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**Towards the privileging of care experienced children and young people’s educational and other ‘life chances’ within social work practice and education**

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**Abstract**

Care experienced children and young people (CECYP) frequently face adverse ‘life chances’ when compared to their peers. Their life course trajectories typically include numerous personal, structural and culturally determined challenges set from a young age. Social workers in the UK now play a minimal role in direct support for young people, and are instead encouraged to focus on short-term priorities, safeguarding investigations, and monitoring ‘risky’ working-class parents. This article considers some explanations and evidence offered for educational and other inequalities experienced by CECYP, and highlights specific issues regarding ongoing neoliberal reforms of social care. Case examples relating to criminal justice, asylum-seeking children, and sexuality are then briefly discussed. The conclusion draws from evidence to identify some recommendations which may help improve CECYP’s full learning potential. This includes moving away from the current neoliberal inspired short-term focus placed on managing risk and towards the provision of more contextual and meaningful support.

**Keywords:** life chances; care experienced children and young people; privatization; risk; education.

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In later life, children in need and looked after children and young people (care experienced children) frequently experience adverse ‘life chances’ in comparison to their peers (Sebba et al, 2015; Datta et al, 2017; Hall and Stephens, 2020). For example, research evidence has drawn attention to care experienced children and young people’s (CECYP) much higher likelihood of facing unemployment, long-term poverty, being involved in the criminal justice system and entering prison (especially younger males); and engaging in substance misuse or committing suicide in later life (Owen et al, 2008; Sebba et al, 2015; Datta et al, 2017; *Prison Reform Trust,* 2017; Katz et al, 2022). Moreover, the likelihood of CECYP experiencing social isolation and of becoming pregnant as teenagers and subsequently having their own children brought into care remains high (Sebba et al, 2015; Broadhurst and Mason, 2017). Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is also an association between typically poorer educational achievements for CECYP and numerous disadvantages faced throughout their life course (Sebba et al, 2015; Ferguson, 2016; Datta et al, 2017).

As is widely recognised, reductions in government funding for welfare - and social care especially - have led to significant gaps and inconsistencies regarding the availability of meaningful support (Garratt, 2018; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2020). Although a proportion of children may flourish following care related support, for many others their life course trajectory remains ever more uncertain yet increasingly predictable. Indeed, many disadvantages faced by CECYP in later life can be set from an extremely young age (Datta et al, 2017; Barnardos, 2019). In England by age five, for instance, there is already a notable educational attainment gap between the most and least socially disadvantaged fifth of children in families (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Barnardos, 2019). Moreover, strongly related gaps in confidence, attainment, and general opportunities widen as CECYP age and develop to become adults (Datta et al, 2017; Hall and Stephens, 2020). Whilst the disadvantages faced by CECYP in acquiring educational qualifications, cultural capital and participation parity are often stubbornly associated with a multiplicity of outcomes, any improvements in gaining access to educational equity can nevertheless ‘predict higher earnings and greater likelihood of employment in youth transitioning from care’ (Sebba and Luke, 2019: 435).

With a long history of closer contact with children and young people - alongside an apparent professional inclination towards advocacy, empowerment and social justice - it is perhaps social work which remains one of the more apposite welfare professions to be able to improve the educational life chances of CECYP. However, much empirical evidence suggests that social workers now play a very limited role with children once they come into contact with formal care services. Indeed, focus is more commonly now placed upon investigations, controlling risk, and often remote and process-driven safeguarding interventions in the short-term. Relatedly, attention from social workers and other ‘helping’ professions is now increasingly placed on parents experiencing endemic poverty, substance misuse, mental health needs, domestic violence or who have a learning disability (for example, Petrie, 2015; Featherstone et al, 2018a; Featherstone et al, 2018b; Morris et al, 2018). Despite the not uncommon emotional turmoil of pre-care neglect alongside being removed from birth parent(s), CECYP can quickly become lost within bureaucratic, resource constrained, and ever more forensic care proceedings (for example, Ferguson, 2016, 2017; Featherstone et al, 2018b; Green and Moran, 2021). Other factors, such as the focus placed upon meeting targets and promptly closing cases, can again limit any opportunities to provide meaningful and consistent support for CECYP (Petrie, 2015; Parton, 2014; Bywaters et al, 2016; Featherstone et al, 2018b). Moreover, children and young people from more excluded backgrounds can quickly become even more significantly disadvantaged in such potentially hostile social care arenas. This can include working class children whose parents experience substance misuse, or who are disabled, seek asylum, are from minority ethnic groups, or remain at significant harm of non-family and community-based violence or abuse (for example, Morris, 2005; Stein and Morris, 2010; Petrie, 2015; Firmin, 2015; Humphris and Sigona, 2019a/b). In essence, for some CECYP at least, neglect or even abuse can continue in care, and indeed in some instances, become more prevalent or extreme (for example, Jones and Novak, 1999; Humphris and Sigona, 2019a/b; Titherade, 2022).

