in mathematics and English and ultimately was not realised. The Children and Young Person's Act (2008) gave children in care the highest priority in schools' admission systems, introduced DTs and PP funding. Whilst many of the strategies implemented by New Labour such as ECM were archived by the Coalition Government in 2010, some policies directly related to children in care have continued. PPP funding for children in care has increased and now stands at £2,300 per child per annum, VS and VSH became statutory in 2013 and statutory guidance for DTs was published in 2018.

2.7 Teachers

When considering the experiences of children in school and the important role played by teachers, it is only reasonable to acknowledge the significant pressures under which teachers operate. As detailed above, accountability for teachers and schools have been

heightened through increased statutory assessments and inspections which have challenged the autonomy of professionals (Berridge, 2007). Additionally since 1997, schools' and teachers' roles have expanded through policies relating to children, families and education.

2.7a New Labour Government (1997-2010)

Blair's approach to teachers was similar to the approach taken towards families: one of support and control. For example, teachers' salaries were improved and the workforce increased. In 2000, the salary of a newly qualified teacher (NQT) was increased by 6.6%, NQTs were given an induction year where they taught a reduced timetable and were supported by a mentor. Additional support staff were recruited and the position of the higher level teaching assistant was created in 2003 (Lupton and Obolenskaya, 2013).

However, alongside these benefits came Beacon Schools in 1998, Performance Related Pay, Advanced Skills Teachers, School Improvement Officers in 2004 and Teaching Standards in 2007. In this way, the mechanisms for monitoring teachers were developed and competition was encouraged within schools and between schools. De Waal (2006) argued that Blair sought to control teachers through increased school inspections, the production of annual league tables and prescriptive curricula such as the literacy and numeracy hours which not only detailed what must be taught but also when and how. Recruitment of new teachers was above target towards the end of New Labour's term but as some of the policies initiated during this term in office became embedded and expanded – such as the increased role of Ofsted – recruitment became more challenging with numbers falling below target every year since 2012 (Foster, 2018).

2.7b Coalition Government (2010-15)

The 2007 DfE Teaching Standards were revised as part of the (2010) *Schools White Paper, The Importance of Teaching*, and finalised in 2011. The main impact of this revision was to

reduce and reorganise the previous 41 Standards into nine sections with all Standards applying to qualified teachers; the higher levels of teaching such as Advanced Skills and Post-threshold were discontinued. Neither version of the Standards makes specific reference to the education of children in care. In the 2007 Standards, Standards 18-21 focused on child development, an awareness of children's personal circumstances and supporting children with a range of needs: English as an Additional Language, SEN and disabilities were given specific attention. Standards 22-25 focused on teachers' responsibility to understand signs of neglect and to report these in accordance with safeguarding policy. Section five of the revised current Standards (2011) focuses on the needs of pupils. Again, some groups of children are highlighted: children with English as an Additional Language, SEN and disabilities (SEND) and children of a higher academic ability. Standard Five makes reference to all children by stating teachers should 'have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils' ability to learn.' It could easily be argued that there are many groups of vulnerable children within education and that the Standards should not make specific mention of children in care. However, children in care are afforded the highest level of priority in schools' admission systems and receive the highest level of PP funding. It is significant that the Standards do not refer to them or an understanding of their associated needs such as attachment or emotional disorders. Potentially this speaks to a significant disconnect between policy and practice. Teachers are not supported or directed to develop their understanding of the care system with approximately 87% of teachers stating that they received no relevant training prior to qualification (Become, 2018).

The revised Teaching Standards (2011) stated that they aimed to ensure higher expectations of teachers; removing the upper pay scales and criteria for Advanced Skills, Excellent and

Upper Pay Scale teaching, instead emphasizing that excellence should be the expectation and requirement of all teachers. The emphasis placed on safeguarding and inter-agency working, the revised Ofsted expectations and the increased assessments continued to place additional demands on teachers. To deliver high quality outcomes and to provide vulnerable pupils with a key adult, consistency and retention of staff is crucial but as noted above, recruitment of teachers has continually fallen below target since 2012. The Coalition Government began the process of examining the reasons for low recruitment and poor retention, opening a survey entitled *Workload Challenge* in 2014 and establishing Workload Review Groups in 2015. Teachers cited workload, bureaucracy and lack of autonomy as key concerns (Foster, 2018).

2.7c Conservative Government (2015 - present date)

Statistics suggest that recruitment and retention of teachers has not improved under the current Conservative government. The number of full time teachers across all schools has fallen by 1.2%: from 457,200 (2016) to 451,900 (2017). The sharpest reduction was in secondary schools, where teacher numbers fell by 1.9%, from 208,200 in 2016 to 204,200 in 2017. 22% of NQTs who joined the profession in 2015 were not teaching in 2017. The number of full time teacher vacancies has increased and in 2017, more teachers left the profession than joined it. Additionally, there have been significant and complex budget reductions which have led to a reduction of teaching assistants in many schools (Foster, 2018). Stable relationships with teachers are of importance for the well-being and educational progress of vulnerable children and the reduction or poor retention of staff may have an adverse impact on children in care.

Efforts to address the underlying reasons for poor recruitment and retention have also continued. In May 2018, a Workload Advisory Group was established and a *Workload*

Reduction Toolkit produced (DfE, 2018). The *Toolkit* aimed at reducing the amount of unproductive work that takes place in schools. However, the Public Accounts Committee (2018) noted that this toolkit stopped short of stating how many hours per week teachers should be working and reported that many teachers work in excess of fifty hours per week.

A new Ofsted framework was brought into effect in September 2019. The head of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, stated that future inspections will focus less on data and performance in assessment and more on the overall quality of education which in turn may improve levels of recruitment and retention of teachers (2017). In a speech to the Schools North East Summit (2017), Spielman recognised that Ofsted inspections have added considerably to teachers' workload and placed a disproportionate emphasis on outcomes. She stated that the proposed new inspection framework will focus on:

What is being taught and how schools are achieving a good education, not just what the results are looking like (Spielman, 2017.)

The published framework (Ofsted, 2019) states that schools will not be required to produce additional data but will be judged in three areas: *intent*, *implementation* and *impact*. The planning, breadth, ambition and inclusivity of curriculum will be considered. Early concerns about the impact of the new framework on smaller primary schools have recently been reported in professional publications such as the Times Educational Supplement (2019). A freedom of information request revealed that the new framework was not piloted in smaller primary schools. A concern is raised that subject leaders in such schools who do not have time allocated for monitoring subjects or observing colleagues may find themselves held accountable by Ofsted (Roberts, 2019). It would be

beneficial to evaluate these concerns and impact of this new framework on teacher recruitment and retention at a future point.

Since 1997 the recruitment and retention of teachers has been problematic. Teachers were recruited to target during Blair's administration, it is possible that students were attracted by the enhanced structures put in place such as additional support and increased salaries. However Blair also introduced many of the regulative mechanisms which over time contributed to high workloads, reduced autonomy and difficulties in teacher recruitment and retention. Recent initiatives and reforms aim to reduce teachers' workload (Ofsted, 2019; DfE, 2018 and Foster, 2018) but the full impact of these measures remains to be seen.

2.8 The Local Context

It is important to consider policies surrounding families, children and education within the Local Authority context of this study. (Note that an explanation of decisions made around including detailed information about the Local Authority is provided in the Methodology Chapter.)

The selected Local Authority is a large urban Authority. From 2004-2012, there was no overall control in the council with the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrat Party forming a Coalition. The Labour Party have held the majority of council seats since 2012. Census information reveals that 22.8% of the Authority's population is aged 0-15 years which is higher than both the national average for this age range (19.1%) and the average for the region (19.6%) (Authority's City Council, 2018). The level of childhood poverty is also significantly higher than the national average and stands at approximately 30%. The

selected Local Authority has the fourth highest level of childhood poverty in the UK (44.33%). In addition to this, areas of the selected Local Authority are reported to have some of the highest levels of deprivation with over half of all children living in poverty after housing costs (Valadez-Martinez and Hirsch, 2018). The Office for National Statistics (2017) reported that 26.6% of children in the Authority's primary schools are eligible for free school meals which is higher than the average for the region (17.6%, the national average in 2017 being 14.7%) and in secondary schools 25.5% of pupils are eligible – again this is higher than the average for the region (15.9%, the national average in 2017 being 13.8%). 70.1% of the Authority's primary schools and 51.6% of the Authority's secondary schools are rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted (Gov.UK, 2018).

At the end of August 2018, 1914 children were in the selected Local Authority's care system. This represents an increase from 2017 when the figure stood at 1,840. 42% of children in care live outside the Local Authority area and 68% have been in care for more than two years. In line with national trends, a recent significant change to the profile of Authority's children in care is the inclusion of ninety-two unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children (Arcatinis, 2018.)

The Authority's Children's Services have experienced significant challenges in supporting and safeguarding the children in their care system though they are not alone. In 2018 63% of Local Authority children services were rated as unsatisfactory by Ofsted – 47% rated as Requiring Improvement and 15% as Inadequate, only 2% were rated as Outstanding (Oakley *et al*, 2018). These statistics must surely point to the difficulty of supporting children and families in complex circumstances, the challenges of multi-agency working and retaining appropriately qualified social workers. In 2018 only one Local Authority, North Yorkshire,

was judged by Ofsted as Outstanding in all areas. Ofsted commended North Yorkshire's ambitious approach and 'No Wrong Door' policy which foregrounds multi-agency working and aims to ensure children receive appropriate support (Reed, 2018). However the North Yorkshire demographic context may also be significant as the level of childhood poverty and the number of children in care are amongst the lowest in England (North Yorkshire Children's Trust, 2018). The Local Authority discussed in this study has 44.33% of children living in poverty and therefore the challenges encountered by the Children's Services may be significantly more diverse and complex (Authority's City Council, 2018).

The Local Authority's Children Services were first rated as Inadequate by Ofsted in 2009. The basis for this decision rested largely with the number of children's homes and foster placements that were judged to be inadequate: a situation regarded as improved in 2018 (Higham, 2018). In 2009, Ofsted also identified that there were a high number of non-accidental child deaths or injuries. The deaths of four children led to serious case reviews, media attention and Ofsted's Chief Inspector's description of the Local Authority's Children Services as 'a national disgrace' in 2013 (Bingham, 2013). However, the Authority's Safeguarding Board (2018) stated that given the high number of children there has not been a greater than average number of non-accidental child deaths per capita in the Authority.

The key areas of concern highlighted by Ofsted's inspections centred on aspects reflecting national policy and/or concern. For example, multi-agency working is highlighted as ineffective in all Ofsted reports. The retention of full time, qualified social workers improved slightly in each inspection however there is still a heavy reliance on agency staff which may impact on consistency and communication. The quality of assessment and early intervention is reported to be variable; the Ofsted inspection reports of 2011, 2014 and 2016 all stated

that too frequently assessments focused on the needs of the adults rather than the children and that opportunities were missed to support families in need which led to higher than necessary child protection referrals. The 2014 Ofsted inspection report is perhaps the most critical, identifying 400 children awaiting assessment and stating that children are failed by the Authority. This inspection was carried out in March 2014 and in September 2014 the Secretary of State for Education appointed a Commissioner for Children's Social Care in the Authority to oversee and accelerate progress. The Authority's Children's Services were required to co-operate with this appointment (Secretary of State for Education, 2014). In April 2015 the Commissioner reported that although some progress had been made, significant weaknesses remained (Secretary of State for Education, 2014). The Commissioner resigned from this position and a new appointment was subsequently made. Ofsted monitoring visits (2015-2018) reported some improvements but stated that provision in areas such as care plans and multi-agency working was too inconsistent. During this time frame (2015-2018) the Authority's City Council made plans to create an Independent Trust to oversee Children's Services. The plan was announced in May 2016 and the trust began operating in April 2018. The Trust is owned by but operates independently of the Local Authority's City Council.

At the Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting of November 2018, the Trust presented a self-evaluation of progress since their first Ofsted monitoring visit in May 2018. Their evaluation reported that 86% of all social workers and managers were permanent, marking a significant improvement from 33% in 2015. 11% of the selected Local Authority's care leavers were in a *Staying Put* (DfE, 2014) arrangement with a former foster parent and 65% are either in education, employment or training. Whilst these figures may

seem low they are above national averages of 7% and 48% respectively. However, it is important to consider the parameters used by the Trust which make true comparisons difficult. For example, the Trust reported in their self-evaluation that as of September 2018, 61% of care leavers aged 17 to 21 are in employment, education or training and 13.6% are in higher education. National statistics reported by the DfE (2018) describe the circumstances of care leavers aged 19 to 21 years old, these national statistics appear to show lower levels of engagement in education with 6% in higher education and 45% in other education, training or employment (DfE, 2018). The inclusion of seventeen and eighteen year olds in the Authority's data may create a falsely positive picture as education or training is compulsory at these ages.

It is reported that the voice of care leavers and children in care drives all areas of practice within the Trust (Higham, 2018) and it is interesting to note that the Trust no longer uses the term 'looked-after children', selecting instead 'children in care' (the same term utilised in this study). Multi-agency working and the appropriateness of interventions remain key targets and concerns for the Trust. It is stated in the Trust's self-evaluation that some children remain on child protection orders unnecessarily and that alternative, more supportive measures could help children who are in need rather than at risk. The Trust identified the reduction of exclusions from primary schools as a priority, stating that schools will be rigorously challenged if they have not fully supported efforts to engage children in education.

The Trust's first full Ofsted inspection in December 2018 rated services as 'requiring improvement to be good' (Higham, 2018). This judgement represented the first tangible improvement in Ofsted ratings since 2009. At this time exclusions from school had been

reduced, PEPs had improved and the voice of children in care was given high priority through the successful development of the Children in Care Council. Children in Care Council meetings are open to all young people in care within the Local Authority and Care Council members work closely with the Rights and Participation team who advocate on their behalf. Ofsted (2018) stated that care leavers receive a strong and personalised service. The inspection report identified educational outcomes and attendance as low, reporting that the VS did not have a clear enough understanding of the progress children in care make over time (Higham, 2018).

The Authority's City Council have announced proposed reductions to the Children and Family budget for 2019-2023. The proposed reductions over this time frame total £15,778 million. Schools are to be charged more for services such as safeguarding and governor training but the most substantial reduction is in the Travel Assist budget which will be reduced by £9,182 million (Authority's City Council, 2019). Travel Assist supports many of the Authority's most vulnerable children by providing safe transport to special schools. The council states that children will be encouraged to become more independent in their travel plans. As SENs are over-represented within the care system this proposed reduction has clear implications for many children in care.

Recent educational data for the Authority is hard to access. The outcomes of children in care have been subsumed into a generic *disadvantaged* category along with adopted children and children in receipt of FSM. In addition to reducing the capacity for evaluation, conflating groups of children also makes national and regional comparisons difficult. As noted above data regarding the educational and employment outcomes for care leavers is also presented

in a manner which prevents meaningful comparison. Analysis of attainment in 2016 showed the children in the Authority's schools underperformed compared with the national picture.

Table 2.2 Attainment nationally and in the selected Authority

	Average (Lowest 20% attaining children)		Percent attainment gap between all children and bottom 20%	
	Authority	National	Authority	National
2013	20.2	21.6	40.6	36.6
2014	20.7	22.5	39.1	33.9
2015	20.9	23.1	38.5	32.1

Source: Authority's City Council, 2016:6

At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2015, 53% of children in receipt of FSM and 53% of children in care achieved a 'Good Level of Development' compared to 65% of other pupils. For children in care, 53% represents a significant improvement, in 2014 only 28% were judged to have made a 'Good Level of Development.'

At the end of KS1 during the same period, 84% of children in receipt of FSM achieved a Level Two in Reading, 80% in Writing and 87% in Mathematics – this compared to 91%, 88% and 92% for those children not in receipt of FSM in Reading, Writing and Mathematics respectively. 74% of the Authority's children in care achieved a Level Two in Reading, 61% in Writing and 71% in Mathematics, these figures represent a considerable attainment gap when compared to children in receipt of FSM. At KS1, disadvantaged children in the Authority can be seen to fare well against national statistics.

Table 2.3 Children achieving level 2 and above – 2015

	Reading			Writing			Maths		
	Authority	National	GAP	Authority	National	GAP	Authority	National	GAP
FSM	85%	84%	+1%	81%	79%	+2%	88%	87%	+1%
NON-FSM	91%	93%	-2%	88%	91%	-3%	93%	95%	-2%

Source: Authority's City Council, 2016:19

Table 2.4 Children achieving level 4 and above – 2015

	Reading, Writing and Maths			Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling		
	Authority	National	GAP	Authority	National	GAP
FSM	69%	66%	+3%	73%	67%	+6%
Non-FSM	81%	83%	-2%	85%	83%	+2%

Source: Authority City Council, 2016:46

At the end of KS2, 54% of the Authority's children in receipt of FSM achieved a Level Four in Reading, Writing and Mathematics combined. As can be seen from the table above, the selected Authority performs above the national average at this stage. Interestingly, 58% of the Authority's children in care achieved a Level Four in the combined subjects. During the

primary school years a high level of attendance is also reported; it has remained consistently over 96% since 2012 and exclusion rates have remained low although they increased from 2.29% in 2012/13 to 3.86% at the end of 2015. During this time frame only one girl was permanently excluded from school (Authority City Council, 2016).

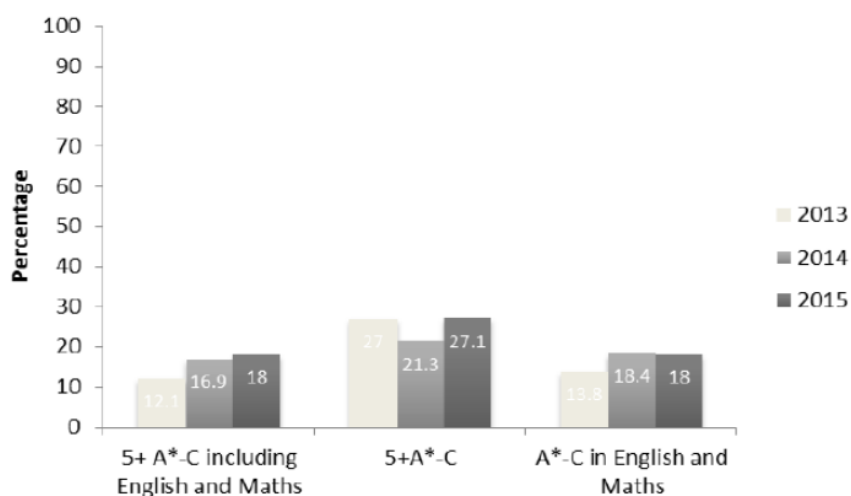
As stated earlier, there has been a marked increase in young people entering the care system at a later age and the problems associated with this are reflected in the increased gap in attainment at GCSE level. In 2015, 60% of the general population of pupils in the Authority achieved five GCSEs (including Mathematics and English) at grade C to A*. 40% of pupils in receipt of FSM achieved this set of qualifications. As can be seen from table 2.5 below, children in receipt of FSM fared well compared to national statistics.

Table 2.5 Children achieving GCSE passes in English and Mathematics

	5 or more A*-C including English and Maths			Expected Progress in English			Expected Progress in Maths		
	Authority	National	GAP	Authority	National	GAP	Authority	National	GAP
FSM	40%	33%	+7%	65%	56%	+9%	52%	46%	+6%
Non-FSM	60%	61%	-1%	76%	74%	+2%	68%	70%	-2%

Source: Authority's City Council, 2016:8

Only 18% of pupils in care achieved this standard at first attempt. However, as can be seen below, 18% marks an increase from previous years.

Chart 2.4 Children achieving five GCSE passes including English and Mathematics

Source: Authority's City Council, 2016:41

It should be noted that these figures discount pupils with significant SEN. School attendance of children in care in the Authority's secondary schools has steadily increased (Authority's City Council, 2016). The number of pupils missing more than twenty-five days per year fell from 17.69% in 2013-4 to 12.45% in 2014-5. Again the Authority's City Council (2016) stated that the rate of exclusions for children in care during the secondary phase is low – the figure during 2014-15 stood at 3.86%. However, the DfE (2016) reported that only 0.07% of all children received a permanent exclusion during the same period.

2.9 Conclusion

It is clear that despite significant investment since 1997, educational, social and personal outcomes for children in care remain low when compared to those in the general population. Policies have employed reporting approaches more commonly utilised in the private sector such as focusing on measurable outcomes. The prioritisation of measurable

outcomes has created tensions for teachers and social workers. As key services focus on collating and reporting information social workers lose the capacity to be social and educators lose the capacity to educate (Berridge, 2012). This concern is perhaps reflected in Harker's (2004) finding that young people in care regarded social workers as impeding their educational progress. The failure of policies to significantly improve outcomes for children in care highlights the complex nature of the care system. Although important issues such as the terminology involved in care were not discussed by Nayer and Owers (2018), their review of foster care did recognise the need to place the experience of childhood at the centre of the care system.

Economic recession and austerity policies in children's and families' budgets since 2010 have left more families vulnerable to poverty and its associated disadvantages – potentially resulting in more children entering the care system. The number of children in care currently stands at a record 78,150 (DfE, 2019). The importance of understanding and addressing children's needs has never been more pressing and this highlights the timeliness and importance of this particular study.

CHAPTER THREE – LITERATURE REVIEW

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will critically discuss relevant research, literature and theory around relationships, personal identity, education and agency. Research from 2017 onwards is particularly valuable in this chapter due to an increased focus on routines and social interactions associated with living in care. This chapter aims to evidence two key issues which are absent in many of the policies discussed in Chapter Two but present in the interviews conducted and analysed in Chapters Five and Six. The first issue centres on the importance of everyday lived experiences such as interactions with key adults, disclosure of care status to peers, premature independence, the role of education, clothing and food in care placements and the terminology associated with the care system. The second issue focuses on how young people in care engage in reflexive internal conversations to plan in both the shorter and longer term (Archer, 2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000).

This chapter demonstrates the fundamental importance of the everyday. Whilst this matter is at least partially acknowledged by Nayer and Owers (2018) it is largely absent in other national and local policies. Evidence from a growing body of research, including this study, indicates the need to listen closely to narratives relayed by the young people at the heart of the care system.

3.0a Areas beyond the scope of this study

It is established that risk factors during pregnancy can have enduring implications for cognitive, physical and emotional development. Risk factors during pregnancy include alcohol, drug or tobacco consumption, poor nutrition, maternal infection, disease, low birth weight, poor access to medical support, maternal stress and exposure to abusive

relationships - all of which are over-represented within the children in care population (McCormack *et al*, 2018; Gregory *et al*, 2015; Polańska *et al*, 2015; Williams, 2015; Arain *et al*, 2013; DiPietro, 2012; Blackburn, 2010; Chasnoff, 2010; Fleming, 2007; Goswani, 2015; 2006; 2004; Wilson *et al*, 2002 and Perry, 2000). Whilst the potential impact of these factors are important to note, this is an extensive and complex area, beyond the scope of this study.

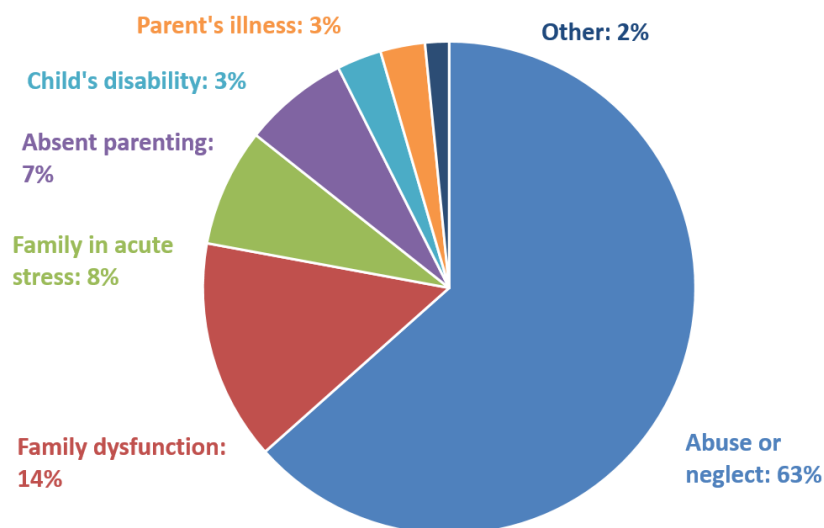
Similarly the importance of attachments formed between infants and primary caregivers has been established. Sensitive, responsive caregiving is understood to benefit early child development (Groh, 2014; Mooney, 2010; Jong-wook, 2004; Honig, 2002; Verrier, 1993; Ainsworth 1989; 1970; Bowlby, 1988 and Brazelton, 1981). Early, pre-care, attachments will not be considered in detail in this study but discussions around caregiving and relationships will draw on attachment theory to highlight difficulties encountered by children in care and the importance of nurturing environments.

3.1 Reasons for entering care

A high proportion of children entering the care system (63%) do so after their tenth birthday (DfE, 2019). Before entering the care system, many children will have experienced several layers of disadvantage with around 63% of those entering care experiencing neglect or abuse (DfE, 2019). Many children entering care will have experienced more than one form of maltreatment. For example, emotional abuse is frequently associated with both physical and sexual abuse (Cecil *et al*, 2017). The short and long-term consequences of neglectful or abusive parenting are significant. Children may be less likely to have experienced the sensitive caregiving noted above as beneficial. In addition to this, abuse and/or neglect can

leave a child susceptible to mental health difficulties, difficulties in regulating emotions and forming relationships and cognitive and physical developmental delays (Cecil *et al*, 2017)

Chart 3.1 Proportions of children in care by category of need – England, 2019.



Source: DfE (2019)

Chart 3.1 highlights the multiple levels of damage to which children in care may have been exposed. Nearly two-thirds of children enter care due to neglect and/or abuse. Children in this group may have also experienced the material and varied consequences of poverty. The above figures only indicate the main reason for the child entering care, there may be multiple factors.

Bywaters *et al* (2016) established a causal link between Childhood Adversity, Abuse and Neglect (CAN) and poverty. They found that poverty exacerbates other problems parents may be experiencing such as mental health issues or substance dependency thus, in turn, increasing the risk of CAN. Bywaters *et al* (2016) conducted a systematic review of available literature to address two key questions: does poverty increase the amount of CAN or the nature of it and does CAN increase poverty in later life. Their study demonstrated how little

is understood or acknowledged about the association of poverty and CAN. Only 1.3% of the literature reviewed by Bywaters *et al* (2016) was from the UK (over 90% of the literature was from the United States of America), their work is the only significant systematic review of evidence linking the impact of poverty to CAN in the UK. The failure to acknowledge poverty as a cause of dysfunction is reflected in the fact that low income is not reported by the DfE as a reason for children entering the care system. Bywaters *et al's* (2016) findings highlight the importance of supportive early interventions which seek to reduce childhood poverty and lessen the likelihood of CAN within families.

3.2 Entering Care

As suggested above, children in the care system are likely to have experienced multiple layers of disadvantage and this complex situation continues once in care. It is difficult to disaggregate the experience of being in care from pre-care experiences and some of the challenges encountered by children in care may well also be encountered by children in need or on the edge of care. However there are specific challenges associated with entering the care system.

3.2a Separation from parents and family

Entering the care system necessitates a temporary or permanent change in a child's primary care giver, potentially creating the possibility of a new, nurturing relationship or attachment (Schofield and Beek, 2009). However, it is also important to acknowledge the distress that can be caused – particularly as moving into foster care may involve separating from siblings, friends and family pets as well as parents and the impact of this should not be

underestimated (Jarrett and Bellis, 2018; Zahawi, 2018; Verrier, 1993 and Erikson, 1980).

Whilst some children are able to maintain contact with their parents and any siblings after entering foster care, others are not. One quarter of children in care report that they have too little contact with their siblings (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). Continuing contact is regarded as desirable where possible as this can maintain relationships and promote continuity. However, it is also reported that many children in care find continued contact to be a source of anxiety and that most importantly the children's wishes should be prioritised whenever possible (Narey and Owers, 2018 and Martínez *et al*, 2016).

3.2b Age of entry to the care system

Early entrance to the care system does not appear to be educationally advantageous (Jackson *et al*, 2005). Those entering the care system at a very young age (0-5) and remaining in care until exam entrance (compared to those entering care at a later age) have reduced chances of achieving five GCSEs (A* to C) including Mathematics and English (Sebba *et al*, 2015). Whilst this is an important point to note, it is also clearly a complex area. The young people involved in Jackson *et al's* (2005) research will have had a range of early childhood experiences and the suitability and quality of their foster placements may have varied considerably. However, Jackson *et al's* research remains valuable as it considered care leavers attending university and asked them to explore which factors supported or enabled this success. On the whole, the stories of foster care outlined in Jackson and colleagues' research are positive. Nearly all participants stated that their foster placements had helped them educationally. Some young people interviewed stated that they regarded their foster carers as their real parents and preferred to refer to them as mum and dad. The majority of those interviewed had entered care at fourteen or fifteen years of age and had

been in care for at least five years and enjoyed stable placements, with the majority only experiencing one or two placements.

3.3 Foster placements: suitability and stability

As established, many children experience significant levels of disruption prior to and, in the process of, entering the care system. Consistent, high quality foster care can support children to develop secure relationships, a sense of belonging and improved educational attendance and attainment (Ofsted, 2018; Children's Commissioner, 2017; DfE, 2013 and Berridge, 2012).

Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) survey of 611 children in care across six Local Authorities revealed that 95% of children and young people (8-18yrs) believed their carers demonstrated an interest in their education. However, as with all research the findings of this study may be somewhat biased and limited. Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) survey reached a significant number of young people (with a response rate of between 23 and 55% across Authorities) it is possible that the respondents were those who were supported or encouraged to reply, therefore reaching those young people enjoying more positive placements. The authors stated that where appropriate, participants were required to have a 'trusted adult' such as a DT, learning mentor or SEN Co-ordinator (SENCO) with them whilst completing the survey. However, it is not explained when or why an adult might be required or how their potential influence might be mitigated. The presence of a key member of teaching staff could increase the likelihood of children giving more favourable answers than they might otherwise and it is interesting to note that the children surveyed reported unusually high levels of satisfaction with school life. For example, 50% of boys reported that they liked school 'most of the time' which compared to just 33% of boys in the

general population (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017: 17). It is also worth noting that no information is given about the Local Authorities utilised in this survey and therefore findings cannot be considered in context.

Nevertheless, Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) study highlighted important aspects of foster care which are supported and developed in other studies (Gilligan, 2009 and Slater, 2007). Relationships within the foster family are reported as key to both the quality and longevity of the placement and the availability of a key adult has been shown to be the turning point for many young people in care (Gilligan, 2009 and Slater, 2007). Participants in Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) study identified trust as a key factor in these relationships. Secure trusting relationships allow children to develop resilience, assert their rights, develop life skills and begin a process of recovery (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). High quality foster care has the potential to compensate for earlier adversities and this is particularly evident in homes where there is a focus on education (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Sebba *et al*, 2015 and Jackson *et al*, 2005). Being kept safe, having a comfortable living environment, feeling involved in decision making and being treated fairly are also considered important (Narey and Owers, 2018; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017 and Masten and Monn, 2015).

Daily interactions and routines involving food are considered by Rees who argued that preparing and sharing food has 'social and symbolic significance' (2019:86). Such involvement would also support the criterion for high quality foster care identified above. Rees identified the importance of understanding individual food preferences but did not consider the impact of religious practices on food choices, preparation and consumption. The importance of respecting children's religious customs is reflected in Article Thirty of The

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990). Clothing also carries 'social and symbolic significance' (Rees, 2019:86), reflecting a child's social customs and/or religious practices. Further research into children's experiences of clothing in foster care placements would be beneficial. Regular experience of safe touch may also contribute to high quality foster care (Sissay, 2019 and Narey and Owers, 2018). The DfE offers little guidance to foster carers about the development of nurturing relationships. Indeed many foster agencies caution carers against showing the children in their care the physical affection which is regarded as crucial in the development of emotionally rich and trusting relationships (Rees, 2019; Sissay, 2019 and Narey and Owers, 2018).

Within foster families, family protocols, familial patterns and interactions such as high expectations, insistence on good levels of attendance at school, readily available resources and a sense of good discipline have been associated with higher academic outcomes for children in care (Jackson *et al*, 2005). To remain in a permanent placement throughout adolescence appears to be relatively uncommon (Children's Commissioner, 2017) and yet this was the experience of the majority of the 129 care leavers attending university interviewed by Jackson *et al* (2005). It is worth noting that the majority of young people in Jackson *et al's* (2005) study entered care at either fourteen or fifteen years of age, and remained in care until entering university. This supports the view that those entering care at a later age but then remaining in care fare well (Sebba *et al*, 2015). In 2011-2012, 43% of those young people experiencing one placement during that timeframe achieved five GCSEs (grade A* to C) including Mathematics and English, this was only achieved by 13% of young people experiencing three or more placements during the same period (DfE, 2013)

Children remaining in stable placements are less likely to experience an unplanned change of school. However, approximately 30% of children in care experience a change in placement in any given year, 45.5% of these children will also change schools – with the majority of these moves happening at the end of the school year (Children’s Commissioner, 2017 and Zayed and Harker, 2015). In the year March 2016 to March 2017, 2,375 children experienced an unplanned end to a foster placement and 10% of these children changed schools as a direct result. Unplanned ends to foster placements are closely associated with persistent absence from school and lower academic outcomes (Ofsted, 2018; Children’s Commissioner, 2017 and Sebba *et al* 2015).

It is not always known why placements sustain or break down. Young people struggling with significant mental health issues or demonstrating anti-social behaviour may be more likely to experience frequent break downs of placement (Children’s Commissioner, 2017). There are numerous and complex causes of mental health problems for children in care, it is estimated that approximately 50% of children in care meet the criteria for possible mental health difficulties (DfE, 2018). Whilst some of the difficulties experienced may pre-date a move into care, these may be exacerbated by aspects of the care system. Young people living in care may experience a lack of influence over decision making processes and future plans; this in turn is linked to a lower sense of well-being; this appears to be particularly true for teenage girls (Wijedasa, 2017). However, children’s perception of their well-being and happiness may not be fixed. Children placed in a caring foster family that met their needs reported feeling more positive about their current sense of well-being and future possibilities (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017).

Jackson *et al* (2005) emphasised cases of individual young people who experienced frequent changes in placement but still achieved the necessary academic qualifications to attend university:

It was usually a final, successful foster placement that enabled the young person to go to university, even if they had had several previous ones where they were not happy. (Jackson *et al*, 2005:32)

It is suggested here that the stability and quality of the foster placement directly preceding entry to university is more influential than school, teachers or social workers. This, in turn, supports the findings of Schofield and Beek (2009) and Jackson *et al* (2005) that changes in placement are not uniformly problematic and that the focus should be on high quality care rather than stability. Ideally children and young people would experience both of these characteristics within their foster care placements.

3.4 Challenges presented by being in care

Whilst high quality foster care can be beneficial, living in care can also present young people with specific challenges. Two studies were published in 2017 which highlighted the problematic nature of living in care. As with most qualitative research surrounding foster care and education in the UK, the studies were relatively small scale and utilised creative methods of data generation (Berridge, 2012). Mannay *et al* (2017) completed research with 67 care experienced children and young people whilst Rogers (2017) worked with ten participants. Of relevance to this study is Mannay *et al*'s (2017) and Rogers' (2017) examination of the stigma and social difficulties associated with living in care. Both Mannay *et al* and Rogers established that the term 'LAC' (Looked-After Children) can carry

connotations of inadequacy and blame and can add to the sense of being devalued and different from peers who are not in care. Rogers (2017) argued that children in care are highly conscious of their in-care status and can feel stigmatised both by the terminology and the experience of being in care. Mannay *et al* (2017) argued that children may also resist the labels and associated connotations ascribed to them. However it is important to consider that all terminology has the potential to carry unwelcome connotations (Berridge, 2007).

Resistance to such labels may lead those in care to reject school rules or academic engagement; therefore taking children further away from the model of the 'ideal pupil' (Rogers, 2017), potentially assigning those who carry the label of 'in care' to the 'failing' subject position. The increasingly performance driven National Curriculum forces schools, particularly those in more challenging socio-economic areas, to adopt instructional and regulative organisational approaches to learning which increase pressure to meet and be judged by academic expectations (Reay, 2006). Pupils' proximity to the notion of 'ideal pupil' is judged on academic outcomes and the ability to conform to behaviours regarded as conducive to learning. Sanction and reward strategies form a crucial part of this as children internalise their teachers' expectations and often begin to monitor their peers' behaviour (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014). This results in heightened labelling and blaming, with more children assigned to a 'failing' position. Many young people report that they were automatically placed in lower ability sets once they had entered the care system and that teachers subsequently made unnecessary concessions for them such as excusing non-completion of work or poor behaviour (Mannay *et al*, 2017; Rogers, 2017 and Hempel-Jorgensen, 2009). However, both Mannay *et al* and Rogers recognised that resisting labels may instead manifest itself in a strong desire to achieve academically. The core of an

identity is the categorisation of the self as an occupant of a role (Stets and Burke, 2000). This is relevant for children in care who may consciously create new and alternative social roles for themselves. Children may experience a sense of shame regarding their care status and at the very least perceive that they are treated differently once they revealed their care status (Cockett, 2017; Rogers, 2017 and Samuels and Pryce, 2008). An awareness of how we are perceived by others cannot help but inform the view we have of ourselves and it is important to examine the language that is used to frame discussions around children in care (Skeggs, 1997).

Of great significance for this study is Mannay *et al's* (2017:686) and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) consideration of how 'mundane, micro-interactions' can contribute to the sense of stigma identified by Rogers (2017). Participants in Mannay *et al's* (2017) research gave several examples of mundane but significant interactions which served to exacerbate their sense of being 'different'. For example, removal from lessons for PEP meetings, arriving at school in a taxi and the challenges presented by parents' evenings were highlighted by Mannay *et al's* (2017) participants as particularly difficult. Whilst their research highlighted micro interactions within school, Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017) foreground those that permeate life in foster care. Only 51% of Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) participants (aged between 10 and 18) reported that they were *usually* allowed the same freedom in their leisure time as their friends. Whilst this could be a question of perception, children in care are required to navigate a complex system of permission in order to participate in seemingly routine social or personal events. Permission must be gained from birth parents and social workers to, for example, go on a school trip, sleep over at a friend's house or even get a haircut (Narey and Owers, 2018). Many young people feel these procedures cause embarrassment, prevent normal social interactions and

the development of secure friendships. It is suggested that foster carers are asked to parent but prevented from making basic day to day decisions (Narey and Owers, 2018 and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017).

