Understanding the reduced educational attainment levels and poor 'life chances' of many children and young people in care

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Introduction

Looked after children and young people (LACYP) in the UK continue to experience adverse 'life chances' if compared to their peers. Moreover, empirical evidence consistently highlights that many LACYP's impaired life course trajectories remain ever more precarious. Despite this, the high proportion of children and young people now taken into care in the UK continues to increase (Petrie, 2015; *National Children's Bureau*, 2017; Sebba and Luke, 2019).

In theory at least, professionals such as social workers and teachers appear well placed to alleviate some of the challenges faced by LACYP in their attempts to gain fair access to education and learning. This is alongside subsequent employment opportunities as well as offering support such as to avoid crime. In practice, however, increasing evidence suggests that social workers now at best play only a minimal role in alleviating any such forms of social exclusion. Instead, their focus has for some time been geared around crisis management, forensic investigations and safeguarding, controlling limited budgets, and regulating 'risky' working-class parents (Webb, 2006; Parton, 2014; Morris et al, 2018). Relatedly, almost all attention is exclusively placed on parents experiencing acute poverty or drug, alcohol, mental health related issues, domestic violence or who have a learning disability (for example, Petrie, 2015; Featherstone *et al*, 2018; Morris et al, 2018). Some evidence also suggests that social workers and other welfare professionals may now represent part of the many challenges faced by LACYP, especially those from more minoritized and structurally-disadvantaged social groups.

Explaining the poor 'life chances' of children and young people in care

According to official data, children and young people in care continue to experience poor life chances. Their long-term challenges can include: limited access to employment opportunities in later life, higher risks relating to teenage pregnancy, poverty, developing mental health needs or chronic illness, and for teenage boys and men especially, engaging in crime and involvement in the criminal justice system (Sebba and Luke, 2019; Hall and Stephens, 2020). Moreover, significant gaps in educational achievement for LACYP remain. For example, in England during 2018, only 18 per cent of young people in care achieved five or more GCSE passes, in comparison to 59 per cent of children not in care. Also, 58 per cent of looked after children are classified as having a special educational need, in comparison to 18 per cent of non-looked after children at key stage 2 (aged 11) (DoE, 2020). Furthermore, 6 per cent of care leavers currently enter higher education in comparison to 36.4 per cent of young people. Care leavers in higher education are also almost twice as likely to drop out compared to their non-care peers (DOE, 2019, p.1).

Despite the many disadvantages and associated risks which being in care generate, the proportion of children and young people in care continues to rise significantly. For example, in England the numbers of children and young people in care has increased from 65,510 in 2011 to 80,850 in 2021. Indeed, recently the *County Councils Network* warned that if resources and preventative support within social care continue to reduce, the current number of young people in care will likely rise to 95,000 by 2025. Moreover, the number of section

47 enquiries – when councils investigate possible child suffering or harm – increased by 78% from 111,700 in 2011 to 198,790 in 2021 (*Social Work Today*, 2021).

Empirical evidence has pointed to a multiplicity of influences effecting LACYP's poor educational outcomes. Among others, these can include inequality and endemic poverty, family background and an absence of positive networks. These dynamics can co-exist alongside any prior neglect or abuse experienced, degrees of extra-familial harm encountered, schools attended, age, personality, resilience, and policy-enacted influences (O'Higgins et al, 2015; Datta et al, 2017; *Prison Reform Trust*, 2017; Walker, 2017). Among other discourses, theoretical explanations analysing educational shortcomings for LACYP include narratives which highlight the possible corrosive effects of pre-care neglect. Here, primary focus is placed on the longer-term impact of early disadvantages faced by LACYP, with related questions asked about the care systems capacity to compensate for any personal, structural and cultural difficulties experienced (Forrester et al, 2009; Walker, 2017). This discursive stance has been challenged, however: including with reference to systematic reviews which highlight that even when multiple early disadvantages are controlled, many LACYP still fall way behind the attainment levels gained by other children and young people (Jackson, 2007; Datta et al, 2017).

