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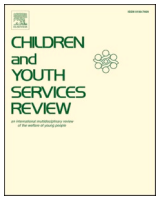

Care and education: Instability, stigma and the responsibilisation of educational achievement

Katie Ellis [a,*], Claire Johnston [b]

[a] Department of Health and Human Sciences, University of Sheffield, Barber House, Sheffield S10 2HQ, United Kingdom
[b] University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Research highlights a plethora of negative outcomes for care leavers and it is widely accepted that children in care are likely to have lower educational attainment than their peers. Rather than concluding that these figures can be attributed directly to being 'in care', scholars have indicated that the matter is more complex, drawing attention to circumstances which pre-date or supersede entry into care. This paper seeks to highlight the experiences of those care leavers who bucked the trend and achieved sufficient qualifications to study in higher education. Despite achieving well academically, our research shows that young people in care still struggled to manage the academic pathway between care and university. This paper draws on evidence collected from 234 care experienced students in England and Wales to consider the educational challenges faced by those without familial support. Findings revealed that instability, stigma and poor institutional support were significant barriers in participants' educational journeys. We consider the impact of narratives of 'meritocracy' and 'resilience' on interpretations of educational success for care leavers. We conclude that caution should be exercised when celebrating individual successes, and greater attention should be paid to structural and systemic barriers to educational achievement.

1. Introduction

Over 80,000 children in England were looked after on 31st March 2020 and a further 40,000 people were defined as 'care leavers' (Department for Education 2021). Research highlights a plethora of negative outcomes for care leavers (Harleigh-Bell 2016, Gill and Daw 2017, Murray et al. 2020) and it is widely accepted that children in care are likely to have lower educational attainment than their non-care experienced peers (O'Higgins et al. 2015, Brady and Gilligan 2019). However, rather than attributing poor educational achievement directly to being in care, scholars have indicated that the matter is more complex (Gilligan 2007) and perhaps linked closely to circumstances which pre-date or supersede entry into care (Berridge 2006; Sebba et al. 2015). Almost two thirds of children in care are placed because of concerns about the risk of abuse or neglect (Department for Education 2021), a factor which, alongside family breakdown, is already strongly linked to low educational attainment (Berridge 2006, O'Higgins et al. 2015). Care leavers are substantially more likely to have Special Educational Needs than the general population (Berridge 2006, Harrison 2017) and the Government Department for Education (2020) recently reported that almost 40% of children in care in 2019 had 'emotional and behavioural' health scores that were considered a 'cause for concern'; both of these factors may influence educational outcomes. Overarching structural inequalities surrounding gender, class and ethnic minority status inevitably influence educational success for care leavers, just as for the wider population (Cameron 2007, Tessier et al. 2018).

Government statistics show that in 2018/2019 only 12% of children looked after achieved grades 5 or above in their GCSEs, compared to 43% of their non care experienced peers (Department for Education 2021). While educational success is often celebrated as meritocratic, and key to creating equal opportunities for children from all walks of life, scholars argue that instead education pathways are intrinsically positioned to favour particular sections of the population (Mijs 2016; Darnon et al. 2018, Ellis and Johnston 2022). While educational tests are standardised, and therefore ensure that performance is comparable, there are significant disparities in the backgrounds of students and the standard of individual education providers. Indeed, scholars recognise that children in care often come from families who are already socially disadvantaged in terms of their class, gender and their ethnicity (Bengtsson et al. 2018). Despite these disparities, educational

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: k.ellis@sheffield.ac.uk (K. Ellis).

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attainment, and the fulfilment of educational 'aspirations' is still considered to be the responsibility of the individual (Baker 2019). Such individualisation is a key component of neoliberal societies and Bracke (2016) notes that a 'good' citizen is one who can overcome circumstantial inequalities using sheer hard work (Keddie 2016).

Sebba et al. (2015) note that those who have been in longer-term care perform better educationally than those with *similar needs* in short term care or not in care at all, suggesting care may in fact provide a degree of educational protection. DfE statistics also illustrate this point, marking the rate in grade 5 achievement by those who have been looked after for more than 12 months as slightly higher than that of those in care for under 12 months, 7.2% for the former and 4.9% for the latter. This being said, transitions through care are rarely straightforward and young people often experience placement moves, school changes, variations in school support and a high turnover of social workers (Sebba et al. 2015, Hanrahan et al. 2019, Ellis and Johnston 2020) in addition to the difficulties associated with processing the loss of their birth family (Holland and Crowley 2013). Official data suggests that children and young people in care experience 'much higher levels of instability' than their peers and are 'around 80% more likely to have two or more changes of home within a year' (Children's Commissioner 2019). As such, care experience itself may contribute to the vulnerability of young people to negative outcomes, in perpetuating instability and damaging children's opportunities to build trusting relationships (McAuley and Davis 2009). Likewise, since decisions about care transitions are made on behalf of, and not alongside, young people, they can create feelings of 'helplessness' (Girling 2019, p134). Furthermore, language used to describe placement changes or 'placement breakdown' can often imply a state of failure, conveying to young people that perhaps they were at fault (Girling 2019).