This article seeks to examine some of the causes of CECYP poor educational and other life chances. Alongside inconsistent support and short-term safeguarding practices, it looks also at the negative impact which quasi-markets of care regularly has on systems of support for CECYP. Case examples - such as around youth justice, and of asylum-seeking children and sexuality - are then briefly offered. The conclusion includes a brief discussion of some possible ways forward for improving CECYP educational and other life chances.

**Explanations for the poor educational ‘life chances’ of children and young people in care**

Gaps in education performance and achievements for CECYP have been acknowledged internationally, and attention has been drawn to a number of interrelated influences. Among others, these can include social class, the consistency and quality of care received, types and number of schools attended, family background, degrees of experiential neglect or abuse, peer-led influences, personality, age, gender, or community and policy-related dynamics (O’Higgins et al, 2015; Firmin, 2015; Berridge, 2017; Walker, 2017). In England, as in many other countries, educational status and examination results remain significantly different for CECYP than their peers not in care. For example, at the end of primary school key stage 2 (aged 11), 58 per cent of looked after children are identified as having a special education need, compared with 18 per cent of non-looked after children (DOE, 2020). In 2018, only 18 per cent of children in care secured five or more GCSE passes in England, compared to 59 per cent of children in the general population. Moreover, only 6 per cent of care leavers enter higher education (in comparison to 36.4 per cent of young people), and of the few that do they remain ‘nearly twice as likely to drop out than their peers’ (DOE, 2019: 1).

Several perspectives have sought to explain any reduced educational outcomes for CECYP. Among others, these include the dominant policy discourse and its strong focus placed upon a ‘failing’ care system (DoES, 2006; Forrester, 2008; Ramsay-Irving, 2015; Walker, 2017). This stance includes specific areas of suggested improvements for social workers, teachers and other supporting agencies. One of the main challenges to the dominant policy discourse remain perspectives which instead highlight the impact of pre-care neglect, maltreatment or abuse for CECYP (Wilkinson and Bowyer, 2017; McSherry and McAnee, 2022). This discourse asks whether it is unreasonable to envisage the care system as able to ‘compensate fully for the long-term impact of early abuse and disadvantage which many looked after children experience’ (Jackson, 2007; Walker, 2017: 918). This perspective has nevertheless also been challenged. International systematic reviews, for instance, such by O’Higgins et al (2015), have highlighted that even when pre-care disadvantages are controlled, many CECYP still fail to benefit, or at least progress significantly, from formal learning whilst in care.

Finally, more critical perspectives have instead highlighted the persistent neglect by policy makers (and some welfare professionals) of the complex, multifactorial and structural obstacles and challenges faced by CECYP. Here, poverty, social class and deprivation, austerity, and cultural-related dynamics within education services and wider society sit alongside the influence of the class-specific and risk averse nature of modern social work interventions. Relatedly, suffuse outcomes such as the tendency for market-based systems of social care to fragment support services and casualise low paid care work have also been questioned. Such dynamics and potential obstacles may coalesce to significantly limit the meaningful contact between social workers, families and children, and undermine any attempts to provide consistent and reliable support (for example, Jones and Novak, 1999; Morris, 2005; Sanson and Stanley, 2010; Williams, 2012; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al, 2018b; Garratt, 2018; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2020).