The dominant policy discourse instead highlights the longer-term negative effects on LACYP of a deficient social care system, and this stance includes a number of suggested improvements for social workers, teachers, and other supporting agencies to address. Finally, more critical and holistic paradigms tend to privilege the marginalisation by governments and other key decision-makers of the multiple structural and cultural disadvantages not untypically faced by many LACYP. Here, social class and poverty-related factors bind with the risk-averse, market-led, techno-bureaucratic and austerity-laden nature of much 'post-welfare' social work, social care support, or teacher-based education and practice. Together, these outcomes can generate significant agency-based disadvantages, intense social exclusion and the almost ritualistic meso-level pathologizing of LACYP, whilst limiting any purposeful contact available between social workers, teachers, and support staff. Such sometimes potent dynamics can undermine any capacities and resources to provide meaningful and sustained support for LACYP (for example, Jones and Novak, 1999; Fraser, 2008; Parton, 2014; Walker, 2017; Garratt, 2018).

Experiences of education and care

Several studies have analysed LACYP's experiences of receiving educational support whilst in care. For example, a series of interviews in Wales with 67 children and young people in care by Mannay and colleagues (2017) has offered a detailed insight into some of the many challenges faced. In particular, the authors query presumptions held by some support and professional staff about young people in care. Notably, this includes the often-inaccurate assumption that LACYP lack educational aptitude and motivation. Indeed, participants articulated their frustration about maintaining what was interpreted as a stigmatising 'looked after child' status, and that it frequently meant that they were treated differently to other students by teachers and support staff. Examples were given of children being encouraged to move down ability sets within an academic year because of their 'in care' status. Moreover, being over protected was again not uncommon, which, paradoxically, tended to hinder their full potential. One young student, for example, highlighted her distressing experiences at a school she attended:

> *As soon as I went into care, then went back to school and my teachers treated me completely different, because I was in care they moved me down sets, they put me in*

special help, they gave me – put me in support groups… they was like you're more than capable of being in top set but we don't think you're going to be able to cope.

As part of a focus group interview another boy expressed his frustration with the seemingly obligatory pity felt towards him:

I hate people feeling pity for me. I'm just a normal child, like … I'm in foster care, it doesn't mean you're just like some pity child.

(Mannay et al, 2017: 689-91)

Contrary to negative presumptions seemingly held by a few staff the researchers instead discovered strong evidence of resilience and high hopes on behalf of many of the LACYP interviewed. This included wishes by some of the children in the 9 to 12 years old category to become architects, doctors, or to succeed in the financial sector. Despite this, the authors highlight what appeared as a discursively-driven yet ultimately stigmatising ''supported' subject position' that was often ritualistically imposed onto LACYP. This almost institutionally-ingrained hegemonic process subsequently generated agency-level distress, disempowered young people and ultimately stood to exclude them from 'discourses of success'. The key driver here appeared to be a desire to reduce and control academic pressure amidst typically unfounded 'perceptions of an already chaotic and challenging life'. The authors suggest that educational support systems should be encouraged to be more effective and to instead sustain the ambitions of LACYP. Moreover, any such paradigm shift should ideally be embodied into everyday professional practices and procedures (Mannay *et al*, 2017, p694-696).

Echoing many of these findings, Walker (2017) undertook interviews with support and professional staff for LACYP across two local authorities in England. By drawing influence from Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and his theoretically-informed attempt to explain the complex yet commonly predictable mechanisms of multi-generational social reproduction, Walker illustrates how multiple support networks in care can unintentionally fortify class-based dynamics which limit the life chances of LACYP. Walker, for example, notes LACYP's typically circumscribed access to cultural capital (educational qualifications, learnt behavioural norms, cultural knowledge, etc), which often begins from an early age through socialisation, parenting and reduced learning opportunities. Moreover, structurally-determined economic assets and social capital (networks and relationships) in Bourdieu's understanding tend to again be lacking for most LACYP. When suddenly thrown into fragmented, regularly unstable and under-resourced fields of social care – in tandem with any emotional, psychological, or physical challenges previously faced - LACYP are subsequently much less likely to be receptive (or offered an opportunity) to gain fair access to cultural resources and other forms of capital. Indeed, Walkers interviews suggest that social care and teaching staff tended to (understandably) focus on supporting LACYP with their emotional needs and in acquiring practical skills. Building up self-esteem, confidence and social skills were key targets and each were rewarded as real achievements by most staff. Conversely, formal qualifications and learning were instead marginalised or even dismissed as unnecessary or unfitting. As Walker concludes, however, despite their best intentions, staff and institutions were inadvertently disadvantaging LACYP by placing too much emphasis 'on achievements which, in the wider fields of education and employment, held very little value compared with the more legitimized achievements of school test and exam results.' (Walker, 2017: 985)

Several international studies - including some systematic reviews - have noted the many structural, meso-level, and agency-based challenges faced by LACYP in receipt of education provision (for example, Bruce Ferguson and Wolkow, 2012; Garcia-Molsosa et al, 2021). Any influences and outcomes however are likely to be complex and multi-faceted, and counter arguments about barriers to learning can be associated to trauma experienced by LACYP prior to entering care.