As previously stated, statistics clearly demonstrate that, on average, young people who have lived in the care system experience a higher level of mental health difficulties than those not in care (DfE, 2018). Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017) measured the sense of well-being of children in care using scales commonly employed by The Children's Society (2016) and the Office of National Statistics (2014). Children were asked to judge aspects of their well-being from zero to ten: seven to ten represented a high sense of well-being, five and six represented a moderate sense of well-being and zero to four represented a low sense of well-being. Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017) found that children in care reported a lower sense of well-being than the general population. For example, 18% of children in care had a low score (zero to four) when asked about their overall satisfaction with life which compared to 5.7% of the general population, 16% of children in care did not feel optimistic about the future compared to 10.1% of the general population. Care experienced children reported being less happy with their appearance and less likely to enjoy school. In the general population, approximately 13% of young people stated that they were unhappy with their appearance which compared to 16% of young people in care. There was a significant gender difference, with 23% of girls in comparison with 7% of boys 'hardly ever' or 'never' liking their appearance (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017 and The Children's Society, 2015). These findings are particularly important as self-image is used an indicator of overall well-being. Poor self-image is connected to low self-esteem, depression and self-harm (Cash and Smolak, 2011). Whilst it may be difficult to attribute these

difficulties solely to the experience of being in care, there is evidence to suggest that living in care can reduce a sense of autonomy which is associated with lower self-esteem (Wijedasa, 2017).

Young people in care also perceived themselves to be at greater risk of bullying than their non-cared for peers. 28% of children in care reported being fearful of bullying which compared to 12% of the general population (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017).

Interestingly, Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's participants did not agree with the idea that the frequency of bullying mattered. In their view, one incidence of bullying could have just as severe an impact on well-being as frequent bullying. A common response to bullying in schools is to remove the victim from the situation to either a different class, isolated room or even a different school (Nassem and Harris, 2015). Such a response might be distressing for any child but for a child in care it potentially adds to a pattern of disruption and a sense of being 'different' (Rogers, 2017). Further disruption in schooling has significant consequences for the development of friendships.

Adolescence may be a difficult phase for many young people. However an adolescent in care may encounter additional challenges. The willingness to take opportunities or calculated risks during adolescence may depend on the availability of a supportive adult who creates a safe family base and is ready to forgive and offer guidance (Bowlby, 1988). Few care leavers enjoy this level of unconditional support. Only 7% of care leavers remain in the *Staying Put* agreement with their foster carers after the age of 19 with approximately 80% living independently or semi-independently at this age (DfE, 2018). One care leaver reported:

My friends, they have a lot of family support, so they're making those mistakes... they have family to back them. I don't have the luxury of making those types of mistakes. (Samuels and Pryce, 2008:1204)

The prospect of impending and premature independence combined with a lack of parental support may impact on educational choices and ambitions during adolescence. Samuels and Pryce (2008) observed participants to be largely operating in a 'survivalist' mode – scared of making mistakes and reluctant to take chances or opportunities even where support was offered.

3.5 Friendships

Poulin and Chan (2010) conducted a secondary analysis of literature about friendships. A difficulty of synthesising the empirical literature in this area is that definitions of friendships varied across the literature considered. For example, some children were asked to identify all the friends that they considered to be important whereas in other studies children were asked to only identify the three friends most important to them. The literature considered by Poulin and Chan (2010) suggested that peer friendships provide an opportunity for children to acquire social skills and develop social identity. Friendships were found to offer an alternative social context to family hierarchies and an alternative context to develop a sense of belonging (Poulin and Chan, 2010 and Ridge and Millar, 2000). Friendships were also found to support educational commitment and protect individuals from potential bullying (Van Doeselaar, 2016 and Ridge and Millar, 2000). It is also understood that the nature of friendship changes as children and adolescents mature (Van Doeselaar, 2016 and Poulin and Chan, 2010).

Friendships during the primary school years tend to be more fluid. Whilst children may maintain broad friendship circles, they are likely to form a variety of temporary friendships

over the course of a school year (Poulin and Chan, 2010). A change of school during the primary school years may be easier in terms of establishing new friendships; parents and carers play a more active role in organising social outings during this period. However friendships mature during adolescence, taking increased significance and allowing adolescents to become increasingly independent of parental figures (Van Doeselaar, 2016). In later adolescence, allowing for a settling period after the transition to secondary school, friendships tend to become more stable with between 50 and 75% of friendships remaining intact over the course of a school year. Friendship groups also become more consistent with up to 80% of friendship groups remaining stable during the same period (Poulin and Chan, 2010). In addition to the positive personal benefits of a close and stable friendship, friendships are associated with educational outcomes. Adolescents who perceived themselves to have stable friendships were more able to commit to their educational tasks and plans (Van Doeselaar, 2016). However, in order for young people in care to benefit from the positive effects of a close friendship such as educational commitment, trust and intimacy, friendships need to endure which emphasizes the importance of placement stability.

Whilst friendships may naturally change and develop, there are additional challenges posed by being in care. There are tangible examples of these challenges such as entering care or changing placement which may involve a change of school or geographical location, thereby potentially separating children in care from their friends. However micro social interactions between friends and peers can also pose problems for children in care's friendships. Trust is regarded as playing a crucial role in maintaining friendships during, and post, adolescence. As we reach adolescence we develop a greater need for intimacy with friends. This intimacy is borne from trust and mutual self-disclosure (Poulin and Chan, 2010; Zimmerman, 2004

and Berndt and Perry, 1986). Trust may pose significant challenges for young people who have experienced neglect or abuse in early childhood (DfE, 2017) and self-disclosure is rendered all the more complex by living in foster care and the constraints identified earlier in Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) research. It is acknowledged that children who are not in the care system may be reluctant to talk about their families with friends who are in care. A sensitive desire to avoid creating distress may inform this reluctance but it can serve to heighten rather than minimise differences in circumstances (Rogers, 2017). Mannay *et al* (2017) may regard this reluctance as an 'unintended harm'.

Rogers' (2017) research develops themes identified in Millar and Ridges' (2000) examination of the friendships of children in care. Millar and Ridge interviewed sixteen young people aged between eleven and nineteen years of age who lived in a rural Authority. Participants in their study reported that friendships were of the utmost importance as they had already lost contact with members of their family. However these participants also explained that they were constantly afraid that their care status might be revealed to their friends. Cockett (2017) and Rogers (2017) develop this issue further. Rogers contended that children in care may perceive themselves as a social 'out-group' with their care status acting as a stigma separating them from the 'in-group' of non-cared for peers which, as Cockett explained, causes considerable anxiety.

Decisions around when, how and whether to disclose their care status are pivotal for young people in terms of peer relationships. Children may seek to carefully manage their care status amongst their peers and attempt to minimise the differences in their living circumstances (Rogers, 2017). Alternatively, children in care may forge their own 'in-group' with other cared for peers, deriving social identity through groups based on perceived

similarities (Rogers, 2017; Archer, 2000 and Stets and Burke, 2000). Children in care may be required to manage their care status in a sophisticated manner; creating alternative social identities by occupying more than one social group (Archer, 2000). For example, they might seek membership of the dominant group at school and supportive relationships with other young people in care in a separate environment outside of school such as the Children in Care Council. Dedicated environments such as the Children in Care Council potentially offer two social affordances: the chance to socialise without the concerns of managing care status and the opportunity to establish vital networks of friendships (Rogers, 2017 and Millar and Ridge, 2000).

3.5a The context of friendships

The contexts of friendships are also significant; the location, architecture and organisation of schools themselves may have an impact on friendships. As children mature, they spend more time in the locality of their school (Poulin and Chan, 2010). This is significant for children in care as many live at some distance from their school, approximately 40% do not attend a mainstream school and many do not attend any school regularly (Longfield, 2018). Whether schools and foster placements are in rural or urban areas may also be significant (Ridge and Millar, 2000). The average journey to a special school is four miles for children living in urban areas and ten miles for those in rural areas. Such distances inevitably mean that children may not live near to their peers and this may well impact on the ability to continue friendships outside of the school environment. (Andrews, 2018 and Sebba *et al*, 2015) In large cities such as the selected Local Authority for this study, children may live in closer proximity to school which creates the potential to be involved in the wider life of school.

Friendships tend to be more stable when they are multi-context. For example, friendships may exist in clubs or sports teams as well as in the classroom environment:

The simultaneous involvement in diverse friendship contexts may represent a crucial factor in influencing stability. (Poulin and Chan, 2010:263)

In practical terms, a level of permanency is required to become an established member of a team or group and can only be achieved if children are afforded the opportunity to remain in the same school, location and/or foster placement. It is well established that involvement in sport or associated activities have a range of physical and mental health benefits but, importantly here, such activities support the development of friendships. Additionally, once a sporting or creative skill is established, that skill is portable. The ability to join a football, netball or cricket team, for example, wherever one might find oneself, creates a layer of protection: a focus, peer acceptance and social circle (Gilligan, 2009).

A wide network of friendships created through involvement in sport or other social activities may be particularly beneficial for children in care who may lack a family network or 'strong ties'. Developing a network of friends or 'weak ties' can help prevent social exclusion and, in adulthood, generate employment opportunities (Millar and Ridge, 2000). Establishing and maintaining such networks can be particularly challenging for children living in rural areas where public transport is limited. Children living in densely populated urban areas are more likely to be able to sustain out of school networks even if a foster or school placement changes (Millar and Ridge, 2000). This is of clear significance as 30% of children experience a change of placement in any given year (Children's Commissioner, 2017).

3.6 Relationship to school and with teachers

3.6a Schools

The importance of educational support from foster carers has been established but it is also crucial that young people in care attend appropriate schools (Narey and Owers, 2018).

Schools have the potential to offer children in care a safe place and teachers and school staff were identified by young people in care as the main determinants of educational progress; playing an important role on a daily basis (Rees and Munro, 2019 and Sebba *et al*, 2017). Provision outlined in *The Children and Young Persons Act (2008)* is vital here; not only did it state that children in care should be able to attend the school of their choice but also, should a change in placement occur during the school year, Local Authorities were given the power to direct schools to admit children in care even where the school is fully subscribed.

This was a significant development as children in care are too frequently placed in a school which is convenient rather than suitable (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Sebba *et al*, 2016; Gilling, 2014 and Jackson *et al*, 2005). Whilst Jackson *et al*'s research (2005) predates *The Children and Young Persons Act (2008)*, their findings are still relevant as of the 129 care leavers interviewed (all of whom were at university) only four participants had attended schools rated as Outstanding by Ofsted. Over half of the participants had attended schools with the poorest rating and academic outcomes. Jackson *et al*'s (2005) findings suggest that Ofsted ratings are not necessarily indicative of the support that schools offer to young people in care. An awareness of childhood development indicated through involvement in the Attachment Research Community which seeks to develop attachment and trauma informed provision in schools may for example, be a better indicator of available support than Ofsted ratings which have focused largely on quantitative data.

The systems and routines of school life can prove challenging for children who have experienced adversity in early childhood. The pressures associated with education's performative agenda have been noted but daily social interactions can also be challenging. For example, break times can pose particular problems due to the lack of structure, routine and adult supervision. These times could generate considerable anxiety for children who have had less or little exposure to positive, independent play (Dann, 2011 and Comfort, 2007). Another example might be the common-place use of sanctions and rewards. A sanction employed in primary school classrooms involves moving a child's name down into the lowest zone of a behaviour chart. This may sound relatively benign compared to disciplinary methods in past decades but often the child is required to walk to the front of the class and move their name into this zone: an act of potential shame and embarrassment. Whilst a resilient child may recover quickly from this; a child whose early experiences involved frequent verbal and/or emotional abuse may find this behaviour management strategy rather more damaging or meaningless (Dann, 2011).

3.6b Teachers

The importance of supportive, high quality relationships between teachers and pupils has been established (Rees and Munro, 2019; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Sebba *et al*, 2016; Gilling, 2014; Sugden, 2013; Comfort, 2007; Jackson and McParlin, 2006 and Harker, 2004). Teachers are regarded as prime motivators in terms of educational success who often act as mentors for children who have experienced adversity (Sebba *et al*, 2016; Sugden, 2013 and Comfort, 2007). Given this, it is interesting to note how infrequently teachers are interviewed in research which specifically explores the educational experiences of children in care.

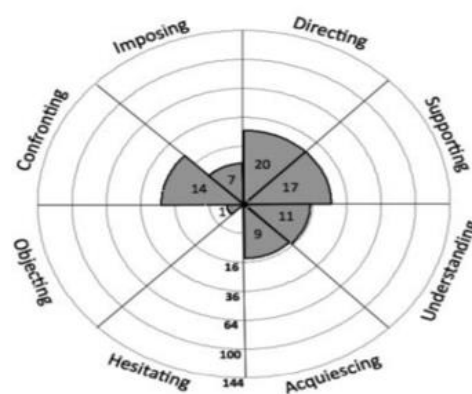
Claessens *et al* (2017) conducted a study of teacher-pupil relationships. They argued that whilst the research was completed in the Netherlands, their findings are largely transferrable to other Western countries, stating that ‘variance in classroom climate lies at the level of the individual teacher rather than of the nation’ (Claessens *et al*, 2017:480). Claessens and colleagues surveyed 135 teachers and from this sample selected twenty-eight participants of ranging ages and levels of professional experience to interview. When interviewed, teachers were asked to describe two positive relationships with pupils and two that they considered problematic. It should be noted that the teachers used their own definitions of positive and problematic relationships, suggesting considerable variation across the sample. Claessens *et al* (2017) found an important element in positive teacher-pupil relationships was interactions outside of the classroom environment. The dynamics of the relationships between teachers and pupils altered outside of the formal classroom setting, becoming more supportive.

Chart 3.2 Teacher behaviour

Teacher behaviour out of class



Teacher behaviour in class



Source: Claessens *et al*, 2017: 484

Chart 3.2 shows that twice as many teachers regarded themselves as supporting pupils when not formally teaching; the level of confrontation dropped considerably whilst the level of understanding increased by over 50%. Teachers involved in Claessens *et al's* study described relationships outside of the classroom as more positive – becoming friend-like in nature. Authentic relationships occur most frequently outside of the classroom and develop through ‘moment-to-moment interactions’ (Claessens *et al*, 2017: 478). Positive interactions repeated over a period of time can enable the development of trust. Another advantage of support offered outside of class time is that conversations may move away from the public space of the classroom, thereby creating a space for young people to disclose concerns (Claessens *et al*, 2017). Although Claessens *et al's* (2017) findings resonate with research around trusting relationships (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Gilling, 2014; Sugden, 2013; Comfort, 2007 and Jackson and McParlin, 2006), it is worth noting that Claessens *et al* (2017) focused on problematic and positive relationships rather than relationships that required, for example, nurturing. Additionally as the authors acknowledged, pupils were not asked for their views on these relationships. Therefore whilst their findings raise important ideas around how and where positive relationships develop within the school environment, there are also limitations to the scope of the study.

In order to develop positive, supportive relationships with children in care, teachers may need an understanding of the impact of early childhood trauma (Dann, 2011). Teachers who demonstrate understanding and offer support when it is not strictly within their remit to do so may be the only adults in that child’s life who are not directly paid to support them. Therefore their importance cannot be underestimated. It is suggested that secure and trusting relationships with teachers can help those in care feel equal to their peers (Selwyn

and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). A trusting relationship with one key adult may act as a turning point for many children in care and is strongly associated with resilience, healthy development and recovery after experiences of adversity (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Maston, 2015 and Gilligan 2009). It is recognised in all research considered here that teachers do not receive sufficient training around child development and specific issues such as attachment disorders, the long-term impact of neglect, separation and the health issues associated with a disadvantaged physical, emotional and social start to life.

Although positive relationships between teachers and pupils may be particularly important for children who have experienced adversity, it is important to consider Mannay *et al's* (2017:691) note of caution that 'special treatment' may generate 'unintended harms'. A universal offer of positive relationships between teachers and pupils built on trust and an understanding of child development may be more beneficial than interventions aimed specifically at children in care.

In order to understand the importance of the findings from this literature analysis a theoretical framework was sought which embraced the main concepts discussed. A carefully selected theory helps researchers to analyse participants' narratives objectively, illuminating the causes and reasons for their actions without distortion (Bourdieu, 1999). At the outset of this thesis and prior to conducting any interviews I was interested in the role of agency within the care system and considered Bourdieu's exploration of habitus particularly in his later work (1999) where he allows for greater individual agency. However this study does not seek solely to discuss the constraints children in care experience, it also seeks to understand *how* they navigate their way through their care journeys. I anticipated that participants would have shared experiences of care but also unique recollections of

education, key adults and peers. My reading of Archer's theory of the internal conversation and modes of reflexivity (explained in more detail below) began before I started interviewing participants. It became apparent that her theory could offer a way of exploring and explaining how young people in care respond to, and make sense of, the structures they encounter. The notion of modes of reflexivity appeared to allow for 'complex and multi-layered representations capable of articulating the same realities but on different terms' (Bourdieu, 1999:3) which resonates strongly with a critical realist ontology. The first four interviews conducted strengthened my commitment to Archer's theory. These interviews revealed clear modes of reflexivity and explicit examples of utilising internal conversations to manage immediate circumstances and to formulate longer-term plans.

3.7 The internal conversation and reflexivity

Archer works within the field of critical realism and has made a major contribution to the debate on the relationship between structure and agency (Caetano, 2014; Farrugia, 2013; Hung and Appleton, 2015; King, 2010; Sayer, 2012 and Lahire, 2003). Archer offers the approach of analytical dualism which contends that whilst structure and agency are interdependent, it is possible to explore each aspect separately and analytically. Accepting the separation of structure and agency allows Archer to examine the interplay between the two factors and how individuals exercise agency which she suggests occurs through reflexive internal conversations (Archer, 2010).

Archer further explains her theoretical position in relationship to other key researchers in this field. For example, Bourdieu's understanding of structure and agency and associated notion of habitus is heavily critiqued by Archer as unreliable in late modernity. Archer views

Bourdieu's theory of habitus as a conflation of structure and agency which contrasts with her theory of analytical dualism (2012). Further to this critique, Archer (2012) argues that late modernity confronts all individuals with increasingly unfamiliar contexts which require new responses that cannot be found in our habitus thus heightening the need for reflexive internal conversations to enable planning and action.

Giddens' later work (1995) which attributed greater power to the individual by acknowledging the reflexive relationship between structure and agency is also viewed as limited. Archer (2012) states that whilst late modernity makes agentic reflexive internal conversations imperative, they are not (as she reports Giddens as suggesting) new. Archer highlights the work of the American pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey who examined problem solving and action through reflexive discussions at the end of the nineteenth century (2012). However, King (2010) contends that there are many parallels between the work of Archer and Giddens, both theorists have contributed to the development of critical realism, both examine the relationship between structure and agency and both (particularly in later publications) place emphasis on the capacity for individual agency.

Where the reflexive interplay between structure and agency has been considered in social theory, Archer argues that the nuances of reflexive conversations have not been understood. She states there has been no acknowledgment that this process may be 'practised in different ways by different people and differently in different social settings' (Archer, 2012:11). The recognition of a range of reflexive modalities is one of Archer's most significant contributions to social theory.

In order to negotiate our way through life, Archer contends that all human beings engage in internal conversations to refine thoughts, consider alternatives and make decisions and

plans (Archer, 2010; 2007; 2000). During internal conversations we are both subject and object. We speak to ourselves, but we also listen and question. As we question, we revise knowledge gained and consider emotional responses and so this continues until we reach a resolution or abandon the thought process. Archer suggests that this conversation is shaped by 'me, I and you' (2010: 4) and develops through three stages: discernment, deliberation and dedication (Archer, 2000). When encountering a dilemma or choice we may employ discernment by first considering all available options, their merits and limitations. The deliberation stage involves questioning our motivations and potential choices. To question ourselves we evoke 'me' or our past self – our past actions and routines which form the basis of our decision making. For example, we might ask ourselves 'what did I do last time?' Past actions may be compared to our future aspirations which Archer (2010) termed 'you'. 'I' is our present, questioning self – 'I' is the self in reflexive mode, questioning past actions and ideas in the present context; deliberating the best course of action to move towards future goals or ultimate concerns. Archer argues that I/you/me change over time. Today's I is not the same as that of last week or last year and therefore the past self (me) also changes and as this happens, the future self (you) changes simultaneously (Archer, 2010). Through this process we arrive at dedication where we commit to a course of action and this becomes a concern or possibly an ultimate concern (Archer, 2007; 2000). Archer (2007) explains that ultimate concerns form a basis around which other concerns are integrated. It is recognised however that all of this process and all accompanying actions or plans are fallible. The internal conversation is iterative, failed plans are evaluated by the questioning self and an ever-present emotional commentary. Through this cycle all but the fractured reflexive (discussed below) move towards their priorities or ultimate concerns (Archer, 2007; 2000).

3.7a Modes of reflexivity

Internal conversations allow individuals to develop plans and actions. Archer refers to this process as reflexivity (2010; 2007; 2000). Reflexivity allows human beings to exercise agency and the need for reflexivity increased as society moved into an age of late modernity. Individuals must rely more on their internal deliberations and inner voice as traditional family structures reduce (Archer, 2000). Archer contends that all 'normal people' engage in reflexivity although she does not clarify what is meant by 'normal' (Archer, 2007). However in interview (2016a) Archer explained that 'normal people just means not pathologically, not physiologically damaged. It's the common sense, everyday meaning.' This simplified and unsubstantiated definition resonates with the critique of Archer as a theorist who underestimates the realities of social adversity (Tyler, 2015, Caetano, 2014; Farrugia, 2013; Sayer, 2012; Reay, 2009; Skeggs, 2004; Lahire, 2003 and Crossley, 2001.) These issues are explored in more detail from page 105.

Archer's notion of reflexivity provides a valuable but not unproblematic insight when evaluating how young people negotiate their way through life in care and education (Archer, 2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000). Potentially, reflexivity is all the more important for those children without a clearly defined or structured family unit. Not only do children in care need to make their way in a challenging, complex late-modern society but they must also navigate complex family relationships during, and beyond, their childhood. Young people in care experience additional social structures such as legal frameworks, corporate parenting, educational progress meetings and transitioning out of care. This study considers how young people develop and utilise reflexive capacities in adverse circumstances.

Archer explored the possibility that the internal conversation was experienced through different modes in 2003 but this theory was fully developed in 2007 when Archer conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-four participants to identify 'whether or not such modes were measurable [or] varied in intensity' (2007:326). Through this research Archer proposed that internal conversations occur in four main modes which vary in efficacy (2007:93):

Communicative reflexivity – individuals whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before resulting in courses of action.

Autonomous reflexivity - those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action.

Fractured reflexivity - those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action.

Meta-reflexivity - those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society.

Communicative reflexives tend to have experienced a relatively stable childhood; marked by high levels of natal continuity. Those operating in this mode are likely to contribute most to their local community; they value family and social continuity. They may seek a career similar to that of their parents and, when they encounter difficulties or problems they seek the advice and guidance of their closest family or social network, their priority is to reproduce their natal context. Conversely, autonomous reflexives rely almost entirely on their internal conversations – feeling little need for external validation. The early childhood experiences shaping this autonomous mode will have taken one of two paths: individuals may have successfully navigated challenging circumstances or they may have been supported to become independent through, perhaps, taking part in a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Fractured reflexives are also likely to have experienced challenging circumstances during childhood. However, those operating in this mode will not have resolved these difficulties and are unlikely to have enjoyed any meaningful support from

primary caregivers. This in turn leads to a lack of confidence both in their own internal thought processes and quite possibly in those around them. It is suggested that increasingly we all engage in meta-reflexivity, questioning our own thought processes and subsequent actions (Archer, 2007).

3.7b Challenges to Archer's model of agency and reflexivity

Whilst Archer offers an invaluable lens through which to understand how participants respond to the structures of care and education, limitations of her theory have been suggested. Critiques of her work largely focus on the high level of agency her later work (2010; 2007) suggests individuals are able to exercise and their ability to reform rather than reproduce social structures and cultures. For example, Hung and Appleton (2015) considered the impact of growing up in care, the relevance of her modes of reflexivity for care leavers and their ability to exercise agency. Hung and Appleton recognised that strong reflexive skills and effective planning are required to enable a young person to transition successfully from the care system into independent living. However, as they explained, many people growing up in care have experienced long term adversity and potentially high levels of disruption. Care leavers may find planning, particularly towards long-term goals very challenging (Hung and Appleton, 2015). This difficulty may appear to dovetail with Archer's description of the 'fractured' reflexives. However, Hung and Appleton suggested an alternative mode of reflexivity 'survival-oriented' which referred to their participants' focus on immediate planning. Many of their participants felt planning for the future was pointless but they planned carefully for day-to-day existence. One participant noted:

If there's just one day, I'll plan for it. I don't believe in planning further ahead. Because you never know – you never know. (2015:46)

In this way, Hung and Appleton's participants can be seen as different to Archer's fractured reflexives. Considering the participants' experiences, planning one day at a time seems logical. It is conceivable that this approach was a conscious decision and not an example of fractured or unsuccessful reflexivity. Participants in Hung and Appleton's study can also be seen to share traits with autonomous reflexives with many disclosing a strong desire to be self-sufficient.

Hung and Appleton identified that this self-reliance was an emerging skill borne from necessity rather than a disposition acquired incrementally throughout childhood. They presented three main challenges to Archer's theory (2015:49):

- That Archer does not sufficiently acknowledge the impact of sustained adversity on life chances and the ability to exercise agency.
- That modes of reflexivity need to flex and recognise that some individuals may experience delays in forming a coherent mode of reflexivity.
- That fractured reflexivity may be a temporary state - Hung and Appleton suggest that Archer underestimates the long term and corrosive nature of childhood trauma.

The suggestion that Archer underestimates the impact of societal structures and lived experiences is voiced elsewhere. Hung and Appleton confined their discussion to her understanding of the impact of care but other theorists engage in a wider debate around Archer's apparent dismissal of Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Caetano, 2014; Farrugia, 2013; Sayer, 2012 and Crossley, 2001). Archer's model of agency is viewed as underestimating the nature and strength of social constraints and demonstrating a lack of understanding of how identities are constructed (Skeggs, 2004). Sayer submitted that social class is an 'embodied disposition' (2012:109); he acknowledged that we may all reflect on our social class and the dispositions we have accrued but he suggests that we may only achieve limited success in distancing ourselves from our social or natal origins. This is also highlighted by Reay (2009) who interviewed working-class students at an elite university. The interviewees explained

that they felt uncomfortable, aware that they did not have a 'feel for the game' (Sayer, 2012:120). Reay identified that some working-class students accepted places at less prestigious universities despite achieving the grades needed for an elite university because they simply felt more *at home* in a more familiar, possibly less middle-class, environment. In addition to the critique above, it is also suggested that Archer seeks to minimise the impact of social context (Tyler, 2015; Farrugia, 2013; Sayer, 2012; Reay, 2009 and Lahire, 2003). This is a complex issue as Archer's earlier writing (2000) demonstrated clear recognition of the challenges posed by social and economic disadvantage. However in later work Archer appears to view late modernity as offering unlimited opportunities, proposing that 'social conditioning no longer has a strong purchase on contemporary identities', suggesting that 'economic privilege instead has become an 'albatross' tied around one's neck' (2010:136/7). Archer's view of the possibilities generated by late modernity is refuted by researchers conducting empirical research around social class and poverty (Farrugia, 2013 and Tyler, 2015). McDonald (2005) explored the long-term impact of growing up in poverty, stating that the neo-liberal economy has created a secondary labour market, made up of unskilled jobs with little training and few prospects, which is very difficult to escape. This can be updated from McDonald's (2005) study to include the now wide-spread zero-hour contracts. Farrugia viewed Archer's discussion of late modernity as:

Uncritically optimistic, unable to understand the material inequalities which continue to structure late modern subjectivities. (2015: 627)

Tyler (2015) argued that far from the impact of class diminishing as Archer suggests, the divide between rich and poor has become further and more deeply entrenched in the neo-liberal economy. Far from late modernity opening up opportunities for all individuals to be free from class and economic restraint, it is possible that we are increasingly divided based

on our financial and social status. Tyler explored the current framing of class divisions and poverty stating that politicians seek to blame individuals for their circumstances rather than acknowledging, accepting or addressing structural problems that create and sustain poverty. Farrugia (2013) challenged Archer's more recent (2012; 2010) discussion of agency and social context by proposing a theory of 'practical intelligibility', which he explained as:

A perspective which understands reflexivity as operating according to practical intelligibility shaped by the structure context the subject is embedded within. (2013:284)

Farrugia accepts that individuals engage in the internal conversations proposed by Archer but suggested that these are firmly framed by what is possible given immediate circumstances. As stated, Archer (2000) acknowledged challenges to agency, additionally in 2010, Archer indicated that communicative reflexives may find it difficult to maintain natal continuity due to the demise of stable communities – recognising that an individual's choices and plans are shaped or constrained by their social context. Archer discussed *'Making our Way through the World'* (2007), Farrugia suggests an adjustment to give greater weighting to social constraints stating that individuals 'make sense of the world' based on a practical understanding of the world and our relationship with it (2013:293).

3.7c Perceptions of agency

Mannay *et al* (2017) found that some children in care exercise agency by actively resisting the labels ascribed to them. However children in care in several studies have expressed the view that people from their (challenging) circumstances stand little chance of achieving social or professional success or exercising control over their own outcomes (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall 2017; Wijedasa, 2017; Jackson and McParlin, 2006 and Skeggs, 1997). 30% of children in care experience a change in their primary caregiver in any given year

(Children's Commissioner, 2017). The lack of stability often associated with being in care creates a sense of 'not being in control' of the decisions affecting their lives (Wijedasa, 2017). Wijedasa contended that adolescents, particularly girls, living in care are more likely to have an external locus of control – a sense that events in their lives are shaped by external factors such as luck or fate. This is particularly significant as higher academic outcomes are associated with an internal locus of control – a sense that life events and outcomes are shaped by our actions and behaviours (Wijedasa, 2017; Sun, 2003 and Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Discussions around loci of control are complex. 'Control' may be best understood as existing on a spectrum which is both contextual and temporal. It may be true that many children, especially teenagers, feel they are subject to external control but for children in care there are additional layers of external control: biological parents and families; foster carers; foster siblings; teachers; social workers and lawyers. An internal locus of control is associated with better health and well-being, resilience and higher grades in academic assessments; this is also demonstrated in research by Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017) and Jackson *et al* (2005). The additional layers of control experienced by children in care illustrate how much harder it may be for them to develop an internal locus of control. The locus of control is affected by a person's interactions with the environment and children's locus of control will be influenced by their rearing environments. Those children who are no longer able to live with their birth parents and are in the care of Local Authorities are likely to experience significant disruption and this may affect their locus of control expectations as shown in the table below.

Table: 3.1 Locus of control.

External locus of control	Adopted n = 28 to 30	Fostered n = 30 to 32	Disadvantaged n = 27 to 30	General population n = 11,418 to 12,789
People like me don't have much of a chance in life	15%	29%	28%	10%
How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck	9%	42%	54%	23%
Even if I do well at school, I'll have a hard time getting the right kind of job	54%	65%	52%	42%

Source: Wijedasa, 2017: 14

Table 3.1 demonstrates that when compared to young people in the general population, those in foster care were nearly four times more likely to agree with the statement 'People like me don't have much of a chance in life'. They were also more than twice as likely to agree with 'How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck'. Wijedasa also found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who were not in care demonstrated a high level of agreement with external locus statements, rating higher than those in care for the middle statement 'how well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck'. The criterion for disadvantage was single mothers of low academic attainment (lower than GCSEs) on low-income benefits.

A high percentage of children and young people in foster care (eight to eighteen years of age) felt their carers displayed an interest in their education (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). This may suggest that where decisions made on behalf of the child are perceived as positive and/or life-improving they do not have a negative impact overall on the young person's sense of choice and control. Children may feel empowered if they have close

association with an adult who is also empowered. It is possible that some children in the disadvantaged group may lack this association (Wijedasa, 2017).

As suggested above association with an empowered adult can, in turn, empower a child (Wijedasa, 2017). The Foster Carers' Charter (Fostering Network, 2016) and the Independent Review of Foster Care (Narey and Owers, 2018) called for greater delegated power for foster carers. Prolonged decision making processes regarding low-risk activities are regarded as a significant source of frustration for children in care (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017 and Fostering Network, 2016). Additionally it is recognised that best practice in the care system would allow young people a voice in the decisions made surrounding their care.

3.8 Conclusion

In terms of my own study, an understanding of internal conversations is vital. This study contributes to research by analysing participants' internal conversations and how they respond to the structures involved in care and education. Modes of reflexivity further illuminate how young people in care navigate their circumstances with or without the support of key adults and friends. Farrugia's notion of 'practical intelligibility' (2013) is a valuable consideration as it allows a fuller understanding of participants' planning, aspirations, thoughts and choices within social contexts.

The literature offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of children in care and their experiences of education. None of the research included in this chapter has been conducted by teachers and very little research involves interviews with teachers. In addition, a notable gap in the research is a detailed examination of the role of the DT. Whilst this study aims to foreground the experiences of young people in care, further research with teachers and DTs

would be beneficial. Methodologically many studies based in the UK employ a similar (although larger scale) approach to this study. The majority of the primary research considered in this chapter utilises qualitative methods and aims to generate rich data which prioritises and respects the voice of the participants. Little information is given in the literature considered in this chapter regarding the characteristics of the Authorities where the research is based. This is significant as foster care is a devolved issue in the UK and therefore funding and guidance may vary considerably. This study locates its findings clearly in the context of the selected Local Authority which allows an understanding of the challenges faced by relevant services.

CHAPTER FOUR METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

The last chapter reviewed literature related to children in care and their experiences of education. The development of agency, identities and modes of reflexivity were also discussed as a way to understand how young people negotiate their experiences of care, school and their own aspirations.

This chapter will introduce the rationale and justification for the chosen research methodology: the theoretical underpinning for sampling, data generation and analysis. The trustworthiness and generalisability of the research will also be explored. This study makes 'private words public' (Bourdieu, 1999:1) and therefore ethical considerations are crucial, they are discussed in detail and foregrounded in this chapter.

4.1 Research Aims

Through foregrounding the educational journeys of children and young people in care, this study aims to illuminate aspects of policies and practice which enable and constrain educational progress. This study aims not only to *hear* care leavers' voices but to ensure that they are *heard*. To ensure participants' voices are prioritised I have included extended excerpts from interview transcripts, findings from this thesis will be shared with key members of the Local Authority's Children's Services (Mannay *et al*, 2019 and Holland *et al*, 2008). The importance of treating participants with respect and sensitivity informed my interviews and the analysis of data. I will begin by critiquing my own perspective, ethical considerations and research design which inform research with vulnerable young people.

4.2 Research Questions

1. What are the current educational and family policies and legislation relevant to children in care?
2. What key relationships for children and young people in care are significant for them?
3. To what extent are children and young people in care able to exercise agency?
4. What are the educational experiences of children and young people who have experienced care?

A qualitative, interpretative approach has been adopted to investigate these research questions. I aimed to generate data ethically and rigorously. Data generated was analysed thematically.

4.3 Research Design

This is a qualitative study in the field of critical realism. Ontologically and epistemologically, I have taken a critical realist viewpoint which is based on an understanding that a 'world exists independently from our thoughts but we can only know what it is like from within discourse' (Sayer, 2000:41). Critical realism adopts a depth ontology which seeks to 'bridge the divide' between positivist and constructivist positions. Three key elements are proposed: the 'real' which refers to universal generative mechanisms that we may or may not sense or know. These mechanisms may create 'actual' events that can be observed and these events are interpreted 'empirically.' Critical realism acknowledges that the 'actual' can be interpreted differently, partially and subjectively (Hawke, 2017; O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014 and Oliver, 2012:372). Research in the field of critical realism accepts that many events and social structures exist independently of our knowledge of them. However, critical realism also contends that these events and social structures are mediated through

language and experienced through subjective social constructions which are historically, culturally and socially situated (Archer *et al*, 2016; Oliver, 2012 and Sayer, 2000).

Critical realism is concerned with the nature of causation, agency, structure and relations. It is accepted that reality is 'multiply determined' and that no single mechanism generates specific outcomes (Archer *et al*, 2016 and O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014:10). Bhaskar explained that a key feature of critical realism is philosophical under-labouring which provided researchers with the tools 'to remove the rubbish that prevents us knowing the world' (2017:7).

A critical realist perspective is therefore appropriate to this study as participants were interviewed and asked to share their empirical perspectives of the multiple structures that shape their lives in care and approach to education, which included: governmental policies, levels of educational and personal support from key adults both prior to and during care, friends, school, the requirements of academic examinations and financial constraints. The interviews conducted in this study allowed access to participants' empirical knowledge or 'the inner world of thoughts' which provided a subjective description of events. These findings were then analysed to theorise the reflexive interplay between the 'actual' or observable features of care and education systems and participants' responses to them (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014:21 and O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Critical realists believe that analysing this complex interplay creates the opportunity to isolate causal mechanisms which have the potential and capacity to change (Bhaskar, 2017 and Oliver, 2012).

Research of social experiences is necessarily complex and difficult. Whilst subjectivity is acknowledged, critical realism demands that researchers examine their own perspectives and remain reflexive throughout the research. Reflexive practice can be understood as an

awareness of the interplay between prospective and retrospective reflexivity (Attia and Edge, 2017). Prospective reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware of their own experiences and beliefs that may impact on the research process (Palmer, 2019).

Retrospective reflexivity refers to the impact research has on the researcher which may contribute to their experiences or influence their beliefs. Three key approaches supported a reflexive approach: discussions with my supervisors and after presentations at conferences (Matchett, 2019; 2018) which challenged my understanding, keeping a journal allowed me to record any observations and thoughts but perhaps most importantly transcribing interviews enabled me to re-play and listen again to the points raised by my participants. The transcription process challenged me personally as participants did not always give the responses I had anticipated which enabled me to reconsider my own positionality (Palmer, 2019). The interviews also informed and changed my perspective of the care system and the crucial role of teachers (Attia and Edge, 2017). When transcribing interviews I often found participants' accounts emotionally distressing, I also admired participants' tenacity and resilience. This retrospective reflexivity heightened my commitment to represent participants as faithfully as possible (Sayer, 2000).