**Studies examining children and young peoples’ experiences of education and care**

Numerous empirical studies have sought to analyse CECYP’s experiences of education and support within formal care: including factors which may influence any attempts to secure greater educational equity. Walker (2017), for example, draws from a small yet in-depth empirical study spread across two local authorities in England, and which included interviews with professional support staff who worked with CECYP. Walker proposes that support networks in care inadvertently add to, and indeed ultimately may promote the circumscribed educational life chances of CECYP. Walker draws influence from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theoretical approach used to explain how social inequalities are habitually reproduced to often become maintained over many generations. As well as lacking generational and structurally-imposed economic (material assets) or social capital (networks of relationships) in Bourdieu’s understanding, Walker argues that CECYP will often experience restricted access to cultural capital (educational qualifications, learnt behavioural norms and tastes, appreciation of bourgeois culture, etc). Typically, this goes on to further limit their access to crucial yet finite resources later on: which, among other examples, can include employment opportunities, access to housing and health care services, and within relationships.

The use of Bourdieu (1984) is interesting as it offers a unique ‘theory of practice’ which privileges social class, whilst rematerializing any analysis of inequality and integrating our understanding of agency alongside social structure (Jenkins, 2002). Walker’s study highlights that following time spent within an increasingly fragmented and unstable care system - alongside any disadvantages faced in the past - CECYP are unlikely to be fully receptive (or given an opportunity) to gain fair access to cultural resources. Indeed, interviews with support workers, teachers and other staff involved with CECYP, discovered that (understandably) most sought to build strong relationships with children. This was largely an attempt to make amends for any disadvantages previously faced by focusing on their emotional needs above all else. This strategy led staff to often celebrate smaller achievements, including attendance at school, the development of self-esteem and positive social skills, confidence, and the ‘acquisition of basic skills’ (Walker, 2017: 982-985). Despite their best intentions, however, by inadvertently reinforcing lower expectations and achievements, the altruistic efforts of support staff and other street-level bureaucrats can further amplify the later challenges faced by children:

Staff wanted very much to encourage and support any noted advancement [for children and young people], however small. In doing so, they were in danger of inadvertently placing 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)

Other studies have highlighted an often institutionally-driven ‘hierarchal binary’ embedded within professional interpretations of the educational needs of CECYP and other children (Mannay et al, 2017: 694). Here, tension can persist between the relational subject positions of ‘successful’ and ‘failing’ students: with CECYP often unfairly judged and therefore stigmatised by teachers as embodying the latter category (for example, Ivinson and Murphy, 2007; Evans, 2015). Such discursively imposed boundaries, however, continue to be challenged by in-depth studies. Mannay and colleagues (2017), for example, analysed interviews with 67 young people and children in Wales to question the relatively commonplace assumption that CECYP lack educational ability, aspirations and drive. Conversely, many of the CECYP participants interviewed were or had been frustrated with their looked after child status, especially as it led to many ways in which they were treated dissimilarly to their peers by their teachers. For instance, one female participant highlighted her negative experience once her care status had been revealed within the 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. And I was just like I don’t need all this shit, I’ve only moved house, that’s it I was like yeah I might be in care but the only difference to me is I’ve moved house, that’s it…they looked at all my papers and where I was in my levels and that and 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. (Mannay et al, 2017: 691)

The authors’ highlight the implementation of an institutionally driven ‘‘supported’ subject position’ for CECYP – ironically generated in part through additional resources and emotional support – yet which merely helps to diminish expectations and further exclude CECYP from ‘discourses of success’. In a similar vein to Walkers (2017) findings, this stance is founded on an inaccurate assumption that schools need to ‘minimise academic pressure amidst perceptions of an already chaotic and challenging life’ (Mannay et al, 2017: 696). Many children or young adults were not simply distraught following their experiences, but also strongly expressed their educational and career aspirations. They were keen to challenge any negative labels ascribed upon them within schools and as part of the wider dominant ‘supported subject discourse’. Subsequently the authors conclude that CECYP’s educational and career aspirations need to instead be ‘embedded into everyday [professional and support] practices and procedures’, and educational support systems encouraged to be effective and develop to sustain the ambitions of CECYP.

