
Who Takes Care of Education 18 months on? A follow-up study of looked after children's perceptions of support for educational progress

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ABSTRACT

This paper represents a follow-up publication to the findings of a previous paper by documenting the views of a follow-up sample of 56 young people, aged 12–19 years, looked after in three English local authorities. Young people were interviewed on two separate occasions, 18 months apart, to assess their perceptions of educational progress and identify factors that might support or hinder their education. The interviews took place as part of an ongoing evaluation of the *Taking Care of Education* project, a development programme designed to facilitate improvements in the education of looked after children. Most young people were aware of individual project-related activities and a number of these were seen to contribute towards educational progress. Perceptions of educational progress were significantly higher at follow-up interview and an increased proportion of young people reported that being looked after had had a positive impact upon their education. Carers and teachers continued to be the most frequently mentioned providers of educational support, but the proportion of comments relating to educational support from social workers increased at follow-up. The most consistent explanation given for improved educational progress was the availability of support and encouragement for educational progress and acknowledgement of young people's achievements.

INTRODUCTION

Addressing the educational underachievement of looked after children continues to be a major government priority and local authorities have been charged with 'substantially narrowing the gap between the educational attainment and participation of children in care and that of their peers by 2006' (Smith 2003).

Although local authorities have made some progress towards improving the educational attainment of looked after children (Robbins 2001), their performance continues to lag significantly behind that of their peers. Recent statistics reveal that 59% of young people leaving care, aged 16 and above, do so

without any formal qualifications (Department of Health 2003a), compared with only 5% of the total school population (Department for Education and Skills 2002). In addition, looked after children's performance at Key Stages of the National Curriculum is generally below 50% of the performance of non-looked after children (Department of Health 2003b).

Whilst, in part, the deprived pre-care backgrounds of many looked after children may contribute to their poor academic achievement (Borland *et al.* 1998; Rutter 2000), the care and education systems may fail to adequately compensate for pre-care disadvantage (Aldgate *et al.* 1993; Jackson *et al.* 2002). Since 1998, the *Quality Protects* initiative (Department of Health

1998) has included the promotion of education as a key objective and sets local authorities specific targets for the educational outcomes of looked after children. The targets have recently been revised (Smith 2003) to emphasize the importance of bringing looked after children's educational performance in line with their non-looked after peers and increase participation through setting targets relating to the proportion of looked after children sitting GCSE examinations.

Local authorities are being assisted in their efforts to meet educational targets for looked after children through joint Department for Education and Employment and Department of Health guidance (Department for Education and Employment/Department of Health 2000). The guidance was introduced in the context of a growing body of research and inspection reports indicating that aspects of the care and education systems may prevent the educational needs of looked after children being addressed adequately. Key findings indicated that:

1 Limited communication and co-ordination between education and social services departments hindered effective planning and monitoring of looked after children's education (Audit Commission 1994; Social Services Inspectorate/Office for Standards in Education 1995).

2 Many social services departments did not hold central records of schools attended by looked after children, and schools could be unaware that pupils were looked after (Gower 1999; Evans 2000).

3 Failure to prioritize educational issues in considering care placements could result in inappropriate changes of school (Jackson 1989; Morgan 1999).

4 Residential placements may not provide basic material support for education such as quiet study areas and key books (Berridge & Brodie 1998; Rees 2001).

5 Carers, teachers and social workers may not support looked after children's educational development adequately (Borland *et al.* 1998; Morris 2000) and can hold low academic expectations for looked after children (Firth & Horrocks 1996; Borland 2000).

The joint guidance provides direction as to how local authorities might fulfil their role as corporate parents more effectively. This includes ensuring that there are focused educational plans for all looked after children, that information about the education and care history of looked after children is appropriately shared by relevant professionals, and that decisions around care placement arrangements include satisfactory consideration and timely allocation of appropriate supportive educational placements.

Within the context of the *Quality Protects* initiative and the implementation of the joint guidance, three local authorities are also currently participating in a National Children's Bureau (NCB) development project, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation. The *Taking Care of Education* project provides support, through staffing (provision of local project Lead Officers) and financial resources, to facilitate improvements in the education of looked after children. In each authority Lead Officers have been directing attention towards improving the quality of corporate parenting by ensuring the education of looked after children is evident in policy documents of all relevant agencies and promoting the need for improved interprofessional practice in this area.