It is important to acknowledge that all research findings may be superseded (Sayer, 2000). New dimensions may be uncovered which add greater depth and understanding. However critical realism allows for judgemental rationality which seeks to ensure an authentic account of research findings (Archer *et al*, 2016). Sayer (2000) argued that this is best understood as 'practical adequacy': researchers must endeavour to find the most authentic account possible whilst accepting other interpretations may exist. In my generation, analysis and reporting of data, I aimed to represent participants fairly and to provide an account which is consistent with their experiences (Charmaz, 1995). This approach is consistent with

Sayer's (2000) notion of 'practical adequacy' in that I do not claim there is no alternative interpretation of my findings but do actively seek to provide as authentic an account as possible.

4.4 Ethical considerations

All research involving human participants must adhere to stringent ethical principles. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018:10) established five key considerations which should underpin all research:

- Research should be inclusive of different interests, values, funders, methods and perspectives.
- Research should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.
- Research should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.
- Researchers should act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research.
- Research should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm.

It is crucial to research groups of people who have experienced disadvantage. Research creates the capacity for change and enables participants to discuss the issues which matter most to them. However, the research process must be approached with caution.

Researchers must remain sensitive and ensure that any research completed aims to prioritise and benefit the group studied (Liamputtong, 2007). The safety and well-being of participants must be considered throughout the research process and my commitment to this principle is reflected in the sections below.

Decisions and discussions around how to refer to the selected Local Authority have been extensive and complex. Protecting the anonymity of participants is crucial but allowing accurate representation by providing contextual information of the site of this research is

also important (Bourdieu, 1999). The Local Authority is an urban, densely populated area and this has implications for children in care such as allowing more young people in care to remain in the same school despite changes in placements, greater access to public transport and local amenities. I am also aware some information provided in the Policy Chapter renders the Local Authority identifiable. The complexity of this issue is acknowledged by

BERA:

When researching a very well-known institution, it may be possible for some readers to infer the identity of that institution even from a fully anonymised account of that research. Furthermore, approaches to this issue differ according to the type of research being undertaken. (BERA, 2018:41)

I believe that the removal of all names and, in the case of information related to young people in care, all uniquely identifying information is sufficient to protect individual anonymity. To help prevent indirect identification distinctive job titles of professional participants have been removed and the name of the Local Authority is also redacted in the reference list (Clark, 2006). This approach has been discussed with and supported by my supervisors.

There were further significant ethical implications for this study and I will address the issues as they arose chronologically.

4.4a Approval

As I planned to interview care leavers in a neighbouring Local Authority it was necessary to obtain ethical approval from both my university and the Local Authority's City Council (appendices 1 and 2). Although gaining approval in December 2015 was crucial, ensuring my research was conducted ethically was an on-going consideration and I was committed

throughout to ensuring that the well-being of participants took precedence over the research study (Nairn and Clarke, 2012).

4.4b Initial Meetings

Shortly after gaining ethical approval and with the assistance of a Local Authority Councillor I was able to arrange meetings with two key members of Children's Services. Both offered their time and vital practical support in generating further useful contacts. For example, a meeting with the Authority's Research Manager was arranged who shared examples of information and consent forms used in the council's research (appendices three to five). All personnel consulted recognised the importance of listening to participants' views and opinions. It was agreed that the findings of this study should be shared with Children's Services at two intervals – an interim report once interviews were completed and a presentation at the conclusion of this study. It is important to note that although this research has received support from the Local Authority it has been conducted independently.

4.4c Financial compensation for participants

The Research Manager advised that participants should receive a £20 Love-to-Shop voucher as compensation for their time and that this was standard practice in all research undertaken by the Authority's City Council. Compensation for participation in research can be controversial and is generally discouraged (BERA, 2018 and Liamputtong, 2007). From a practical perspective however I needed the co-operation of key council members and they viewed compensation as non-negotiable. Liampattong (2007) contended that whilst compensation can be, in certain circumstances, undesirable it can also serve to indicate that the interviewees' time and participation is valued and certainly this was the view of the Local Authority. I consulted the university's Ethics Committee regarding the requirement to

compensate participants and approval was given. The vouchers were funded by the university's research department.

Vouchers were given to participants at the start of interviews. I also offered assurance that the vouchers did not imply any obligation to answer questions. All participants remained free to withdraw from the interview at any stage. In this way, I aimed to minimise any sense that vouchers were being utilised to coerce or reward participants (Nairn and Clarke, 2012).

4.4d Informed Consent

A key member of Children's Services also enabled a connection between myself and a key member of the Local Authority's Rights and Participation team (RAP). The RAP Officer (RAPO) had extensive knowledge of the care leaver population, was committed to their welfare and acted as a diligent gatekeeper (Mayock, 2000). She proved instrumental in identifying potential participants and ensuring their consent was informed and voluntary. Initially, the RAPO and I met to discuss my research. She then shared this information with a group of young care leavers at one of their regular meetings. Following this, I was invited to a subsequent informal meeting with care leavers which allowed potential participants to assess my approach and general demeanour. My aim was to put potential participants at ease whilst also reducing any demands on them (BERA, 2018). The information leaflet (appendix three) was then shared with the young people by the RAPO which allowed potential participants greater freedom to ask questions and to decide whether or not to take part thus helping to ensure informed consent. Although there were no significant questions arising from this process, the young people expressed a preference to be interviewed as a group in the first instance.

Where participants were not contacted through the Authority's RAPO a similar process was followed. Potential participants were given the information leaflet and given time to

consider their participation and any questions. Before any interviews began, the nature of the research and participants' right to confidentiality, anonymity and withdrawal were reiterated. Four participants were students at the university where I am employed and it was important to assure them that participation or withdrawal from this study would have no impact on their studies and that their identity would remain confidential.

4.4e Locations

Interviews were conducted in locations that were convenient and comfortable for participants (Brown and Dowling, 1998). When meeting individual participants (with the exception of the four university students) I endeavoured to again hold interviews in the RAPO's meeting room. Occasionally this was not possible and at these times I reserved an appropriate room at a central university campus – always checking first that this was accessible and acceptable for participants. Safety for myself and participants was a primary concern when selecting a location (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and in accordance with the university's Lone Working Policy, I informed my supervisor of the time and location of all interviews. I ensured rooms used at the university offered an appropriate level of confidentiality whilst also being located centrally within the building to reduce any safeguarding concerns. I ensured furniture was comfortable, that chairs were the same height and were arranged appropriately – avoiding formal arrangements such as sitting directly opposite one another (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

4.4f Interview process

All interviews followed a schedule (appendix six). At the start of all interviews I ensured participants were made welcome – for example by offering a drink and ensuring they were comfortable. Interviews took one of two formats: individual or group. Group interviews can be challenging both in terms of ensuring conversations stay on track with all participants

gaining an equal opportunity to contribute and ensuring any details disclosed remain confidential (Allen, 2002). However as noted above, a group interview was requested by the participants introduced to me through the Local Authority's RAPO. They were a group accustomed to discussing potentially sensitive issues and had an established code of conduct for meetings. We met in their regular meeting room which enabled participants to feel comfortable and secure. It was important to share information about the research in both written and spoken form as some participants may have low levels of literacy (Allen, 2002). At the start of this interview I outlined the parameters and purpose of the research and how the data might be used. I reassured participants that their information would be held securely and that no identifying features would be used in my thesis or related presentations. I reminded all participants that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and/or to refuse to answer any question. I was mindful to inform participants that once my thesis is completed it would not be possible to remove their information. I then checked for consent, participants either signed the form (appendix four) or gave consent verbally which was recorded (Ovenden and Loxley, 1993). This process was then repeated at the start of each subsequent interview.

The group interview continued to develop trust and yielded further interviews: one participant was subsequently interviewed individually, the RAPO identified further care leavers as potential interviewees and some participants suggested a friend who would be interested in participating. It is suggested that research of this nature often operates in this way – making the first contact can be difficult and time consuming but once trust is established participants often provide further contacts (Allen, 2002). The RAPO remained in her role as gatekeeper, contacting potential participants, sharing the information leaflet and liaising with me around any questions raised. Her support here was invaluable. Not only did

she enable effective communication but her knowledge of the individuals added a layer of protection, ensuring that no individuals experiencing significant current or recent challenges were asked to participate (Nairn and Clarke, 2012).

As stated, four participants were not contacted in the way outlined above. These participants were students at the university where I am employed. They approached me and expressed an interest in my research plans. I again sought advice from the ethics committee, approval to proceed was given on the basis that I neither regularly taught nor assessed these students.

4.4g On-going consent

In order to ensure on-going consent and to minimise any discomfort during interviewing I paused the interview process periodically to outline the subsequent areas of discussion. This was important as it allowed participants to feel at ease and informed, it gave participants the opportunity to consider whether any points of discussion may be uncomfortable and to voice any concerns. Whilst Braun and Clarke (2013) state that mild distress is not unusual during interviews it was my responsibility to ensure that no participant was unduly distressed by the interview process. During the interviews I remained alert to, and acknowledged, any discomfort displayed by participants (BERA, 2018 and Braun and Clarke 2013). When participants displayed any signs of distress, I paused recording and took time for the participant to regain composure. The most significant example of this is in Caroline's interview, I observed signs of distress and stopped recording, after a short interval, we did resume the interview but moved on to a new topic. At all times care for participants' rights and decisions remained my priority (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

4.4h Generation and storage of data

Interview data was recorded in the first instance on a portable device and transferred at the earliest opportunity to the secure one-drive network offered by the university. In order to ensure confidentiality, I transcribed all interviews and all participants were given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity (BERA, 2018 and Braun and Clarke, 2013). Participants were asked if they would like to select a pseudonym but none indicated a preference. Therefore I selected pseudonyms which aimed to reflect both their gender and ethnic background.

Whilst interviews in this study were conducted in 2016 and 2017, the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (DPA) in 2018 placed an on-going responsibility on researchers to protect participants' personal information. Accordingly I ensured that any information which could indirectly identify participants was not included in this study. For example, two participants recalled very specific events such as representing the selected Local Authority in a recognisable national event. Detailed information of this nature is not included in this study to ensure anonymity and prevent indirect identification.

4.4i Professional Interviews

Three key members of the Local Authority's Children's Services were interviewed individually. These interviews are referred to as 'professional' as participants have access to knowledge about the care system (Littig, 2008). Access to professional participants can be challenging (Littig, 2008) but fortunately a member of university staff introduced me to a Councillor who in turn enabled contacts with professional participants.

The professional participants were aware of my research as they had offered support and advice from the outset. However at the start of each interview I recapped the parameters of my research, ensured and recorded verbal consent. Although all three individuals orally agreed to waive their right to anonymity, BERA (2018) reminds researchers to be aware that more vulnerable participants may be identified by association. Therefore in order to further protect the young people in this study, distinctive titles of key personnel and the name of the Local Authority have not been used.

4.5 Researcher's Perspective and Suitability

4.5a Perspective

A critical realist perspective acknowledges that research is subjective, involving interpretation at every stage of the research journey (Johnston and Smith, 2014 and Sayer, 2000). In this study, data was generated through interviews which themselves require an interpretation of roles, verbal and non-verbal communication (Cohen *et al*, 2017). Whilst acknowledging that qualitative research involves interpretation it is important that researchers continually challenge their interpretations (Palmer, 2019 and Braun and Clarke, 2013). Throughout this study I maintained a journal but it has been the discussions with my supervisors that have most effectively encouraged me to reflect on my findings and interpretations.

In terms of my own perspective it is important to acknowledge my personal experience of the care system. Adopting my son from foster care in 2013 developed my understanding of the care system and shaped my view of the impact early childhood trauma has on personal and academic development. My personal experience and emotional investment in this study has proved both an asset and a disadvantage. This personal commitment has been a source

of considerable motivation. Sharing appropriate aspects of my experiences helped to generate a sense of trust in interviews. I believe participants felt reassured that my interest in their experiences went beyond the requirements of my studies. However it has also meant that, at times, I have found this research distressing (Loughran and Mannay, 2018). As a qualified and experienced teacher, it is also possible that my reaction to participants' accounts of teachers and teaching was subjective and biased. A reflexive approach has enabled me to retain respect for participants' experiences and circumstances whilst also identifying when my emotional responses were less helpful. In this way I endeavoured to produce as authentic an account of participants' concerns as is possible (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

4.5b Suitability

I have worked in education for twenty years and specifically with young adults since 2010. Working in a university requires tutors to develop a rapport with students very quickly. This rapport requires both tutors and students to interpret and negotiate roles – building on common ground whilst acknowledging separate responsibilities within an educational context. It is not uncommon for university students to disclose personal concerns to tutors and tutors are required to listen carefully, offer appropriate support and refer students to other colleagues or support networks as necessary. My experience of developing relationships within very short time frames supported my ability to engage with participants.

Personal qualities are also important. Sensitivity was required throughout the interviews to ensure participants felt as comfortable as possible (Seale *et al*, 2004). Not only was sensitivity required in response to information shared by participants but also in how I presented myself and my position as a university tutor. For example, whilst it was important

to show participants my identification badge at the start of interviews to ensure participants felt safe, I did not then wear it as such items carry connotations of authority which may be particularly unsettling for care experienced young people. I was also careful to minimise the display of car keys and technological devices as again these carry connotations of social and/or material affluence which may have been insensitive.

4.6 Sampling

A large urban Local Authority was selected as the context for this research for two main reasons. Firstly, the selected Authority has a high number of children in care (DfE, 2018) and secondly as explained above my supervisor was able to support contact with relevant personnel at the council.

I aimed to interview approximately twenty care leaver participants as this number is regarded as appropriate for a small-scale qualitative study. Twenty interview transcripts are understood to generate a sufficient but not overwhelming amount of interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). There were also practical considerations, as explained above each participant was given a £20 voucher and there was a limit to the vouchers that could be funded by the university. All potential participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- Be at least 18 years old.
- Have been in care for at least six months.
- Have attended a school in the selected Local Authority.

In the initial recruitment of participants I utilised the support of the RAPO to exclude any young person who was currently experiencing (or had recently experienced) significant trauma. In addition to these basic inclusion/exclusion criteria I aimed to interview as diverse a group of care leavers as possible both in terms of personal characteristics such as ethnicity

but also in terms of educational experiences. Purposive sampling was utilised initially as the RAPO helped to identify suitable participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I was aware that these participants were likely to be those most engaged with care leaver services and therefore their views may not have been widely representative of care leavers. To aid stratification of the sample group I contacted a local charitable organisation which specialises in supporting vulnerable young adults. Unfortunately, after extensive conversations no potential participants were identified.

This study also included elements of snowballing and convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was utilised to a very limited extent through the inclusion of four university students who expressed a desire to participate. Snowball sampling proved invaluable as it ultimately enabled me to reach a more diverse group of care leavers (Yin, 2016 and Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Participants were able to suggest friends or acquaintances that they believed might be interested in my study. Ultimately this approach enabled me to interview two care leavers who were not actively engaged with care leaver services and whose educational outcomes were very low.

Purposive sampling was also employed in professional interviews: I selected three key personnel from the Local Authority's Children's Services to interview. These members of staff held relevant positions and enabled me to triangulate findings by examining aspects of the care system from a different perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2013 and Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In the course of this study twenty-one young people were interviewed. Saturation became apparent when themes recurred in interviews and little new information was forthcoming (Braun and Clarke, 2013 and Seale *et al*, 2004).

4.7 Participants

All participants were between eighteen and twenty-seven years of age. As stated above, participants were initially contacted through the Local Authority's RAPO although four were students at university.

At the end of August 2018, 1914 children were the Local Authority's care system. It should be noted that only two participants are male despite their slight over-representation in the Local Authority's care system. In terms of ethnicity, my sample is more varied than the profile of the Local Authority's care system. Children with White British ethnicity account for 75% of the Local Authority's care population but only 30% of my sample. Ethnicity has been recorded as defined by participants.

Table 4.1 - individual participant information

Date:	Name:	Age:	Ethnicity:	Gender:	Type of care:
17 th March 2016	Brooke	19	White British	Female	Foster care and Staying Put
21 st March 2016	Cat	24	Black British	Female	Supported lodgings
24 th March 2016	Nicole	27	White British	Female	Foster care, residential care and supported lodging
8 th April 2016	Caroline	18	White British	Female	Adoption, foster care and Staying Put
25 th July 2016	Anisah	18	Asian British	Female	Kinship placement and foster care
9 th November 2017	Raz	20	Mixed heritage: White British and Asian	Female	Foster care
17 th November 2017	Kath	24	Black British	Female	Foster care and staying put
17 th November 2017	Iz	20	Mixed heritage: White British and Asian	Female	Foster care, accommodation provided by a

					charity
17 th November 2017	Kai	19	Mixed heritage: Black and Pakistani	Male	Foster care
24 th November 2017	Kate	20	White British	Female	Foster care
28 th November 2017	Esther	19	White British	Female	Foster care
1 st December 2017	Sal	18	Dual Heritage: White British and Black Caribbean	Female	Foster care, residential care

Table 4.2 – Interview Group A (IGA) participant information

Date:	Name:	Age:	Ethnicity:	Gender:	Type of care (where know):
29 th June 2016	Alisa	18	Asian British	Female	Foster care
	Bria	19	Dual Heritage	Female	
	Chandni	18	Asian British	Female	
	Danh	18	Vietnamese	Male	Foster care
	Sal	19	Dual Heritage	Female	Foster care, residential care
	Francis	18	Dual Heritage	Female	Foster care
	Gayle	18	White British	Female	

Table 4.3 – Interview Group B (IGB) participant information

Date:	Name:	Age:	Ethnicity	Gender:	Type of care:
16 th August 2016	Aliyah	18	Black British	Female	Foster care
	Jess	19	Asian British	Female	Foster care

Table 4.4. – Professional participant information

26 th April 2016	Key personnel in Children in Care Provider Services.
16 th May 2016	Key personnel in The Virtual School
3 rd November 2017	Key personnel in Rights and Participation

4.8 Data generation methods

A vast quantity of statistical data is available about the care system, children in care and care leavers. However complex systems and experiences such as the care system can only be examined through 'thick data' which seeks to explain the micro-interactions which exist behind statistics (Mannay *et al*, 2017; O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014 and Murray *et al*, 2011).

At the initial stages of planning this project alternative research methods were considered. I explored the possibility of using photo elicitation with pupils of primary school age. I hoped to provide participants with a disposal camera and to ask them to take photographs of places that held significance in their experiences of education and/or care. I hoped that this approach might generate conversations which placed direct value on the participants' experiences and opinions. Ultimately as a new researcher I was unable to gain ethical approval for this plan due to the age of the potential participants. The approach (or a modified version) remains a plan for future research.

All participants in this study are over the age of eighteen and interviews are considered an appropriate research method with older participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The aim of interviewing care leavers was to reveal the thick data of social interactions and experiences that lie behind policy and then to ensure it is utilised to evoke a response and to promote action.

The methods employed in research based in the field of critical realism should connect the inner world of ideas to the other world of observable events (Edwards and O'Mahoney, 2014). To this end, semi-structured interviews were utilised to allow an authentic insight into participants' lives (Silverman, 2001). Interviews are regarded as a social encounter

which value participants' experiences above any data available about them, interviewees offer interpretations of their social situation and the researcher is able to examine the relationship between social structures and the interviewee's perspective (Cohen *et al*, 2017 and Sims-Schouten *et al*, 2007). Additionally interviews allow the researcher to identify reflexivity and gain explanations of thoughts and actions. Critical realism understands that whilst social systems such as foster care exist independently of any research or personal narrative, our *understanding* of foster care is mediated through personal experiences and perceptions. An interplay between our thoughts, actions and social systems also exists and therefore identifying and examining participants' inner-conversations is vital as they 'have powers that can be causally efficacious in relation to himself and to society' (Archer, 2003:14).

Face-to-face interviews allow the researcher to take note of any non-verbal cues which may add to the narrative relayed. Semi-structured interviews have many practical advantages over other research methods, they promote dialogue and flexibility but also enable the interviewer to retain some control over the proceedings (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This approach is flexible; I established an order of the key issues for interviews and shared this with participants. However there remained scope for spontaneity and I was able to focus on interesting points as and when they arose (Cohen *et al*, 2017).

As established, trust is a crucial part of the interview process and the extent to which this trust is successfully formed may vary significantly between interviews. The level of trust established may in turn impact on the language used within an interview, how much information the interviewee is willing to disclose, the willingness to ask for clarification of any unclear questions or answers and the perception of social roles (Cicourel, 1964).

Maintaining a flexible approach to each interview may reduce comparability, for example

different topics and issues may be pursued in interviews (Cohen *et al*, 2017). Another consideration is the variation between interviews conducted by the same person. However semi-structured interviews have benefits for both participants and researchers. They allow participants greater control over the direction and content of the interview which in turn helps the researcher to generate rich data.

To mitigate the impact of the concerns outlined above, the sequence of interview questions was organised to aid the development of trust (Cohen *et al*, 2017). All interviews began with an informal conversation which was brief and solely aimed at ensuring the participants' comfort (Seale *et al*, 2004). The first questions within the interviews were closed questions which required straightforward answers, for example asking the participant's current age and for a description of their current education or employment situation. Throughout the rest of the interview I asked open ended, neutral questions. Occasionally I recapped points made by participants or expressed sadness or disappointment at the challenges that they had encountered. Whilst it can be argued that revealing personal responses lessens objectivity (Cohen *et al*, 2017), my aim throughout the interviews was to value participants' accounts and experiences and therefore it was not always possible or desirable to remain neutral. Disclosing my reactions ensured participants were not treated as an 'objects' of examination (Loughran and Mannay, 2018; Seale *et al*, 2004:19 and Sayer, 2000). I remained reflexive about my subjectivity – ensuring that the participants' accounts and views remained the priority in my interviews and their subsequent analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013 and Sayer, 2000).

Interviews can be time consuming (for both interviewer and interviewee) and as established, vulnerable to bias, subjectivity and context. Researchers may not share personal demographics with participants and this can affect the relationship between

interviewer and interviewee. I discussed interview duration with the RAPO and we agreed that no interview should last longer than one hour and that I would be mindful of participants' commitments. My participation in a range of events arranged by the VS (discussed in more detail in 4.9) helped to reduce the impact of different personal demographics between myself and the participants.

Critical realists accept that alternative interpretations of interview material are possible (Sayer, 2000). For example, each layer of the interview process can fracture the participant's intended meaning (Miller and Glassner, 2004). Participants respond to questions asked and information provided may only be partial, they may truncate their narrative either through choice or an awareness of time limits (Brown and Dowling, 1998 and Miller and Glassner, 2004). Interviewees may also employ narrative constructs when recalling events from their childhood (Miller and Glassner, 2004). Pertinent to this study is the suggestion that each time we recall events and memories they are altered, becoming distorted over time. This can be particularly true when those memories are traumatic (Perry, 1999). However, the events and experiences participants prioritise in interviews highlight key issues which the researcher must consider. A critical realist approach enables the researcher to consider empirical interview data alongside policies, statistics and literature which enables a more complete account of social experiences (Sims Schouten *et al*, 2007).

All interviews were audio recorded with permission from participants. Recording interviews is regarded as the most reliable method of capturing material (Perakyla, 2004) but it is also noted that some participants can initially feel inhibited when being recorded (Denscombe, 2007). Seale *et al* (2004) argue that the impact of recording of interviews may be more pronounced when interviewing someone in an official capacity than a personal one.

Therefore it may have had more significance in the professional interviews although I did

not see an expressed difference between conversation before, during or after recording.

This may again have been in part influenced by the fact that the individuals in key positions were new to their posts and therefore could speak more objectively about the council's work.

I transcribed all recordings shortly after interviews had taken place, the interviews generated a combined total of 60,860 words. Whilst this was a time-consuming process I found it to be immensely beneficial. It was important to transcribe the interviews myself to ensure confidentiality and to deepen my knowledge of the interview material and establish emerging themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The transcribing process allowed me to listen closely to the participants' views and recollections, I was able to make connections to previous interviews and notice which questions had produced more detailed responses. Transcribing also supported 'quality assurance' through ethical considerations and methodological reflections. Whilst transcribing I listened carefully for poorly worded questions, the tone of my voice and any times when I spoke more than necessary. Any evaluative notes of this kind were taken forward into subsequent interviews.

4.9 Trustworthiness, transferability and dependability

The trustworthiness of qualitative research can be assessed through four areas: credibility; transferability; dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility of research findings can be increased by prolonged engagement in the context studied. Prolonged engagement supports the development of trust between researcher and participant and helps the researcher to understand the context in greater depth (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As previously noted, I spent time with the RAP group prior to interviewing

which established trust. In addition to this, I also worked closely with the VS' team for several months. I facilitated 'aspire to university' evenings for children in care, supported a partnership between my own university and the VS which involved several students training as academic mentors for children in residential care, I was instrumental in arranging an awards evening for young people in care and I continue to attend various social and celebratory events. These were and are important endeavours in their own right but they also developed trust and knowledge of the field studied.

There are two ways to understand transferability or generalisability. The first relates to the sample and context of the study and to achieve this:

The key... is to describe the specific contexts, participants, settings and circumstances of a study in detail. (Braun and Clarke, 2013:282).

Important issues are raised in this study involving the lived experiences of children in care which are likely to apply to children in care in other schools and other Local Authorities. These issues would benefit from further research in a range of settings. As Braun and Clarke recommended, this study provides detailed contextual information regarding the demographic data of the selected Local Authority. Challenges encountered by the Local Authority's Children's Services are also examined and demographical information of the Authority's children in care provided. This enables future researchers to determine whether this study's aims, approach and/or findings transfer satisfactorily into new contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The second way to consider the transferability of a study is through theoretical generalisability (Silverman, 2010). Theoretical generalisability involves:

Creating deep interpretative analysis from the specifics of the study which can contribute to wider knowledge. (Braun and Clarke, 2013:281).

Analysis of participants' contributions in this study have generated strong themes around the notion of enforced and premature self-reliance. Archer's model of the internal conversation and modes of reflexivity have been utilised to further examine this theme and an adjustment to the autonomous mode of reflexivity is proposed. This theoretical analysis of participants' experiences could be applied to other studies involving the care system or other vulnerable groups of young people.

The dependability and confirmability of this study were enhanced by following Helpert's (1984) audit trail process. All raw data was transcribed verbatim and summarising notes focused on emergent themes and connections to theoretical frameworks. These summaries were then developed further to produce the main themes of the study. As explained earlier in this chapter, throughout this process I kept a reflexive journal and utilised valuable feedback from meetings with my PhD supervisors. Professional interviews provided the opportunity to understand issues raised by care leaver participants from a different perspective. For example, I discussed the terminology involved in the care system with a key member of Local Authority's VS and the quality of foster care with a key member of the Local Authority's Children's Services. It was reassuring that professional interviewees recognised the significance of issues raised by participants. Additionally, I provided the Local Authority's City Council with an interim report in October 2017.

My final care-leaver interview was with Sal in December 2017. Sal had previously formed part of the group interview in June 2016 and, as I attended meetings prior to the group interview, we had met several times. Sal presented as a confident young woman with whom

I had established rapport, I believed that she would express her opinions freely which proved to be the case. At the start of her interview I explained that I would ask her to comment on general themes raised in previous interviews. This allowed me to 'check' emergent themes with a key participant. For example, I asked Sal to respond to *'some people have said that they find the language that's used around care to be upsetting and inappropriate... they don't like the term 'foster carer', ... 'LAC', 'Respite' – are there any terms you hear that you don't like?'* This generated a thoughtful and passionate response. Sal talked in some detail about the notion of 'corporate parenting' which she found offensive – supporting my findings that the terminology surrounding care needs to be reconsidered. To ensure the reliability of this approach I also presented Sal with statements which represented the opposite of my findings. For example, I asked Sal to respond to *'some people have said that whilst they've been at school, they've found the designated teacher to be really helpful.'* This initiated a valuable discussion where Sal stated that she had not found DTs to be helpful. More interestingly, it also became apparent that Sal was not familiar with the role of the DT, describing instead a counsellor at her school. Here Sal not only confirmed my findings but added new information.

The strategies outlined ensured the trustworthiness of my research methods and findings.

4.10 Data analysis

All researchers hold preconceptions that can influence how data is interpreted and analysed (Charmaz, 2014). Preconceptions may emanate from the researcher's own lived experiences and social position and it is vital that researchers remain reflexive so that 'these invisible standpoints linger outside the frame for discussing the analysis' (Charmaz, 2014:156). Prior

to interviewing participants I expected themes related to the research questions to emerge. These themes centred on relationships with key adults and peers and the affordances and challenges involved in education. It was important to recognise that my expectations were informed by my experience of schools and the care system and also through pervasive media representations of children in care, foster care and statistical outcomes. For example, I anticipated that participants might recall examples of adults holding low expectations of them but this did not prove to be a common experience.

4.10a Phase One – learning from emerging data

A strength of this study is that some participants were interviewed early in the research process. Information shared by participants helped shape the research (Mediani, 2017 and Charmaz, 2014). All interviews were transcribed and annotations established broad emergent possible themes around key adults, the self and belonging which were then examined further (Charmaz, 2014). Emerging themes informed the selection of research, literature and theory examined and areas to be considered in subsequent interviews. The importance of daily social challenges for young people in care became apparent and therefore I actively sought material examining this issue. Participants' concerns drove the research. For example, whilst I had anticipated that relationships with key adults would form a central part of interviews, I had not anticipated how significant they would prove to be. The first four interviews conducted illuminated stories of exceptional support offered by teachers and one recollection of absolute disappointment in the approach adopted by the participant's DT. These stories were powerful and important. As my interviews continued and researched developed, the theme of *relationships with key adults* was refined to several sub-themes. I identified themes that ran through all interviews as well as unique recollections.

4.10b Phase Two – refining themes

Analysis of interview material develops through an iterative process of re-reading interview material and writing to further refine themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Emergent themes are often identified in the manner explained above, through close reading of interview material, identifying broad themes which are then distilled into sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). At this stage, interview data was refined further to establish sub themes under the headings: key adults, the self and belonging (see appendix seven for examples), this enabled a fuller understanding of the issues raised by participants. For example, it became apparent that whilst education was a key concern the majority of interviews focused on issues related to the theme of belonging.

4.10c Phase Three – consideration of language employed by participants

At this stage, the language employed in interviews was considered in more detail.

Extracts from interviews are used as illustrative examples which support and develop the researcher's analytical narrative and the content of the extracts are also analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Excerpts were selected and discussed to highlight the main concerns raised by participants and these excerpts are discussed in relation to the literature and policies identified in Chapters Two and Three. However, in some incidents the context of interview excerpts is examined in greater depth. For example the language employed by participants to describe relationships with key adults is powerful including frequent uses of 'love' and 'foster mum', in another interview school is described as a 'trap'. It is important to explore the language used as it provides a valuable indication of participants' experiences and emotional responses.

Three interviewees relayed extended, complex and often contradictory narratives of challenges encountered. It is accepted that interviewees may respond to questions through

familiar narrative constructs and vulnerable people may be more likely to employ these constructs (Miller and Glassner, 2004). Greater analysis of the language employed in these interviews enabled me to identify how participants positioned themselves and others within their recollections. This in turn enabled me to make decisions about which information gave the most authentic account of the educational experiences of children in care.

4.10d Phase Four – professional interviews

Findings from the professional interviews were examined at this stage. These interviews were initially analysed into the themes and sub themes identified above. The aim was to identify the level of understanding of the issues raised by care leaver participants.

Responses to individual questions from all three professional participants were then examined to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

4.10e Phase Five – relationship to theory

At this stage I returned to Archer's theory of internal conversations and modes of reflexivity. Initial readings of the interviews with care leaver participants demonstrated clear evidence of internal conversations. However, considering data through Archer's theory allowed a more comprehensive understanding of reflexivity and agency in relation to education and care. Analysing data through this theoretical lens necessitated a return to the data and a reorganisation of themes. This continual examination of data is an essential element of qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and crucially for this study, this approach highlighted the importance of routine social interactions for care experienced participants.

4.11 Adjustments to aid fluency

To aid clarity and fluency for the reader, I have occasionally altered or eliminated introductory words in interview excerpts but have ensured that the intended meaning is not affected by this. In order to represent participants fully, I have included non-verbal interactions such as laughs/pauses. Additionally I have utilised punctuation devices such as ellipsis and exclamation marks to represent short pauses, anger, surprise or pleasure.

4.12 Dissemination of findings

The dissemination of findings is an integral part of this study (Mannay *et al*, 2019 and Holland *et al*, 2008). Research in the field of critical research should aim to effect practical change (Oliver, 2012) and it is crucial that participants' voices are heard by those in a position to influence policy and practice. Findings will be shared with members of the children in care council and care leavers' council, the Local Authority's Children's Services and within the university as follows:

Working with the Authority's RAPO, Children in Care Council and Care Leavers' Council we will produce a range of leaflets giving information for those entering care. Leaflets will cover a range of issues such as a guide to the terminology employed in the care system. It will also signpost further support for more complex concerns such as the disclosure of care status.

Whilst the design and content of these leaflets is yet to be discussed and confirmed it is imperative that the leaflets are appropriate for the intended audiences. For example, leaflets for children new to foster care will need to be differentiated for different age groups. The illustrated report about estrangement produced by Taylor *et al* (2019) may offer some initial ideas.

Findings will be shared with key personnel within the Local Authority's Children's Services.

The university where I am employed is the largest teacher training facility in the West Midlands and findings from this study will be incorporated into training programmes.

Aspects of this study will also be shared at conferences and in academic articles.

4.13 Conclusion

Ethical responsibilities underpinned this study. All participants were provided with information regarding the study, given time to consider their involvement and the opportunity to ask questions. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to focus on the aspects of their educational trajectories which mattered most to them. These interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify common themes and interesting insights. One of the strengths of this research lies in the relationships developed between myself and key members of the Local Authority's Children's Services team. The RAPO acted as a gatekeeper to the majority of participants in this study. She provided invaluable guidance and support as well as ensuring participants' informed consent and comfort. All decisions involved in this study have prioritised respect for participants, their right to confidentiality and the importance of relaying their experiences and concerns as faithfully as possible.

CHAPTER FIVE – CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

5.0 Introduction

The previous chapters have examined policy, literature, theory and methodology.

Throughout these chapters the importance of prioritising the views and accounts of young people in care and care leavers is emphasized. This chapter presents the main findings from the interviews conducted. Findings are presented and analysed in two sections: Children and family, and school, although there is significant interplay between these sections. As stated in the methodology, some longer extracts from care leaver participants are included in order to prioritise their voices.

This section focuses on children's experiences prior to, during and when leaving the care system. The role of key adults in supporting education is considered. Participants' reported internal conversations and modes of reflexivity are analysed to offer an insight into how young people navigate these relationships and experiences of care.

5.1 Parental educational support prior to care

Only Brooke gave a clear description of parental support prior to entering care. Brooke explained that her mother valued education and ensured that she maintained a high level of attendance at school:

A lot of kids who go into care don't have good attendance – I always had good attendance. I never really had a day off. I do think that makes a massive difference – the values my mum instilled in me. If you don't have that you might just not care.

Brooke regarded herself as embodying her mother's educational values. Her belief that this early insistence on a high level of school attendance was influential is supported by Sebba *et al*'s (2015) finding that pre-care educational support influences longer-term educational outcomes. Brooke experienced high levels of continuity as she remained in contact with her mother and father throughout her time in care and was placed with a foster carer who shared and reiterated similar educational values to her mother. However other participants who did not experience the same pre-care support did subsequently develop a strong commitment to education which suggests a potential challenge to Sebba *et al*.

Other participants recalled either receiving no educational support or negative messages from parents about their futures. Anisah and Cat stated that they were actively discouraged by their parents from learning. Anisah felt that her parents had clear views about the role of girls and women in education and society as exemplified by the following comment:

They didn't think that girls should be educated. Girls should just be housewives – they shouldn't drive, shouldn't do anything.

Cat recalled similar experiences although these did not relate specifically to gender:

My mum, people who were supposed to be there to support me – if I said I wanted to do something – they would say maybe you should set your standards a bit lower, aim for the bottom – but I would always say I was going to do it. My dad was one of the main ones – he constantly told me what I couldn't do or wasn't capable of doing. I was constantly told you can't do this, you'll never do that.

However Cat had experienced emotional support from her grandfather. The role of the extended family is also highlighted by Kath who credited her grandparents as her main source of support, suggesting they were pivotal in the academic success she achieved. This may suggest that the support of key adults in a parental or nurturing role can compensate for a lack of support from biological parents.

Nicole could only remember one occasion when her parents had attended a school event and she stated that no-one had read to her or helped her to develop early learning skills. She recalled her mother giving her a guitar, stating it was 'the only educational thing my mum did for me'. Although Caroline also reported a similar lack of educational support, she did recall having access to educational resources:

Me: Do you have memories of that, of doing things yourself?

Caroline: Yeah, I used to go on the computer and play the knowledge games and stuff. I used to read too.

Me: Do you have any memories of doing learning activities in the family home – things like being read to?

Caroline: No, not really. I just did things myself.

Caroline entered care at four years old and therefore the learning resources available formed part of her immediate environment as an infant. It is possible that Caroline engaged with the educational resources available as a means of distraction from the circumstances that led her to be taken into care by the age of four years old. Certainly throughout her interview she described education as offering 'absorption' and 'escape'. In a similar manner, Anisah recalled reading her older brother's academic texts and feeling motivated to learn for herself. Interestingly, Anisah recollected a sense of defiance in this learning experience, stating:

I remember reading it and my brother saying 'You're too young to read that.' And I remember thinking why can't I read that – so I think I've always thought why can't I do this or that.

The most striking feature of participants' pre-care experiences is the absence of a common theme. Within the sample there are examples of active support, availability of educational resources, no support and negative expectations. Whilst Archer (2000) acknowledged the impact of social and economic constraints, it is argued that her later work (2012; 2010)

underestimated the impact of challenges experienced in childhood (Tyler, 2015; Farrugia, 2013 and Sayer, 2012). All participants, regardless of their natal context, articulated a desire to achieve academic qualifications. However, it is important to note that at the time of interview, only Brooke had acquired required passes at GCSE and A Level at first attempt allowing her to attend university from the age of eighteen. This finding potentially confirms Brooke's sense that her pre-care experiences had a continuing impact on her educational trajectory and offers some support for the critiques of Archer's theory.