**Significantly disadvantaged children and young people**

Specific evidence has indicated that some CECYP may be more disadvantaged than others within the wider social care and education system. For example, as part of a participatory research project, the *Prison Reform Trust* (2017: 3) has highlighted how being in care can drastically increase the likelihood of certain children entering the criminal justice system, especially poorer white working-class and black male youths. In 2016, around one per cent of children in England and two per cent in Wales were in care. Despite this, around one half of the 1,000 children in custody were CECYP, the majority of which were working class and male. Moreover, the *Prison Reform Trust* estimates that children or young people who had contact with and experience of care were around fifty times more likely to become involved with the police than children outside of care. The report provides instances of the many problems faced by CECYP: including, for example, the not uncommon and typically disorientating experiences for young people of regular changes in their places of residence, schools attended, and foster carer(s) or other ‘service providers’.

This report again reiterates evidence highlighted in other studies that stability and consistent support remain essential for not only learning and educational achievement but also wellbeing and safeguarding. Indeed, the report concludes that persistent fluctuations in who cares for CECYP - alongside who offers emotional and practical support and where it is that children live or are educated - typically maintains an enduring and sometimes profound impact upon any potential to become involved in criminal behaviour. Alongside such influences remain the potentially corrosive impact of limited professional support, as well as the current restricted capacity of professionals and support services to work together. Finally, the report draws attention to the now sustained lack of availability of preventative care and early interventions for many CECYP. It’s worth noting that these outcomes are not merely the preserve of social work and social care in the UK, but echo elsewhere. For example, in discussing the poor life chances of many care experienced children in Australia, Sanson and Stanley (2010: 3) highlight the lack of coordinated formal care, resources and preventative support offered to many families and children. This is alongside a tendency for the state to ‘respond to the problems rather than the causes’ of child neglect or abuse.

Day (2017: 121-125) has also highlighted the increasing ‘adulteration’ of youth justice in the UK, which persists alongside an ever more ‘punitive approach to youth justice’. Indeed, Day’s semi-structured interviews with looked after children subject to a youth justice supervision order - and who were based in residential care in the North West of England - has underlined the seemingly not uncommon tendency for such CECYP to be negatively labelled by welfare professionals. Such prejudice often occurs alongside impulsive removals from crucial mainstream provision including education services, and commonly occurs with little consideration being given to any underlying structural causes of challenging behaviour on behalf of young people. Unsurprisingly perhaps, many of the young participant’s interviewed expressed their anger, frustration and lack of trust felt towards residential care staff and social workers. This included with regard their limited available meaningful support received within what were perceived to be hostile care and school environments. Some children also argued that their challenging behaviour was to encourage a move to another placement if they were being treated poorly, and many felt powerless with their alienation not uncommonly drawing them closer to peers in care or acquaintances outside. Often, however, this carried the potential of further increasing any likelihood of involvement in crime or social deviance. Again, the potent dynamic of social reproduction and exclusion appears to be almost baked into the very systems intended to support CECYP.

Further evidence of children in care being made to feel very different from other children is provided by Lewis (2019). He argues that foster children often feel deeply confused and upset when forced to attend regular bureaucratic meetings such as looked-after child (LAC) reviews attended by social workers, teachers, and health care staff. Indeed, the commonplace use of legal or technical terms such as ‘LAC’, ‘placements’, ‘challenging behaviour’ or ‘corporate parent’ can quickly traumatise children in foster care:

We talk about and subject these children to language and processes which are alien to our own children’s childhoods. We do this without malice but also without thought for the consequences and with professional legitimisation. The jargon of the profession confuses already confused children and makes them feel different – stigmatised, and in my view directly contributes to poor outcomes across the board. (Lewis, 2019: 3)

While such meetings in principal appear to have a child’s best interests at heart they can quickly lead to unintended negative impacts, some of which may be long-term. Such tendencies, among other chiefly bureaucratic trends outside of the direct control of social workers according to Ferguson (2017) and others, have led to many children’s tangible needs gradually becoming more and more marginalised within social work and social care sectors.