In addition to the general emphasis on corporate parenting, the *Taking Care of Education* project has also funded activities intended to provide direct support to young people looked after. These can be grouped under three main themes: acknowledging and encouraging achievement; improving educational support in care placements; and enabling access to a wider range of learning opportunities.

Schemes to acknowledge and encourage achievement include the introduction of annual awards ceremonies to recognize young people's educational achievement. Encouraging achievement is also evident in schemes to provide financial rewards for GCSE attainment in year 11 and for regular attendance at further education centres, as well as promoting regular attendance amongst young people in residential care. Strategies to improve educational support in care placements have involved material provision, such as computers for children in foster care, schemes to enable young people to purchase key books, and enhancement of libraries and computing facilities in residential homes. In addition, training events around educational issues have been offered to foster and residential carers to enable them to effectively support young people's educational progress. Finally, in terms of providing access to a wider range of learning opportunities, vacation courses for looked after children and outward bound residential weekends have been organized.

Alongside the developmental work of the *Taking Care of Education* programme, the project funders have also provided for a detailed independent evaluation of the development programme (Berridge & Sinclair 1999). One strand of the evaluation programme aims to analyse the impact that changes in local authority policy and practice, and project activ-

ities, may have on educational outcomes and experiences for a sample of looked after children.

The research outlined in this paper concentrates on interview data from a sample of looked after children in foster, residential care and independent living, gathered at the beginning of the *Taking Care of Education* development programme and again 18 months after their initial interview. Findings relating to the original round of interviews (Harker *et al.* 2003) showed that most of the sample believed their education had improved as a consequence of being looked after. Teachers and carers were most frequently cited as sources of educational support, whilst social workers were often associated with hindering educational progress.

The current paper compares information gathered from 56 young people who took part in both original and follow-up interviews, to establish whether any differences have emerged over time in their perceptions of the level and type of educational support received, including factors that support and hinder their progress. Follow-up interviews also examined young people's awareness of project activities and their perceptions of any impact these may have upon their educational progress. The interviews illustrate areas where project activities and policy and practice are seen to have made a difference to the education of young people who are looked after.

METHOD

The evaluation of the *Taking Care of Education* development project involves a longitudinal design, within which the views of a sample of looked after children are sought through semi-structured interviews at varying stages of project activity. Initial interviews were held throughout the period covering March to October 2001, with follow-up interviews taking place from October 2002 to February 2003.

The original evaluation sample was drawn from the three English local authorities, two unitary and one Outer London Borough, participating in the NCB *Taking Care of Education* development programme. Random quota sampling was used to select 50 children in each authority, aged between 10 and 18 years, who received information about the research and were asked to participate. Quotas were based upon age, gender, ethnicity, legal status and placement type, so that the sample broadly reflected actual frequencies in each authority. In response to original participation requests, 80 young people agreed to take part in an interview during the period covering March to

Table 1 Reasons for sample attrition

Reasons for attrition	Frequency
No telephone contact available	8
Refused follow-up interview	7
No contact details available	6
Over three 'no shows'	3
Total lost to sample	24

October 2001 and were informed that their follow-up interview would take place around 16–18 months later.

In September 2003, letters were distributed to remind young people that they would be contacted within the next few months to arrange a follow-up interview. Young people were subsequently telephoned and their consent to participate in a follow-up interview sought. Fifty-six young people agreed to take part in the follow-up study, with 24 young people (30%) being lost to the follow-up sample. Table 1 lists the reasons for sample attrition.

Table 1 shows that the most common reasons for attrition are that young people either refused to take part in a follow-up interview, or accurate contact details were not available. Despite checking the accuracy of information in August 2002, on attempting to contact young people for follow-up interview it emerged, disconcertingly, that a considerable proportion of details were inaccurate. The research team liaised with social services staff to remedy this problem, but by February 2003 accurate contact details remained missing for six young people. Whilst three of these young people had left the care system, three were still classed as looked after. In addition, there were some instances of young people persistently failing to keep agreed interview appointments – i.e. a 'no show'.

Interview procedure

All interviews with young people were held at their home address and most were held after school hours. The interview schedule included open-ended and closed-ended questions to elicit information on young people's educational and care experience. In addition to revisiting questions from the first round of interviews, the follow-up schedule also included questions to establish young people's awareness of project-related activities. Where young people were aware of any activities or change they were asked to indicate

whether this had made a difference to their educational progress.