5.2 Separation from parents

By necessity all participants in this sample had experienced temporary or permanent separation from their biological parents with three participants experiencing separation before the age of five years old. Some participants had maintained contact with parents and/or family members whilst others explained that they had no official contact with any of their biological family.

Two participants, Raz and Brooke, reflected on the impact of separation from their biological parents. Brooke was unique in the sample as she continued to have contact with both her mother and father but recalled the restrictions placed on this contact:

I used to be only allowed one text a day to my mum to say goodnight and when I was about fourteen, I thought it was ridiculous – I wanted to tell her about my day. I used to send her a sneaky two texts a day and then in the end they just let me have whatever contact I wanted.

As explored later in this chapter Brooke aimed for humour in her recollections. Nevertheless it was clearly a source of frustration to her that regular and open contact with her mother

was not officially permitted. Brooke's sense that her views should have been considered is acknowledged in Narey and Ower's (2018) review of foster care.

Raz's situation was different to that of the other participants' in the sample. She spent some of her early childhood in care before returning to her biological home. She spoke at length about the impact of this situation. Firstly she explained her fear that the experience of separation from her biological mother might be repeated:

That was engrained in me so even if things weren't okay I would say they were – just to not be separated from my mum. I only wanted affection from my mum so yes, definitely a sense of protecting my mum – in her state, she would often say to me 'you can't get taken away from me. If you were to go, I wouldn't be able to cope, I'd die.' I think that really stayed with me so no matter what she would do or how volatile she would get – I would always say to the social workers or the police that everything was fine.

Raz's sense of responsibility was conceivably exacerbated by her mother's comments 'If you were to go, I wouldn't be able to cope, I'd die.' Raz recalled a complex combination of emotions – the need to protect, lie and the desire to receive affection from her mother.

Later in the interview Raz stated:

When my mum died in some ways it was a relief – I know that sounds bad but I didn't have to live her pain any more.

Whilst Raz experienced some relief after her mother's death an enduring sense of responsibility for other members of her family is evident throughout her interview. At the time of interview she had assumed almost parental responsibility for her two younger siblings:

Me: So I understand that you went into care when you were young, could you tell me a little about that – just what you're happy to.

Raz: Yes, definitely. I went into the care system I think when I was a baby – I was always on the care system radar because my mum was an alcoholic so I had withdrawal symptoms.... I stayed for some time – I can't remember exactly but during that time I went to two or three families. So, yes.

Me: Please only answer what you want to here – when you returned to your mum, were social services still involved then?

Raz: They were – very actively, they were very actively involved. Me and her would see a social worker around once a week and they would ask me are you happy, how are things with your mum. At such a young age I couldn't really say anything but I just knew that you had to tell social services that things were okay or you would get taken away again. That was engrained in me so even if things weren't okay I would say they were – just to not be separated from my mum.

Me: Not wanting to be separated from your mum, did you have a sense of protecting your mum?

Raz: Definitely, I think because my dad was always working – he wasn't as present as he wanted to be – which I completely understand now as an adult – but I was with my mum on a daily basis so not having her there sent me into panic mode. I would have had to live with strangers otherwise and I was a sensitive child – I didn't deal well with strangers.

Archer (2010) contends that modes of reflexivity are generated through experiences in childhood. Raz presented as very articulate, she raised the notion of 'protection' in the interview prior to the excerpt above. Therefore it is interesting to consider Raz's reflections regarding the relationships between herself, mother and father. In the excerpt above Raz identified her desire (during childhood) to protect her mother and family unit. In Archer's terms, this prioritisation might be expected to result in a communicative mode of reflexivity and certainly Raz articulated a significant commitment to her family throughout her interview. However Raz also learnt how to navigate challenging situations which were often exacerbated rather than ameliorated by her mother. Potentially through these early challenges Raz developed the autonomy that is also evident in her interview.

In the extract below Raz gave evidence of operating primarily in an autonomous mode of reflexivity shortly after her mother's death.

Me: Did you have anyone to talk to?

Raz: I did – my best friend's family were amazing. They took my little sister in – she was only a month old, my brother was with my dad. In school, there was a mentor who was amazing but she would always start with what I wanted to do and because I didn't really want counselling... I didn't want to be taken out of the classroom, I just wanted to get on with the lessons – I wanted to prove that I could get on despite what had happened. So I rejected that support really. I went back to it about three years later though.

Me: Would you say then that it's mostly you that keeps yourself on track?

Raz: Definitely.

Me: So for example, the decision to go to university – did that decision largely come from you?

Raz: Yes, definitely.

Raz replied to the question 'did you have anyone to talk to?' by stating 'I did, my best friend's family were amazing.' This is the only answer in Raz's interview where adults appeared to offer support and are described in strong positive terms. However, the key support offered by this family appeared to centre around caring for Raz's younger sibling rather than Raz herself. The school mentor was also valued although there is some suggestion that she is valued because she did not attempt to counsel but instead facilitated Raz's wish to focus on educational activities. This suggestion is supported by Raz's decision to reject formal counselling at that time. This excerpt powerfully illustrated the desire and difficulties of accepting support following a sustained period of necessary or enforced autonomy. This complexity is illustrated again below as Raz demonstrates elements of meta, communicative and autonomous modes of reflexivity:

Raz: Just to reiterate that a lot of it came from me and I think I'm starting to reflect on how much has come from me, how much I've had to push myself. I don't think I wanted any one to push – I think I wanted to push myself. When my mum died in some ways it was a relief... I could get on with it.

Me: If you could pass on any advice or recommendations to teachers or to teacher training courses – what could be done better?

Raz: Definitely – I think right from the application to secondary school, I think there should be a process where children get assessed so teachers know the family situation so they can support children. So teachers do know what's going on and they're not guessing. I feel like it's a teacher's duty to know certain things about the children in their classroom. In primary school, if a parent says something – like my dad told teachers not to talk to me about my mum – well, I think they should have a conversation with the child. I think that would have made a major difference. Kids need to understand that if they're going through things at home it's okay to talk about it. Schools need to invest in proper counselling – money needs to go where it's important. And even though a child's doing well academically – it might be that the academic work means too much to them, you need to know where that motivation is coming from. I think self-motivation can be pressurising – if you lose that motivation what happens to you? I think lessons around developing a more caring environment – that the person matters more than the grades.

There are several interesting statements in the extract above. Raz stated that she 'wanted to push herself' but subsequently identified a significant problem inherent in the self-reliance displayed by many participants in this study: 'I think self-motivation can be pressurising – if you lose that motivation what happens to you?' Here Raz employed meta-reflexivity, challenging her own dominant mode of reflexivity. Towards the end of this extract she highlighted the importance of encouraging young people to communicate openly. Raz suggested that schools should prioritise emotional well-being above the academic process which she had so clearly focused upon. These statements initially present as contradictory but demonstrate the complicated nature of Raz's experiences and her reflections upon them. Farrugia (2013) and Lahire's (2003) asserted that complex circumstances necessitate different dispositions and/or interplay between structures and the self, Raz's exploration of both the importance and personal cost of self-reliance further highlight the need for available and responsive key adults to help care-experienced young people negotiate the structures of care, school, education and self.

5.3 Siblings

Three participants highlighted the well-being of their siblings as a key concern. All three of these participants were the eldest child in the family and expressed considerable concern for their younger siblings. As stated above Raz assumed near parental responsibility for her younger siblings:

When my little brother and sister were born... it wasn't all about me... I became their role model really.

Raz regarded the birth of her siblings as pivotal. In the above extract she suggested her siblings' births altered her perspective and that they became the family's priority. However, throughout Raz's interview it is clear she has taken responsibility for family members since early childhood.

Esther and Kath also regarded themselves as role models although they were not able to have any official contact with their siblings at the time of interview. Kath described the emotional distress created by this separation. The sense of loss she described is acknowledged in the literature reviewed (Jarrett and Bellis, 2018; Zahawi, 2018; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Verrier, 1993 and Erikson, 1980). Esther explained that she had five siblings and although no official contact was permitted, she occasionally contacted her younger sister. This presented as a distressing situation which was further intensified by her sister's pregnancy. Esther explained:

I am sort of like her role model. She said to me 'I'm having a baby soon – you're going to be the best aunty'.

Both Esther and Kath hoped to resume relationships with their siblings in the future. Kath envisaged a scenario where at a future time, she would be reconciled with her siblings and

they would understand the circumstances that had led to her placement in foster care. For these three participants the desire to be a role model acts as a strong but complicated consideration in their internal conversations.

5.4 Entering care

It is crucial to acknowledge the range of emotional reactions generated by the process of entering care although none of the participants expressed high levels of anger or sadness. Indeed, Aliyah stated that her life became more stable once in care:

I was getting more help – I felt more settled, I could focus more. Before that I was moving around a lot and I couldn't focus on my work.

It was interesting that no participants focused on the separation from their parents as a key issue although Raz clearly explained that once returned from foster care, she was extremely anxious not to be separated from her mother again. Whilst it is accepted that participants may withhold aspects of their experiences (Miller and Glassner, 2004 and Brown and Dowling, 1998), the lack of discussion around leaving the family home is significant. As demonstrated above, only Brooke highlighted the importance of maintaining contact with her mother, expressing frustration at the restrictions placed on communication between them. For other participants, the loss of contact with siblings presented as more significant than the separation from parents (Jarrett and Bellis, 2018; Zahawi, 2018; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Verrier, 1993 and Erikson, 1980).

A key issue for participants was the terminology they encountered as they entered the care system. Participants preferred terminology which most accurately described their

circumstances. For example, corporate parent and foster parent were resented because, as participants stated, they had parents and the notion that an adult in a paid role could be called a parent generated strong responses:

Sal: 'Corporate parents' – I hate that term. I hate it. I've got parents, they may not be the best parents but I've got them and I don't feel like – social services – obviously it's their job to do what's in our best interests but that's their job, they're paid. They aren't parenting us.

Sal was clear that any terminology should aim to accurately reflect reality. 'Corporate parenting' was therefore disliked as Sal believed it undermined the role of her own parents. In IGA, there was general agreement amongst participants that the terms 'looked-after', 'foster carer' and 'foster parent' were disliked. The term 'foster parent' generated the most vocal response with participants agreeing 'yeah, they aren't your parent', instead suggesting 'guardian' as a more acceptable term. The acronym LAC was generally disliked by participants in this sample although it was interesting that no participants commented directly on its reductive connotations (Mannay *et al*, 2017 and Rogers, 2017). However Sal did explain why she preferred 'in care' to 'LAC':

LAC, well when you're young you don't really know what it means – it is a bit confusing. But child in care I don't mind because it's just a statement – it doesn't define who you are, it's just a statement.

Anisah explained that she preferred the term 'in care' to 'looked after' as she considered 'looked after' to be 'too obvious'. Whilst Danh stated simply 'I'd rather they said nothing.' This presented as an astute comment which recognised that all terminology has the potential to carry unwelcome connotations.

The importance and potential impact of the language used in the care system was highlighted in two of the professional interviews. The key member of the VS supported the view of young people in care that much of the terminology involved in the care system is problematic:

I did the conference last week – the first slide says VS and the second slide says For Children in Care and it's quite interesting because different audiences understand different things. That's the first thing I talk about. Children don't like looked after children as a title... That's the feedback we've got, they want children in care. The Virtual School hides the fact that they're in care so it gives an education feel – so events can be branded as VS, no-one has to be identified.

This excerpt provides tangible evidence that key personnel at the Local Authority's VS valued the opinions of children in care. Terminology had been changed and the term 'looked after children' is no longer used within the Local Authority. In addition to this, key personnel from the VS utilised opportunities at conferences to discuss terminology thereby expanding the discussion to a wider audience and signifying its importance.

The RAPO demonstrated a nuanced awareness of the emotional impact of language for those associated with the care system. She explained that the young people who attend Children in Care Council had discussed care terminology, she stated that the discussion had become highly emotional for many young people:

With the Children in Care Council – we looked at a range of the words used. The session was quite distressing – we had tears from beginning to end. Tears around the word 'contact', the words 'foster home' – 'respite' was a big one, 'foster parent' – what do you call them? And for some young people – they don't want – they might call their foster carer mum/dad/aunt/uncle – whichever, because they don't want anyone else to know. But when you move placements – if you're in the same school – it's difficult. It was a very emotional session... They say 'I get sent on respite' – if I'm part of the family why am I getting sent away on respite.

The RAPO is known to these young people and a trusted figure. It is quite possible that young people felt able to discuss the impact of the language involved in care more freely with her. Members of the Children in Care Council were able to discuss the distress that terminology such as 'respite' generated. It is clear that key personnel at the VS had listened to the concerns of children in care and reconsidered the term 'looked after children', however, evidence from the RAPO strengthens the suggestion that all terminology associated with the care system needs to be examined.

The terminology, acronyms and abbreviations employed in the care system are vast and complex. Evidence from participants in this study supports the belief that the terminology employed often serves to stigmatise children and heighten a sense of 'being different' (Rogers, 2017). It is interesting that Narey and Owers' recent review of foster care for the DfE (2018) does not directly address the issue of terminology but makes broad use of the phrase 'children in foster care' rather than the acronym LAC - established in the Children's Act (1989) – although LAC is used towards the end of the review. This is significant, the review itself dedicates much space to the lived experiences of children in care. Its tone is sympathetic and warm (Owers himself is an adoptive father). However the apparently conscious decision to change the language employed to refer to children in care is confused by the reappearance of LAC at the latter stages of the review and the failure to discuss terminology directly. The evidence from this study, whilst limited, clearly demonstrates a need to research the impact of terminology further to better inform policy.

5.5 Care placements

The levels of support experienced by participants whilst in care varied considerably, not just between participants but also within individual journeys through care. Only Brooke experienced a stable placement where she considered herself to have been consistently supported. Brooke felt that her foster carers encouraged her educationally and made no distinction between expectations of her and their birth children.

Brooke developed positive relationships with her foster family and referred to her foster carers as foster mum and foster dad. Her foster mum was a teacher, again providing a level of continuity between pre-care and care. When the foster parents separated, she was bereft. The importance Brooke placed on family relationships represents a key feature of communicative reflexivity. One of the ways in which Brooke's interview differed significantly from the other participants' was in terms of her 'ultimate concern' (Archer, 2007). In many other interviews, participants expressed a clear desire to ensure their futures are very different to their pasts and their parents' lives. Brooke did not appear to be seeking a different outcome: she has remained in contact with her biological and foster family; maintained friendships from secondary school, chosen to remain in the same geographical area and is training to be a teacher. In Archer's terms (2007) Brooke can be regarded as communicatively reproducing her natal context.

By contrast other participants' experiences of care were more varied. Three individual participants described foster placements as largely or moderately positive. A consistent feature of these placements was the carers' high educational expectations and insistence on hard work. Two members of IGA recalled high levels of educational support from foster carers. Danh explained that his current foster carers were providing material resources such

as a laptop to aid his educational studies. Francis recalled previous carers who encouraged her to apply for university. This finding is supported by Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017); Sebba *et al* (2015) and Jackson *et al* (2005) who argued that foster placements are most successful where there is a focus on education. However those participants recalling the most positive experiences of foster care also described affectionate relationships with their carers. The importance of physical affection in care placements is powerfully expressed by Sissay (2019) and recognised in Narey and Owers' (2018) review of foster care.

Six participants in the sample recalled receiving a lack of support from foster carers, raising concerns such as their carers' motivations for fostering, a lack of educational support, a breakdown of trust between the carer and young person and even possible maltreatment. Four participants in the individual interviews stated that their foster carers 'didn't care' or had 'no care' and within the group interview there were examples of poor care. Concerns around varying levels of care and support within foster care are reflected in recent reviews of provision (Longfield, 2019 and Nayer and Owers, 2018). Bria (IGA) recalled being taken to a police station when her foster carer believed she had taken sweets without permission. Sal (in IGA) also described physical abuse from a foster carer who she said had 'slapped' her:

This woman was evil – she bit me on my arm, any time I misbehaved or when Social Services came – she used to bite me or burn me with fags and whatnot. Yeah – she was evil.

However it is important to acknowledge that there were contradictions within these recollections. Sal was also interviewed individually and, at this time, she described her foster carer in positive terms. Whilst it is possible for both positive and negative experiences to co-exist, Sal's accounts of her time in foster care presented as wholly different. It is notable that recollections of foster carers as abusive were only shared in the group interview and

important to note that for complex reasons allegations of maltreatment are not uncommon in foster care (Blackburn, 2016.) It is acknowledged that participants may employ narrative constructs when describing events from their childhood (Miller and Glassner, 2004). In group interviews, young people may seek to conceal events in their lives through employing narrative constructs and it is also possible recollections become competitive. For example, Sal explained in her individual interview that she enjoyed sharing anecdotes from her time in a children's home as these gained attention from her peers. Therefore it is important to consider one of two possibilities: that aspects of Sal's story may have been exaggerated or that, her memories of difficult experiences alter and become distorted each time she recalls them (Miller and Glassner, 2004 and Perry, 1999).

A more common frustration expressed in many interviews was a perceived lack of educational support from foster carers – the importance of which is established in the literature (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Sebba *et al*, 2015; Jackson and McParlin, 2006 and Jackson *et al*, 2005). Participants across the academic ability spectrum reported a lack of educational support. Esther and Caroline gave examples of low levels of support such as foster carers attending occasional school events or encouraging involvement in after-school clubs. Caroline noted that educational support had decreased as she began to academically 'out-perform' her foster carers (Rees and Munro, 2019). She explained that no one accompanied her at university open days or demonstrated an interest in her plans:

It was like, I don't know, if I wanted to do anything about university – she was like, 'you can ask your social worker about that, I don't know anything about it.'

Caroline highlighted potential difficulties which can occur when the foster child's academic studies are beyond the experience of the carer. Jackson and McParlin (2006) recognised that

an integral part of foster care was educational support. They recommended minimum educational qualifications as a requirement for foster carers. This issue was discussed in the professional interview with key personnel from Children's Services. He acknowledged the problems encountered by those in care who achieved at the highest level academically:

If we had a child who was very academic and looking at good outcomes anyway, we wouldn't be trying to match them to a foster carer who had exams and knowledge. That wouldn't come into the mix. Of course, yes – all parents could struggle with that [unfamiliar academic work] but as parents you're probably going to be more motivated to invest further – relearn the ways they're teaching children these days.

The phrase 'motivate to invest further' appeared to exemplify the frustrations of many participants in this sample and illuminated Kia's sentiment that 'You could never be part of the family'. It is perhaps unsurprising that so many participants stated that they have learned to support themselves and present as developing traits of autonomous reflexivity to do so (Archer, 2007; 2000).

The phrase also appeared to suggest that there is naturally a limit to the support a foster carer can be expected to provide. Whilst this is clearly not the experience of all children in care, Brooke for example described herself entirely as a member of the family, it does appear to be a common situation. Narey and Owers (2018) contended that more focus should be placed on the initial *matching* process between child and potential foster carer and that, where appropriate, children should be actively involved in this process. This proposal could allow children and young people the opportunity to co-construct these vital relationships which may help foster placements to sustain and see carers 'motivated to invest further'. This is particularly significant as relationships with teachers present as co-constructed with participants describing their teachers in very positive terms and recalling examples of extensive support. This is discussed fully in the next section of this chapter.

The professional participant from Children's Services reflected further on the potential of foster care to support children's academic journeys:

In some respects, I think it's probably a myth that children in care don't do as well as their peers - there's research out there that says if children come into care earlier – never mind that their background wasn't great – they will achieve equally with their peers. If they have a positive experience of the care system.

In contrast with evidence from interviews with young people in care this presented as an optimistic perspective which is not supported by the persistently low academic outcomes of children in care (DfE, 2018). Whilst many of the young people interviewed had achieved academic qualifications, this was often the result of examination retakes and significant personal commitment. The professional participant acknowledged that 'achieving equally' is dependent on a 'positive experience of the care system'. As noted, only Brooke described a pattern of uniformly positive experiences within the care system and importantly she believed her positive pre care experiences to be key to her educational progress. Additionally, 'never mind their background' may again simply be an unfortunate phrase but the young participants in this sample were clear that their 'backgrounds' were central to both the difficulties they encountered and their personal commitment to succeed. The young participants' rather than the professional participant's view is supported by the literature which clearly illustrates the impact of childhood experiences prior to care (Jarrett and Bellis, 2018; Zahawi, 2018; Cecil *et al*, 2017; Sebba *et al*, 2015; Jackson *et al*, 2005; Verrier, 1993 and Erikson, 1980). It is important to note that whilst the professional participant stated that education is a priority there is a lack of clarity surrounding teacher training and a lack of clear requirements for foster carers to actively support educational opportunities. The professional participants from the VS and Children's Services

acknowledged limitations to their ability to 'quality assure' educational support in care placements:

Professional participant from Children's Services: We want to have the same aspirations as any good parent would – you've got to go and visit the school and make sure it's the best place for the young person, make sure that's aligned; be supporting them with their homework; supporting them to go on trips; social activities – it's that side of school too. Some foster carers are very good at that, they will spend a lot of time liaising with the school and supporting their young people, where others unfortunately don't do quite as much. We're putting on a number of evening events – sort of informal training – we had a careers evening so children can find out more possible careers and foster carers can come along too and find out more about how they can support the young person. There's a lot going on.

Me: And for foster carers, is attending these events a requirement of their role?

Professional participant from Children's Services: There aren't requirements no, the expectation is that foster carers do their very best to support young people move forward in terms of their education.

The above discussion highlighted disparities between the 'ideal' foster care and the official requirements of the role. The professional participant acknowledged that attending educational events was an 'expectation' but not a 'requirement.' Young participants in this sample frequently used the term 'luck' to describe the quality of care they received. Brooke referred to 'luck' four times in her interview – believing she was 'lucky' to have experienced stable, supportive care placements. The professional participant from Children's Services' explanation appears to support this view by suggesting an awareness of considerable variation in foster carers' commitment. Indeed, he continued by acknowledging some basic elements of foster care needed to be addressed. This lack of consistency somewhat undermines the suggestion that foster care can act as a protective factor for young people in care.

The professional participant from the VS stated that the induction process for foster carers needed to be rigorous to ensure children in their care receive educational support.

However, when questioned further about possible training, he stated:

Hmmm, it depends if money comes under scrutiny, then it could go towards that. Should it be compulsory? Hmmm, I think you'd have to balance it out – because you can't get enough foster carers as it is. I think really, you have to entice people and say 'here's a six month induction programme' and maybe build into it a bonus for completing the induction. It's just theory at the moment. I think perhaps... it'll never happen though. I can't see anyone, politically, getting hold of it.

This suggested a significant problem. The VS participant has expanded the range of extra-curricular activities and learning events for children in care. Many of these events occur outside of school hours and therefore attendance relies on the practical support of engaged foster carers. Both professional participants recognised that foster carers have the potential to support those in their care, they stated that more training and stringency is required but unlikely to come to fruition.

Archer (2007) explains that modes of reflexivity are developed during childhood. Therefore experiences within foster care placements and relationships with foster carers can be seen to influence the modes of reflexivity developed by young people in this study. Sal, Brooke, Nicole and Caroline appeared to have developed reasonably consistent modes of reflexivity during their internal conversations. Brooke and Sal (in her individual interview) recalled the most positive and consistent care experiences and presented as communicative reflexives. Nicole and Caroline recalled a range of difficulties and challenges from infancy and presented as the most coherent examples of autonomous reflexives within the sample. However other participants such as Kath, Kai, Iz, Raz and Esther had not formed a cohesive mode of reflexivity but did not present as *fractured* reflexives (Archer, 2007). Rather they presented as individuals who had, through necessity in less supportive or brief foster

placements, developed an ability to operate with elements of autonomous reflexivity.

Engaging in meta-reflexivity, Kai explained how his experiences of the care system had influenced his internal conversation:

Kai: I make a lot of the choices myself – I think I've taught myself that through the imbalance of support.

Me: Do you feel like that's something you've taught yourself since you've been sixteen or is that something you've been learning for a long time?

Kai: A long time, quite some time. But I think when I went into care – it's an environment where you're a lodger, you do feel more mature. I noticed that and my friend says that too – that being in care makes you more mature. I think you read people better and I think it makes you put up a guard and develop resilience. You wouldn't just open up – you can't just unclench your chest and let things happen. You're always on your guard about certain things. It makes you mature but probably not in the best way.

Me: A lot of people have said that... I've asked people if it gives them satisfaction to know that they are quite self-sufficient and that they know they can look after themselves. And I think as you say, being able to look after yourself is obviously a good thing but it's where it comes from isn't it – that sense of having to – as opposed to it happening gradually.

Kai: Yeah. When I was in foster care, I had to. I had to take control of a lot of things myself. After what happened with the benefits, I took it upon myself to do things – I was doing a lot of things at sixteen that a lot of people don't have to.

Kai explained that his internal conversation must remain internal. His experiences of care had impacted on the trust he was able and willing to place in key adults involved in his care. He recognised that he had developed certain skills such as resilience and the ability to understand other people. However Kai also expressed concern that these skills develop prematurely in care and his sense of 'taking control' suggested the necessary development of autonomous reflexivity.

Sal's journey through care included time spent in a residential setting and presented as more positive than Kai's recollections. She developed a positive relationship with her foster

carer and sustained relationships with friends. She explained that she relied heavily on the advice of trusted adults:

I like to be guided. I like structure, to know exactly what's going on. When I speak to people about what I'm going to do, they highlight the good things and then that's made up my mind.

Perhaps as a result of positive experiences in care, Sal prioritised relationships and regarded her foster carers as key adults who were trusted to provide guidance. Although Sal was studying a performing arts course which is perhaps contrary to a communicative trajectory, she is a young mother whose daughter was (at the time of the interview) in foster care. In this sense she is, perhaps unintentionally, reproducing her natal context and challenging Archer's model of agency (Archer, 2007; 2000).

The RAPO was able to discuss the impact of care placements on care leavers' willingness and ability to seek help and support. She reflected on conversations with care leavers and suggested that the majority of young people needed to vocalise their thoughts externally in a communicative mode of reflexivity:

We all need somebody to explore ideas with. And I would say most of the ones who are successful have, by this point, found that key person that they can bounce those ideas off... Those that have had that support all the way – for some, they're really confident and they feel like they know what they want and they go and do it. This is what they want and this is where they're going to go and nothing else really matters... and then those who have not had that support, I would actually say I'd get a higher percentage of those that are willing to talk it out. Because – well, what I often hear is 'no-one's ever told me this before' or 'why couldn't I have spoken about this earlier with someone else.' So, I think with those that haven't had that supportive journey – for some, for those who see it as being a way to access a better life – moving out of the circumstances I'm living in now – if I can get a job, I can this – and I can move on. Those ones are often more open to it.

This conversation resonated strongly with evidence provided by the young people interviewed and discussed above. The RAPO identified that some young people were able to trust their internal conversations, make and implement plans with little need for external validation. Crucially she recognised not only that some young people had not developed confidence in their internal conversations and were therefore often 'willing to talk it out' but she also identified their disappointment that such conversations had not occurred earlier.

5.6 Suitability and Stability

Two participants had experienced a significant number of foster placements. Jess (IGB) recalled a pattern of brief foster care interspersed amongst periods spent living with family members. Jess explained that her childhood lacked stability and that these changes in placement often also resulted in a change of school – an experience that was unique in the sample. Alisa (IGA) provided a clear illustration of the impact of frequent changes in placement:

I remember one day going into town after school to get the bus and I couldn't remember which bus to get because I couldn't remember where I was living. I just stood there...

Whilst no other participant recalled the confusion highlighted above by Alisa, none of the participants interviewed had remained in the same placement throughout secondary school, sixth form and beyond. Although this is a small sample of care experienced young people, it does suggest that long-term stability of placement (even when the placement is successful) is unusual. Nevertheless, at the time of interview, six participants in this study

had studied at undergraduate level. This finding provides a challenge to Jackson *et al's* research (2005) which found that the majority of the 129 care leavers attending university had experienced only one placement.

Although participants in this study were working towards and generally achieving academic qualifications, a lack of stability is regarded as problematic. Frequent changes of placement are likely to impact on educational development and the development of friendships which require a level of permanence in order to flourish (Poulin and Chan, 2010 and Millar and Ridge, 2000). Nicole expanded on this idea, explaining that frequent moves meant that she was always an 'outsider', unable to form positive relationships with her peers. However, it was striking how few participants spoke at length about the impact of moving placements. Participants appeared more concerned by the nature of each placement than changes to those placements. Participants gave powerful accounts of placements they considered to be unsuitable. Kai entered foster care at sixteen after spending much of his childhood in hospital. He explained that when he left hospital and entered foster care there was no specific provision made to ensure his well-being:

When social workers tried to support me to get back into education, they just spent time placing blame – no-one worked together - there was no discussion of what I might need. I did have the Education and Health Plan but none of that was enforced. There should have been a plan to help me.

Kai perceived his needs to have been entirely overlooked with key adults failing to communicate or fulfil their responsibilities towards him. The lack of suitable and suitably trained foster carers is recognised by Narey and Owers (2018) and Jackson *et al* (2005). After Kai's prolonged stay in hospital he was not placed with carers who had any additional training or expertise. He was not offered any on-going support to help with either his

mental health or the transition from a hospital environment into life in the wider community.

Nicole's only experience of foster care also involved an unsuitable placement. She shared a small bedroom with the foster carers' biological daughter and stated that her foster carers did not care and were simply 'doing it [fostering] for the money.' Nicole's placement with these foster carers was very brief and from there she was placed in a children's home.

Interestingly Nicole was entirely positive about this experience, stating:

It was amazing. It really was – you had different adults coming in and talking to you – saying you can do it, they just seemed to really care.

As Nicole explained above, the move to a children's home was experienced as positive. Within this residential setting, Nicole received the support that had been largely absent from her childhood. She enjoyed the company of the other young residents and felt that the adults cared about her. This recollection provides confirmation that nurturing relationships with key adults can be pivotal (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Gilling, 2014; Sugden, 2013; Comfort, 2007 and Jackson and McParlin, 2006). Despite the various challenges associated with living in a residential setting Nicole valued the availability of key adults and as a result was able to recall this placement as positive.

Two participants regarded their placements as unsuitable as their religious and cultural needs were not met. Anisah and Sal discussed difficulties involving food, clothing and religious practices, the importance of these issues is supported by Rees (2019). Anisah gave a powerful account of the difficulties she encountered when placed with a non-Muslim family:

I was put into care with a white lady and, like for me, that was a big deal...I maintained my own personal beliefs and values so for example, I continued to wear a headscarf. But because I was living in an area where there were no Muslim people living – it was awkward but I adapted myself to it... Islamically, if you eat off a plate where the food's not Halal – you can't eat off the same plate. I explained to her and for a while it was okay but a couple of months later she was mixing up the plates again.

In addition to adapting to life in foster care, Anisah had to consider how she dressed and what she ate. She displayed a clear commitment to the practices of her religion and illustrated the carers' lack of understanding of *Halal* food. Similarly Sal experienced difficulties with food and religious practices when placed with a Jamaican family. Sal recalled the Jamaican food in her foster placement as entirely different to the food she had eaten with her mother. Sal identified as being of mixed heritage: White British and Black Caribbean. She explained that her father was Black Caribbean but that she had only lived with him briefly and therefore identified herself more through her mother's cultures and traditions. Sal was then placed with a Black Caribbean family who ate traditional Caribbean meals which Sal had never experienced which she explained was difficult, saying: 'I couldn't handle it – my stomach couldn't handle it.'

Religious practices were also significant for both Sal and Anisah. Sal's foster carers were committed Christians and Sal was required to attend church every Sunday and to engage in religious worship every night. She stated that she had no choice in this:

Yeah, I didn't like it. I hadn't grown up with it. When I lived with my mum I could say 'Oh my God' and if I said that in front of my foster parents I would be mortified – they believed in God, they believed in Jesus – it was just an automatic thing to say but then I would get told off. I felt like I was forced to believe.

Sal and Anisah's discomfort was clear and their experiences appear to contravene Article Thirty of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states:

Every child has the right to learn and use the language, customs and religion of their family. (UNICEF, 1990)

Significantly Nayer and Owers (2018) reported that such experiences are not the result of a lack of available foster placements. They recommended a national database of foster carers to ensure young people are more accurately matched according to need and protected characteristics rather than carer availability.

5.7 Trust

Four participants shared incidents which resulted in a lack of faith in their foster carers. Kai recalled experiencing problems with his financial allowance:

The foster carer was supposed to complete some forms for it and she just didn't – she completely missed the deadline. I was quite angry – you know, because that's my money – even though I was just sixteen, it was still my right. And she had no care for it, she was just like 'it's part of life' – like it was just a life lesson.

Here Kai explained his anger, not just that his foster carer did not complete the forms but also that she appeared to dismiss their importance. The repeated use of the word 'just' appeared to emphasize the carer's dismissal of Kai's concerns. He stated that the carer 'completely' missed the deadline. The word 'completely' again appeared to suggest that the carer made no attempt to help which Kai understood as a lack of care and respect for his rights. Caroline and Kate shared similar examples where they had relied on foster carers to make an important telephone call or complete paperwork on their behalf. Whilst there may have been legitimate reasons for foster carers not completing these tasks they were experienced by participants as a breach of trust. Four participants gave powerful accounts

of foster carers failing to help or honour agreements. Caroline recalled an example of a repudiated promise:

They said I had to have the health review at school and I said 'I'm not doing it' and my foster carer said she'd ring up and say I wasn't doing it. Well, I just assumed that she had rung. But she hadn't.

As Kai identified, these situations caused frustration and disappointment which resonates with the importance Mannay *et al* (2017) and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017) place on micro-social interactions. Participants recalled these incidences as significant and described them in equal or greater detail than, for example, changing placements. This finding is supported by Schofield and Beek's (2009) and Jackson *et al's* (2005) findings that placement changes are not uniformly problematic and that a focus on high quality care should be prioritised.

As discussed above, interactions between young people and foster carers influence the modes of reflexivity developed by young participants in the sample. As Kath explained 'you wait so long for people to do things so in the end you just do it yourself.' This sentiment was repeated in many interviews with participants stating that they have learned that they can only trust themselves. In this sense participants reluctantly developed traits associated with autonomous reflexivity and these became amplified as they prepared for living independently.

5.8 Premature independence

A distinctive feature of the care system is the certainty of premature independence.

Participants discussed three experiences of the care system after the age of eighteen years

of age: *Staying Put* (DfE, 2014), supported lodgings or similar residential settings and living independently. Each of these are considered below.

Three participants (Brooke, Kath and Caroline) were living in *Staying Put* placements.

Caroline was eighteen years old at the time of interview and had very recently entered into a *Staying Put* arrangement with her foster carers. It is perhaps unsurprising that Caroline expressed concern about changes within her placement. A longer extract is included here as Caroline provided a clear illustration of the impact of premature independence on plans and social comparisons with friends:

Yes, so when I turned 18 I went on to the Staying Put policy – so you get to stay where you're living with your foster carers but you pay rent and you have to pay your own expenses. So, I had to go to the Job Centre for this – which also meant time out of school. That's something my PA [personal advisor] doesn't understand – that I am at school for five days a week, I don't have free time. She doesn't comprehend that. I had to claim housing benefit which goes straight to my foster carer and then I had to claim income support and £20 of that a week goes to my foster carer. That was all complicated because I was working and now that I've quit my job to concentrate on my exams I'm getting no money at the minute – I'm waiting for it all to get sorted out and it isn't being.

I have to worry about these things while my peers can just concentrate on their exams. And my PA and foster carers are also pushing for independence. I get that it's helpful but I just think that it's too much. Other people in my class aren't having to worry about cooking their own dinner tonight and all that. My foster carer doesn't understand about how much I have to work – she wants me to clean the bathroom once a week and all this which I know is acceptable but she doesn't understand that I have a lot of work to do. She thinks I'm shutting myself out when I'm in my room but I'm not she just doesn't understand how much work I have to do because she didn't go to university, no-one in her family went to university. I think it's a lot of pressure. It's like setting you up to fail again.

Here Caroline, who achieved several academic qualifications, expressed frustration that the circumstances surrounding life in care prevented her from focusing fully on her education. She recognised that her experiences were different to her peers and that at eighteen years old she was expected to prepare for living independently, these concerns are supported by

Samuels and Pryce (2008). Caroline identified many key issues: the lengthy and complex paperwork surrounding *Staying Put* which required her to attend a Job Centre. Not only is it conceivable that this could be a daunting prospect at eighteen years of age but it also necessitated time out of school whilst Caroline prepared for her A Level examinations. It is noteworthy that the responsibility for organising and completing paperwork appears to have fallen to Caroline, and whilst the organisation and funding of *Staying Put* placements are not the focus of this study it is an issue worthy of further research. In addition to the changes in the funding of her placement, Caroline also had to adapt to a different role within the household. She was required to prepare her own meals and complete household chores. Caroline compared her situation with her peers and was aware of the disparity in opportunities and support. It is distressing to note that this ambitious and academically able young woman regarded the care system as 'setting her up to fail.'

Other participants such as Cat and Nicole shared their experiences of living in supported housing from the age of sixteen years old and living alone at the age of eighteen years old. It was clear that all participants had found living independently challenging and those in supported lodgings had been exposed to drugs and alcohol. Nicole described feeling fearful about living in supported lodgings whilst Cat recalled a lack of adult supervision that allowed the young inhabitants considerable freedom. Cat explained that at sixteen years old she experienced difficulties accepting and processing the circumstances which had led to her entering the care system. Perhaps due to their easy availability, Cat drank excessive amounts of alcohol and took illegal drugs:

I went into a..., well they call it supported housing but I call it a youth hostel. It was full of sixteen to twenty-five year olds who had bad upbringings or basically sat around on drugs all day – no life prospects – they'd just sort of given up... I hadn't

really dealt with what had gone on so I did end up drinking a lot, doing loads of drugs.