Significantly disadvantaged looked after children and young people

Despite many disadvantages tending to affect most LACYP, any challenges faced can still vary significantly between specific groups. This includes according to criteria such as social class, health status, disability, race, nationality and asylum status, gender, and so forth. Evidence suggests, for example, that children with a disability or those who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum can face significant challenges if taken into care (for example, Morris, 2005; Humphris and Sigona, 2019; Kilinc, 2021). Attention has also been drawn to the more specific obstacles often faced by working class male youths. In 2016, around one half of the 1,000 children in custody in England were LACYP, with the majority represented by working-class boys. Moreover, it is estimated that specifically disadvantaged young people in care are around fifty times more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system (including direct involvement with the police) than those not in care. A recent report by the *Prison Reform Trust,* (2017: 2-7), for example, highlights that increasingly fragmented social care services and changes in who support LACYP, where they are educated and reside, alongside who offers pedagogical, emotion or practical care, can have a lasting impact upon any potential to engage in crime. These outcomes can persist alongside inconsistent or limited direct professional support including once leaving care, alongside a failure of services and welfare support staff to work together.

Any lack of foundation may also be associated with other overarching dynamics including endemic poverty, low expectations from support staff, pre-care neglect, and extra-familial abuse such as from peers. Together these factors can quickly generate a perfect storm leading to a lack of opportunities and multiple types of structurally, economic and culturally determined exclusion. Subsequently, it can quickly become much less likely that any such significantly disadvantaged LACYP will go on to benefit from education services, and possibly later attempts at support, leading to further possible disparities in educational attainment levels and later life chances.

Privileging the learning needs of looked after children and young people

Numerous LACYP still receive adequate or good care - including from capable social workers, teachers, foster carers and other support staff - all of which can promote improved life chances. However, despite their vulnerabilities, too many LACYP continue to face significant challenges in their attempts to secure dependable support and care which is focused on long-term outcomes. This can regularly include gaining limited access to purposeful education or learning services, which would likely improve their otherwise circumscribed life chances. Challenges faced by LACYP might include relative neglect from support staff and welfare professionals, who may dismiss their capabilities, aspirations, or more specific learning needs. Titherade's (2022: 1-2) recent report for the BBC, however, has offered a sobering insight into some of the more unsavoury experiences faced by some LACYP. Alarmingly, the journalist highlights evidence of LACYP being groomed, sexually assaulted and given alcohol or drugs by some staff and fellow residents within independent

care homes led by one large company based in four local authorities in southern England. Moreover, the company runs specialist schools with some LACYP receiving up to £23,000 per year from local authorities intended for one-to-one teaching. This additional pedagogical support is not always provided however.

Studies cited in this article and numerous others in the past have advocated policy pathways, initiatives and practices to improve the life chances of LACYP. Briefly, among numerous other examples, evidence points to a need to provide more resources and support to structurally-disadvantaged families, including provisions directed at the 'causes of the causes' of poverty, so to increase the likelihood of disadvantaged children and young people not being brought into care. Moreover, there is it seems a need also to deliver more training and resources to teachers, social workers and other welfare professionals, including about the causes and effects of poverty on families and children. Finally, studies also suggest a requirement to provide consistent, stable and person-centred educational and other support for LACYP, ideally offered in local areas and supplied by as few professionals and service providers as possible over an extended period (for example, Petrie, 2015; Mannay *et al*, 2017; Morris *et al*, 2018; Featherstone *et al*, 2018). Such agendas would also benefit from placing the promotion of the educational life chances of LACYP at the centre of government policy and professional practices. Unfortunately, for this to be sustained, we may also require a root and branch restructuring and transformation of the presently under-resourced, deeply-fragmented, business-focused, and, at times, unfit for purpose social care system.

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