RESULTS

Follow-up sample characteristics

Fifty-six children agreed to a follow-up interview. The background details collected allow us to describe this sample in terms of variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, care placement, placement moves, school attendance and experience of exclusion.

Age, gender and ethnicity

At the time of follow-up interviews, the children and young people interviewed were aged between 12 and 19 years. The average age at follow-up was 16 years and the most common age was also 16 years. The follow-up sample showed a relatively even gender distribution, with 30 males and 26 females taking part. The majority of the follow-up sample, 77% ($n = 49$), were classified as 'White' (either UK or other European; $n = 43$), with 12% ($n = 7$) being of 'Black' background (UK, African, Caribbean), according to local authority ethnicity recording systems.

Care placements and placement stability

Most young people 52% ($n = 29$) were living in foster placements, which reflects national trends for placement types. Twenty-one per cent of the follow-up sample ($n = 12$) were placed with relatives (siblings, aunts/uncles, parents), 16% ($n = 9$) were in independent living and 11% ($n = 6$) in residential care. The proportion of young people in independent living, or placed with relatives, had increased slightly at follow-up, which is likely to be a natural care career-related effect, whilst the proportion of young people in residential care had decreased. The majority of the follow-up sample had also remained within the same placement: 37 young people (66%) were living at the same address at the time of their follow-up interview. The average length of time in placement for this group of young people was 4 years. Of the remaining 19 young people who had experienced placement moves, 16 had experienced only one move, two had experienced two placement moves, and one young person had changed placement three times. The length of time these young people had spent in their most recent placement ranged from 1 month to 22 months, with an average of 11 months.

School/college attendance

Forty-nine children and young people (88%) were currently on roll at a school or college. Thirty-five of these young people were in secondary schools, with 13 young people in further education and one at university. The majority ($n = 45$) described themselves as attending school or college regularly, whilst four young people (7% of sample) described themselves as persistent truants. Seven young people (12%) of the sample were school/college leavers, all of whom were currently seeking employment. Twenty-six young people (46%) had not changed school or college since their previous interview. Where school or college change had been experienced this was mainly due to natural transitions: nine cases (16%) of primary to secondary transfer, six cases (10%) of secondary school to college transfer, seven cases (12%) of leaving school and one case (2%) of college to university transfer. Seven young people (13%) had experienced a change of school/college that was not due to natural transition. In two cases this was due to care placement change, whilst three young people had changed college to access a better course programme, and two had switched from mainstream to special schools.

Exclusions

Children were asked to state whether they had experienced any exclusion episodes in the period between interviews. Only four young people (7%) reported incidence of short-term exclusion episodes; there were no permanent exclusions reported.

A note of caution regarding sample attrition

The level of stability in both educational and care placements amongst the follow-up sample appears to be an encouraging finding, and is likely to be appreciated by the young people contained within this group. However, the attrition rate from the original sample of 80 is 30% ($n = 24$) and we cannot ignore the possibility that this group of young people may have had markedly different care and schooling experiences to those progressing to the follow-up sample. Those young people for whom accurate contact details were not available at follow-up may have experienced a higher degree of placement change resulting in uncertainty regarding their whereabouts. Likewise, those young people who refused to take part in a follow-up interview, or failed to attend a series of fixed interview dates, may represent a disaffected group

due to turbulent care or educational experiences. Indeed, 71% of the 24 young people who were lost to follow-up had reported experience of exclusion episodes (fixed term or permanent) at original interview and 29% described their education as progressing 'badly' or 'very badly', compared with only 30% and 18%, respectively, for the follow-up group. Hence, the follow-up sample may have some bias towards young people who have enjoyed relatively positive educational and care experiences. Nonetheless, the findings represented in this paper relate only to the 56 young people taking part in both stages of interview and any reported differences in educational support can be seen to represent genuine change for this group of young people.

Perceptions of educational progress

Young people were asked to estimate their current educational progress using a five-point Likert Style response scale to indicate whether they felt their education was progressing 'very well, well, average, badly, very badly'. Fifty-four young people responded to this question at both original and follow-up interview, with two school leavers believing that the question was no longer relevant. Figure 1 displays the percentage of responses given at each interview phase.

The proportion of young people providing above average ratings increased at follow-up: 70% said 'well' or 'very well', as opposed to 49% at original interview. There was a reduction in the number of young people who believed that their education was going 'very badly', although a slight increase in the proportion who felt it was going 'badly'. Overall, estimates of progress provided at follow-up interview were significantly higher than those recorded at original interviews ($t = -2.7$, *d.f.* = 53, $P < 0.01$) (see Note 1).