Cat's description is not unique within the sample and it is important to note that as many as 42% of care leavers aged between nineteen and twenty-one years of age live in supported lodgings, community homes, bed and breakfasts or other temporary accommodation (DfE, 2018). The evidence from this study, whilst limited, suggests that premature independent living involves exposure to high risk behaviours. This finding is recognised in current policy with measures in place to enable young people to stay in foster placements until the age of twenty-one years of age. At present very low numbers remain in a *Staying Put* arrangement beyond nineteen years of age and work is needed to simplify the process for both young people in care and their carers (Morse, 2015). Approximately 80% of all care leavers aged nineteen to twenty-one years old live independently or semi-independently (DfE, 2018).

Nicole and Cat retained the ability to assert their independence within these challenging circumstances. This extended extract shows that at the age of eighteen years of age, Cat resolved to return to education:

Cat: A lot of the reason I started college was so I could get out of there. They wouldn't sign me off until I had a plan.

Me: There was someone asking you those questions then 'what are going to do?' Did they point you in the right direction?

Cat: No. I applied for college to shut them up. Then they put me on the housing website.

Me: So, do you go and live by yourself at that point?

Cat: Hmmm, yeah – I got a flat in the August but it needed a lot of sorting – it was filthy, she was a hoarder so I moved in in November.

Me: At that point when you moved out – did you have anyone assigned to you to support?

Cat: No.

Me: From that point you're on your own? And that's the point at which you do the legal secretary qualification?

Cat: Yes and then fell pregnant with my son.

Me: At what point did you study with the OU?

Cat: That was two years ago. No, three years ago sorry. Initially I think I just wanted to get a degree but now I want the career. I think I want to work with children so I can provide better support. I had four social workers in three years. I want to create a place where children can be referred straight from social services but also where I can offer drop in support because I know that sometimes I was fine and then something would happen and I would hit rock bottom and then I might have to wait three months to see someone. It would be better to have a drop in sort of thing – to offer support. That's what I want to be doing when I'm 40. At least then – I look at my own life and I think that if I had had something like that I probably wouldn't have gone the way I did. I want to help but also say – if it goes wrong, you can come back and see me, you won't have to wait.

Cat's actions provide a challenge to Hung and Appleton's (2015) findings as she demonstrated the ability to plan in both the short and long term. Cat's plans were clearly defined by contextual circumstances (Farrugia, 2013). Initially, committing to an educational course enabled Cat to leave supported lodgings and gain a place on a housing list. After this Cat appeared to develop a more meaningful commitment to education including study at undergraduate level which helped her define career aspirations. Cat's explanation of her progress towards her aspirations exemplifies Archer's (2007) contention that all plans, regardless of the mode of reflexivity employed to generate the plan, are often fallible before they are successful.

Nicole was also able to describe a pivotal incident which necessitated an evaluation of priorities:

I always remember once when I was in the children's home and they were all going off to nick a car and they were like 'are you coming or what?' and I thought actually

this could change my life so I'm not going and I didn't and they were all caught by the police. So that was a pivotal moment in my life because if I had been caught by the police and got a caution it would have been on my record because I was 16 so that was quite significant and a bit scary thinking about it... Everything else around me had fallen apart and that was the one thing [education] that I had routine with – so I didn't want to give up on it, it was the only thing I knew at that time.

Nicole had struggled to develop friendships throughout her time at school and described the isolation she experienced during her childhood. In the excerpt above Nicole was confronted by the expectations of her peers and the knowledge that their plans to steal a car could result in a criminal conviction which would constrain her future educational and career opportunities. Nicole highlighted the deliberation stage of the internal conversation where she questioned the consequences of the proposed theft. This internal conversation allowed Nicole to identify her educational prospects as her priority or, in Archer's terms, a dedication to her ultimate concern (2012; 2007). Both Cat and Nicole provide a challenge to Wijedasa's (2017) suggestion that young people in care, particularly females, experience a sense of a lack of control in their lives. Cat and Nicole describe making and successfully acting on decisions in complex circumstances.

Iz has lived independently from the age of eighteen years old. She discussed at length how living alone impacted on her ability to consider and pursue educational and career choices:

I feel like I have to – I feel like my housing situation – I live alone so my rent, where's that coming from? I have to think about these things before I can think about what I want if that makes sense.

The ability to pay her rent was clearly her priority and influenced decisions around employment and study. Iz also identified that her life was different to many of her peers:

It is harder – a normal person, they could be living with their families and think 'I can do this or that...' And me, I can't do that.

Iz illustrated the constraints placed on her ability to make choices (Farrugia, 2013 and Archer, 2000). As she identified, many young people would benefit from either emotional and/or financial support which expands the range of choices available. Her situation resonated with Hung and Appleton's (2015) finding that many young care leavers become 'survival-orientated'. Practical considerations such as paying rent or buying food places constraints on the choices available to care leavers and prevents longer term planning. This resonates with the secure base theory posited by Bowlby (1998) and the need for a safe place to return to in order to successfully explore the wider world. A secure base enables young people to take calculated risks safe in the knowledge that they can return home if their plans fail. The *Staying Put* policy (DfE, 2014) was an attempt to address this disparity in experiences but as noted, much work is required before a significant number of young people in care benefit from the policy.

Iz explained that she made decisions independently and that, at times, she did not consider herself to be coping:

Iz: It would come to a point where every day I would go home and think 'tomorrow, I'm going to quit.'

Me: And were you thinking that or saying that to someone?

Iz: I was thinking that to myself. Like you know, 'I can't do it, I can't do it.' And then in the morning I would go to work and then come back home and say the same thing.

Me: How long did that last for?

Iz: About seven months.

Me: It's a long process isn't it – making these decisions.

Iz: I lasted for seven months because I thought 'I'm going to get something out of this' – 'I won't get my Maths and English out of it but I am going to get my admin out of it.' So I stayed to get my admin. I hated it there but I thought to myself 'I can't leave without nothing, I've got to get something out of it.'

Me: So, we might say that you made a plan – that you would get your admin and then you would move on.

Iz: Yes.

Here Iz could be viewed as operating in one of two modes of reflexivity: Archer's notion of fractured reflexivity (2010) and/or Hung and Appleton's (2015) survival orientated mode. Iz was unable to take direct action, she experienced a repeated internal conversation for seven months. However this also serves as an example of the limitations of Archer's fractured mode of reflexivity. Archer's description of fractured reflexivity suggests that those operating in this mode are unable to plan, with internal conversations intensifying distress and disorientation (2007). This description does not pay sufficient heed to the contextual constraints experienced by care leavers. Iz identified that other young people may be able to take decisive action but she simply was not. Hung and Appleton's (2015) survival-oriented mode of reflexivity may have some relevance. Iz had to prioritise her day-to-day survival over her career and educational aspirations however she was able to plan towards longer-term goals but the realisation of these plans was fraught with difficulties.

Iz: I debate everything. Everyone says to me 'you already know what you're going to do, you're just asking me to see what I'll say.' And I am really like that, I'm always trying to make my mind up.

Me: If I can just pick up on that, do you feel like when you ask other people it's because you're not sure and you need their input or is it that you 90% know what you think and you just need to work it through?

Iz: Yeah, for me, it's just like most of the time I know what I want to do – I just want to run it through with them.

Me: But if they disagree with you, does that make a difference?

Iz: No. They say 'there's no point talking to you, you've already made up your mind.' It's more like I'm convincing them.

Me: Do you feel like you want their support?

Iz: No, not necessarily. I think it's my way of getting my ideas out of my system – it's nothing to do with their input.

Me: Do you feel like you need other people's support or are you able...

Iz: I'm able to do things... I feel like I haven't had that support so I've been doing things myself.

This excerpt suggested that Iz's reflexive process almost exemplified Archer's (2010) autonomous mode of reflexivity. Iz utilised many of the processes associated with autonomous reflexivity such as placing more trust in her own internal conversation than external validation. However, crucially for Iz, this is a learned disposition unsupported by the confident childhood experiences outlined by Archer (2010).

Me: You've developed techniques to help you cope with your situation.

Iz: I think when I started living in care that's when I started planning. That's when I needed to sit up and start planning. Before that I was very laid back.

Hung and Appleton (2015) argued that strong reflexive skills and effective planning are required for the transition from the care system into independent living. Iz's recollection above develops Hung and Appleton's argument by explaining that she started to plan when she entered the care system which suggests a higher level of planning than reported in Hung and Appleton's research.

Issues around premature independence were discussed in the professional interviews. The participant from Children's Services recognised some of the challenges associated with premature independence for care leavers:

You know, I mean there aren't many people who leave their parents at 18 and have to go and live independently. And if the accommodation isn't in place, you can't continue your education and training. Over the next three to six months, we'll have much better accommodation in place and much better opportunities for work-based placements.

Clear actions are identified to improve access to appropriate accommodation and work-based placements. However the daily challenges outlined by the RAPO are not reflected in the discussion above. Funding for retakes of GCSE examinations, complex application processes for benefits and funding and a lack of opportunities were highlighted by young people but not considered by the professional participant from Children's Services. The RAPO demonstrated a clearer understanding of the difficulties care leavers encounter:

Just because they're twenty-one that does not mean they can figure it all out on their own. That's the worrying thing for me.

The RAPO had a personal and empathetic relationship with the care leavers she supported. She recognised that at twenty-one years old, young adults may need guidance and she conveyed personal concern about their needs. She gave specific examples of the challenges encountered by young people of similar ages and in similar circumstances to Iz who had not achieved grade C or above in Mathematics and English GCSEs:

Because of the changes in education we're finding a lot of young people are coming back to us through advocacy support and the care leavers' forum to say we can't get our Maths and English because we have to pay for it and they haven't got the resources or funds to pay for it. Because of that barrier, it's then causing them a further barrier to getting on to any education, training or employment. What's also come out through the Care Leavers' Forum which is quite big is access to dyslexia support. When they were younger the support that they got was 'you may be dyslexic' but they were never tested. Now they're older, they trying to get dyslexia testing – they're being told they have to pay for it themselves.

Most care leavers aged nineteen to twenty-one years of age live independently or semi-independently, the DfE (2018) reported that the percentage could be as high as 81%. This excerpt identified a key difficulty for care leavers who lack financial support – the lack of funding for dyslexia tests and resits of vital GCSE examinations prevented care leavers

making the educational progress highlighted as a priority by the professional participants from the VS and Children's Services.

5.9 Social Workers

Five participants discussed or reported frequent changes and a lack of continuity in social workers. This meant that they had to explain their circumstances repeatedly. For example

Nicole recalled:

I had about four different social workers so the process would be 'hi, my name's...., tell me a bit about yourself.... This is what I'm going to do...' and then the next time it would be the same. So there was no stability there.

Kath and Cat also reported experiencing several changes in social workers and a sense that they were not genuinely concerned or interested in their well-being. Additionally Kath and Brooke stated that social workers were not aspirational for young people leaving care and this view is supported by Harker (2004). Brooke felt that social workers directed other young people in care towards:

Benefits and not training... or if it is training, I feel like it's just try sports Level One.

It is important to note that Brooke did not feel she had been subjected to low expectations but was commenting more generally on the advice she perceived social workers as giving to care leavers.

The heavy reliance by local authorities on temporary social workers is highlighted in Chapter Two and therefore it is unsurprising that participants noted and were critical of the frequent changes in their social workers. Participants who presented as experiencing multiple layers

of difficulties appeared caught in a cycle of increased vulnerability. Jess for example, was unable to form stable relationships with any social workers as she explained 'I've had loads of social workers. I've lost count.' Jess had also been in several foster placements. She experienced bullying which led to changes of school and had significant mental health difficulties. Jess presented as an impressively articulate young woman and again, her own determination to succeed seemed to be key to her continued commitment to education.

As previously stated, support from social workers was reported as variable. Only one participant recalled a social worker who 'always made an effort' and gave good advice. Generally social workers changed too often to be regarded as a trusted or key adult. Brooke explained that whilst her personal advisor's low expectations may not be directed at her she recognised the discourse of failure (Mannay *et al*, 2017):

I am quite aware of attitudes and assumptions made by social services. I have a PA now – a personal advisor – she makes a lot of assumptions about other kids. I don't think she does it with me, she knows what I want to achieve but with other kids she just talks about benefits with them – I don't hear her encouraging [their] education.

Development of trust between a young person and their social worker is clearly desirable.

One participant, Nicole, raised the important issue of forgiveness. Nicole explained that she had tried to forgive her mother for childhood experiences and that this forgiveness was important for her own emotional well-being. One of the roles of a trusted social worker is to support life-story work with young people in care. By its very nature, life-story work involves exploring sensitive memories to enable the young person to better understand their parents' difficulties and the circumstances which led to their care placement. The success of this work depends in part at least on the trust developed between social worker and young person and this requires stability.

5.10 Conclusion

Several important issues are highlighted in this chapter regarding participants' experience of family and childhood before and after entering the care system. Prior to entering care participants experienced varying levels of stability and educational support. Only Brooke gave a clear account of parental involvement in education. Anisah and Cat were exposed to low educational expectations and felt that no adults encouraged them to achieve academically. Other participants such as Caroline recalled accessing educational resources independently from a very young age. Despite the variation in pre-care experiences all participants developed a commitment to education.

The process of entering care was not described in detail by participants. However it became apparent that routes into care also varied. A small number of participants had entered foster care directly from living with parents, the majority had lived with family members or family friends before entering the care system. The loss of contact with siblings that resulted from a move into care was highlighted as distressing by two participants. One participant expressed frustration about the constraints placed on contact with her mother. These concerns are supported by Narey and Owers (2018); Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017) and Martínez *et al* (2016).

The terminology involved in the care system was regarded as problematic by both care leavers and professional participants. The phrases 'respite', 'corporate parent' and 'looked-after child' were highlighted as undesirable as they generated confusion or carried unwelcome connotations. Concerns around terminology had been raised through the Children in Care Council and it is pleasing to note that the VS and Local Authority's Children's Trust now routinely employ the term 'children in care' which has been identified

as preferable by members of the Children in Care Council as well as participants in this study. However evidence from this study suggests that a wider range of terminology now also needs to be reconsidered.

Participants appeared to regard the suitability of their care placements as of greater concern than their longevity. Placements which offered a sense of belonging and educational support were described in strong terms with the word 'love' used in two interviews. Many participants experienced a lack of support or suitability in their care placements and these situations generated frustration, disappointment and a lack of trust in key adults. These emotions were often exacerbated by incidents where foster carers had not fulfilled promises which was experienced by participants as a breach of trust. This evidence resonates strongly with Mannay *et al's* (2019; 2017); Rogers' (2017) and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) research which highlights the importance of daily social interactions.

A perceived lack of support during childhood whether from biological families or foster carers appeared to underpin many participants' explanation of the self-reliance they had developed. The need to be self-reliant is further reinforced by the prospect of living independently from the age of eighteen years old. Only three of the young people interviewed were living in *Staying Put* arrangements (DfE, 2014) and all three were studying courses at university. Other participants recalled living in supported lodgings or were living independently. The challenges presented by living independently at a young age are considerable. Iz explained that the responsibility for meeting housing costs limited the educational and social options available to her. Premature independence and associated

premature self-reliance were explained as influencing participants' internal conversations and modes of reflexivity and this is discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX - SCHOOL

6.0 Introduction

This section focuses on participants' experiences of school and education. Related concerns such as allocation of funding, relationships with teachers and friends and aspirations are also discussed. Participants' internal conversations and modes of reflexivity are analysed to offer an insight into how young people navigate experiences of school and education.

As previously noted, participants regarded school as separate and distinct from education. Education was regarded as a personal investment whereas school was understood as a social arena - providing an arena for relationships with adults and peers. The importance of feeling 'normal' and concerns about feeling or being perceived as 'different' were highlighted by many participants.

Participants highlighted issues around self-worth as crucial to remaining at school. The commitment to achieve academically was explained by participants as a way to ensure their future respectability (Skeggs, 1997). Mannay *et al* (2017) and Rogers (2017) identified that some young people in care resist the labels associated with care by focusing on educational aspirations. Resistance is certainly evident in this study. For example participants highlighted a determination that their future lives will be different from their parents' but a desire to help other young people in care was also presented as important. Participants employed strong language when describing their future lives, such as: 'I can go to school, smash it out and go to uni' / 'I want to do well for myself' / 'I want to say 'look where I am now' / 'I want to do something that makes me happy' / 'I'm still me. If I decide to let care define me and my past experiences define me then I'm not going to get to be who I want to

be.’ These confident declarations of ambition continue the challenge to the suggestion that young people in care experience themselves as lacking control (Wijedasa, 2017).

6.1 School

Seven participants described school as a safe space or an escape. For Anisah, school provided a place of physical safety whilst for other participants the escape school offered was more social or emotional. For many participants school provided an arena for social interactions where participants could relax and socialise with friends (Rees and Munro, 2019). However, it should be noted that three participants experienced bullying and school was described as a ‘trap’ by one participant.

Sal described the benefits that school can offer children whose home circumstances are difficult:

It’s literally a safe place. You can just get away from anything that’s going on at your foster carers or the residential home. You can just get away from it. It’s a different space and you look forward to going there because you’ve got your friends. It’s just a relief sometimes to go to school, it was my place to express my feelings – especially when you’re in a new foster place and to begin with you just feel you have to be good but at school you can jot all your feelings down and talk to friends. Yeah – definitely – I feel it was my safe place.

It is interesting that Sal felt that school was a place where she could express her feelings most freely and be the most authentic version of herself. She explained that in new placements she would have to be ‘on her best behaviour’ at least initially and school clearly offered her a place to relax. School not only afforded Sal the opportunity to confide in her friends but also a space to reflect on her emotions and experiences, an idea reiterated by Jess and Aliyah (IGB) and supported by Rees and Munro (2019). Sal’s description of school as

a constant which supported her through changes in foster placements reinforces the importance of a stable school placement.

Raz, Caroline, Anisah and Alisa also identified that school operated as an escape. For Raz, school offered an escape from difficulties at home and afforded her the opportunity to create a different personal identity, whilst Anisah (IGA) explained that school allowed her to reclaim aspects of her childhood:

I think it's good, probably for us – most of us didn't really get to be kids so when you are at school it's good to just be silly.

For Anisah the safety offered by school extended to her physical well-being as she regarded school as the only place where she did not experience 'abuse'. This description was particularly poignant as Anisah was kept at home by her parents for several months, something she explained went unquestioned by her former headteacher.

Raz discussed her experiences of school in some detail:

I think for me, school became an escape. I asked my dad about this, and he didn't want anything at home to affect my schooling – he would talk to the teachers and explain what was going on but he wanted to make it as normal as possible for me at school. So he would say 'look don't bring up the issue with Raz, she's doing fine academically, it doesn't need to be a massive thing.' I think there's pros and cons to that... but I think socially, I didn't realise it was an issue until I saw everyone else's mum – they didn't get drunk, they didn't come to school drunk, they didn't argue with the teachers – yes, socially that really affected me – I couldn't have friends over. I would never know if she was drunk at home. And my friends would tell me things their mum did – my mum cooks this, my mum cooks that, bedtime stories – all these things that most mums would do – my mum didn't do that – so, very early on there was a big difference. I resented my mum for a while – because she wasn't like a normal mum. I know she did love me – she was ill, she made certain choices that prevented her from being the mum that she wanted to be.

Me: So – when teachers at school didn't speak to you about the situation – you said there were pros and cons?

Raz: There were pros and cons, I think in school, primary school especially – I knew exactly what was going on at home but I never knew where to place my home life in

school because I didn't know if there was anyone I could speak to about it – I didn't know it was possible to bring your home life into school. So, I tried to talk to my peers about it but then they told their mums and they told school – there was a lot of conflict around that... but the pros were that I could just get on with it – I could just throw myself into my work and get the best reports I could – so I could come home and have something to show to my mum and dad – I could show them everything was okay and that they didn't have to worry about me - I could say to my dad 'look you don't have to worry about me, you can focus on mum.

Me: Did that become then your main reason for wanting to do well at school so you could report home and try to alleviate worry?

Raz: Definitely.

Raz highlighted several key points. The excerpt above demonstrated that Raz learned to manage her thoughts and feelings independently during her childhood. Her mother's alcoholism meant that she was largely unable to offer support, her father advised teachers not to discuss family problems with Raz. Additionally although Raz tried to talk to her friends, these conversations appeared to exacerbate Raz's emotional distress as her friends relayed stories of their mothers engaging in traditionally domestic activities. Raz learned to manage the challenges of her childhood through a reliance on her internal conversations with a clear focus on alleviating worry for her father.

Me: Was the transition from primary to secondary smooth or was that a difficult time?

Raz: I would say it was smooth enough. Just because everything that happened in primary school – my mum's alcoholism – all of that – I didn't tell anyone. At secondary school nobody knew. The teachers didn't know and at secondary school they don't ask those questions. Which I think they should to be honest – but at the same time I understand there's huge amounts of pupils. But I slipped under the radar so I thought 'okay if nobody knows, I can create my own identity'. I didn't have to be an alcoholic's child, I could just be a normal child who just gets her head down and gets good grades.

Me: So you were quite aware of almost re-inventing yourself at secondary?

Raz: Yeah, I was.

This extract reflects the reluctant development of Raz's autonomy. She stated that she did not discuss family difficulties at secondary school and that 'nobody knew'. Throughout her interview Raz articulated the complexities of experiencing the care system and subsequently living on the edge of care. She welcomed the anonymity that secondary school brought but also expressed a belief that her secondary school teachers should have 'asked questions' about her circumstances. Here Raz powerfully illustrates the tension that many participants in this study experienced: they were able to operate in an autonomous mode of reflexivity but this ability was borne from the absence of supportive adults.

Raz continued to describe the responsibilities she held at a young age and the crucial role education played:

Me: What kept you motivated?

Raz: When my little brother and sister were born in 2008 and 2009, it wasn't all about me then. I became their role model really – neither of my parents achieved academically so I felt like it was up to me. And up to me to show them that education matters, I think education saved me. I wanted to show them a higher ambition – for me that would be academic but I hope they would see that hard work helps you to achieve those ambitions – whatever they might be.

Me: There's a clear pattern of you feeling responsible.

Raz: Definitely – and I think that comes from my dad – I've seen him take on a lot. I don't think I would have it any other way because I think I've learnt a lot about resilience. And breaking stereotypes – I think that's important to me.

Raz illustrated key features of autonomous and meta-reflexivity (Archer, 2010). She identified a strong desire to construct a different future to her parents' and recognised the personal commitment required to achieve that ambition. However, it is also evident that this desire is informed by her sense of responsibility to her siblings rather than personal ambition.

Me: Can you remember a time when you were faced with a challenge and you made a conscious decision to pull yourself out of it – can you remember any of the thoughts you had?

Raz: I would say, well my biggest dip was when my mum passed away and I remember I wanted to go into school the next day but my dad wouldn't allow it so I went back the week after and I remember sitting down and feeling like I didn't want to be there and then I do remember thinking 'you owe it to your parents, you owe it to your mum to do well – to do the best that you can because you can do it.' Yes – I do remember telling myself to get a grip on my academic work.

Me: How old were you?

Raz: I was eleven.

Me: And you were having all those thoughts?

Raz: Yes...

Here Raz recalled internal conversations after her mother's death. It is interesting that the loss of her mother served to strengthen Raz's sense of responsibility, she stated 'you owe it to your parents' and told herself 'to get a grip on her academic work'. It is perhaps unsurprising that such complex experiences in early childhood might result in more complex modes of reflexivity than proposed by Archer (2010).

Whilst many of the participants above described school as 'safe' or an 'escape', it is important to recognise that this experience was not universal within the sample. For three participants school was an unpleasant environment which heightened their sense of being different to their peers. Jess and Esther described prolonged periods of bullying and Nicole experienced social isolation and one incident of severe bullying. It was clear during the interview that this incident had been extremely distressing for Nicole. Participants in Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall's (2017) study suggested that one incidence of bullying could have just as severe an impact on well-being as frequent bullying.

Esther recalled, as a result of the bullying she experienced, that she was removed from lessons and taught in a separate room and her experience resonates with Nassem and Harris's (2015) finding that the victims of bullying are often withdrawn from lessons or schools. However, Esther stated that she preferred to be in the isolated room as it kept her safe and she was able to concentrate on school work. The theme of bullying dominated her interview and was referred to on nine occasions. When I asked Esther if there was a theme to the bullying she pointed to a perceived flaw in her own personality and behaviour rather than suggesting a fault in those who had bullied her. Similarly Jess changed schools in order to escape the bullying she experienced and Nicole avoided attending school for some time. All three participants encountered difficulties with friendships generally in addition to the bullying they experienced. Van Doeselaar (2016) and Ridge and Millar (2000) reported that secure friendships had the potential to protect individuals from potential bullying. Removal from classes, changing or avoiding school contributes to a pattern of disruption and potentially further hinders the development of friendships which could protect against bullying (Rogers, 2017).

Kate was the only participant to describe school in wholly negative terms. She stated:

Kate: (Pauses) I sort of hated it – I didn't want to go to school. But I knew if I never went to school I'd get told off – they'd ring the carers so either way I was trapped.

Me: And school didn't offer you anything.

Kate: No.

Me: Did it offer you, at least, a place to see your friends?

Kate: Not really, I could have called them and arranged a time to see them.

Kate's use of the word 'trapped' contrasts with the notion of school as an escape. Kate stated that she did not find any aspect of school beneficial, socialising with friends could

occur outside of school and teachers were not to be trusted. Kate's description of school acts as a powerful counterpoint to the idea of school as an escape suggested by other participants. Kate was unable to recall any support from teachers and stated that the school she attended was 'going downhill', relying on supply teachers who failed to teach anything meaningful.

Within the professional interviews education and school were discussed in broader terms than academic outcomes. The professional participant from the VS stated that the key concern for the VS is to raise the academic and wider educational outcomes of children in care. For example, he explained that in the year to date (at the time of interview) no young people in care had been permanently excluded from a school in the Authority. Significantly no participants in this sample recalled a permanent exclusion from school. The professional participant from Children's Services explained that academic outcomes were a priority but were balanced by promoting well-being and health. He acknowledged a lack of certainty around whether teachers were trained to support these priorities for children in care. This raised an important question regarding how priorities are disseminated and supported in school when there is a lack of clarity about levels of training and understanding amongst teachers.

The professional participant from the VS stated that the suitability of any school for young people in care rested in its leadership which was not necessarily reflected in Ofsted ratings.

There are some schools that RI [requires improvement] that do some outstanding work with children in care and equally there are some outstanding schools who'll kick them out as soon as look at them. I want to remove that inconsistency.

This perception of Ofsted ratings is supported by Jackson *et al* (2005). No participants commented on the Ofsted ratings of their school and only one, Kate, commented on their school's overall academic outcomes. However several participants did discuss senior members of school staff which supported the suggestion above that developing relationships with school leadership teams is crucial.

6.2 Expectations of behaviour at school

Another example of micro-social interactions (Mannay *et al*, 2017 and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017) is how young people in care feel about their own behaviour in relationship to the expected behaviours at school. Esther is the only participant in the sample who considered her behaviour difficulties to be long-term and significantly problematic:

Esther - I was naughty anyway at school... really naughty. I used to get excluded all the time.

Me: You say you were naughty at school – was that before or after you went into care or...

Esther: It was before and after.

Me: Did it change at all after you went into care:

Esther: No, it just carried on the whole way through.

Whilst Brooke's experiences did not result in exclusions from school, she shared Esther's sense of responsibility:

I'm not like naughty.... but I would say that I'm a bit like cheeky and loud. I'm a bit of a class clown. There was one teacher – he just hated me and he would always sanction me. He'd use my log book. But I used to think it was really funny and I used to play up to it because I'd get a reaction. I'm just a bit chatty and I do distract other people. It's not fair really because I'm the sort of person that can chat and still take notes – that might not be the case for them. I can distract other people... He [the teacher] treated me the same – I think I needed to see that really – that I couldn't

get away with stuff just because I was in care. It should be the same rules and boundaries.

The importance of feeling 'normal' at school was highlighted by five participants. Several routine aspects of school life had the capacity to heighten or reduce a sense of normality. For example, teachers who held the same expectations of all pupils' behaviour regardless of their circumstances were valued.

This sentiment was reiterated in IGA with general agreement that poor behaviour should not be tolerated. The group developed Brooke's comments by suggesting that when exceptions were made for poor behaviour awareness of their care status was heightened and the sense of being 'normal' lessened. This finding is supported through research conducted by Mannay *et al* (2017); Rogers (2017) and Hempel-Jorgensen (2009) who contend that young people understand these unnecessary concessions as an expectation of failure.

One participant, Anisah, expressed a different view. She regarded her behavioural difficulties as resulting from a lack of support from teachers:

My Aunty was always being pulled in because of my behaviour – but I don't think they understood why I was behaving that way and it was because I wasn't getting the help that I wanted and needed.

The different perceptions of behaviour are interesting here. Esther regarded herself as 'really naughty' although later in the interview she discussed the role of other children in her behavioural difficulties. Esther did not consider entering foster care as a catalyst for her 'naughty' behaviour and did not (in this interview) discuss the impact of experiences within the family home. Brooke discussed her behaviour with the same combination of objectivity

and self-blame as is evident throughout her interview. In this excerpt Brooke uses *me/I/I'm/I'd/my* thirteen times and again demonstrated concern that her behaviour may have had implications for her peers. Brooke recognised that she enjoyed the attention being 'cheeky' created and again, although she is troubled by the potential impact on her peers her need for attention appeared to supersede these concerns.

6.3 Routines and school uniform

Participants also highlighted several aspects of their daily or routine lives at school which caused discomfort and/or a sense of being different to their peers. Caroline outlined the frustration of being removed from lessons to attend PEP meetings:

I had to go back into class and everyone was asking 'what was going on there?'/ 'what did she want?' You just don't want to have to explain all the time.

Caroline's frustration resonates with Mannay *et al's* findings (2017). Such meetings are not only educationally disruptive but also serve to highlight a child's care status, thereby potentially exacerbating a sense of difference or stigma and effectively removing a child's right to keep their care status private (Rogers, 2017 and Millar and Ridge 2000).

Sal reflected on her experiences at school and tried to view her childhood as similar to her non-cared for peers, she stated: '*I don't think it was really different.*' After this statement she proceeded to highlight several ways in which her experience of school was significantly different to children who were not in the care system. For example she recalled being removed from class for medical appointments, meetings, reviews and contact visits. Sal also

recalled being withdrawn from subjects that she enjoyed and sitting examinations at different times to her peers:

I missed my SATs – I had to do it late and I should have been in the same room as my friends and in a way that did make me feel different.

The DfE (2019) states that pupils may sit a SATs examination at a different time to their peers if they arrive at school late or require individual support. It is therefore conceivable that the separate arrangements Sal described were an attempt to support her educational needs. Nevertheless she recalled the experience as one which heightened a sense of being treated differently to her peers.

Issues around clothing and school uniform also generated broad agreement in IGA. School uniform was regarded as preferable to a non-uniform policy as uniforms removed competition and some signifiers of material wealth or poverty. Participants in IGA recalled anxiety about clothes for special occasions or non-uniform days at school. Celebrations such as 'prom nights' were viewed as particularly difficult with participants commenting on their lack of appropriate clothing and their foster carers unwillingness to purchase new clothing for them. Kai also raised this issue, explaining:

I was still always recognised... my status was as foster child. And you were always reminded of that through pocket money or regular meetings with your social worker – there was always that stigma... You do feel at a disadvantage growing up – you know your life is different. Even with clothes – you know the foster carer would never buy you anything fashionable – I don't mean expensive, just fashionable – you just get the basics... you want to fit in with the people and society around you...

Clothing has social and symbolic significance and was clearly viewed as having the capacity to emphasize or reduce the sense of feeling different (Rees, 2019). There was general agreement in IGA that school uniform was preferable to a non-uniform policy:

Yeah, everybody looked the same. You didn't have to worry about the latest trainers or what your jeans were like. Everyone was just in school uniform.

The importance of clothing and school uniform for children in care is worthy of further research as published literature around this topic is limited. This supports this study's finding that there is insufficient attention paid to the daily social challenges encountered by those in care.

6.4 Teachers

By antithesis, the vital role of teachers is well documented within the available literature and discussed at length by participants in this study. Eight participants shared examples of experiencing strong, positive relationships with teachers. Nicole articulated the difference support from one key adult can make to the life of a vulnerable young person:

I had a really close relationship with this teacher – she just really looked out for me. She was the cooking teacher actually and she was so kind and so caring. She said 'look Nicole,' I don't know what she could see but she said 'Nicole, just come and talk to me.' So I did and she would spend twenty minutes of her lunch just talking to me... I've met her a couple of times since and I just say thank you to her every time because she just saved me in a way I suppose.

Nicole reflected that without the support of this teacher she may have 'just given up'. The language employed to describe this teacher further emphasizes her importance. Nicole used seventeen positive words or phrases in the entirety of her interview and eight are dedicated to this key teacher including powerful statements such as 'she saved me'. Nicole's comments suggested that a nurturing relationship with a key adult can act as a turning point in a young person's life as previously noted by Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017); Maston (2015); Gilligan (2009) and Comfort (2007). The teacher displayed characteristics that Nicole

valued such as being 'kind' and 'caring' and the relationship developed through regular interactions. Importantly for Nicole, the teacher's support appeared to arise from an intuitive understanding that Nicole would welcome help. It is interesting to note that the teachers highlighted by participants were not senior members of staff. They were generally slightly older and female – potentially fulfilling a maternal role.

Key aspects of this teacher-pupil relationship were replicated by evidence from other participants. Participants explained that the most valued relationships with key adults are co-constructed, occurring outside of the classroom which confirms and develops findings from Claessens *et al* (2017); Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017); Maston (2015) and Gilligan (2009). Participants emphasised the importance of feeling that the relationship between themselves and the teacher was mutual, originating from a sense of genuine concern or affection. Iz explained that the presence of a particular teaching assistant enabled her to 'focus' on her work. However Iz also commented that she 'hated' seeing the teaching assistant working with other pupils potentially suggesting that she was emotionally dependent on the teaching assistant:

Iz: ...she would come into a lot of my lessons... she was lovely. She understood me and we got along and I think that's what it's about.

Me: Absolutely – that's key isn't it. You can have a designated teacher but the relationship needs to be genuine, you need to sense that they care. So the woman that did support you – did you talk to her about things outside of the classroom?

Iz: Yeah – we just chatted – normally. I used to be happy when I saw her and she used to be happy to see me too. It was good.

Here Iz clearly identified that a mutual connection is important. She sensed that she was valued by the teaching assistant and that she contributed to the relationship. Policies such as *The Children and Young People Act* (2008) highlighted the importance of key and

consistent adults and DTs but failed to sufficiently consider how these relationships could be developed. Ridge and Millar (2000) observed that whilst many policies during Blair's tenure were family-orientated they were not child-focused and did not consider the experiences of childhood. As the interviews in this study demonstrated, young people actively construct relationships with key adults. Relationships cannot be imposed and this is particularly important in the consideration of the role of DTs which follows below.

Further examples of extensive support from teachers were relayed. Francis (IGA) recalled an example of her teacher's generosity and kindness:

One of the teachers there was absolutely amazing – for every young person in that school that was in care. When it came to Prom Day as well, and you worry that your foster parents might not buy you a dress or whatever (lots of 'yeahs' and general agreement from the group) – she took me out and bought me this nice prom dress. You know, those touchy things that touch you because you think – you didn't have to do that. But she did it because she had the emotion and the empathy – she cared.

Strong language is employed here as the teacher is described as 'absolutely amazing'. Alisa described another teacher as 'really good' as he ensured they (Alisa and sister) received any support they required. Sal recalled the process through which she developed a strong relationship with a teacher at secondary school:

Like – for example, you'd go and see her before class – she wouldn't launch at you with a conversation – we might just sit there and then we just chat – general stuff before she'd ask you how you were. We would talk more like friends – she was a friend to me. Even when I left we kept in contact – we still chat now sometimes. I love that woman, she was great.

Sal stated that she and the teacher maintained contact after she had completed her GCSE examinations and moved to college which evidences Sal's view that the relationship was more like a friendship. It is important to again note the strength of language utilised to

describe these teachers: 'kind', 'caring', 'great' and 'love'. Teachers were the only professionals to be described in these terms by participants.

Kai and Anisah reported that their teachers were trusted and acted as 'role-models.' Anisah explained that she was able to contact one of her teachers out of school hours if necessary. Like Sal, Anisah regarded this relationship as 'more like a real friendship' although it is conceivable that safeguarding considerations would require the teacher to allow contact only via a work telephone rather than a personal one. Jess and Aliyah (IGB) suggested that positive relationships with teachers could act as a protective factor for young people in care. They suggested that if young people do not find an empathetic key adult they might seek 'love and attention' from 'the wrong person'. Jess explained:

That's when you end up in abusive relationships. That's why young people need someone empathetic in school because if they're looking for attention – they'll look for it in other people.

Both Jess and Aliyah felt this was a common experience. It is interesting that Jess felt the empathetic key adult should be found at school, again emphasizing the trust participants appeared to place in teachers.

By contrast, there were also examples of young people experiencing a lack of support from teachers. Nicole recalled receiving very little support before developing a relationship with the cookery teacher as noted above. Kath, Iz and Kate all finished school without achieving GCSEs in Mathematics and English at grade C or above and interestingly all three participants recounted a lack of support from teachers. Kate reported an absence of support at school whilst Kath believed her English teachers were not sufficiently concerned about her progress:

I resent my English teachers – they cared about the people who were over-achieving and making sure they got good grades but if you were under-achieving – I don't feel like they supported us.

It is interesting to note Kath was diagnosed with dyslexia at sixth form college which she perceived as further evidence that her needs were not met at secondary school. Six participants recalled teacher behaviours which could be viewed as unsupportive. It is important to note that all the examples given by participants centred on a lack of academic support rather than for personal or emotional issues.

Iz and Esther highlighted the importance of ensuring young people in care leave with the necessary qualifications in Mathematics and English to allow them to either continue studying or gain employment. Iz remembered her teachers as unwilling to help:

I feel like, with me, when I really need help I do go out and seek it. But most of the time – that would be exceptional – most of the time I do it myself. Like with my Maths and English I did go and ask for help and I never got it so for me, it's like 'what's the point?' There's no point so I just do it myself. But I feel like if I'd had that help and support I would have been in a better position and situation now.