**Markets, outsourcing, neglect**

In the UK especially, neoliberal reforms of social care have reduced the key roles of social workers to a bureaucratic purchaser and manager of ‘outsourced’ services. Moreover, the ownership and control of support services within social care has shifted from a predominately public sector-led model to instead prioritize private and business sector suppliers of formal care (Harris, 2003; Ferguson, 2017; Fenton, 2020; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2020; *Competition and Markets Authority*, 2022). Regarding foster care, for example, an oligopoly of large independent providers now supplies over three-quarters of foster care placements commissioned in England, with £1.2 billion spent on such private sector agencies in 2019/20. Furthermore, three of the largest providers of foster care placements are now owned by private equity firms, with each company accounting for 45 per cent of the spend on independent foster care by local authorities in England (Berg, 2019). Monopolies have formed in another key social care service, that of residential care home support for CECYP. For example, a total of ten companies now own a third of children’s residential homes in England, with 185 homes owned by one company, *Care Tech Holdings PLC* (Jacobs, 2019).

Rapid changes in the ownership of care providers - as well as significant problems relating to the lack of availability of consistent support – have been identified as a key challenge in relation to meeting CECYP’s learning and associated needs (Jordan and Drakeford, 2012; Petrie, 2015; *Competition and Markets Authority*, 2022). As part of a recent report, for example, the *Competition and Markets Authority* (2022: 122-134) has argued that private sector suppliers based in England, Scotland and Wales, now make ‘excessive profits’, and represent a central part of a ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘unstable market’. With limited suppliers from which to choose, local authorities have been forced to pay more than they should for core services including foster care from a small number of business and corporate providers. Despite regular excessive costs, many vulnerable children do not receive adequate care within an increasingly chaotic market which also often lacks regulation. Indeed, many children are forced to live far away from their place of birth or long-term residence and can be separated from siblings and other family members, friends and networks of support. As part of a recent report for the BBC, Titherade (2022: 1-2) has presented evidence of children being given alcohol, groomed, and sexually assaulted by some staff and residents within care homes run by one large private company based in four local authorities in southern England. The company also runs schools with some CECYP receiving up to £23,000 per year for one to one teaching from local authorities which is not always not provided. Invariably in such environments, the capacity for learning and person development will likely be significantly undermined.

**Risk, safeguarding, and exclusion**

Social care provision in the UK for care experienced children and young people has changed significantly in other areas. Much attention, for example, has been placed on excessive priority being given to encouraging social workers to focus on safeguarding service users and controlling potential risks rather than offer more meaningful support to families (Webb, 2006; Parton, 2014; Petrie, 2015; Featherstone et al, 2018b). Any precedence given to controlling risks on behalf of governments and within welfare have partially been explained in terms of the dystopian vision of modern society presented by Ulrich Beck (1992). Here, relentless risks and hazards are deemed pervasive within a fragmented post-industrial and free market-driven *Risk Society*. As Parton (2011) highlights, for social work and the state, such dynamics have led to excessive attention subsequently been placed upon ‘risky parents’ and ‘poor parenting’, with intense pressure being placed on any capacity to ‘identify risk factors and intervene early’ (Parton, 2011: 862). But alongside an almost pervasive neglect of poverty as determining factor, some questions also remain about whether relative social risks have increased: or if instead the denial of any structurally-induced causes are the main problem, in conjunction with the perceptions and responses to any perceived risks (for example, Furedi, 2004; Bauman, 2004; Webb, 2006).

Alongside limited available resources, and greater surveillance for structurally-disadvantaged parents, the persistent micro-interventions of risk averse practice (in tandem with excessive marketisation) has distilled many core social work activities to be built around targets, performance measures, risk assessments, audits, evidence-based practice, procedures, intrusive casework, and, at times, the displacement of risks elsewhere. Despite implying precision and accuracy however, in practice risk assessments tend also to be highly speculative. Moreover, for social work in their typically compulsive emphasis placed on clinical safeguarding, such technologies of care paradoxically tend also to generate more collateral risks, including not least the ‘marginalisation of intelligent inquiry’ (Webb, 2006: 71-76). Inevitably, risk-averse governance may also quickly lead to priorities becoming ever more short-term, whilst attention given to otherwise essential outcomes - such as the longer-term pastoral, educational and learning needs of CECYP - can quickly diminish as priority.