It was also possible to specify the forms of change in perceptions of progress by examining shifts from

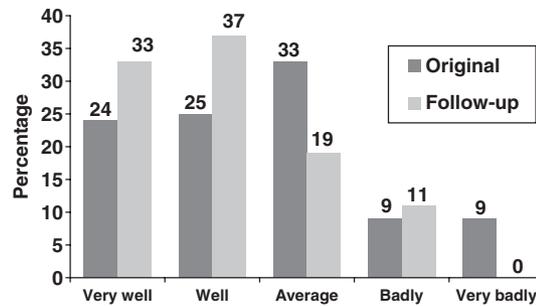


Figure 1 Percentage of 56 young people taking part in original and follow-up interviews describing their education as progressing very well, well, average, badly, or very badly.

one response category to another. Table 2 indicates that most young people provided stable (43%) or improved (43%) progress ratings, with only a minority of the sample (14%) giving lower estimates at follow-up.

Young people were asked if they could identify factors that had led to stability or change in their estimates of progress. Those providing stable estimates of 'well' or 'very well', as well as those showing positive improvements over time, mentioned the same three factors to explain their response. Firstly, the degree of support for education provided within care placements was the most frequently mentioned factor. Eighteen young people commented that the level of encouragement to succeed educationally and the promotion of school/college attendance within their care placements had assisted their progress. It also appeared important that support was associated with a stable care placement, and young people believed that being in a long-term placement was conducive to educational progress.

'I think things improved because of being in the same place. I had a fair bit of moving around at first, but then I got settled here and things definitely improved. It's just easier to think

Table 2 Frequency of type of shifts in perceptions of educational progress

Rating	Stable	Positive change	Negative change
Very well	10	N/A	8 (3 to well, 4 to average, 1 to badly)
Well	8	2 (2 to very well)	
Average	3	14 (5 to very well, 9 to well)	
Badly	2	3 (1 to very well, 2 to average)	
Very badly	0	4 (1 to average, 3 to badly)	
Total	23 (43%)	23 (43%)	8 (14%)

about school and stuff when you don't have to worry where you're at [in terms of placement].’ (18-year-old, foster care)

Secondly, 12 young people felt that their personal motivation and appreciation of the importance of education served as an important factor in ensuring that they did well. Six young people commented that they had consistently applied themselves to their studies irrespective of any distress or distractions associated with being looked after, whilst the remaining six believed that age-related changes had contributed to their progress. Increased maturity was seen to enable young people to appreciate the value of education and apply themselves more fully to their studies. In addition, some young people felt that drawing closer to the school leaving age emphasized the importance of applying themselves more ardently to their studies.

The third factor in explaining improved or sustained good progress, suggested by 11 young people, focused on support available in schools or colleges. Eight of these young people had experienced a change of school placement due to natural primary/secondary or secondary/further education transitions and believed that the increased autonomy and responsibility associated with their new educational establishment enabled them to engage better with the curriculum. In addition, a number of young people in secondary schools commented on commendation or rewards systems, which were appreciated for acknowledging young people's efforts and serving as a motivational factor that could promote further success.

The progress estimates of eight young people (14%) fell at follow-up. All of these cases related to young people who provided ratings of 'very well' at original interview. Three young people had experienced a slight drop in coursework or examination grades, which had led them to revise their estimates to 'well'. Two of the young people reporting a shift to 'average' believed this was due to their own tendency to leave work until the last minute rather than any

change in the level of support for their education. One young person reporting a shift to 'average' believed that low expectations on the part of teachers had prevented them being given adequate support for their education, whilst another young person had experienced placement change involving a period in residential care, which was associated with reduced school attendance. The young person, whose progress estimate changed from 'very well' to 'badly', had experienced difficulties within their current placement which they believe had made them argumentative and distracted at school.

Finally, the three young people who continued to report 'average' progress did not provide any clarification of why this might be other than that their academic performance had always been of average standard.

Impact of being looked after

At both original and follow-up interviews, young people were asked whether they believed that being looked after had made any difference to their educational progress. Whilst one young person did not answer this question, the remaining 55 responded at both initial and follow-up interviews. Table 3 shows their responses.