There is a strong sense of Iz's frustration in the excerpt above. The desire to operate communicatively is evident but also a sense of fear that it could be 'pointless' to 'ask for help'. Instead Iz, alongside other participants in this sample, experienced a lack of trust in key adults and learnt to operate independently. Esther explained the practical difficulties involved in studying for GCSEs past the age of compulsory education. She explained that no financial support was available and, at the time of interview, she was twenty years of age and living alone, working part time, studying for a Level Three qualification and GCSE Mathematics and English.

In addition to high and low levels of support, IGA highlighted the importance of teachers treating all pupils equally. As this excerpt demonstrated, participants were uncomfortable with any concessions or unwelcome attention:

Francis: The teachers would always just be watching me. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing but it was a bit awkward.

Alisa: I had that too – every little thing was a big deal. It's a good thing but....

Lots of comments stating 'it's a bit too much'/ 'it's awkward.'

Sal: The only thing I didn't like was that they would let you off with too much. (Lots of agreement.) They would feel sorry for you and that would really annoy me.

Alisa: It can be a bit smothering – I don't need you to feel sorry for me. Shout at me!

Sal: Yeah, because my friends might have done the same but got in trouble! And I feel really guilty. That's the main thing, teachers condoning your behaviour because you're in care or you've had a troubled life. No.

Here Sal identified the social problems created when teachers publicly treat one pupil differently from another. She explained that such concessions had the potential to create social difficulties with her friends but also carried the suggestion that poor behaviour was acceptable or expected from young people in care. This quotation reflects Mannay *et al's* (2017) notion of 'unintended harms'. This unwelcome support is experienced as pity and possibly the 'discourse of failure' which is described as:

Couched in an expression of concern and sympathy by teachers. (Mannay *et al*, 2017: 694).

Caroline highlighted a further example of unwelcome concern:

When there was a school trip going on – I think she [English teacher] just assumed that I didn't have any money – she kept me behind after class and said if you need any help with the funding and stuff, the school can help with that. I didn't really appreciate that because I was being singled out because I was in care and she just assumed I didn't have any money.

Caroline suggested that her needs were misunderstood by her teachers. The belief that she might need financial support was unwelcome and served to increase Caroline's sense of being treated differently to her peers. The desire to be treated 'normally' by teachers is also reflected in Brooke's respect for a teacher who sanctioned her for 'misbehaving' in lessons:

I just think that if he had responded any differently or made me an exception because of my circumstances then that would have been quite patronising and quite... I think it was good that he had the same expectations of me that he did of the rest of my peer group. He treated me the same – I think I needed to see that really – that I couldn't get away with stuff just because I was in care.

Brooke's evidence is compelling. Despite her difficult relationship with this teacher she commended him for holding the same expectations of her behaviour as her non-cared for peers and thereby allowing her a sense of equality. However, participants in IGA demonstrated empathy for those teachers who made the perceived mistake of offering too much support – recognising that it could be very difficult to correctly anticipate help which was necessary and that which was unwelcome.

Where participants felt supported by key adults, this support was valued highly. Teachers were regarded as the most common source of adult support with nine participants highlighting specific examples of help or encouragement. Significantly teachers were described as the most supportive group of adults in the lives of children in care (Rees and Munro, 2019 and Harker, 2004). Within the interviews, examples of kindness and emotional support from teachers were identified. It is noteworthy that the majority of teachers discussed did not hold any specific pastoral or managerial responsibility. Indeed only one participant, Anisah, recalled significant support from a senior member of staff. The majority of teachers identified held substantive teaching commitments which involved regular contact with pupils. This suggests that positive relationships between teachers and pupils

develop through day-to-day availability and interactions as noted by Claessens *et al* (2017).

The crucial role of teachers is recognised in the professional interviews. The professional participant from Children's Services highlighted the need to develop training for teachers in order to enable more 'holistic' support for children in care.

6.5 Designated Teachers

Whilst generalist teachers were commended by participants in the sample, DTs were not so well regarded. With the possible exception of Nicole, every participant in this sample should have encountered a DT whilst at school. When asked about this role it became apparent that some participants such as Kath and Anisah had not encountered their DT. Other participants confused the DT with other key members of staff. For example Sal described the school counsellor when asked about her DT. It is interesting that no participants recalled receiving personal support from their DT. As detailed above, participants appeared to prefer to choose a teacher themselves rather than be assigned to a policy appointed person.

Only Caroline demonstrated a clear understanding of the DT role and it was evident that she felt the approach adopted by the DT was inappropriate:

The designated teacher... she wasn't very good. All the other care kids would go and see her every other day with their problems but I just didn't bother. I don't think I liked to mix my school life with my care life... Oh God, so she was just really condescending. She tried to be on the same level as the care kids. She'd speak down to you quite a lot, she spoke down to me quite a lot.

Me: In these PEPs when you're asked to talk about friendships – do you think, if you'd had a better relationship with her you might have been more willing to talk a bit more?

Caroline: Possibly yeah.

Me: If there had been somebody that got it right and spoke to you in a way that you respected – would that have been a useful person to have in school?

Caroline: Yes – definitely.

Me: That's quite interesting. Did you feel she understood you individually?

Caroline: Well, you had to go to her – she didn't approach me.

This discussion is particularly poignant. During her interview, Caroline gave sixteen one-word answers and nine three or four word answers such as 'yeah, definitely' or 'no, not at all'. The only extended answers centre on the discussion of key adults specifically employed to support young people in care: DTs, social workers, personal advisors and foster carers. In every case, Caroline expressed her disappointment in the level of support and understanding shown by these adults. She expressed considerable frustration with social workers and meetings that occurred during lesson time. Caroline also explained that questions during these meetings focused on friendships and health – neither of which presented as priorities for her. The DT is critiqued at some length (sixteen lines), which represented Caroline's longest response. Caroline recognised that some young people in care did find the DT helpful and this suggests two possibilities. Firstly, that Caroline did not view herself as having the same needs as many other young people in her position and secondly that she resented the DT for failing to acknowledge her considerable academic abilities and this is perhaps indicated by her perception of the DT as patronising.

Professional participants recognised the importance of key adults for young people in care. The role of teachers was discussed with the participant from Children's Services and RAPO who acknowledged the difficulties and limitations of the DT position. Both interviewees identified that young people in care may prefer to develop relationships with teachers they interacted with on a regular basis. The RAPO indicated that many young people felt that communicating with the DT risked unwelcome exposure of their care status. The participant

from Children's Services articulated an issue raised by several of the young people interviewed, saying:

A number of children seem to go towards a person in a school – someone who will listen. I know there are designated people in the school for children in care so there is someone there for them. I don't know that that 'go to' person is that successful... Often those young people don't warm to that person specifically because they are in that role. It's quite a complex issue.... It's got to be dealt with in a more holistic way – that starts when teachers are training.

Me: The one person who said they didn't find someone they could talk to was the person who talked about the designated teacher. They didn't like the designated teacher, found her patronising and didn't think that she really understood the situation.

Professional participant: It's got to be dealt with in a more holistic way – that starts when teachers are training.

This professional interviewee suggested that developing a community of practice centred on an understanding of child development would be more beneficial than assigning one individual to the role of DT. This notion develops contributions from participants in Mannay *et al's* research (2017) who suggested that a DT or space would be beneficial but that this should be available to all pupils rather than be specifically aimed at those in care. A universal offer of support would offer two clear affordances. Firstly, young people would be more able to access support without the risk of exposing their care status. Secondly, it would challenge the current requirement for DTs to be senior members of staff (DfE, 2018). This is significant as participants in this study valued the support of teachers they encountered regularly and developed relationships with over time. A universal offer of support could create greater opportunities for co-constructed relationships and potentially extend the number of young people benefitting from the nurturing relationships which participants in this sample described as crucial.

There is very little published literature available specifically considering the role of the DT and this is clearly an area that could be developed in future research. However it is important to note how little of the guidance for DTs (DfE, 2018) focused specifically on working directly with the child or young person in care. Four of the five priorities for DTs highlight the importance of communication with carers, parents or guardians but fail to mention the young people themselves. This may indicate that little has changed since Ridge and Millar's (2000) suggestion that policies are family focused rather than child centred.

6.6 Education

As stated above, participants understood education as separate and distinct from their experiences of school. Education offered numerous benefits which included, but was not limited to, achieving academic qualifications. Kai contended that the appeal of education lay in the value and longevity of its benefits and the importance of education dominated Caroline's interview.

Education formed a priority or ultimate concern for many participants. Whilst achieving academic qualifications acted as a concern for Raz, she believed that engagement in educational studies could help her create a different personal identity:

Me: You have a sense of creating your own identity?

Raz: Definitely, very actively. I hated that look of pity, I would always say – 'you can't stereotype me, I'm not an average alcoholic's child. Yes, that's my mum's choices – they aren't my choices. I want to do well for myself.

Raz displayed a strong desire to resist and challenge what she perceived as stereotypes about her natal circumstances (Mannay *et al*, 2017 and Rogers, 2017). Not only did Raz want to achieve the necessary qualifications she also understood education as an alternative lens

through which to view herself and be viewed by others (Stets and Burke, 2000). Raz expressed her determination to achieve academic qualifications as this would allow her to be understood through her own actions rather than her mothers’.

It is important to note that participants who achieved at a lower level academically remained equally committed to their educational development. As noted earlier, Esther lived independently, had part time employment and was studying for both a Level Three qualification and retakes of GCSE Mathematics and English. For Esther education may not offer absorption or satisfaction but she understood academic qualifications as creating opportunities and she demonstrated considerable tenacity in her efforts to acquire the necessary qualifications. Esther explained, in practical terms, the importance of obtaining GCSE passes in Mathematics and English examinations:

My Maths and English – you need those to go anywhere.... Like I wanted to go and do my Health and Social Care Level Three but because I didn’t have my Maths and English I couldn’t go to that level so then I thought ‘I’ll just go and do my Maths and English somewhere else’ – that didn’t work out so now I’m back at college and I’m studying for a Level Three and doing my Maths and English all in one.

Esther’s commitment to passing these key GCSEs was evident. Despite encountering several obstacles, she still understood these qualifications to be crucial and continued her efforts to obtain them.

Kath also left compulsory education without passes in GCSE Mathematics and English but presented as focused on establishing an alternative route to achieving her academic and career aspirations.

When other people say ‘I haven’t got my English or Maths, I can’t do this, I can’t do that’ I can say – ‘no you can, you just need to find your route – you might not be able to go the same route as everybody else, it might be longer but you can find another

way around it.' I knew that the Level Three would get me on to the FDA that I did to do the BA – so yeah, I had to do a lot of research.

For Esther and Kath, academic qualifications allowed access to the ultimate concern of a fulfilling career. Nicole and Caroline appeared to view progressing through the hierarchy of educational qualifications as an ultimate concern in its own right. For example, Nicole recalled feeling highly motivated and determined, she explained that despite being a state registered nurse and holding a Master's degree she still needed to constantly challenge herself. Caroline's interview was dominated by the discussion of her commitment to education. Teachers, friends, foster carers and social workers were only discussed in connection in their ability or willingness to support her educational progress and preparation for key examinations.

Raz and Kai suggested that education offered both a route to future opportunities and a secure, reliable focus for their efforts:

Kai: ...It's easier to manage just one thing. Friendships and relationships they involve emotions and managing the two is hard.

Me: So why choose education over friendships?

Kai: Because it's worth something – it's something that will last forever. Friendships you know, it could just be an acquaintance or it could be a troubling acquaintance – it could make you go off track a bit.

Similarly, Raz suggested:

The work wasn't terribly difficult – well, not compared to my home life – there were no emotions attached to coursework...

Where young people have experienced complex relationships, education may seem relatively straightforward as well as an escape from family circumstances. Raz suggested

that learning itself offered a way to 'disconnect' from thinking about home and this idea of education as a means of escape was reiterated by Caroline who said: 'I was too focused on that to worry about what was happening at home.' For Raz, Kai and Caroline education presented as potentially fulfilling the role of the key adult – offering stability, comfort and creating independence.

Kai's statement that education is 'worth something' challenges the focus of the education policies reviewed in Chapter Two. During Blair's tenure from 1997 to 2007 (and subsequent governments) prioritisation of measurable educational outcomes has not taken a sufficiently holistic account of the role education plays for young people in care (Henricson, 2012; Bradshaw, 2010; Brewer and Gregg, 2001 and Ridge and Millar, 2000). Children and young people are often represented in policy through the lens of their contribution to the economy as adults (Ridge and Millar, 2000). The more nuanced values of education such as providing escape, identity and absorption are not reflected in policy.

Cat and Esther shared the commitment to succeed articulated by participants above but had also developed specific career plans which were informed by their natal circumstances:

Me: Do you have a job in mind you'd particularly like?

Esther: Yeah, I want to work as an ambulance officer – or a probation officer.

Me: Why those careers?

Esther: Because, at the moment, everyone in my family has a criminal record and all that so I've heard about probation officers and I thought it was something I could do – I used to be a youth worker – but I'd rather work with older people now.

The majority of participants were studying in areas (such as education and social care) that could arguably be connected to past experiences although Kai, Caroline, Kath and Sal were not. This evidence suggests two possibilities or questions. Firstly, as Skeggs (1997) identified,

young women from challenging circumstances often seek employment in a 'caring' profession. Skeggs argued that professions such as nursing or teaching carry desirable connotations of respectability. Secondly however, this evidence also raises a question about the career possibilities and guidance that is presented to young people in care. Given that the young people in this sample express a clear determination that their futures should be distanced from their family context it is interesting that so many participants are moving towards careers related to their past experiences.

Iz explored the difficulties she encountered in trying to gain the GCSE qualifications and experience necessary to realise her ambition of becoming a teaching assistant:

Me: Can you think of an example of when you have experienced a set back and how you dealt with that?

Iz: That would be with my Maths and English, I'm okay with the other subjects although I know for me it takes me a lot longer to do things than the average person but that's something I deal with myself but with Maths and English – passing that was a challenge.

Me: And – I know this might sound like an obvious question – but why do you want that Maths and English?

Iz: I will have to have them in certain jobs and I want to be a teaching assistant so I will need them. I need them for anything I want to do – it's the basics.

Me: The desire to be a teaching assistant – is that long-standing or a more recent ambition?

Iz: Well, I did want to be one and then I changed my mind and then I came back to it and I thought, yeah – that's for me. I did go on an admin course. I did it and I managed it.

Me: But you had this long-standing goal to be a teaching assistant. Given that that does require you to go back and do your Maths and English which I understand is a really long process – what keeps you going – moving towards that goal?

Iz: Well, I'm starting courses. I know I can pass my Level One in Functional Skills – I just need a little bit of a push but I know I can do it. And that's what keeps me going. I have got better over the years – not necessarily with Maths and English but in everyday life... when I was doing my admin job I did develop and start being more confident in myself.

Me: So you've had experiences that have made you more confident, where you've had to use your skills. So, when you made that decision that admin wasn't for you and you wanted to pursue being a TA – can you recall the thoughts you had that helped you make the decision – that you were going to go ahead and try and get support and get those qualifications.

Iz: For me, it was like I was miserable – it wasn't an apprenticeship, I wasn't earning anything from it – I had bills and I had rent to pay for – so I wasn't getting anything out of it. So I thought 'well, if I'm going to do something, I want to do something that makes me happy.' So, yeah – kids make me happy so that's what I want to do.

Iz's long term goal is to work with children and to do 'something that makes me happy', a notion which is supported by Archer's (2003) explanation that commitment to a longer-term aim requires emotional investment. Whilst Iz's plans faltered, her determination challenges Hung and Appleton's (2015) contention that, due to the uncertainties involved in the care system, longer-term planning is difficult for young care leavers. She continued to discuss the difficulties she encountered:

Me: So some of the thoughts processes we might go through – do you find that you mull things over – weigh up the pros and cons for yourself?

Iz: Yeah – with my job – I was scared in a way. I knew I wasn't going to get any support; there wasn't any support for me to do an apprenticeship. Yes – I was earning but I was still trying to study at the same time and I feel like for people that live alone that's hard. A lot harder. It's just a joke really. I feel like it's either education or work – when you're a young person like this you can't do both. It's just double the pressure.

Me: And did you have people to talk to about that or were you working it out for yourself?

Iz: I was making the decisions myself. I just knew that I wasn't coping, it was hard and I just literally fell apart. The college I was with at the time – they were literally useless. They would come into my meetings and I would try to tell them what the issue was and they would blame everything on me and I just had enough. I was at breaking point really.

Iz articulated the constraints leaving the care system placed on her ability to exercise agency. These constraints are acknowledged by Tyler (2015); Farrugia (2013); Sayer (2012) and Reay (2009). Iz worked hard to meet basic responsibilities and requirements such as

rent but in order to advance her career prospects she also needed to complete further studies – a situation she referred to as ‘a joke.’ This situation exemplifies the long-term difficulties which confront many care leavers. Statistics indicate that over 80% of those in care leave compulsory education without GCSEs in Mathematics and English at grade four or above (DfE, 2018). This finding is supported by McDonald’s research (2005) who suggested that young people growing up in poverty may find themselves accepting unskilled work with few prospects and little chance of meaningful career advancement.

Challenges to educational progress were discussed by six other participants who recalled non-diagnosis of dyslexia and concerns about the allocation of PPP funding. For example Esther could not recall any benefitting from the available funding whilst Kate believed her school ‘kept’ the funding, stating:

When there was trips and everything, I got told I could use it for the trips but that wasn’t the case. The only time I got something out of that money was my last year – year eleven – and it was at the end of year eleven – after all my exams and everything that I got a laptop. I needed it earlier.

It is important to note that PPP funding may have been allocated in ways that were not immediately obvious to participants. However, Kate’s example of receiving a laptop once her examinations were complete does highlight problems with allocation of funding. Alisa (IGA), in the excerpt below, stated that whilst she and her sister received support whilst at school, they did not benefit from PPP funding at any time in her school career. Alisa perceived teachers or school leaders as dishonest, stating:

There’s money that you should get every year and it can go towards laptops or equipment – and my school, I’ve been in care since I started secondary school – so the whole of my secondary career – and me and my sister never got any of that money. We’d be told ‘you’ll get a laptop, don’t worry about it’ but we never got it. Our school was using that money for extra curriculum and me and my sister never

attended any – no after school clubs, no extra tuition. We did nothing – that money wasn't going towards us.

There was no immediate reaction to Alisa's experience from other members of IGA. This issued was pursued but interestingly when the group was asked if anyone had a similar experience, Bria gave an account of a teacher who passed on good quality clothing from her own daughter. It is conceivable that this indicated one of two things – either a lack of clarity about PPP funding or simply a desire to change the course of the conversation.

The participants above completed GCSEs in 2015 and although not conclusive these excerpts appear to challenge Ofsted's (2014) assertion that PP and PPP funding is being used more effectively and accurately. Whilst acknowledging the complex nature of schools' finance, it is worth noting that no participants recalled clear examples of benefitting from PPP funding. In turn this reiterates the importance of ensuring all young people in care are afforded every opportunity to develop a positive relationship with a member of staff who can advocate on their behalf.

6.7 Planning for the future

Participants identified a range of educational and career aspirations and these are considered above. To achieve these aspirations participants forged plans which they revisited, evaluated and when necessary re-designed. The extended excerpts below reveal Kath's internal conversation. Kath explained that during her time at sixth-form college she began to consider her career options:

Me: So, what I'm really trying to focus on here – I hope this doesn't sound patronising – you've obviously done really well – so what I'm interested in is how

you've kept yourself going through challenging times or any adversity you may have experienced at school and how you've kept yourself on track to get to this point. And one of the things I'm thinking is how we do that – how some people are more reliant on their own thoughts and making their own plans whereas some people need other people's opinions and approval.

Kath: I think back at school I don't think I had that support. The school did get me a tutor through LACES and that was going well but school wasn't really pushing me so I wasn't going in a lot but I think in year ten and eleven they wanted me to go to college – you know to do a beauty course or something but I thought 'no, I'm able to do...' I felt like if I'd gone to college at that age I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now, I would have just been like in a salon and not doing very much and I expect more from myself and to get further. So I decided at college level to... that was my reset – that was my time to think about 'what do I want to do with my life?' – not with anyone asking. So I did Social Care – I did my Level One and I felt like 'why do I really want to be a social worker? Is it because I want to help people – or is it because I feel like the system failed me and that's why I want to help other people?' And then through LACES I did a beauty course, like a day a week for five weeks and I found that I liked doing make-up and then from there I did my Level Two and I asked at beauty counters – what qualifications do I need? And I went from there – so it was more me going out of my way – me deciding what I wanted to be and thinking 'what's the best route to get me where I want to go?' So I did my Level Two and then my Level Three and then my BA and thought 'Okay, I want to do teaching.' Because I really liked the Culture Studies on my BA so that's how I got on to my MA.

Here Kath demonstrated her ability to make long term plans and the excerpt above affords a clear understanding of her internal conversation. Kath appeared to be at the discernment stage of the internal conversation, considering potential career paths (Archer, 2000). There is clear evidence of reflective, retrospective and prospective dialogue which may also be understood as I, me and you (Archer, 2010; 2000).

There is a clear sense of her 'you' or future self (Archer, 2010) as Kath planned a fulfilling career and elsewhere in her interview Kath indicated a desire to say in her future 'look at me now.' Part of Kath's planning process involved referring back to her past self or *me* (Archer, 2010), she recalled a sense that school 'wasn't really pushing' her and an awareness of low expectations which she sought to disprove. However the excerpt above highlighted Kath most strongly in active reflexive mode or meta-reflexivity which Archer (2010) referred

to as *I* – the present self. Kath identified five questions she posed to herself in this excerpt such as ‘what do I want to do with my life?’ Through this internal conversation, Kath was able to identify influences on her thoughts and plans. This process of questioning and modification ultimately resulted in Kath selecting an entirely different career path in make-up artistry.

Elements of autonomous reflexivity are also evident; Kath was aware of her teachers’ low expectations but remained determined to achieve at a higher level academically. As Archer (2007) contended reflexivity involves planning and when necessary, re-planning projects to help achieve our ultimate goals. Kath was able to acknowledge that enrolling on a Social Care course was a mistake and engaged in meta-reflexivity to examine her motivations. Archer (2007) explained that individuals who engage primarily in meta-reflexivity tend to be analytic and creative and it is interesting to note that Kath chose to study undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in make-up artistry.

Me: So at that point when you make that conscious decision when you go to college that you’re going to be different – things are going to be different – what sort of thought processes might you have gone through?

Kath: (Hesitates) Deciding what to do and what’s best. Thinking about school – thinking ‘okay when I was at school I wasn’t going in much...’ so making sure I’m going into my lessons and handing in my work – doing better than I did at school. And then deciding what I want to do and how to get there.

Me: Some people have said that the planning for example – they might have planned week by week – you know, I’m going to be in college every day this week and might not have wanted to plan further ahead than that – would that be true for you?

Kath: I think with college I did, I thought ‘this is what I’m going to do for the year’ – go in, get that qualification.

Me: So you’re able to plan further ahead than your immediate situation.

Kath: Yes.

Kath was clearly able to plan for the forthcoming year and put her plans into direct action. It is important to note that Kath recognised the practical constraints on her future plans (Farrugia, 2013) and hoped to teach in order to support her ultimate ambitions:

Me: Would you say there are constraints on the choices you can make?

Kath: When it comes to make-up courses yes – the kit's expensive, you need to do photo shoots and for editorial in London, they don't like to pay people. So that made it difficult... so that's why I thought "I need to be teaching, I need to be doing something else where I will have money so I can do make-up on the side.' Making make-up my main job won't pay the bills – it's hard to do that. The way I thought about it is that if I teach make up, I can use my MA theory in my teaching – that would be my ideal – because they use that theory on the course so that would be my ideal. A bit of both – using the theory as well.

Me: And did you have anybody that – did you ever try to talk to anyone about these problems?

Kath: I don't think so, at the time – no. I just accepted their decision. I'm dyslexic as well but no-one picked up on it so when I went to college I said I thought I was dyslexic and they tested me and said I was. So through all my school life...

Me: And no social workers or support workers were advocating on your behalf when you were at school?

Kath: No.

Although Archer (2007) identified budgeting as an aspect of the reflexive process the issues that Kath raised here also resonate with critiques of Archer's theory. Farrugia (2013) suggests that Archer's concept of reflexive internal conversation is useful but that these conversations are firmly framed within the realities of social context. Kath's financial constraints impact on her longer-term plans and influenced her decision to teach rather than attempt to solely establish herself as a make-up artist. Kath also explained the difficulties dyslexia created in her efforts to obtain GCSEs. She recalled that no-one advocated for her during this time to ensure she received appropriate support. It is these layers of disadvantage that Archer is considered to underestimate (Caetano, 2014; Farrugia, 2013; Sayer, 2012 and Crossley, 2001).

Kath lived in a kinship placement until the age of twelve years old and subsequently experienced a stable and generally positive foster care placement. It is possible that, as a result, Kath experienced a higher level of continuity during childhood than Hung and Appleton's participants which enabled Kath to develop more coherent reflexive capacities:

Me: And you say you debate quite a lot what will be the best path for you... does anyone contribute to that debate or is it a debate with yourself?

Kath: I think my carer might have an input but I need to be able to do it by myself. Because if something went wrong I can't say 'you told me this or you said I should do that...' doing it yourself, making your own way – if you struggle, then you struggle but you can look back and say 'right this is what I need to change for the next time.' So I think planning for yourself is much better.

Me: Are you quite good at that – perhaps if something hasn't quite worked, you're able to say 'right, this is where it went wrong, next time I need to...'

Kath: Yes.

Me: Do you find if something hasn't gone quite right – do you think it through and almost relive it in your mind to try and make sense of it?

Kath: Yes – yes, I do.

Me: Would you say you have conversations where you almost talk it through and rehearse conversations – almost conversations with yourself?

Kath: No – I don't think I do that... no.

Me: There's a bit of a pattern there through your secondary education of people having low expectations and people not really listening – do you think those things contributed to you ultimately becoming someone who's very self-reliant?

Kath: (laughs) Yes – I'll use my carer as an example – you know, when she asks me to do something and I don't do it straight away, she'll say "I'll just do it myself" – it's like that. You wait so long for people to do things so in the end you just do it yourself. It kind of does make it better for you in the long run – you get more done relying on yourself.

Me: Do you feel satisfaction in now being more than capable of being self-reliant or is that a source of any frustration?

Kath: I do get satisfaction in knowing I can do it for myself – yeah – yes – I do. I may not have had the help but I can do it by myself. I think when I feel like that – I feel I can't do this – I think 'no, you need to get to the end of this so you can say to somebody...' You know, if I went to a school reunion and they asked what are you doing now – I can say well, actually, I'm doing my Masters – without any support. So

yes, maybe there is a little bit of that – I would like to say I'm doing my Masters, there were people who didn't think I would finish college.

Me: So that's a good motivating thought?

Kath: Yes, mostly to show myself that I can do it but to show others that may not have thought I could have done it – especially having dyslexia too.

Kath identified the need to be autonomous. Her foster carer may contribute to a limited extent but Kath expressed a need to take responsibility for her decisions. This necessary self-reliance may involve similar features to autonomous reflexivity but Kath identified it as a 'need' rather than a pattern of behaviour developed in childhood. Kath's statement that 'you wait so long for people to do things so in the end you just do it yourself' clearly illustrated the circumstances leading to increased self-reliance. Kath's experiences resonate with Hung and Appleton's (2015) findings who also identified this distinction, explaining that self-reliance can be a skill borne from necessity and therefore not necessarily unproblematic.

Kath also displayed aspects of meta-reflexivity; she demonstrated an awareness of how her internal conversation is constructed. As noted above, she clearly talked to her future 'you' (Archer, 2010). She imagined her future self and anticipated the pleasure of disproving expectations by imagining herself saying at a hypothetical school reunion 'I'm doing my Masters'. Kath stated that she could not recall engaging in internal conversations but gives examples of doing just that within the interview. This is quite possibly because such conversations are a natural and regular occurrence and she was not fully conscious of engaging in the process. This contrasted with her clearly articulated desire to manage decisions and plan independently – again suggesting that self-reliance is a skill she consciously developed.

Esther and Cat described a desire to help other young people in similar circumstances to their own. Cat explained her plans to offer other young people the immediate and personalised support she would have welcomed. Her ideas resonated strongly with Milich *et al*'s finding that a more flexible approach to support would be beneficial:

I want to create a place where children can be referred straight from social services but also where I can offer drop in support.

Cat was able to articulate specific career plans and in that way this excerpt differed from other participants in the sample. Raz, for example, presented a generic desire to be successful and whilst that formed the basis of her ultimate concern she had yet to determine specific plans. Similarly Francis (IGA) demonstrated a broad commitment to ensuring the safety of her future, envisaged, family:

Right, what can I do for myself – for my future – I've got my future in my hands. I can go to school, smash it out and go to uni. I can have the best family – I can make the best family and give my children the best.

In these forty-seven words there are ten references to *I/I've/my*. Francis clearly envisaged a future involving a university education and a family. The desire to protect her future children is a clear concern. It is interesting that Francis corrected her statement 'I can have the best family' by reiterating it as 'I can make the best family'. The use of the verb 'make' suggested that she understood being a mother as an ultimate concern and something she would work actively towards achieving.

Archer (2000) argues that our ultimate concerns shape our personal identity and that this process only truly occurs as we reach maturity. With the exception of Nicole, participants were very young and in the process of refining their concerns or future aspirations. In the

excerpts above a range of broad aspirations are evident: Raz and Kath envisaged the satisfaction of out-performing expectations and resisting perceived stereotypes; Esther and Cat hoped to help others in similar situations but for Sal, Nicole and Iz concerns presented as entirely personal - centring on a desire to be happy or free of past experiences.

Caroline appeared to be confidently operating and planning in an autonomous mode of reflexivity. Archer (2007) suggested that an autonomous mode of reflexivity develops through the successful navigation of challenges in childhood and certainly Caroline gives a clear account of educating herself independently from an early age. At the time of interview Caroline was applying for university courses – she expected to study law and to move a significant geographical distance from her natal context. Perhaps most significantly Caroline was able to identify and articulate examples of her inner dialogue:

There's a thought that if I stop now I could be like every other care kid and just not do anything, live the easy life but then I look at the people around me that are doing well and I think 'right, well, I'm here now and I need to keep going. I'm supposed to be here and I need to get on with it' and I get back on track.

Me: And it's a conversation you have with yourself? You get yourself back on track – it isn't a case of talking to someone and them helping you get back on track?

Caroline: No, I do it.

As this excerpt from Caroline's interview highlights, those operating in an autonomous mode of reflexivity do not rely on external validation. Caroline trusted her internal dialogue and, as illustrated above, this dialogue leads to direct action.

Brooke and Sal appeared to go through this process in a communicative mode of reflexivity. They were able to reflect on their need to vocalise their plans and gain guidance from key adults, Sal explained:

With me, I'm a bit of a sheep really. I can make up my own mind but I am easily guided. I like to be guided. I like structure, to know exactly what's going on. When I speak to people about what I'm going to do, they highlight the good things and then that's made up my mind. My foster carers have always given me choices – I tried football and I hated it and then I tried a dance class and I loved it – so I was given the choice but when I was young I would just follow my friends and what they wanted to do. When I left school, I'd say to my friends 'what are you going to do at college?' and I'd follow them. It was only when I spoke to my staff at the children's home – that's when I realised that I had got a talent and I needed to start using it.

Sal recognised that all stages of her internal conversation are influenced by her relationships with peers and adults. In the discernment stage she experimented with a variety of activities – often following her friends. Although she deliberated her choices after leaving school she was again influenced by her friends. However the combination of recognising her ability in the expressive arts and the support of key adults at the children's home encouraged dedication to her talent.

Although the participants identified supportive adults in their interviews, it is clear here that they believe their futures are theirs to create. In the excerpts above, there are twenty-three occurrences of *I/I'm/I've* or *I'll* and fifteen occurrences of *me/my* or *myself*. It is also interesting to note that two participants envisaged or recalled themselves talking to an unidentified other. This suggests that parallel to the desire for a different future is the desire to have their success acknowledged by others. This may be more potent for those in care who lack a key adult to demonstrate parental pride in their achievements.

6.8 Mental Health

Seven participants spoke in detail about the emotional difficulties they had encountered and the debilitating nature of their mental health problems. Experiences described included

anxiety, depression and emotional breakdowns. Kate explained how her mental health problems affected her ability to fulfil her plans and work towards her priorities or ultimate concerns:

I wasn't motivated as much as I could have been because of everything that was going on – it was always at the back of my head... I understand that other people were stressed because of the work but the kind of stress I was having meant I was shutting off – not wanting to do anything – like nothing.

Kate reflected that 'stress' prevented her from focusing on work and impacted significantly on her daily life. Archer (2010; 2007) may regard the difficulties outlined by Kate as leading to a temporary state of fractured reflexivity as during this time, Kate was unable to act or make progress.

Younger participants in this sample looked to their future achievements and the anticipated satisfaction of gaining a career and creating a new life. Nicole, aged twenty-seven at the time of interview, was a state registered nurse qualified at Master's level and therefore could be seen to have achieved the 'new life' envisaged by other participants. Whilst she expressed satisfaction in the realisation of her plans stating: 'I'm very proud of where I've got to.' She also identified the sadness of realising that her mother was unlikely to acknowledge her achievements. Nicole's age gave her a unique position within the sample, she was able to reflect on the impact of childhood experiences, the system and their enduring impact:

Nicole: There's always a nagging voice saying you're not good enough but you try not to listen to it. I think the way that you see yourself, it can be quite difficult if you've been so messed up in the past. It's a battle.

Me: So many of us, no matter how old we get – there's a part of us that wants our parents' approval?

Nicole: Yeah, or even just for our parents to recognise that you've done well – which is difficult to get.

Me: And if you didn't get that message as a youngster... I imagine that's heightened?

Nicole: Yeah, and you do need it. It doesn't matter how old you get.

Nicole: You kind of learn to forgive. You accept this is what happened. It's all a process isn't it – I still have to process it now. You have to learn to let things go.

Nicole identified how difficult emotions such as self-doubt interrupted her plans. Nicole illuminated her continued desire to receive her mother's approval and the sadness of realising this approval would not materialise. It is this enduring impact of low levels of parental support during childhood which Archer is considered to underestimate (Tyler, 2015; Farrugia, 2013; Sayer, 2012; Reay, 2009 and Skeggs, 1997).

Brooke identified being in care as contributing to her anxiety:

I'm the sort of person who seeks approval. So when people aren't happy with me I get very upset, very anxious... If I upset her [foster carer] or did something wrong I would be very upset about it so I would try and compensate for it and try to rectify what I'd done wrong... Probably – I would say a bit of low self-esteem as well... I think that's quite natural for someone that's been in care – especially a teenage girl.

Here, Brooke identified both her anxiety and her need to please. These emotions translated into a desire to amuse and entertain - which she described as crucial to her sense of well-being. Brooke appeared to view her anxiety and need for reassurance as her 'problem' – evident in her explanation that she tried to compensate for mistakes made. Brooke's suggestion that she was more likely to experience low self-esteem as a teenage girl is also supported by Wijedasa (2017) who found that teenage girls living in care were more likely than boys in care to experience a lower sense of well-being.

Brooke's understanding of her mental health difficulties and sense of personal responsibility contrasts with Jess's (IGB) perspective:

More support is needed for children in the system – especially when it comes to mental health... I used to skive out of school all the time – everyone I knew did – just come back at 3pm and try and get my mark. That's how bad things were and no-one noticed. When you're in care, you just don't have that stability and that's something that every single human being needs. Otherwise, if you haven't got foundations – everything's just going to fall down. I needed to have a counsellor really and a plan – a clear plan of what would happen – so you would know you weren't alone.

Jess highlighted many important factors here. Where Brooke appeared to regard her mental health difficulties as hers to resolve, Jess placed more emphasis on the support she needed and lacked. Jess also recognised the impact of being in care, suggesting that living in care left her without emotional 'foundations'. Jess gave a valuable insight into the challenges she had encountered with her mental health and the available support structures. She argued that support services for children in care should prioritise mental health and highlighted the problem of operating support services through schools. Here Jess highlighted the support she needed such as 'a counsellor and a plan'. She also recognised that her non-attendance at school meant that her needs were not necessarily identified by teachers. Jess experienced a high number of foster placements and therefore also lacked a consistent carer who might have advocated for support on her behalf. Jess indicated that the combination of her mental health problems and the lack of family support left her fragile and alone.

It is worth noting that the prevalence of mental health difficulties was recognised in two of the professional interviews. The participant from the VS stated that addressing mental well-being was a high priority with funding allocated to providing support in schools in addition to working with the DfE and NHS projects such as the School's Link Project and the

Vulnerable Children's Project. However as explored in Chapter Two funding for children's mental health services remains inconsistent. Milich *et al* (2018); Parkin *et al* (2018) and The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2016) reported that funding does not appear to have reached front line services, that CAMHS have experienced reductions in its budget and young people in care were too frequently refused access to support services. As Milich *et al* (2018) identified, contrary to statutory guidance, children in care are often refused assessments by CAMHS as they do not meet the requirement of being in a stable placement. This may mean that the most vulnerable children and young people do not receive appropriate support. There is a parallel difficulty with centralising mental health services through the context of school. The most vulnerable children may change school placements as well as foster placements or have poor attendance at school which again reduces the chances of receiving support. As highlighted in Chapter Two, the current government's Green Paper: *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision* (DfHSC and DfE, 2018) includes plans to introduce a designated lead senior teacher in schools to oversee mental health provision. A key finding of this study is that the model for the DT role (for children in care) does not function well, it is not understood or received well by participants. It is conceivable that a DT for mental health may encounter the same difficulties.

Many participants expressed a desire to receive support at a time of their choosing, a notion that is supported by Milich *et al's* (2018) finding that a more flexible mental health service would be beneficial. Examples of personalised, flexible support were shared by the Authority's RAPO who recounted examples of supporting individuals through the 'Have a Good Day' project funded by Public Health England. Young people in care were provided with £500 which they could spend on anything they felt would improve the quality of their

day-to-day life. The RAPO gave examples of young people improving their garden, buying a cat and funding regular visits to the countryside. In this study, unintended harms are frequently discussed but this initiative appears to generate unintended benefits. For example, the young person who utilised funding to buy plants and flowers to improve her garden and create a pleasant outdoor space inevitably spent time outside in her garden. During this time, she became engaged in conversations with her elderly neighbours and a good rapport developed. The RAPO explained that this relationship flourished over time and the young person's mental health has benefitted as much from this new supportive connection as it has from the improved outdoor space. It is possible that small scale regional projects such as 'Have a Good Day' support personalised plans and encourage positive micro-social interactions (Milich *et al*, 2018 and Mannay *et al*, 2017) where national policies cannot.