A more recent example of some of these dynamics is provided by the experiences of unaccompanied children who seek asylum (UCSA) in the UK. By utilising case study and mixed methodological research, Humphris and Sigona (2019a: 6-15; 2019) detail how the state is eager to measure and simplify its role with UCSA through ‘bureaucratic capture’ whilst maintaining its legal requirement to protect vulnerable children. Yet, paradoxically, it is also keen to protect society ‘from threatening, unruly and uncontrolled outsiders, even if they are children’ (Humphris and Sigona, 2019: 1497). Regarding the risk-averse care of UCSA, several cumulative tensions have been reconstituted through four policy-based developments which initially appear to include attempts to meet the ‘best interests’ of children enshrined in national and international law. First, once in care, any top down business-led drives for economic savings and efficiencies by local authorities leads to UCSA regularly being moved to localities where the cost of their support is less. This push for proficiencies can quickly lead to the undermining of any child’s capacity to access consistent support including education services. Other potential consequences persist, which may include an increased risk of neglect or abuse for children following any moves to unfamiliar geographical localities (typically where housing and property costs are cheaper). Second, the dominant role of profit-focused service providers within safeguarding services intensifies any moral tensions between the priorities of financially-focused managers in local authorities and social workers who seek to meet UCSA’s basic needs. Third, ongoing and often financially driven restructuring within local authorities helps to again destabilise support further: such as by reducing the likelihood of access to consistent expertise provided to meet asylum seeking children’s more complex needs. Finally, and as Parton (2011) has also noted, implicit priority given to children’s ‘best interests’ legally empowers risk-averse welfare professionals. However, this can again generate further tensions with greater focus quickly being given to bureaucratically capturing children whilst moving UCSA further away from their family members or other networks of support. Paradoxically, by alienating or distancing any familial or informal support, any risks of emotional or psychological distress, and potentially physical damage for UCSA can increase. Again, each of these outcomes can quickly undermine any capacity for social care services and staff to provide stable and consistent support for UCSA’s education and learning.

Another example of some of the risks posed by professionals’ narrow focus on the complexities of social issues or needs is offered by Firmin *et al* (2016) in their study of child sexual exploitation and safeguarding responses in England. By analysing a cumulative evidence base - which included qualitative interviews with young people and case study analysis - the authors’ highlight the tendency for child sexual exploitation to occur mostly among peers within extra-familial environments including parks, disused buildings, transport hubs, high streets, schools, and elsewhere. Their findings stress the normalisation of abuse and prevalence of grooming within some peer groups, alongside evidence of sex being utilised by teenagers for survival or due to coercion within gangs, with victims sometimes relying upon any abusers. Just as telling was the not uncommon finding that rather than offer support professionals including social workers often tended to individualise the many challenges faced by those most effected by child sexual exploitation:

Our research provides examples where professionals reference young people’s behaviours abstracted from the contexts in which they occurred and, in doing so, locate risk with the ‘choices’ made by young people rather than the contexts and/or individuals who pose a risk to them (Firmin *et al*, 2016: 2328)

Within such scenarios the relative circumscribed educational life chances experienced by many young people inside the orbit of formal care can further intensify due to misunderstandings and a lack of appreciation of critical context on behalf of some support staff. In advocating for more ‘contextual safeguarding’ practices the authors’ maintain that social workers should be encouraged to move beyond atomised one-to-one practices to instead meaningfully ‘engage with situations, contexts and relationships that disrupt young peoples’ developing sexualities’ (Firmin *et al*, 2016: 2332-2334).

Other studies echo these findings, and again highlight increasingly omnipresent obstacles to meaningful support which can include a lack of available ring-fenced resources, alongside understanding of many CECYP’s more specific, minoritized, and contextual needs. Morris et al (2018), for example, undertook fieldwork and interviews with social workers specialising in work with children and families across six local authorities in England and Scotland. Although overwhelmed by the structurally-induced and multi-generational poverty of their clients, the researchers’ discovered that practitioners tended to work around - and largely accept - an ‘underclass’ discourse of poverty. Among other influences, this led to the regular pathologizing of service users evidenced in practitioners’ detailed descriptions of their roles, and which included the use of ‘highly loaded and stigmatizing images to represent their clients’. Their role was also perceived as being chiefly about ‘regulating’ families (often via coercion), and part of the researchers’ conclusions remained that practitioners need to be provided with more education and support regarding the causes and effects that poverty and structural exclusion typically has upon families, young people and children (Morris *et al*, 2018: 369-371). Moreover, evidence suggests that verifiable risks can too often increase once CECYP are removed from parents or families: at least partially as a result of entering a fragmented and sometimes chaotic social care sector and welfare system (Day, 2017; Humphris and Sigona, 2017; Titherade, 2022).