The 16 young people who continued to describe being looked after as improving their education invariably attributed this to the availability of support in care placements. Young people felt that they had continued to experience a higher level of support for their education within care settings than in parental homes. The notion of feeling settled within a placement was seen to have a positive impact on education for eight of the young people who had remained in the same placement. However, a further eight young people had experienced at least one placement move. Despite such placement change, most of these young people

Table 3 Reported impact on education of being looked after at original and follow-up interviews

Perceived impact	Frequency at original (n = 55)	Response at follow-up	Frequency at follow-up (n = 55)
Positive	23 (42%)	16 same 7 to no effect	25 (45%)
Negative	23 (42%)	12 same 6 to better 5 to no effect	12 (22%)
No effect	9 (16%)	6 same 3 to better	18 (33%)

felt that being looked after had increased the range of individuals taking an interest in their education and this was beneficial to them.

Placement stability was the sole explanation given to explain shifts in perceived impact by the seven young people who changed from recording a positive impact to no effect. For these young people, the constant level of support for their education had begun to be viewed as a natural aspect of their lives and was no longer seen as making a significant impact.

'I think last time I might have said better because I'd not been here that long so maybe it was more of a contrast to what I'd had at home. Whereas now, I mean I've been here for nearly 2 years so it just feels normal to be getting supported and stuff.' (16-year-old, foster care)

Stability of care placement was also cited as the main reason why young people who felt being looked after had not impacted on their education at original interview reported that it had a positive impact at follow-up. The three young people falling into this category all explained that at the time of their first interview they had not experienced their current placement for long enough to appreciate the support available to them. In addition, the six young people who changed from reporting a negative effect to a positive one explained their altered perceptions in terms of length of time in their current placement. All of the young people had remained within the same placement since their original interview (with the exception of one young person who had moved to independent living two months before follow-up) and believed that this had enabled them to benefit from available educational support as well as enabling them to feel secure enough to concentrate on their education.

It is encouraging to observe that there are no instances of young people who initially felt that their education had improved, or was not affected, changing to a view that being looked after had a negative impact on their education. However, there were still 12 young people who continued to believe that being looked after had made their education worse. The explanation provided was invariably that the young person had failed to recover from falling behind in their education as a result of being in care. For some young people this was due to the distress associated with being taken into care and separated from their birth family. Other young people commented that they had received little or no support for their education within care placements.

'One of the places I ended up in was just disgusting, absolutely filthy, I got a real shock that they could expect children

to be put there, but I was dumped there for a couple of months. It really was unbelievably bad and there was no way I could sit in there and do homework and stuff. Plus the carer, if you can call them that, didn't even bother to notice if you went to school or not.' (18-year-old, independent living)

In addition to receiving little support within a care placement, one young person also reported that they had experienced negative stereotyping within school whereby some teaching staff were seen to hold low expectations of young people who were looked after.

The six young people who continued to believe that being looked after did not affect their education either commented that they had been looked after for such a long period it was difficult to judge whether a difference had been made or that their educational progress was due to their own attitude and behaviour rather than being looked after.

People who support educational progress

At both original and follow-up interviews, young people were asked to reflect upon their educational experience and highlight any people who they believed had supported or hindered their progress. Most young people mentioned individuals who supported their education at original interview (82%, $n = 46$) and this proportion increased slightly at follow-up with 49 young people (88%) mentioning at least one individual who had supported their educational progress. Seven young people (12%) were unable to mention any individuals who supported their education, a reduced proportion compared with the original round of interviews (18%). Table 4 shows the individuals mentioned at original and follow-up interviews and the frequency of comments made about each.

Teachers continued to be the most frequently mentioned people fulfilling a supportive role at follow-up

Table 4 Frequency of comments made by 56 young people taking part in original and follow-up interviews about individuals who support educational progress

Individuals	Original frequency	Follow-up frequency
Teachers	32	29
Carers	24	24
Foster	21	21
Residential	3	3
Social workers	4	12
Family members	3	11
Peers	7	4
No-one	10	7

interview, although the number of young people mentioning them did fall slightly. Twenty-nine young people described how teachers supported academic achievement, and motivated them to believe in their ability. Teachers were mentioned as providing both study-specific and emotional support.