The professional participant from the VS and the RAPO recognised the emotional and mental health difficulties encountered by young people in care. The professional participant from the VS suggested that well-being issues are pervasive amongst children in care and highlighted the developing support available through schools in the Local Authority:

We can parachute that emotional support in when it's needed. So it's starting to impact...

This understanding of the high level of mental health concerns coalesced with evidence from the young participants' interviews. Participants such as Raz and Cat reported a need for more flexible and personalised counselling services. It is possible that the multi-agency support services referenced by the professional participant partially addresses this concern. However the RAPO identified specific difficulties with the support structures available to

children that may not be fully recognised in the VS's plans. The RAPO repeated Jess's concern that many multi-agency services operate through schools and therefore those young people regularly not attending school may not benefit from such support services.

The RAPO suggested that for many young people support structures which operated separately from schools such as Care Councils offered a crucial chance to feel less isolated.

The RAPO also addressed the need for personalised and flexible support by suggesting young people in care be allocated monetary funds which could be accessed at a time of their choosing. This resonated strongly with Cat's interview where she outlined future plans to offer flexible, on-going support to those in care.

6.9 Relationships with peers

Within the sample friendships presented as complex and varying in importance for participants. This is an interesting and slightly concerning finding as the available literature demonstrates the considerable benefits of secure friendships. Networks of friendships have the potential to protect against social isolation and bullying (Millar and Ridge, 2000). Secure friendships can support educational commitments and offer a sense of belonging which may be particularly valuable for children in care (Poulin and Chan, 2010). However as Poulin and Chan (2010); Zimmerman (2004) and Brendt, (1986) noted the development of such friendships require mutual self-disclosure and trust.

At the time of interview Sal and Brooke appeared anxious to reduce any impact of their care status on relationships with their peers. Sal recalled using humour to lessen any concerns about living in care. Throughout the interview Sal referred frequently to looking forward to

telling her friends about her new foster or residential home. Sal admitted that after moving placement, she would sometimes exaggerate aspects of her new home in order to entertain her friends. When living in residential care, Sal utilised humorous embellishments to describe staff at the children's home:

I used to love shouting 'staff, can you help me with this or that.' I used to love saying my staff were coming to pick me up. And I used to just love it, I used to play on it – they used to clean my room.

This approach allowed Sal to manage her relationship with her friends. She was able to gain attention whilst also positioning herself as 'in control' of her situation. Sal presented the residential home as a hotel where she was a customer. This portrayal rejects common depictions of life in a residential home which might place Sal as a victim. In a similar manner, Brooke also sought to minimise any pity or sympathy from friends:

I think if my friends thought I was gutted about it they might have felt bad too.

Both Sal and Brooke adopted the role of entertainer and this approach resonated with Roger's (2017) finding that young people in care skilfully manage their care identity amongst their peers. Sal utilised humour as a coping mechanism and Brooke sought to minimise the differences between her circumstances and those of her friends. Brooke regarded her own feelings about foster care as central to the reaction she received. As she explained, she believed her friends would react with sadness if she had presented her situation differently. It was apparent throughout Brooke's interview that she worried a great deal about upsetting or worrying those close to her.

Cat and Brooke explained their conscious decision to present a cheerful and humorous persona to their peers. Brooke explained that adopting this persona deflected attention away from any difficulties she was experiencing:

I don't really show that I'm upset. I always seem happy, always smiling. So when I got to school, people didn't really know. A lot of my friends think I'm funny, I make them laugh – they can never tell what's happening.

Interestingly Cat identified two contrasting social identities. She too explained that she smiled irrespective of circumstances at home. It was clear that Cat regarded this as a positive approach as, at the time of interview, she was encouraging her son to adopt the same approach. Cat also explained that she had occasionally utilised violence:

I was a gobby sixteen year old – there was nothing that would scare me. I think I would always stick up for my brothers so any sixteen year old girl that thought she could come up to me and intimidate me, I would probably head-butt her. I'm not being funny but I used to fight with guys, a little girl's not going to scare me... So when it came to going into a youth hostel with catty girls it was like I'll just beat you up like I would any man. It was fine.

Here Cat identified aggression as a social identity when living in supported lodging at sixteen. Other participants, such as Nicole, explain that semi-independent living as a very young adult was a frightening situation. Such circumstances perhaps necessitate coping mechanisms such as a desire to physically defend oneself.

Two participants displayed a strong emotional response regarding friendships. In Brooke's interview eighteen lines (out of 189) are dedicated to the discussion of friends. Brooke reflected on her desire to entertain her friends and the importance of feeling well-liked:

When I was younger in primary school – I wasn't very popular. I think I just used to cry a lot. But now I think I just look for attention in a better way. The girls always say I'm like Tinkerbell – she dies when she doesn't have attention. (laughs) I'm trying to control it.

Brooke's need for approval and attention contrasted with Kai's desire to distance himself from potential friendships:

Kai: I mean, I wouldn't necessarily make friends. My main focus was my education. I would see having a surplus amount of friends as possibly detrimental to my education...

Throughout his interview Kai described positive relationships with teachers, tutors and teaching assistants. He stated that his college tutors regarded him as another member of staff. Relationships with peers however were avoided as they were complex and unpredictable. Unlike Sal, Nicole and Kate who experienced friends as supportive networks, Kai regarded peers as potential hazards which could derail his education and future prospects.

Friendships with other children in care were valued by Sal and Nicole. Sal explained that the school counsellor helped connect young people in care to one another:

She couldn't tell me who else was in care but she might say 'there's a couple of kids that you might know, they could use a friend at the moment.' And two of those girls I go to college with now and they're like my best friends. I'm grateful for that. We do everything together.

The benefits of connecting with other young people in care were reinforced by Nicole who moved to a children's home at fifteen years of age and met other young people in care. For both Nicole and Sal the structure of the care system allowed contact with other children in care – either through a school counsellor or living in residential care. However Kate described developing her own connections with other young people in care and regarded these as her main source of support:

Kate: Some of my mates have been in care themselves so it's really just comparing stuff and seeing how it...

Me: And when you talk to other people who've been in care, does that help you understand your own experiences?

Kate: Yes.

Me: Are there certain things you'd rather go to adults about?

Kate: No, because if I couldn't go to my mates I'd rather leave it in my head.

Me: So your friends are your main port of call.

Kate: Yes.

Kate's friendships developed through an understanding of shared experiences (Rogers, 2017). As previously noted Kate did not trust teachers or enjoy school which possibly heightened the importance of these friendships.

Friendships were discussed briefly in the RAPO's interview. She highlighted the social and educational benefits associated with extra-curricular activities. The RAPO's observations are unique within the sample but are supported by Poulin and Chan (2010) who suggested that friendships tend to be more stable when they exist in more than one context. The RAPO suggested:

Another thing that they've found useful is The Duke of Edinburgh scheme so in terms of additional educational support and meeting a lot of new people – everything that The Duke of Edinburgh scheme brings – for one young person in particular – they could have done it within the school, but they were worried because they kept moving placements so when they knew it was happening through the council, they were like 'this is something I'll be able to do all the time, regardless of where actual education is' and it's like another qualification. So things like that seem to work but it is very much about the support.

This presented as a positive example of the Authority acting as a corporate parent. The impact for the child in care was clear, they were able to maintain a level of security and potentially maintain a consistent social group despite frequent changes to care placements and schools. However it is worth noting that commitment to extra-curricular activities is often dependent on the practical support of foster carers and therefore the evidence given

by the professional participants from the VS and Children's Services that the quality of foster care is variable and likely to remain so is of concern.

6.10 Disclosure of care status

Mature friendships require trust and mutual self-disclosure (Poulin and Chan, 2010; Zimmerman, 2004 and Brendt, 1986). Participants' decisions related to disclosure of care status to friends centred on personal and practical considerations. Participants' evidence suggests that the timing and context of disclosure of care status are complex and this is supported by Rogers (2017). It was striking that no participants referred to advice or guidance around the decision of whether or how to disclose their status. Although there was a sense throughout the interviews that disclosure of care status was preferable only two participants described managing this disclosure with relative ease:

Me: And in terms of living with the foster family – were your friends aware of that?

Brooke: Yes – always.

Me: And was that your choice or did it just become almost too difficult not to tell them?

Brooke: It was probably a bit of both – I would have told them anyway but I think to explain why you've come back to a school you left a year ago and why you don't live with your brothers at home and you're referring to people at home – it would have just been too difficult.

In order to establish and maintain friendships seven participants felt it necessary to disclose their care status to friends. Brooke suggested that open disclosure also allowed her to 'normalise' her situation for her friends. As previously explained Brooke employed positivity and humour and it is evident here that she took care to minimise any difficulties associated with living in care. Whilst Brooke's ability to manage the disclosure of her care status

appeared successful it also placed significant responsibility on her. The lack of support and guidance given to children in care regarding the management of social micro-interactions (Mannay *et al*, 2017) such as the disclosure of care status is a finding of this study and develops Nayer and Owers' (2018) key recommendations. Appropriate guidance could reduce anxiety around social relationships with peers, potentially allowing young people in care the opportunity to focus on their key educational concerns.

In addition to practical considerations, participants highlighted a desire to be honest with friends.

Sal: I think it's easier if they do know because – I feel like if I hadn't told my friends that I was with a foster carer and then later in a children's home – they wouldn't have known and how would I have ever brought them round my house? They would have been like 'who's this? Why don't they look like you?'

If I didn't tell them or lied and said I was with my mum and dad, it wouldn't really make me a good friend – it would have been a lie and then it would be awkward when they did come to my house or I'd go to theirs and they could never come to mine.

Sal and Brooke were able to manage this disclosure throughout their time in care and viewed this decision as vital in minimising the differences between themselves and their friends (Rogers, 2017) which supported the development of secure friendships. Caroline and Kate explained that in different phases of education they made different choices:

Caroline: When I started sixth form I made the choice not to tell everyone and it started so many complications – when you're trying to talk about your family. It's just easier to tell people right from the beginning and then you don't have the repeated questions all the time.

Caroline displayed a moderate level of regret about the decision to conceal her care status at sixth-form college. Caroline identified practical concerns for this regret. Non-disclosure appeared to generate speculation and questioning amongst her peers. These frustrations

are also evident in other interviews. For example Kate highlighted two important issues. She recalled that at her first secondary school she had attempted to maintain confidentiality regarding her care status. However she explained that aspects of care, such as meetings during school time, made it very difficult to maintain the privacy she desired. She continued to reflect on the relationship between her own confidence and her willingness to disclose her care status:

But then in my second high school I was okay because my confidence got gained and I was more confident about telling people – and the two people I was in with were in care themselves – so I was more confident.

Kate identified her own confidence as pivotal to her ability to confide in friends which suggests that the confidence to confide is contextual. It is noteworthy that she had established friendships with other young people in care thereby potentially reducing her sense of care as unusual (Rogers, 2017). Additionally she highlighted practical concerns and the desire to be honest with her friends as prime benefits of disclosing her care status.

The interviews made it apparent that as a young person it is very challenging to conceal being in foster care even where that is the preference. Therefore how to manage this disclosure in a manner which enables agency rather than diminishes it must be considered and is a key finding of this study. Kate explained that she delayed telling friends that she was in care but ‘social workers would come into school’ ultimately making non-disclosure very difficult.

Two participants expressed a strong desire to maintain privacy. Anisah explained that she felt her situation would be judged as problematic within her community:

It’s culturally issues of disclosing my care status. I still don’t make it apparent – yeah, I just say my mum and dad when I’m talking about my aunty and uncle. Literally only

one of my friends knows – but I trust her... within our culture, our community, it's a big deal not to live with your parents – I don't want people to be judgemental from that perspective.

This excerpt illustrates the complex nature of care and how perceptions of the care system may vary significantly between cultures and communities. Anisah suggested that within her Muslim community being in care would be considered highly unusual. Esther also expressed a desire to maintain confidentiality, stating:

I just didn't want people to know I was in care. I didn't want anyone to know.

Both Anisah and Esther acknowledged that non-disclosure had resulted in practical difficulties in terms of friendships but also felt disclosure would bring unwanted attention and judgement (Millar and Ridge, 2000). Esther consistently chose not to disclose her status and acknowledged that this had caused practical difficulties within her friendships. Esther entered foster care at thirteen or fourteen (she was unable to recall the exact age) and did not disclose this information to any of her peers throughout her time at secondary school. It would appear that Esther's friendships were quite fragile; she explained that although she did have a friendship group it was not secure:

If one person falls out with you – everyone does and it sort of came to a point where I was getting bullied.

She explained that as most teachers were unaware of her care status she was not offered any additional support when attempting to deal with the bullying but on balance Esther still felt keeping her care status private was the right decision as it allowed her a sense of normality at school. However, Esther was also clear that her teenage years were very different to her peers, she explained that she spent a good deal of time worrying that her peers would find out that she was in care and worrying about the safety of her siblings who

were still in the family home (Millar and Ridge, 2000). Esther also explained that she was not able to develop any potential friendships as she could not act spontaneously; she could not invite friends to her home or make any arrangements without speaking to her foster carers first. There was a stark difference in Sal's and Esther's experiences and the difference would seem to centre on decisions around disclosure of care status to friends.

There was a brief discussion around the disclosure of care status amongst IGA. Alisa explained that she and her sister did not disclose their care status until they were older and had developed more secure relationships with their friends. She explained that when she did disclose her status it was readily accepted and understood. She shared this experience with her younger siblings and advised them to disclose their care status more openly. This was because she had learned that people were ambivalent about her care status and open disclosure had resulted in easier social situations. Alisa considered the difficulties of non-disclosure, recalling an occasion when a teacher shared a register including emergency contacts prior to a trip:

I was thirteen and I was worried that everyone could see – that they weren't my parents. And the teacher had it there so everyone could see... Not many people knew I was in care so that made me really uncomfortable and I kept thinking everyone had seen it and that's it, they know I'm in care now.

A lack of sensitivity from the teacher is demonstrated here but also the variety of difficulties encountered by young people in care who choose to maintain privacy regarding their status. The need to support young people in making decisions around disclosure of care status is clear. A key finding of this study is that young people should be provided with guidance and information around disclosure. As this study has demonstrated many young people in care develop an autonomous mode of reflexivity but this is often reluctant, resulting from the

lack of an available key adult. Friendships are a complex but important part of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Developing support for young people in this vital area could support friendships, engender trust in key adults and contribute to coherent modes of reflexivity.

6.11 Conclusion

Interviews clearly demonstrated that participants valued education and academic qualifications which were recognised as a route to desired careers. Experiences of support from key adults such as parents and foster carers varied considerably with few participants reporting consistently high educational support. Teachers in non-managerial positions were identified as offering high levels of support which extended beyond the requirements of their role. A significant finding of this study is that the position of DT is not well understood or well received by young people in care, further research around this issue is recommended.

Perceptions of friendship also varied within the sample. Kai and Caroline regarded friendships as potential distractions from their priority of succeeding in education. Other participants such as Brooke and Sal valued friendships and social interactions, they openly disclosed their care status and appeared to enjoy secure relationships. Anisah and Esther expressed a clear desire to maintain privacy around their care status and felt that this decision afforded them a level of normality amongst their peers. Disclosure of care status presented as a complex issue for participants and it was striking how little support they appeared to be given with this important decision.

Whilst participants recognised that key adults, in particular teachers, had offered educational and personal support they were clear that they were responsible for their own behaviour, difficulties and successes. The young people in this study explained that they had encountered a range of challenges, including mental health difficulties, bullying, low levels of educational support and delayed assessments for dyslexia.

Professional interviewees demonstrated an awareness of the concerns raised by the young people interviewed. Interviews with professional participants from the VS and Children's Services focused on policy, aims and new initiatives. The RAPO had daily interactions with care experienced young people and focused on individual accounts of challenges they encountered. There is some convergence between the VS participant and the RAPO. The VS participant recognised concerns highlighted by the Children in Care Council regarding the need to support mental health difficulties. However the interviews suggest that the RAPO's detailed knowledge of the daily experiences of being in, and leaving, care are not understood by those in a leadership role. It is noteworthy that all three professional participants work in separate buildings within the Local Authority and that the distance between buildings is approximately two and a half miles. The professional participant from the VS recognised these distances made communication challenging and stated that the Authority had now understood the need for change. A key concern of this study is that policies concerned with children in care do not reflect the concerns of children in care. Evidence from these key personnel within the Local Authority suggest the same distance between policy and practice.

Examining the findings through Archer's explanation of agency, internal conversations and modes of reflexivity further illuminated participants' journeys through care and education.

Whilst Archer (2000) identified that natal circumstances may constrain choices and opportunities, her more recent work is frequently critiqued as underestimating the lasting impact of adverse experiences during childhood (Tyler, 2015; Farrugia, 2013; Sayer, 2012; Reay, 2009 and McDonald; 2005). Participants in this study demonstrated the desire and ability to transform rather than reproduce their circumstances (Archer, 2000). However, challenges generated by mental health difficulties, premature independence and inconsistent support influenced modes of reflexivity and constrained educational and career choices for many participants. Such difficulties are recognised by Archer (2000) but Farrugia's (2013) notion of practical intelligibility perhaps allows greater recognition of the enduring impact of challenges encountered by young people growing up in care.

Participants demonstrated the ability to plan and understand their internal conversations. There was evidence of participants operating in all four of Archer's (2010; 2007) modes of reflexivity and some evidence to challenge Hung and Appleton's (2015) survival-orientated mode. Only four participants presented as clearly meeting Archer's criteria for a specific mode of reflexivity (2010; 2007). Brooke and Sal provided the clearest examples of Archer's notion of communicative reflexivity – both established positive relationships with their foster carers (who they refer to as their foster mum) and regarded themselves as relying heavily on the guidance of the key adults in their lives. There is also some evidence that both participants are reproducing aspects of their natal context.

The majority of participants demonstrated elements of all four modes of reflexivity: communicative, autonomous, fractured and meta reflexivity. Participants explained the difficulties of trusting other people when their trust had often been broken or abused. Many participants' plans and goals were constrained by the material disadvantages they had

encountered. Other participants identified the impact of low expectations, premature independence and mental health difficulties. The most striking feature of the interviews is the number of participants who learnt to operate in a mode which shared traits with the autonomous mode. A new mode of reflexivity – reluctant autonomy - may better capture the experiences, strengths and challenges encountered by young care leavers as they begin to *make their way through the world*.

CHAPTER SEVEN - CONCLUSION

7.0 Introduction

This study has explored the research questions through a critical realist perspective to provide an authentic account of the educational experiences of young people in care in one Local Authority. To achieve this, evidence from twenty-one interviews with care leavers has been foregrounded. Evidence given by young care leavers was prioritised and discussed alongside policies, literature and interviews with key members of the Local Authority's Children's Services and VS. This approach aimed to generate an authentic account of the educational experiences of young people in care (Sayer, 2000) whilst also accepting that alternative interpretations are possible.

The welfare and dignity of all participants has been a priority throughout this research. Trust between myself and participants was established in three primary ways. Firstly, I believe I was suitable to conduct this research. My personal experience of the care system underpinned my commitment to this research and my extensive experience of working with young people engendered a sense of trust between myself and participants. Secondly, collaboration with the Local Authority's RAPO was crucial. She acted as a gatekeeper to participants – helping to build relationships and ensure informed consent. Lastly, I am involved in the work of the VS organising and supporting educational activities such as celebratory evenings and Aspire to Higher Education masterclasses. This involvement allowed me to better understand local priorities and initiatives, build relationships with key staff involved in supporting children in care and create opportunities for meaningful dissemination of the findings of the study.

This study offers detailed contextual information about the Local Authority where the research is based. This information is important as foster care is a devolved issue within the UK and therefore funding and policy can vary between Local Authorities. The challenges encountered within a densely populated city with high numbers of children in care may be different to those encountered in a rural area with a smaller population and fewer children in care. The inclusion of selected contextual information allows other researchers to more accurately evaluate the transferability of this study's approach and findings.

It is also recognised that where research has sought to 'hear' the voices of children in care, those voices are not always 'heard' by those in a position to engender change in policy or practice (Mannay, *et al*, 2019). As stated above, this study has received comprehensive support from the Local Authority and secure relationships have been established. An interim report of findings has been shared with the Local Authority's research manager and further dissemination activities are planned. These plans include working with the Children in Care Council to develop guidance for children entering care. I have also shared findings at two conferences, one seminar and by contributing to a blog which generated meaningful discussion and feedback (Matchett, 2019a; 2019b; 2018a; 2018b).

The findings of this study contribute to the available research regarding the care system, specifically it contributes to research conducted by Mannay *et al* (2019; 2017); Rees (2019); Rees and Munro (2019); Narey and Owers (2018); Rogers (2017); Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017); Hung and Appleton (2015); Samuels and Pryce (2008) and Ridge and Millar (2000). Whilst small scale, this illustrative study identifies important issues, including issues that existing research and professional practice has not adequately recognised, which have implications for future policy. Experiences of teachers and DTs; relations with peers and

issues of identity; the importance of education for children in care, premature independence and terminology involved in the care system are highlighted.

This chapter will now revisit and respond to the research questions:

1. What are the current educational and family policies and legislation relevant to children in care?
2. What key relationships for children and young people in care are significant for them?
3. To what extent are children and young people in care able to exercise agency?
4. What are the educational experiences of children and young people who have experienced care?

7.1 What are the current educational and family policies and legislation relevant to children in care?

Policies and examples of legislation discussed here relate to England. It is important to note that policy, practice and provision are different in other parts of the UK as a result of devolution. In England under the current Conservative government there has been an increase in funding for specific programmes related to the educational opportunities available for children and young people in care. The clearest example of increased funding is PPP which has risen to £2300 per child per annum. Other supportive mechanisms introduced or piloted by New Labour have been maintained or developed. The *Staying Put* policy (DfE, 2014) allows young people the opportunity to remain in their foster placement until they complete higher education or training. Children in care continue to have the highest priority in schools' admission systems. However in practice the support offered by these policies can be limited. Approximately only 7% of care leavers remain in a *Staying Put*

arrangement with their foster carers, the vast majority continue to live independently (DfE, 2018). It is acknowledged that the processes involved in the *Staying Put* policy are complex with interpretations varying widely (The Education Committee, 2016). Additionally whilst schools may be expected to offer care experienced children the highest priority admissions status, this policy only applies to state funded schools which leaves academies and free schools free to set their own admission criteria.

The role of the VSH and DT were extended in 2018 to include adopted children. This development indicates an understanding of the enduring impact of challenging experiences in childhood. However a key finding of this study is that the role of DT needs to be revised. Findings from this study indicate that the role of the DT is not fully understood by young people in care and, where the role is understood, it is not well received. This finding is an important contribution to research around the educational experiences of children in care particularly as there are plans to appoint mental health DTs in all schools (DfHSC and DfE, 2018). This is a crucial issue for children in care in particular but also has clear implications for other young people. It is an area which warrants further research.

During Blair's administration schools became subject to increased regulation. The *Green Paper: A Better Education for Children in Care* (2003) set a target of 15% of children in care achieving at least five GCSEs by 2006. This target was not realised and no further targets have been set. Under the Coalition and Conservative governments outcomes for children in care are considered in broader terms, which is exemplified in *The Care Leaver Covenant* (DfE, 2018). The Covenant involved twelve governmental departments as well as private and public sector employers who all pledged to support apprenticeships and enhanced access to higher education for care leavers. However, there is nothing significantly novel in this

Covenant. Rather there appears to be a continuation of existing policies such as *Staying Put* (DfE, 2014).

This research is situated in a Local Authority which has experienced many challenges and changes since first being rated as Inadequate by Ofsted in 2009. Although some improvements were noted by Ofsted ultimately progress was deemed insufficient and the Authority's Children's Services has been managed by an Independent Children's Trust since 2018. The most recent Ofsted inspection (December, 2018) stated that whilst services required improvement to be 'Good' they were no longer Inadequate (Higham, 2018). Importantly for this study, Ofsted reported that the voice of children in care drove practice within the Local Authority. Outcomes for the Authority's children in care and care leavers appear to be slightly above the national average with 11% of care leavers in a *Staying Put* arrangement which compares to 7% nationally (DfE, 2017). However data from The Children's Trust's self-evaluation (2018) makes further national comparisons difficult. For example, the self-evaluation stated that 65% of care leavers are in education, employment or training which compares favourably with the national figure of 48% reported by the DfE (2018). However the Local Authority's figure reflected the position of 17 to 21 year old care leavers where the DfE's figure referred to 19 to 21 year old care leavers. Similarly, in reporting GCSE results, the Local Authority has subsumed the outcomes of pupils in care into a generic *disadvantaged* category.

7.2 What key relationships for children and young people in care are significant for them?

Relationships with teachers and particularly those teachers in non-managerial roles, are highly valued by participants in this study. This finding confirms and contributes to research

conducted by Rees and Munro (2019); Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall (2017); Maston (2015) Gilligan, (2009) and Harker (2004). Teachers in this study are experienced as nurturing, trustworthy and committed, they are regarded as the adults offering the most consistent source of support to young people in care. The importance of generalised teachers is supported by Claessens *et al* (2017) who found that positive relationships between teachers and pupils develop through regular and informal interactions which often occur on the fringes of lessons. In turn, this finding not only validates the importance of teachers but also supports the assertion that the role of the DT should be re-considered. Statutory guidance states that DTs must be senior members of staff (DfE, 2018). Teachers in senior roles within schools are likely to teach a reduced timetable and are, therefore, less able to develop the relationships valued by young people in this study.

Interviews also revealed more variable relationships with other key adults. Support provided by foster carers and social workers was described as variable. A lack of consistency in social workers was reported as a concern by participants and this finding is supported by Ofsted inspections of the Local Authority's Children's Services which found a heavy reliance on agency staff. With only one clear exception, participants felt their foster carers' willingness to support their educational ambition was limited. This is an important finding as it potentially challenges the current reluctance to introduce minimum academic qualifications for foster carers.

Whilst relationships with peers were of clear importance to many participants they were also explained as complex and a potential distraction from education. Participants highlighted the challenges living in care could pose for friendships. For example, participants discussed a lack of freedom, difficulties in knowing how to refer to foster carers and

considerations around disclosure of care status. Decisions around revealing care status appear to depend on many factors which exert control over social identity: self-confidence, contextual issues such as the timing of foster care, advice given by older siblings, relationships with non-cared for peers and with other children in care and interventions such as PEP meetings during school hours. Interviews demonstrated how difficult it could be for young people in care to maintain privacy around their status even when this was their preference. Meetings during lesson time and occasionally a lack of discretion from teachers often resulted in unwelcome questions and speculation from peers. This evidence suggests that schools and teachers do not consistently protect the identity of young people in care and that little has changed since Ridge and Millar's research in 2000.

Relationships with peers who had not experienced care appeared to exert considerable influence in crucial decisions around disclosure. Fear of a negative response from non-cared for peers was reported as a key reason for non-disclosure of status. Interestingly, participants who did disclose their care status appeared to experience more consistent friendships and none recalled incidences of bullying. However this is a complex picture. For example, Brooke stated that by taking control of her care identity and disclosing her status with confidence she lessened the reaction from her non-cared for peers. She also gave a clear account of carefully managing this disclosure to reduce any sense of discomfort for her friends. This resonates strongly with Rogers' finding (2017) that young people in care feel stigmatised by living in care and aim to minimise the differences between their circumstances and those of their non-cared for peers.

7.3 To what extent are children and young people in care able to exercise agency?

To understand these concerns further, Archer's theory of internal conversations and reflexivity has proved essential in identifying and explaining the significance of participants' accounts of their experiences and aims. This study also contributes to the application of theoretical concepts and frameworks which can provide new illumination of issues and allow greater transferability of the findings in this study.

This desire to ensure an improved and secure future was apparent in all interviews with care leavers. Planning for the future involved mediating complex structures of the care system, schools, colleges and universities, social expectations and financial constraints. To enable progress through these structural considerations participants engaged in internal conversations. Participants gave clear examples of their reflexive processes as they considered options available to them and deliberated over their own motivations and aspirations before dedicating themselves to a course of action (Archer, 2000). The excerpt from Kath in Chapter Six (section seven) exemplified the crucial deliberation stage of the internal conversation when she questioned her motivations for considering social work as a potential career.

Participants were also able to identify the extent to which their internal conversations remained internal. Kath for example explained that the deliberation outlined above was wholly internal. Only two participants (Brooke and Sal) actively sought guidance from key adults as they made decisions about education or potential career paths. Despite clear evidence of the desire to ensure futures distanced from natal circumstances it is interesting to note that seventeen of the twenty-one participants were planning careers which were closely associated with those of their biological families or care experiences. This finding is

supported to some extent by Tyler (2015); Farrugia (2013); Sayer (2012) and Reay (2009) who argue that social disadvantage constrains choices to a greater extent than Archer acknowledges. Participants in this study did not necessarily present as constrained but their career choices did reflect childhood experiences.

Archer's explanation of agency and modes of reflexivity (2012; 2010; 2007; 2003; 2000) allowed greater analysis of the findings in this study. Considering how agency is enabled and constrained helped to identify which experiences and relationships supported young people as they moved through education and care. This study seeks to contribute to knowledge by proposing an adaptation of Archer's modes of reflexivity – specifically an adaptation to Archer's autonomous mode. Autonomous reflexivity is associated with independence and ambitious career trajectories. An autonomous reflexive is likely to have skilfully negotiated challenges therefore developing trust in their own choices and plans. Certainly participants in this study experienced challenges in their childhood and described how they negotiated these. However, participants also expressed a desire to receive support and guidance. They explained that they learnt through experience that support and guidance is not always available or reliable and therefore to avoid further disappointment or rejection, they have learnt to operate independently. This enforced independence presents as *reluctant autonomy* which I suggest differs from Hung and Appleton's (2015) survival-orientated reflexivity. Unlike participants in Hung and Appleton's study participants in this research established a reflexive mode which allowed them to plan in both the short and longer term. However, their reflexive modes did not develop incrementally in childhood and this presents as different to Archer's (2007) account of autonomous reflexivity.

The proposed mode, *reluctant autonomy*, supports two crucial insights into the experiences of children in care. It recognises and respects the resilience and independence of young people in care. It acknowledges the ability to plan successfully in both the short and longer term and it reminds professionals to respect their ambitions and aspirations. However, this new mode of reflexivity also acknowledges the personal and emotional cost of developing independence prematurely and often through necessity. This finding emphasizes the importance of ensuring all young people in care can build an enduring and high quality relationship with a key adult to support the development of gradual rather than reluctant autonomy.

7.4 What are the educational experiences of children and young people who have experienced care?

A key finding of this study is the commitment to education demonstrated by all twenty-one participants. Whilst at differing stages of their academic journeys at the time of interview, each participant spoke of their interest in education and their determination to achieve academic qualifications. Education was understood as valuable both for the immediate and longer-term benefits it offered. For example, education was understood to offer stability, routine and absorption as well as a route to a more stable future. These affordances were considered to be crucial by participants with Kai explaining that he preferred to focus on education rather than friendships as education held greater value and provided a permanency that human relationships could not. The value of the stability afforded by education is perhaps best exemplified in Nicole's interview. Through several significant changes and challenges, education provided routine and the potential to maximise the

distance between her future life and natal context. At the time of interview, Nicole was a state registered nurse, held a Master's degree and was considering studying for a PhD.

The importance of daily interactions in care and education is highlighted in recent literature (Mannay *et al*, 2019; 2017; Narey and Owers, 2017; Rogers, 2017 and Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). This study contributes to this growing body of literature in several ways.

The impact of the terminology employed in the care system is examined. Participants stated a preference for terminology which simply and accurately described their circumstances. For example, the phrase 'corporate parenting' was experienced as disrespectful to biological parents. The Local Authority's RAPO considered much of the terminology employed in the care system to be problematic, recalling that the phrase 'respite' had caused considerable distress for young people in the Children in Care Council. Terminology should be examined in consultation with young people in care to reduce stigma, unwelcome connotations and distress.

Issues around clothing and pocket money also generated much discussion. Participants in IGA recalled a reliance on teachers to provide appropriate outfits for social occasions such as school proms. Kai expressed considerable frustration at the lack of fashionable clothing his foster carers were willing to purchase and their apparent unwillingness to help him access the financial support he was entitled to receive. This study reinforces the importance of attending to the daily challenges and frustrations of young people growing up in care.

7.5 Recommendations for future research

- The notion of 'reluctant autonomy' should be examined in further depth. It would be interesting to interview older care leavers to understand whether their mode of reflexivity altered as they established careers, friendships or families. This would help researchers analyse whether 'reluctant autonomy' becomes a dominant mode of reflexivity or temporarily operates as a survival mode during care placements and the transition into independent living. A greater understanding of how young people in care mediate their circumstances would contribute to social theory and support future training for all relevant key personnel.
- Further research into the role of the DT is needed to inform policy and improve practice. Crucially research should consult young people in care to evaluate whether the role itself is appropriate. This research should consider the purpose of the role, how teachers are selected and how the DT communicates with young people in care. The findings of such an evaluation could also inform current proposals for mental health DTs in schools.
- Further research with teachers in non-managerial roles is recommended. Research should aim to establish how teachers view their role, understanding and training with regards to young people in care. Participants in this study consistently identified teachers in non-managerial roles as nurturing and supportive. It would be beneficial to understand how teachers view this finding.
- Although challenging to achieve, research involving a wider range of participants to include more male participants and those not in education, employment or training

would be valuable. This would enable a more comprehensive evaluation of policy and practice. It would also create opportunities to examine the notion of 'reluctant autonomy' in greater depth.

- The disclosure of care status to friends and peers is a complex and important area. This study suggests that young people who exercised control over their social identity by disclosing their care status confidently and at a time of their choosing enjoyed greater social freedom and more secure friendships. Through collaborative research with young people in care, comprehensive advice and guidance should be developed and made readily available for all young people entering the care system.
- It is recommended that future research should provide contextual information for research findings. The inclusion of relevant contextual information would allow researchers to more accurately determine the transferability of findings.
- When conducting the literature review for this study a lack of available research about the importance of clothing and school uniform for children in care or economically disadvantaged children was noted. Participants in this study highlighted the difficulties caused by social events such as school proms for which there is a perceived need to purchase new and fashionable clothing. The young people in this study stated that foster carers were unwilling to purchase such clothing and this exacerbated the young people's sense of social inequality. Research around this issue could highlight the social importance of clothing for young people in care and subsequently inform reviews of foster care.

- Recent policies such as the *Care Leaver's Covenant* (DfE, 2018) and the *Staying Put* policy (DfE, 2014) extend housing and training support for care leavers. However, despite these policies, the majority of care leavers continue to live independently from eighteen years of age (DfE, 2018). The impact of impending premature independence on educational and career choices as well as emotional well-being should be examined in greater depth.

7.6 Recommendations for policy

- The Teacher Standards should refer directly to an understanding of child development. To support teachers' understanding of children in care and other vulnerable groups, this study recommends greater training for teachers during initial training and whilst in post. This training would also facilitate and support the evaluation and possible restructuring of the DT post. Additionally teachers should be aware of the high level of importance young people in care place on education. All participants in this study were committed to achieving academic qualifications and any concessions in expectations made by teachers were experienced as unintended harms (Mannay *et al*, 2017).
- A development of the Independent Review of Foster Care (Owers and Nayers, 2018) is recommended. Future reviews should consider the importance of pocket money, clothing, school uniform, terminology and disclosure of care status to friends.
- The selected Local Authority has replaced the term 'LAC' with 'children in care' in all documentation. Through continued collaboration with the Children in Care Council

and Care Leavers' Council, Local Authorities should now reconsider all terminology involved in care as participants in this study highlighted phrases such as 'respite' and 'corporate parent' to be problematic. This study recommends that all terminology should be written in full and not contracted to form acronyms.

- The *Care Leaver's Covenant* (DfE, 2018) should be extended to support care leavers financially after compulsory education is completed. Dyslexia assessments should be fully funded for care leavers. The extension of financial assistance for assessments and Level Two qualifications would enable more young care leavers to continue and develop their educational and career aspirations.

7.7 Final thoughts

This thesis contributes to knowledge in two areas: theoretical and empirical.

7.7a Theoretical contribution

The notion of 'reluctant autonomy' provides a way to explore how young people in care respond to the absence of a consistent key adult and the experience of enforced and premature independence. This study demonstrated that participants were able to function in, and maintain, an autonomous mode of reflexivity (Archer, 2007) but that this autonomy often developed as a result of broken trust with key adults. As a result this autonomous mode of reflexivity may be fragile or cause personal distress. This finding troubles prevailing notions of resilience (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014; Gilligan, 2009) by suggesting that independence or autonomy can be enforced rather than developed – something which may not support emotional well-being through adulthood.

7.7b Empirical contribution

This study reinforces the importance of the daily lived experiences of the care system and recommendations for policy and future research are outlined above. Participants shared their commitment to education and their appreciation of classroom teachers. This study contains several examples of the high level of personal and emotional support offered by these professionals. It is also clear that the role of DT needs to be re-evaluated to ensure it provides for young people in care without heightening their sense of being different to their peers (Mannay *et al*, 2017 and Rogers, 2017).

The complexity of social relationships was evident throughout the interviews. Participants discussed friendships and the difficulty of knowing when, how and where to disclose their care status. Additionally, issues around a lack of fashionable clothing, money, freedom and food affected participants' view of how fully foster carers supported their ability to develop and sustain friendships. Nayer and Owers (2018) recognised the importance of daily experiences in their review of foster care but more is needed to reposition the focus of policy away from measurable outcomes and onto the experience of childhood for young people growing up in care.

7.7c Closing observations

The limitations of this study are acknowledged. It is a small-scale project, interviewing a limited number of participants. Additionally the sample of participants is not representative of the children in care population within the Local Authority. For example, only two of the participants are male and many of the participants had achieved GCSE passes in Mathematics and English. However, due to a snowball sampling strategy, three participants who had not achieved these GCSEs were interviewed. It is acknowledged that accessing

more vulnerable groups is difficult (Mannay *et al*, 2017). Significant efforts were made to collaborate with a local charity who work with disadvantaged young adults but these efforts did not come to fruition and this remains a limitation of this study. The Local Authority selected for this research has higher than average levels of childhood poverty and a high number of children in care (The Office for National Statistics, 2017). Whilst the aim was primarily to describe and analyse participants' experiences, the theorisation of this study's findings can provide useful ways of thinking about the issues raised.