**Prioritising the life chances of care experienced children and young people**

Some research has, nevertheless, highlighted instances of positive educational outcomes for CECYP. Alongside consistent ‘wrap around’ support from different agencies - and the long-term benefits of strong relationships formed with carers, peers and relatives - evidence also indicates that CECYP appreciate being listened to and understood by professionals, their carers and other agencies (Stein and Morris, 2010; Sebba et al, 2015). As part of a study across six local authorities involving 26 teenagers who were in foster care for at least one year, Sebba *et al* (2015) discovered that a proportion of young people can go on to improve their learning skills and educational performance. Positive outcomes from the sample, however, tended to largely be dependent upon the extent to which younger people had been living long-term in a placement providing stable care, in addition to the receipt of heuristic support and a capacity to build meaningful relationships which were consistent and reliable. This included regular contact and support provided by the same social worker.

As we have seen, however, numerous challenges faced by CECYP at street-level are compounded by wider policy-related transformations and associated reforms of social work. Many studies referred to in this article imply or advocate some clear but general directions to follow if policy makers, organisations and professionals are to improve the relative life chances of CECYP. Among other examples, these include:

* More resources and support being targeted at structurally-disadvantaged families, including provisions directed at the ‘causes of the causes’ of poverty and class-specific interventions. Specifically, these measures would be part of a wider plan to reduce so many children and young people being brought into care
* Moving beyond almost ritualistic and mechanical ‘risk and removal’ assessments and interventions which are too regularly focused upon pathologizing marginalised social groups living in poverty
* Avoiding any reductive risk-averse focus on child-safeguarding and instead looking at longer-term holistic imperatives including meaningful ‘life chances’ enhancing support provided to CECYP throughout their transition to adulthood and beyond
* Delivering support by as few professionals as possible over a sustained period and in a familiar location close to established networks of support
* Relying much less upon fragmented, opportunistic and business-led monopoly service providers whilst looking to build up more focused and meaningful care in the public and community-based sectors
* With resources and contextual education and practice, focusing on supporting the strengths and aspirations of CECYP whilst avoiding oppressive stereotypical assumptions including overtly negative assumptions about their capacities to learn and develop a career

(Morris, 2005; Ivinson, and Murphy, 2007; *National Children’s Bureau*, 2017; Mannay et al, 2017; Day, 2017; Humphris and Sigona, 2019a/b; Featherstone et al, 2018a; Titherade, 2022)

Relatedly, Feathertone *et al* (2018b: 8-26) have argued that social work and other welfare professions should advocate for a new social model of child protection. This paradigm can draw influence from the many achievements of the social models of disability and mental health and seek to resist the current narrow policy and practice orientated focus placed upon risk and biomedicalization, or quickly prioritising any apparent individual deficits of ever more surveyed and objectified families and children. Instead, we can collectively look towards engendering better understanding and responding to the root causes of needs, whilst critically reappraising the current role of the neoliberal state. Moreover, this ‘new story’ can it seems also seek to develop ‘relationship(s)-based practice and [meaningful] coproduction’ alongside a ‘dialogic approach to ethics and human rights in policy and practice’. Clearly, a principal part of any such agenda remains a need to place the promotion of the life chances of CECYP at the very heart of the social work and other welfare professional’s roles. Such agendas may be idealistic and even somewhat remote in the current political climate which, as Fraser (2008) notes, too often retains only tokenistic and rhetorical support for more progressive welfare. Nevertheless, the *principal* of improving children and young people’s (alongside their siblings and parents) educational and other life chances clearly remains a pressing issue which continues to generate wide support in social work and other disciplines connected to the welfare of CECYP.

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