‘Yes my teacher. She was really good at listening to my problems and stuff when there wasn’t really anyone else I could talk to about them outside of school.’ (18-year-old, independent living)

Twenty-four young people mentioned foster and residential carers at both interviews as individuals who supported young people’s education by advising and encouraging them. The importance of foster carers praising young people for their achievements and communicating high expectations for their educational progress and behaviour was noted. As well as acknowledging young people’s efforts through verbal praise, some young people greatly appreciated earning material rewards (e.g. money, books, outings) from their carers as an added incentive to apply themselves to their studies. Young people in residential care believed there were more opportunities to access support within their residential centre due to the relatively high number of adults available. In addition, one young person believed that improvements in communication between residential staff and the school they attended had helped to solve behavioural and motivational problems at school and had prevented a potential exclusion episode.

The number of comments forwarded about social workers had trebled since the original round of interviews; four comments during initial interviews compared with 12 at follow-up. In part, this increase was related to young people transferring to leaving care teams and perceiving that there was more support available here for educational issues. Nonetheless, younger children also appeared to appreciate their social workers showing a genuine interest in their education.

‘My latest social worker really helps support me. She’s just like [foster carer]. Every time she comes she’s like “how are you getting on at school?” That’s the first question she asks except for like “how are you?” and I’m like “oh fine” but then I have to rush upstairs and get my studies down and show her and stuff like that. She’s really nice. I’ve had her about a year now I suppose . . . all of my social workers have been good but I think she takes more interest in school.’ (12-year-old, foster care)

Whilst the number of comments forwarded about social workers providing educational support contin-

ues to lag behind those relating to teachers and carers, it is nonetheless encouraging to note that some young people have noticed that their social workers are taking a more active interest in their educational progress.

The increase in comments forwarded regarding family members at follow-up is likely to be due to a higher proportion of young people being placed with relatives at the time of second interviews. The number of young people mentioning peers as providers of educational support fell slightly. Those who found peers helpful at follow-up interview mentioned that a shift in friendship circles had improved their motivation to attend school and concentrate on their studies.

People who hinder educational progress

Twenty-one young people (38%) mentioned individuals who they believed had impeded their educational progress at follow-up interview, a slight reduction from the 48% ($n = 27$) at the first interview phase. The categories of people mentioned were identical to those for support but the ordering of frequency differed as shown in Table 5.

Peers were cited most frequently as hindering young people’s educational progress at both original and follow-up interviews. Some young people were members of a friendship circle that did not value education and peer pressure could promote disruptive behaviour. Other young people reported having experienced bullying at school when fellow students discovered they were looked after. The lack of understanding shown and the level of taunting could serve to de-moralize and de-motivate.

Social workers continued to feature relatively frequently in terms of individuals who had hindered educational progress. The majority of comments

Table 5 Frequency of comments made by 56 young people taking part in original and follow-up interviews about individuals who hinder educational progress

Individual	Original frequency	Follow-up frequency
Peers	9	8
Social workers	8	7
Teachers	6	4
Carers	6	3
Foster	5	1
Residential	1	2
Family members	8	1
Self	1	1
No-one	29	35

related back to issues raised at original interview and focused on movement within the looked after system without any perceived awareness of the young person's needs. It also appeared that difficulties could be encountered when young people's educational achievement was high. Young people with the opportunity to progress to university could find themselves uncertain about their financial situation and the level of support they might expect to receive from the local authority.

'To me it seemed as if they'd never come across the situation of having someone in care who wanted to go to university and they didn't know what to do because they'd just never considered what their policy might be. To me that suggests they've got very low expectations, which OK might be based on the fact that no-one's done it before, but that shouldn't stop you thinking that one of these days some young people might come out with good enough grades to go and you need to plan what you can do for them. There's all these things like this project that are supposed to help people like me get a better education but if they don't seem to expect you to get as far as university it's sending out a bit of a mixed message.' (18-year-old, independent living)

The number of negative comments about teachers had diminished slightly at follow-up interview. Two young people felt that they had suffered from teachers holding negative stereotypes that looked after children were more likely to exhibit behaviour problems and have lower academic attainment than non-looked after children. Two young people mentioned instances where class teachers' lack of awareness of their looked after status had resulted in embarrassment when their absence due to care review meetings was queried in front of classmates.

Negative comments relating to carers focused on absence of support and encouragement for educational progress throughout a young person's care history. Finally, one young person mentioned that a family member had hindered their progress by causing distress that could affect the young person's concentration, whilst another young person attributed their lack of progress to their own attitude and behaviour.