Semi-structured interviews were utilised in this study. It is acknowledged that all interviews are open to subjectivity and bias. Whilst flexibility is a strength of semi-structured interviews it can also reduce comparability as slightly different themes were pursued in interviews (Cohen *et al*, 2017). The level of trust established in interviews varied. Towards the end of the study I interviewed care leavers who expressed a lack of trust in adults. Whilst our interviews afforded these young people an opportunity to vocalise their grievances it would be naïve to assume they felt able to trust me. This may have influenced the information participants were willing to disclose (Cicourel, 1964).

Completing this study has been challenging in several ways: cognitively, emotionally and practically. My understanding of the challenges encountered by young people in care as they move through school and into independence has developed considerably. In addition to this, I have learnt a great deal about structuring and conducting research. I am grateful to the participants for their involvement in this study and have aimed to relay their concerns and views respectfully and authentically.

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Appendices

Appendix One – ethical approval from Birmingham City University



Ref: MH/JW/AW/jb /2015

Address for Correspondence

Faculty of Health, Education and Life Science Research Office
Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences
Birmingham City University
Westbourne Road
Birmingham B15 3TN
Tel: 0121 331 6172
Email: HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

2nd December 2015

Elaine Matchett
Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences
Birmingham City University

Dear Elaine

Re: The education experiences of children in care

Thank you for your amended application and documents regarding the above. I am happy to take Chair's action, which means you may begin your study.

The Committee's opinion is based on the information supplied in your application. If you wish to make any substantial changes to the research please contact the Committee and provide details of what you propose to alter. A substantial change is one that is likely to affect the

- safety and well-being of the participants;
- scientific value of the study;
- conduct or management of the study.

The Committee should also be notified of any serious adverse effects arising as a result of this research. The Committee is required to keep a favourable opinion under review in the light of progress reports.

I hope the project goes well and wish you every success.

Yours sincerely,



Merryl E Harvey, Deputy Chair, Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences Ethics Committee

CC Jane O'Connor

Indemnity agreement from Birmingham City University

Ref: LL/jb195/2015

Wednesday, 10 February 2016

Email: HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

Elaine Matchett

Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, Birmingham City University

Dear Elaine Matchett

University Research Insurance and Indemnity Agreement

Title of Project:	<u>The education experiences of children in care</u>
Name of Researcher (s):	Elaine Matchett

Full Title of Course:	
Name of Academic Supervisor (Chief Investigator):	

I can confirm that the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, Birmingham City University, has agreed to take on the role of Sponsor under the Department of Health Research Governance Framework.

I can also confirm that legal liability for death or injury to any person participating in the project is covered under the University's insurance arrangements.

Yours faithfully



Professor Lucy Land
Chair
Research Insurance and Indemnity Committee

Appendix Two – ethical approval from the selected Local Authority

Our ref: 201510 The educational experiences of children in care

Elaine Matchett Birmingham City University Perry Barr Birmingham B42 2SU

11 December 2015

Dear Elaine

Re: The educational experiences of children in care

Documents Supplied:

1. Completed Research Governance Application Form v0.2 (received 17/9/15)
2. Confirmation of research methods (received 3/9/15)
3. Favourable ethics approval (received 8/12/15)
4. Confirmation of insurance arrangements (received 8/12/15)
5. Confirmation of sponsor (received 8/12/15)
6. Consent leaflet v0.2 (received 8/12/15)
7. Leaflets for older and younger participants v0.2 (received 8/12/15)
8. Consent form for staff v0.2 (received 17/9/15)
9. Consent form for care leavers v0.2 (received 17/9/15)
10. Interview schedule for staff v0.1 (received 10/9/15)
11. Interview schedule for care leavers v0.2 (received 17/9/15)
12. Letter to staff v0.2 (received 17/9/15)
13. Letter to care leavers v0.2 (17/9/15)
14. Project timetable v0.1 (received 17/9/15)

15. Research proposal (received 3/9/15)

I am writing with a favourable opinion on the application you have submitted.

Please reply to: Charles Ashton-Gray

Email: SCHResearchGovernance@[Local Authority].gov.uk Research Governance Lead
Telephone: XXXX 464 6952 Directorate for People Facsimile: XXXX 464 0505 www. [Local
Authority].gov.uk/researchgovernance

I confirm that no objection is offered to this project.

When you have completed your research please send us a summary of the results that you would be happy for us to share within or outside of the directorate. We would also be interested in details of any publications, such as journal articles, that have resulted from the research.

I look forward to hearing from you and to receiving a copy of the study results. Yours
sincerely

Charles Ashton-Gray Research Governance Lead

Appendix three – participant information letter

Elaine Matchett
Senior Lecturer
Birmingham City University
Perry Barr
Birmingham
B42 2SU

Dear

Thank you for considering participating in my research project. I am a lecturer in Education at Birmingham City University and a PhD student.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project on the educational experiences of young people who have been in care. I am a lecturer in Education at Birmingham City University and a PhD student.

I believe, and research suggests, that young people in care do not get asked for their opinion about important issues often enough. I would like to help you get your voices heard.

I am hoping to research and better understand the educational experiences of young people who have passed through the education system whilst in care. If you did agree, I would hope to interview you for approximately one hour (at a neutral, safe and convenient location) to talk about your time at school. I would like to hear about the support you received, changes in placements, relationships with friends and teachers and anything that you felt was important. I would be very happy to meet you in person initially to explain my plans in more detail and at that point you could decide whether or not to take part.

A report of my findings will be available to you at the end of my research. Additionally, I will use the findings in:

My PhD

Presentations at Birmingham City University

Presentations or reports for [Selected Authority] if and where appropriate

Presentations at relevant conferences

My teaching at Birmingham City University

Guidance for trainee and established teachers

Journal articles

It would be fantastic to meet you and talk about the project in more detail. Please do not hesitate to contact me on: elaine.matchett@bcu.ac.uk

Many thanks

Elaine

Please note that all participants must be able to give/withdraw consent independently. It would not be possible to ask another person to act on your behalf. Should you have any questions/concerns about my research please contact Steph Tallis-Foster on 0121 331 7651 or Stephanie.Tallis-Foster@bcu.ac.uk

Appendix four – participant consent forms

Experiences of Education and Care: Permission Sheet	
Introduction	Before we talk, I want to make sure you understand why you have been asked to talk to me and what will I will do with the information you and others tell me.
Details about the Research	
Why are you talking to me?	I am talking to care leavers about their experience of education. I will ask about what (and who) you found helpful, what you did not and what you would change. I am a PhD student completing research, I am not a social worker.
How long will the talk take?	I won't take more than an hour of your time.
How will the information be used?	I will use the information you and other young people tell me, to let the people who run Children's Services know how it can be improved. It will used in my own studies – as part of my PhD. It may also be used to write academic reports and presentations and to train staff who work with young people.
Is it recorded?	Yes, I will record your voice only; no one will be filmed. This is to make sure I have a good record of our talk. It will not be shared with anyone else outside the Research Team (myself and my supervisors). The typed notes are also not shared with anyone outside the Research Team.
Is it confidential?	Yes, your name and personal details will not be in any of the things I write about the research. Your feedback will be joined together with the feedback from other young people, so people reading it will not know what one person has said. However, if you tell me something that makes me think you or someone else is in danger I may need to tell someone about this.
Can I change my mind?	It is up to you if you want to take part. It is not a problem to change your mind (even after the interview). You can contact me on: elaine.matchett@bcu.ac.uk
Will I get the results?	I will make sure the young people who have talked to me get a booklet telling you what I found out and what I have told the people that run Children's Services.
What do I do if I am not happy about our talk today?	If you want to know more you can contact Richard Hatcher on Richard.hatcher@bcu.ac.uk . Richard is an experienced researcher and my PhD supervisor at Birmingham City

	<p>University.</p> <p>If you want to make a complaint you can contact Steph Tallis Foster on Stephanie.tallis-foster@bcu.ac.uk. Steph is the Assistant Director of Student Services at Birmingham City University.</p>
Permission	<p>It is up to you if you give your permission, if you do the interview can begin. If have changed your mind, that is okay. I will not contact you again and there will be no pressure on you to take part.</p>
Date:	Signed:

Appendix five – professional participant letter

Elaine Matchett
Senior Lecturer
Birmingham City University
Perry Barr
Birmingham
B42 2SU

Dear

Thank you for considering participating in my research project. I am a lecturer in Education at Birmingham City University and a PhD student.

As you may be aware, I am interviewing young people in [selected authority] who have experienced the care system whilst in compulsory education. In order to better understand [selected authority's] educational and social context I would like to interview key figures involved in the provision for children in care at [selected authority] City Council. I would be very grateful if could spend an hour with me explaining your role and how the council supports young people in care. A more detailed interview schedule is attached.

All findings will be held securely and you would have the right to withdraw your information from the research. All participants will be anonymised in my writing. A report of my findings will be available to you at the end of my research. Additionally, I will use the findings in:

My PhD

Presentations at Birmingham City University

Presentations or reports for [placement] City Council if and where appropriate

Presentations at relevant conferences

My teaching at Birmingham City University

Guidance for trainee and established teachers

Journal articles

It would be fantastic to meet you and talk about the project in more detail. Please do not hesitate to contact me on: elaine.matchett@bcu.ac.uk

Many thanks

Elaine

Please note that all participants must be able to give/withdraw consent independently. It would not be possible to ask another person to act on your behalf. Should you have any questions/concerns about my research please contact Steph Tallis-Foster on 0121 331 7651 or Stephanie.Tallis-Foster@bcu.ac.uk

Appendix six – interview schedule

Interview schedule

All interviews to begin with the same introduction and initial questions. All interviews to end with the same final questions and thanks. The rest of the schedule may alter slightly depending on issues raised by participants and their responses to questions asked.

Introductions

Brief welcome – ensure participant is comfortable

Reiterate aims of the study, the participant's right to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality.

Initial questions

Start with basic information:

Age

Education at present

Age of entering foster care

Potential areas for discussion

School:

Overall opinion of school

Opinions and experiences of education

Relationships:

Teachers

Designated Teachers

Friends - disclosure of status

Educational support from foster carers

Educational support from social workers

Educational support prior to care

Biological parents

Siblings

Support services:

SEN

Mental Health

Agency

What acts as key motivators

How do participants make decisions and plans

Awareness of internal conversations

Terminology

Thoughts on the terminology around care

Final questions

Any recommendations for teachers

Any points participants would like to raise.

Thanks

Thank participant

Appendix seven – examples of data analysis

Relationships		
Sub-Theme	Evidence from interviews	Evidence from literature
<p>Positive relationships with teachers at school</p>	<p><i>Me: Some people have said that they've experienced teachers or other significant adults holding quite low expectations of them or of what they might go on to achieve.</i></p> <p><i>Sal: I didn't feel like that. My teachers would encourage me. My teachers contributed to my life story book – they wrote me letters and they said they thought I could achieve a lot. They knew I was good at performing arts so they wrote about that. I thought they saw my potential, I don't think they put me down.</i></p> <p><i>Me: When you were at secondary – did you have a designated teacher?</i></p> <p><i>Sal: I had one, she was so good. And she was – she wasn't really a teacher – she was more like a counsellor – and she would see me before class and just say 'how you doing?' and she wouldn't say 'how are things at the children's home' she'd say 'how are things at home?' After a while, you do think of it as home so I liked that about her – I felt comfortable with her, I felt like I could tell her everything. And if anything was</i></p>	<p>Barnardos (2006), Selwyn (2017) and Jackson (2005) – report that teachers often have low expectations of children in care – that was not supported in my findings. Many, like Sal, spoke of high expectations.</p> <p>It is apparent here that Sal does not fully understand the post of designated teacher – she is not alone in this – which in itself is telling.</p> <p>This could be a key point – often designated teachers are senior members of staff and this can lead to conflicting agendas. It could be argued that staff involved in welfare should not be involved in assessing the young people they work with.</p>

	<p><i>going wrong – like my pocket money hadn't gone up – she would help me.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Do you know exactly what her role was at school?</i></p> <p><i>Sal: She was the school counsellor. But she was the counsellor for all of the children in care – she was more like a social worker – she was there for us and it made me feel quite special actually. She helped me make friends actually. She couldn't tell me who else was in care but she might say 'there's a couple of kids that you might know, they could use a friend at the moment.' And two of those girls I go to college with now and they're like my best friends. I'm grateful for that. We do everything together.</i></p> <p><i>Anisah: My head teacher changed in year eleven I think, she is literally the most down to earth; the most understanding person I've ever met.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So, the head teacher you've got now – far more supportive. Is that about her personality? Do you find her more relatable or is about practical things she's done to support you?</i></p> <p><i>A: It's both. Honestly, I've never known a teacher in my entire history of schools so open and honest. She's straightforward – she's related her own experiences</i></p>	<p>Like Brooke, Sal recognises that she enjoys attention. Brooke presents as more able to analyse her need for attention and the reasons that might underpin this need.</p>
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	<p><i>to mine. Her daughter's boyfriend is a care leaver so she talks to me about that.</i></p> <p><i>Me: This teacher who was so supportive – did he teach any of your subjects?</i></p> <p><i>A: He taught me Science and even now – my younger brother's at the school and the teacher's just left and my brother was really upset. He was just a really nice teacher. He was a nice teacher but to me he was really helpful. Like, he helped with my PEP – he would come to my meetings.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So he advocated for you?</i></p> <p><i>A: Yeah. He was really good. If he saw we were leaving school early he would ask why – not in a patronising way but he would check on us.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Sorry what was his role at the school?</i></p> <p><i>A: He was the child protection officer and a teacher. And he attended any LAC meetings.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Was he a youngish teacher?</i></p> <p><i>A: No, he was in his 40s... not really old but not in his 20s..</i></p> <p><i>(Group Interview – participant D): I moved to Sutton Coldfield so I had a two hour taxi ride to stay</i></p>	<p>Unusual within the sample – a teacher who holds a related post who seen as helpful/supportive.</p>
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	<p><i>at the same school. One teacher was friendly – they were the same nationality as me – we got along very well. She helped me a lot, when I first got to the school – I didn't know anything, she was teaching me in private. So when I went in care, she did everything she could. She sorted out everything me and my brother needed – she was very good. I had not a good experience in my first care placement – she never attended anything – like parents' evenings so my teacher would tell me that I was doing well and that I should keep moving forward.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Some people have said to me is that the designated teacher has not been helpful because it's a job that sometimes they've been given, you know, that they're not necessarily suited to – people have said that they often find someone to gravitate to more naturally – someone who's more naturally empathetic.</i></p> <p><i>Jess: Yes, definitely, an empathetic person. You need someone to turn to because otherwise people tend to turn to the wrong person and that's when you end up in abusive relationships. That's why young people need someone empathetic in school because if they're looking for attention – they'll look for it in other people.</i></p>	<p>An interesting insight into how it might feel when first entering care.</p> <p>Very important – striking the right tone with young people.</p> <p>None of the interviews suggest that age is an issue – possibly teachers who could be parental seem effective.</p>
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	<p><i>Me: That's a very interesting point. Have you both seen that happen to people – looking for...</i></p> <p><i>Jess: Love and attention.</i></p> <p><i>Aliyah and Jess: Yeah, definitely.</i></p> <p><i>Jess: Me personally and I don't think...</i></p> <p><i>Me: That you would be alone in that?</i></p> <p><i>Jess: Yes – definitely not alone.</i></p> <p><i>Iz: I would have support, teachers would come into the class. And I think then, I did focus on the work. And I got along with one of them – I really loved her, she was so nice.</i></p> <p><i>Me: How often did you work with her?</i></p> <p><i>Iz: Quite a bit, she would come into a lot of my lessons. And I did have one other lady but she was the worse support worker ever – but the other one, she was lovely. She understood me and we got along and I think that's what it's about.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Absolutely – that's key isn't it. You can have a designated teacher but the relationship needs to be genuine, you need to sense that they care. So the woman that did support you – did you talk to her about things outside of the classroom.</i></p>	<p>Cultural identity</p> <p>Such an interesting explanation of the importance of a key adult. Relate to attachment theory.</p>
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	<p><i>Iz: Yeah – we just chatted – normally. I used to be happy when I saw her and she used to be happy to see me too. It’s was good.</i></p> <p><i>Me: And that makes a difference doesn’t it, if it’s mutual.</i></p> <p><i>Iz: I didn’t like her working with other people – I wanted her to work with me.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So who would you go to?</i></p> <p><i>Kai: My social worker, I would obviously trust her more. Even my college personal tutors – but I wouldn’t necessarily go to my carer.</i></p> <p><i>Kai: I learned a lot at the college. I get along with the teachers – to the point where they say I’m like staff. I put trust in the professionals at college.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Did you have a named person at college or was it that you just develop good relationships generally?</i></p> <p><i>Kai: The main person I would go to was my tutor. I would maintain a very good relationship with her and then with one of the teaching assistants in the class too. I do think teachers are very important because they are your role models really – someone you can trust. Even if you’re not in foster care, you can still have problems at home – going to</i></p>	<p>Key person at school – again not the designated teacher, not a ‘high stakes’ position at the school. The relationship develops from a sense of mutual respect.</p> <p>Trusts those in professional roles which is perhaps unsurprising as he spent several years being cared for by professionals rather than parental figures – possibly this explains a level of resistance towards foster carers?</p>
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	<p><i>school can be daunting.</i></p> <p><i>Esther: Yes – I talked to my year manager – we used to get on quite well.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So you kept yourself to yourself but there were a couple of adults who you talked to?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: Yes.</i></p> <p><i>Me: How did they become the adults that you talked to?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: We just got on the whole way through. We got on – she realised there was something wrong. She asked me what was wrong and I told her everything.</i></p> <p><i>Me: And was that talk the thing that prompted you going into care?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: Yes.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So that significant person – was she a mentor?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: No, she was year manager – we had a head of year and a year manager.</i></p> <p><i>Me: And is she a teacher?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: No, she was on-call – so if you'd be naughty she'd come and get you and because I used to be naughty she would have to come and collect.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So quite interesting that she's the one you make a bond with – so when she comes to</i></p>	
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<p>Examples of extraordinary levels of support:</p>	<p><i>collect you, she didn't tell you off as such?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: No, well – she would tell me off but then she would talk to me because she understood the things I'd been through. So like that's why I explained things to her.</i></p> <p><i>Me: And you found she was someone you could trust and you could talk to?</i></p> <p><i>Esther: Yes.</i></p> <p><i>N: Yes, I've met her a couple of times since and I just say thank you to her every time because she just saved me in a way I suppose.</i></p> <p><i>Me: If she hadn't been there as an anchor and a safe place, what do you think might have happened?</i></p> <p><i>N: (Sighs) I don't know, I (pause) I've never really thought about it but I wouldn't have done as well. Or maybe I would have just given up.</i></p> <p><i>(Group Interview – participant B) Yeah, she used to call herself my school mum. When I was in sixth form... well, the placement I had wasn't very nice. She was my form teacher. Well, obviously at sixth form you can wear your own clothes but my foster carer</i></p>	<p>I haven't read anything where teachers offer this level of support but this example is not unique in the sample. Individual teachers (in the sample) are often singled out for praise.</p> <p>Archer here – most of the positive relationships reported in the sample developed this way – they started with a sense of connection and mutual trust. Archer (2007) states that relationships need the possibility of trust to develop and that is very much what the participants describe. This helps to explain why the role of designated teachers does not appear to be successful.</p> <p>Selwyn identifies four key areas that contribute to well-being; relationships built on trust were highlighted as crucial for young people. The other areas: resilience building, rights and recovery also relied heavily on the</p>
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	<p><i>wouldn't buy me any clothes so the teacher used to bring in clothes from her daughter. Yeah. She paid for a lot of things. She also taught two of my subjects as well as being my form tutor.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Are you still in touch with her now?</i></p> <p><i>B: I tried to email her the other day but she never... we used to email each other lots but I think she's quit the school and the email was a school email.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Ah, so she probably doesn't have access now.... How many years did you know her for?</i></p> <p><i>B: Two years... actually probably three years.</i></p> <p><i>Me: How, if you don't mind my asking, how did it happen that she took should an interest in you – did it just happen gradually?</i></p> <p><i>B: I think, well when we wore school uniform – my foster mum never used to dress me properly for school and I always used to get bullied for that, my shoes didn't fit... and she noticed, my form tutor, and she used to talk to me about it.</i></p> <p>(Group Interview – participant F): I was friends with every single teacher at school. The school I went to was the most supportive school – I was there for school and sixth form. I would recommend parents, foster</p>	<p>strength of the relationships with carers and other significant adults. For example in terms of resilience building, participants highlighted the importance of a key trusted adult who supported learning and the development of life skills. Research on resilience has consistently demonstrated that having a trusting relationship with one key adult is strongly associated with healthy development and recovery after experiencing adversity (Masten 2015). The availability of one key adult has been shown to be the turning point in many looked after young people's lives (Gilligan 2009).</p> <p>A teacher in a pastoral role fulfilling a parental 'mum' role here.</p>
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<p>Designated Teacher</p>	<p>parents – one of the teachers there was absolutely amazing – for every young person in that school that was in care. When it came to Prom Day as well, and you worry that your foster parents might not buy you a dress or whatever (lots of yeahs and general agreement from the group) – she took me out and bought me this nice prom dress. You know, those touchy things that touch you because you think – you didn’t have to do that. But she did it because she had the emotion and the empathy – she cared. But the teachers were funny.</p> <p><i>So, this designated teacher then that you had assigned...</i></p> <p><i>C: Oh God, so she was just really condescending. She tried to be on the same level as the care kids. She’d speak down to you quite a lot, she spoke down to me quite a lot. And she was at my reviews and everything – when you’re at your PEPs, you have to talk about who your friends were and everything and I was just like ‘I don’t really want to be talking about this, it’s not really got anything to do with – well, I suppose relationships are a part of school but I didn’t really feel it was necessary.</i></p> <p><i>Me: So... the designated teacher was getting it wrong in a number of ways then...</i></p>	<p>Here the conversation starts through a teacher’s observation rather than as part of a role. Archer (2007)</p> <p>This highlights two things: 1) the levels of support offered by some teachers and 2) the importance of social events such as prom – although this anxiety would not be unique to those in care.</p> <p>The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) placed the role of the designated teacher on a statutory footing. However, much as with the role of Virtual Headteacher, whilst there is a statutory requirement for schools to have a DT, there is no requirement that this is the only additional responsibility the member of staff holds. Very often it is the Head or Deputy Headteacher that holds this position.</p> <p>As Archer (2007) states relationships develop where both parties sense the possibility of trust and it is possible that for children in care, the very fact that designated teachers occupy an official position generates the</p>
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<p><i>C: Yes, well, most of the people she was involved with were a lot more emotional than me. They weren't doing as well as I was I suppose.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Did other people find her more helpful than you did?</i></p> <p><i>C: Yes, another girl in my year who was in care got on with her really well.</i></p> <p><i>(Professional Interview): It's an interesting one isn't it – a number of children seem to go towards a person in a school – someone who will listen. I know there are designated people in the school for children in care so there is someone there for them. I don't know that that 'go to' person is that successful. One person trying to keep an eye on all those children in care and the idea that the children will go to that one person with issues. Often those young people don't warm to that person specifically because they are in that role. It's quite a complex issue. Until we have a number of people like yourself who look into it and can see what is working.</i></p> <p><i>Me: The one person who said they didn't find someone they could talk to was the person who talked about the designated teacher. She didn't like the designated teacher, found her patronising and didn't think that she really understood the</i></p>	<p>possibility of mistrust or caution.</p>
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	<p><i>situation.</i></p> <p><i>Professional: It's got to be dealt with in a different way and it could be that it's dealt with in a more holistic way – that starts when teachers are training.</i></p> <p>Me: Do you have a designated teacher here at school? Do they use that phrase?</p> <p>A: No, it's not. We're more like friends.</p> <p>So, now in every school, there's now a designated teacher in every school but there's no stipulation about who that designated teacher should be or how much time they should spend on the role. And what some people have said to me is that the designated teacher has not been helpful because it's a job that sometimes they've been given, you know, that they're not necessarily suited to – people have said that they often find someone to gravitate to more naturally – someone who's more naturally empathetic.</p> <p>Jess: Yes, definitely, an empathetic person. You need someone to turn to because otherwise people tend to turn to the wrong person and that's when you end up in abusive relationships. That's why young people need someone empathetic in school because if</p>	<p>Again – the phrase 'designated teacher' is not understood.</p> <p>Again – the designated teacher does not play any active role.</p>
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	<p>they're looking for attention – they'll look for it in other people.</p> <p>Me: What do you think of the school support networks – like the designated teacher – did you ever see any of that?</p> <p>Kath: No... I had a teacher in year ten or eleven who would check up on me and see how I was.</p> <p>Me: Right – that's very interesting. Some people have said that whilst they've been at school, they've found the designated teacher to be really helpful.</p> <p>Sal: To be honest, I didn't – I felt like they were interfering. I felt like one of my teachers, when care proceedings started and she kept asking me questions and she'd ask me in front of everyone. She'd ask me questions and then report back to social services – I know it was her job but I felt like she was prying. I never wanted to go school after that.</p> <p>Me: When you were at secondary – did you have a designated teacher?</p> <p>Sal: I had one, she was so good. And she was – she wasn't really a teacher – she was more like a counsellor.</p>	<p>It is apparent here that Sal does not fully understand the post of designated teacher – she is not alone in this – which in itself is telling.</p> <p>This could be a key point – often designated teachers are senior</p>
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<p>Problematic relationships with adults at school</p>	<p>Me: You know every school has a designated teacher – did you ever see anything of them?</p> <p>Kate: No, I don't think so.</p> <p><i>Brooke: There was one teacher – he just hated me and he would always sanction me. He'd use my log book. But I used to think it was really funny and I used to play up to it because I'd get a reaction.</i></p> <p><i>A: I think I was behaving inappropriately on purpose because I found it funny and like, well, I did make my teacher cry. But I didn't make her – she chose to cry in my opinion because all I said was, 'People don't want to go on your trip.' But I think she had got fed up of all the comments I made before that...</i></p> <p><i>Anisah In school terms, I didn't feel supported until I was in Year Ten. When I was getting support, I felt that it was a tick box exercise. So I made excuses not to be here.</i></p> <p>(Group Interview) G: Basically when I was in school I always had my form teacher... when other people went to her with problems she wouldn't listen to them but she would listen to me.</p>	<p>members of staff and this can lead to conflicting agendas. It could be argued that staff involved in welfare should not be involved in assessing the young people they work with.</p> <p>This is also highlighted by Brooke – support needs to be offered privately but when in front of peers, teachers need to treat all the same. Participants object when teachers make allowances for their behaviour as it implies that they are not capable of behaving well.</p> <p>Whilst Brooke appears to experience tension with this teacher, the opportunity to 'play up' mostly serves as an opportunity to amuse her friends and gain a reaction – both of which she readily accepts are vital to her. Selwyn (2017) reported that children in care – particularly girls – experienced lower levels of emotional well-being. For example: 18% of looked after care children scored at the lowest end when asked about their overall satisfaction with life which compares to 5.7% of the general population.</p>
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	<p>Me: So, would you say you experienced them treating you differently in a positive way? Anybody else experienced that?</p> <p>F: Me, but at college. The teachers would always just be watching me. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing but it was a bit awkward.</p> <p>A: I had that too – every little thing was a big deal. It's a good thing but....</p> <p>Lots of comments stating it's a bit too much, it's awkward.</p> <p><i>(Group Interview) The only thing I didn't like was that they would let you off with too much. (Lots of agreement.) They would feel sorry for you and that would really annoy me.</i></p> <p><i>A: It can be a bit smothering – I don't need you to feel sorry for me. Shout at me!</i></p> <p><i>Kath: No... I had a teacher in year ten or eleven who would check up on me and see how I was. They would let me drop certain lessons to accommodate me – instead of actually trying to get me to go... so yeah.</i></p> <p><i>Me: That's interesting isn't it? The way of managing was to try and make things easier rather than trying to support you more. And what impact did that approach have on you?</i></p> <p><i>Kath: I didn't get anything done.</i></p>	<p>Schools being 'too soft' not always welcome – see Mannay – 'unintended harms'.</p>
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<p>Relationships with peers: Positive</p>	<p><i>I think I realised... I thought 'why isn't anyone trying to do anything?' So I think I realised after that.... No one tried to get me onto exams.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Did you see other people getting support?</i></p> <p>Me: Do you feel any resentment about that?</p> <p>Kath: Kind of. I resent my English teachers – they cared about the people who were over-achieving and making sure they got good grades but if you were under-achieving – I don't feel like they supported us.</p> <p>Me: Are there certain things you'd rather go to adults about?</p> <p>Kate: No, because if I couldn't go to my mates I'd rather leave it in my head.</p> <p>Me: So obviously having a network there of people you knew – that's very important for most people I'm sure but how did having a network of people you knew help you?</p> <p>Brooke: Hmmm, just having friends. Just being surrounded by people you know and not having too much change.</p> <p>Me: And in terms of living with</p>	<p>Again, interesting that we expect teenagers to be old enough to cope but not necessarily old enough to be asked what they need or (where they are asked) to trust their decisions.</p> <p>In other parts of the interview, Kate does suggest that she might occasionally seek the help of an adult but nonetheless, there is a level of distrust.</p>
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	<p>the foster family – were your friends aware of that?</p> <p>B: Yes – always.</p> <p>Me: And was that your choice or did it just become almost too difficult not to tell them?</p> <p>B: It was probably a bit of both – I would have told them anyway but I think to explain why you’ve come back to a school you left a year ago and why you don’t live with your brothers at home and you’re referring to people at home – it would have just been too difficult.</p> <p>Me: And what kind of response did you get from your friends?</p> <p>B: Normal – people weren’t too fussed. I’m quite lucky, because I didn’t see it as a bad thing for me. I know it can be for some people but I never saw it that way. I think if my friends thought I was gutted about it that might have felt bad too.</p> <p>Me: People do take the lead from how you present things don’t they... teachers will have been aware of your care status (B nods).</p> <p>Me: If you were a bit of a class clown – why do you think that was?</p> <p>B: I just love people laughing at me, I love the attention. She</p>	<p>Brooke identifies the importance of continuity.</p> <p>Brooke chose to disclose to her friends.</p> <p>Again – lucky.</p>
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laughs – I'm not even joking. I do, I love it. I love making people laugh – I just burst with pride when everyone laughing at my joke. That's really embarrassing.

Me: Have you always had that characteristic do you think?

B: I reckon so but when I was younger in primary school – I wasn't very popular. I think I just used to cry a lot. But now I think I just look for attention in a better way. The girls always say I'm like Tinkerbell – she dies when she doesn't have attention. B laughs. I'm trying to control it.

Cat: School was great for me. In the sense that that's where my friends were so everything that was going on at home, I had people at school I could talk to about it.

Me: Some people have said it's easier if your friends don't know about your situation because it makes it easier to just feel like you're 'one of the gang' or just 'normal'.

Sal: No, I think it's easier if they do know because – I feel like if I hadn't told my friends that I was with a foster carer and then later in a children's home – they wouldn't have known and how would I have ever brought them round my house? They would have been like 'who's this? Why

	<p>don't they look like you?' If I didn't tell them or lied and said I was with my mum and dad, it wouldn't really make me a good friend – it would have been a lie and then it would be awkward when they did come to my house or I'd go to theirs and they could never come to mine. I think it's a lot easier if they do know. And if they're your friends, they not going to judge.</p> <p>Me: And was that your experience?</p> <p>Sal: Yeah, that was my experience. As I got older – because I had ADHD I went into a children's home for children with special needs and some of the people there had a lot of difficulties – and my friends came to see me there and at least then they could understand what you're going through.</p> <p>Me: And that's important that they do understand?</p> <p>Sal: Yes, definitely.</p> <p>Sal: It is – it's a safe place. Literally a safe place. You can just get away from anything that's going on at your foster carers or the residential home. You can just get away from it. It's a different space and you look forward to going there because you've got your friends. It's just a relief sometimes to go to school, it was my place to express my</p>	<p>Again, Sal explains the rationale behind sharing information with friends. Link to Archer – relationships need to be based on the potential for trust.</p> <p>Common in the sample – disclosure to friends seems to enable stronger friendships. Only two participants (in the sample) mention knowing other young people in care whilst at school.</p>
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<p>Relationships with peers: Problematic</p>	<p>feelings – especially when you’re in a new foster place and to begin with you just feel you have to be good but at school you can jot all your feelings down and talk to friends.</p> <p>Sal: I think I’ve got a good personality, I don’t let anything phase me. I have had a few breakdowns in the past but I just bounce back – done. I’ve literally just bounced and I’m not even sure why – I think it’s because I’ve got people around me and friends.</p> <p>Kate: Well, in my first high school I kind of held it back but then my social workers would come into school and take me out of lessons but then in my second high school I was okay because my confidence got gained and I was more confident about telling people – and the two people I was in with were in care themselves – so I was more confident.</p> <p>Me: Feeling more at ease – did that help you?</p> <p>Kate: It kind of did – it didn’t feel like I had to be lying to mates. If I had to be back by a certain, I felt it was all right – they could understand it more.</p> <p>Me: So these friends – were they better friendships because you</p>	<p>Young people interviewed by Selwyn spoke about the importance and complexity of relationships with their peers. Selwyn research suggests that children in care either experience more incidents of bullying or perceive themselves to be more at risk of bullying: 28% of those interviewed reported being more fearful of bullying (28%) which, Selwyn states, compares to 12% of the general population. Interestingly, Selwyn’s participants did not agree with the idea that the frequency of bullying mattered. Their view was that one incidence of bullying could have just</p>
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	<p>were open?</p> <p>Kate: Some of them yeah – but some of them not really.</p> <p><i>N: Hmmm, it was quite difficult because I was a loner but I managed to make friends with a couple of different groups. I'd always be quite anxious about who I was going to be hanging out with at school that day. I actually developed this irritable bowel syndrome when I was at school. I would just get so worked up about going to school. At that time I was being quite badly bullied as well. I actually got beaten up as well. It was awful. I remember the police being involved and everything.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Was that at school or after school?</i></p> <p><i>N: It was going home – walking back. They just got me, there was this horrible group of people just stood around me – I remember someone spitting in my face.... yeah, it just wasn't nice.</i></p> <p><i>Me: Were teachers aware that you were being bullied?</i></p> <p><i>Jess: Yes. I had to move schools because it was so bad. I moved schools and got bullied again and then I moved schools again and it was fine. In Solihull... it's different to [selected authority]. Nothing happened in [selected authority]</i></p>	<p>as severe effect on their well-being as frequent bullying.</p> <p>She moved schools – common response to bullying – E Nasseem.</p> <p>Anything about disclosing status or advice given to young people in care?</p>
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	<p><i>schools – they were fine but in [nearby authority]... they're a little bit more... I don't want to say something about every single person but... they've got a lot more egotism. I did have CAMHs – I'd get taken out and they'd talk with me but I can't remember any other additional support.</i></p> <p>Me: Are you able... in terms of the bullying, feel free not to answer this, but was there a theme to it – was the bullying around a particular issue?</p> <p>Esther: Yeah, I think the way I was reacting – people picked up on that and started bullying me – following me home and that.</p> <p>Me: Did you tell people you'd gone into care?</p> <p>Esther: No.</p> <p>Me: So when you were at school, obviously it wasn't a settled time – did you manage to make friends?</p> <p>Esther: I did have friends but they – you know what it's like at school – if one person falls out with you – everyone does and it sort of came to a point where I was getting bullied but in a way people wanted me to bully back – but I didn't.</p> <p>Me: When I was a teacher, there was a boy in my class who a real</p>	<p>One of only two participants who does not disclose care status at any time.</p> <p>Esther feels the bullying is attributable</p>
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	<p>temper and the other kids knew that so sometimes they would push him and push him until he exploded and then they stand back and be like 'nothing to do with me.'</p> <p>Esther: Yes – that's me.</p> <p>Me: You could see it as an adult – you could see exactly what was happening but then of course you're the one...</p> <p>Esther: Who ends up getting into trouble.</p> <p>Me: Those friends then – were you able to talk to any of them?</p> <p>Esther: Not really – I would keep myself to myself.</p> <p>Anisah: I didn't want to disclose the fact that I'm in care to my friends. I felt awkward.</p> <p>Me: When you went into care, there were some adults you chose to go to – the social worker and tutors at college. What role did friends that you made play during that time?</p> <p>Kai: I mean, I wouldn't necessarily make friends. My main focus was my education. I would see having a surplus amount of friends as possibly detrimental to my education.</p> <p>Me: Was that a conscious</p>	<p>to her own behaviour.</p> <p>A picture of unstable relationships.</p> <p>This is very interesting and reads a conscious decision. Throughout the interview, Kai suggests his positive relationships are with professionals – peers and foster carers are far less</p>
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	<p>decision – not to focus on making friends or has just happened that way?</p> <p>Kai: It was a conscious decision. It's easier to manage just one thing. Friendships and relationships they involve emotions and managing the two is hard.</p> <p>Me: So why choose education over friendships?</p> <p>Kai: Because it's worth something – it's something that will last forever. Friendships you know, it could just be an acquaintance or it could be a troubling acquaintance – it could make you go off track a bit.</p> <p>Me: A few people have said one of the good things about education is that it's clean cut – if you've got a certain level of ability and you work hard, listen to the advice given – you probably will do all right. In a sense, it's a cleaner, easier situation – friendships can be quite messy – they might be brilliant but they might not be but they certainly draw on your emotions.</p> <p>Kai: Yeah quite.</p>	<p>involved. He is able to develop relationships with safe, predictable patterns – with professionals and with education. A common theme within the sample is the avoidance of potentially complicated relationships. What support do children in care get around friendships? If early relationships create the template on which we base future relationships – how are children in care supported?</p> <p>An idea picked up by Raz – education is reliable – friendships are messy and harder to predict. Caroline also prioritises education over friendships.</p> <p>A useful quotation – makes perfect logical sense.</p>
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