Educational supports in care placements

The young person's interview schedule included a checklist to assess whether certain supportive factors were available to them in their current placements. The checklist contained 12 items and was administered at both original and follow-up interviews. Table 6 shows the items included on the checklist and

Table 6 Percentage of young people in follow-up sample who reported availability of educational supports in care placements at original and follow-up interviews

Supportive factor	Percentage reporting availability	
	Original (n = 56)	Follow-up (n = 56)
Quiet space to study in	91	98
Interested adult	91	91
Newspapers/magazines	72	89
Key books	70	88
Access to a local library	62	88
School event attendance	71	86
Computer access	61	79
Funds for leisure activities	65	77
Educational outings	48	71
Funds to buy books	64	68
Internet access	29	64
Information on educational rights	11	38

the percentage of young people reporting their availability at both original and follow-up interviews.

Overall, Table 6 makes for encouraging reading. The reported provision of all forms of support within care placements has improved over time and, with the exception of information on educational rights, over 60% of young people reported access to each form of support. The distribution of the sample in terms of types of care placement prevented a meaningful analysis of the types of support available according to whether young people were in foster or residential care placements.

Experience of *Taking Care of Education* project-related activities

Young people were provided with a description of activities stimulated by the *Taking Care of Education* project that had taken place within their authority. Young people were asked whether they had heard of each local activity, and if so whether they had been involved with it in any way, and their perceptions of the usefulness of the activity. The majority of young people (n = 46, 82%) had heard of at least one of the project activities that had taken place in their area.

The greatest reported awareness and involvement with project activities related to schemes to acknowledge and encourage achievement. Achievement awards ceremonies were widely known and most of the sample had attended an event. There was unanimous agreement that these were most enjoyable

events and the majority of young people believed that they could serve to motivate future progress.

'Yes I have had an award for educational achievement from Social Services. I went along on the day and saw the mayor and we had a party thing. It was really good. I'll probably work harder this year to try and get another one.' (15-year-old, foster care)

The rewards for revision scheme, involving monetary rewards for obtaining GCSE examinations, was also relatively well known. Some young people had already been eligible for rewards but were unsure whether it had helped them to revise as they were notified about the scheme only shortly before sitting their exams. Other young people who had not yet taken GCSEs believed it was a good idea and reported that it might make them apply themselves better to their studies.

There was also a relatively high awareness of schemes to promote school or college attendance. Young people in residential care had noticed that staff appeared to be directing added emphasis towards their school attendance. In terms of providing financial benefits for college attendance, those who were not yet in further education believed that it may encourage them to think more seriously about going to college and could promote regular attendance once they had progressed to further education. Young people who were already in receipt of the benefit believed such assistance had definitely encouraged them to go to college regularly.

Schemes to enable young people to benefit from wider opportunities to learn outside school included homework clubs, outward bound residential weekends and vacation courses. These activities were appreciated by young people who had been involved for both their social and educational elements.

'Yes. It was a great experience. Absolutely great. We were learning all aspects of photography: taking the pictures, getting perspective, developing them. And it was just so much fun but also you were learning about the scientific principles behind taking and developing pictures. It was brilliant and I got a certificate and things at the end so it all adds up.' (16-year-old, foster care)

In terms of attempts to improve facilities in care placements, young people in receipt of computers tended to comment that this had a beneficial impact on their education since they were able to use the computer for homework assignments and improve the presentation of their work. One young person was candid enough to report that they used the computer only to play games!

Some young people had received book tokens, which could be redeemed through attendance at a literacy promotion evening at a local bookstore. Those involved were enthusiastic about the opportunity and appreciated being able to select their own reading materials. This particular scheme was designed to encourage carers to show interest in developing young people's literacy skills and therefore information and gift vouchers were distributed to foster and residential carers. Unfortunately, a number of young people whose carers were sent vouchers were not aware of the scheme, which may indicate that carers failed to pass on information to young people.

Young people in residential centres provided positive comments regarding the extended range of reading materials available in their placement. A scheme whereby monthly deliveries of books and magazines from local libraries were made to centres was seen as particularly helpful in ensuring that a range of reading materials was available.

Training schemes to enable carers to effectively support young people's education also appeared to have had some impact for young people. Those in residential care reported that they had noticed an improvement in the approach of staff as a consequence of training activities. However, young people in foster placements had little knowledge that training schemes were available for their carers, or indeed whether carers had attended such schemes. Evidence from the local authorities themselves suggests only limited attendance by foster carers at training events focusing on educational issues. Only four young people were aware that carers had attended some form of training event, and they were unable to indicate whether this was associated with improved support for education.

CONCLUSION

In general, the findings drawn from the follow-up sample are encouraging, and it was reassuring to discover that the majority of young people in the follow-up sample were still engaged in education. Most of these young people's perceptions of educational progress were positive. A key factor for young people in explaining improvements in progress, or the maintenance of positive progress, was the degree of encouragement and support for education provided by carers. Promotion of an educational ethos within care placements was frequently associated with concepts of stability and security. Young people experiencing a relatively long-term placement, of at least

11 months, may be better able to build a relationship with carers whereby educational encouragement and support takes on enhanced meaning since it comes from a respected and established figure in the young person's life.

However, a number of young people who had experienced placement changes also believed that being looked after had had a positive impact on their education. Whilst an ideal scenario may be for young people to maximize the supportive benefits of care placements by remaining in their placement for a considerable period, where placement change does arise this need not be detrimental provided young people can experience similar, or even enhanced, levels of support in subsequent placements.

The opportunity to experience a supportive care placement, in which carers valued education and encouraged young people to succeed, may have been influenced to some degree by training schemes directed towards enabling carers to better support young people's education. However, with the exception of young people in residential care, very few of the sample were aware that their carers were in receipt of any training and indeed it appeared that few carers availed themselves of available training opportunities. It may be that rather than specific activities, the general impetus of the *Taking Care of Education* project housed alongside government initiatives like the joint guidance and *Quality Protects* has reinforced the importance of all corporate parents, including foster and residential carers, in meeting the educational needs of looked after children. It is of course possible that carers' practice has remained constant, and that improvements are largely due to a considerable number of the sample remaining in a constant placement over the course of the project and being better able to benefit from available support. Yet other findings do imply that corporate parents' awareness of the need to promote the educational opportunities of looked after children is improving. The observation that some young people believe that their social workers are exhibiting more interest in their education is encouraging, although it would be desirable perhaps to have found a larger number of young people citing social workers as sources of educational support. Schools were also mentioned as a factor in maintaining educational progress where commendation systems were in place. This again serves to illustrate young people's desire to have their efforts and achievements acknowledged and is in keeping with the finding that awards ceremonies were so widely appreciated. Indeed, the notion of encouraging and acknowledging young people

's progress is constantly repeated in young people's explanations of why their education is going well, be this encouragement from carers, teachers, social workers, etc., or through corporate events such as awards ceremonies.

Resources to support education in care placements tended to have improved at follow-up and some of these changes were directly related to project activities. The increased availability of computers and key books is likely to be attributable to project-related activities. Although there remain some areas where the availability of resources could be further enhanced, the overall impression is a positive one.

Whilst it is encouraging to report positive findings for the majority of the follow-up sample, it should not be overlooked that some young people continue to report being looked after as having a detrimental effect on their educational progress. Twelve young people believed that the distressing experience of entering the looked after system, or inadequate levels of support for education, had such a detrimental impact upon their education that they were unable to recover from such adversity. Given that most of these young people had experienced unsupportive placements, their comments serve to underline the previous argument regarding the importance of being placed with interested adults who communicate the central role of education in young people's lives. Comments regarding the absence of support and encouragement from carers appear to indicate that perhaps further training and communication is required to emphasize the importance of supporting young people's educational opportunities; and carers should be encouraged strongly to take up available training.

Comments that placement changes were not always made with young people's educational interests at heart also persisted at follow-up interview, albeit at a reduced frequency. One young person also highlighted the problem of mixed messages whereby young people are encouraged to succeed on the one hand, but opportunities for their progression are tempered when systems are not in place to support higher education. This would indicate that although progress has been made, there is more work to do to emphasize that consideration of educational issues is of paramount importance in care planning.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the current sample may have some bias towards those young people who have had relatively positive experiences whilst being looked after. Those young people lost to the follow-up sample may have provided a different impression. Nonetheless, for the 56 young people

who were willing to share their experiences over a 2-year period, there are indications of positive change. Whilst a simple explanation of why such change may have arisen is difficult to forward, and the individuality of the young people concerned should not be overlooked, there does appear to be some consensus from the young people involved in the current study that obtaining effective support, encouragement and acknowledgement of their efforts is central to educational success.

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NOTE

1 The *t*-test is a parametric statistical test suitable for small samples which compares the actual difference between two means in relation to the variation in the data. A significant difference at the level of $P < 0.01$ suggests that it is unlikely that the size of mean difference between the two testing stages is due to chance effects.