With so much already in flux, the educational goals of children in care are sometimes considered to be of secondary importance. This was illustrated by Harker et al. (2003) in their longitudinal study with looked after children, in which participants described how immediate issues of safety and emotional wellbeing were often prioritised over educational achievement by social workers. Similarly, Mannay et al. (2017) report that although primary aged children in their sample had high aspirations for their futures, those in secondary or further education reported that their educational careers had been informed by their care status. Young people in care report that those working with them tend to have low academic expectations and limited aspirations for their success (Mannay et al. 2017, Hanrahan et al. 2019, Ellis and Johnston 2020). Jurczyszyn and Tilbury (2012) and Tessier et al. (2018) emphasise the importance for care leavers of having someone to encourage their educational aspirations, and help them to explore career options and further education, yet children in care often find themselves without a trusted ally (Munro 2001, Ellis 2016). As a result, Cameron (2007) and Williams et al. (2020) note that young people in care often find themselves the key drivers of their own educational success, with limited professional and familial support. Although this is sometimes commended as 'resilience' (Stein 2006), ascribing success to individuals who persevere in the face of disadvantage may serve to shift responsibility away from systems and structures which enable or restrict educational attainment (Keddie 2016, Baker 2019).

The Children [Leaving Care] Act (2000) notes that children in care should be encouraged to progress to higher education, yet only 13% of care experienced pupils progress to higher education by the age of 19, in comparison with 49% of the general population (Department for Education 2018). In our earlier paper (Ellis and Johnston, 2022) we explored the everyday experiences of students with a care background as they settled into higher education. This paper uses the same dataset to consider some of the structural and educational barriers that impacted on this unique group of university students as they navigated significant transitions through school and leaving care. Findings are presented in four sections, the first exploring the impact of instability whilst in care, and the impact of moving home and school whilst studying. The second section considers school as a potential site of safety, and describes the experiences of participants attempting to maintain stability in their schooling and home life. The third section considers school as a site of stigmatisation and explores the negative perceptions that were conveyed to participants about their care background. The final section explores participants' experiences of ageing out of care at the age of 18, and will pay special attention to those who took nonlinear pathways to university.

2. Methods

Findings in this paper are based on research that explored the perspectives of 234 care experienced students in universities across England and Wales. Data were generated in two sequential phases across 2018 and 2019. Prior to each phase of data collection, ethical permission was granted by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee, who reviewed and approved our data collection tools and data management plans. In phase one (2018), 42 students from four universities took part in in-depth, semi-structured life history interviews, charting their experiences through care and subsequent transition to university life. Students were invited to contribute via their own university's widening participation team. Those who contacted the research team were sent an information sheet and consent form to read before being invited to interview. Consent forms were completed at the beginning of each interview and participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time, without sharing their reasons. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded. They lasted between 90 and 120 min and took place on campus at participants' respective universities.

Interview data were transcribed by a university approved transcriber; the research team then pseudonymised, coded and analysed data thematically. NVivo was used to code the findings deductively according to the themes explored in qualitative interviews, creating theme codes ('nodes') such as, 'going into care', 'placement changes', 'educational support', 'stigma', and 'school'. These nodes were then analysed inductively by the team, who met regularly to discuss the coding process, and compare samples to ensure consistency. This process produced a series of sub-themes; for example, the code 'school' contained sub-themes such as 'school support', 'relationships with peers', and 'educational attainment'. The analysis framework was modified iteratively to accommodate new codes as they emerged from the data, and as such, the code of 'school' acquired new sub-themes such as 'being treated differently', 'school as an escape', and 'coping with adversity'. This paper is based upon the data codes relating to participants' pre-university experiences of care and school; other codes emerging from the project focused on their experiences of the transition to university and beyond, and these are discussed in preceding papers (Ellis and Johnston 2022, 2019).

In phase two, data were collected from a larger sample of care experienced students across 29 universities using an online survey. Survey questions were informed by the initial themes and sub-themes arising from phase one of the project. Following recruitment via university widening participation teams, 192 students responded to share their experiences of leaving care and becoming a student. Survey respondents indicated their consent by ticking a box at the beginning of the survey; they were able to 'skip' survey questions they did not feel comfortable answering, and could exit the survey at any point. At the beginning and end of the survey, contact details were provided for national support organisations, such as care experience charities, through which respondents could seek further information and support if necessary. Survey participants were invited to enter a prize draw to win a £150 amazon voucher, for which they could choose to enter their email address at the end of the survey. The draw was completed prior to data analysis, at which point all email addresses were permanently deleted from the dataset, and not associated with individual survey responses.

The survey generated primarily qualitative data via open-ended questions inviting respondents to write answers in free-text boxes;

these data were subject to deductive thematic analysis using the codes generated during phase one. Closed-ended questions were analysed using the analytical tool available within the survey platform. Findings in this paper are based upon our qualitative interview and survey data, alongside a small number of descriptive statistics from the survey. Quotes appear in the text using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

3. The Sample

The majority of interview participants and survey respondents were women; 71% of survey respondents were female (n = 133), 27% male (n = 51) and two per cent (n = 3) self-described as intersex or non-binary. Of the 42 interview participants, 26 were female and 16 male. This reflects the slight imbalance in the UK undergraduate population more broadly, in which 57% of students are female and 43% are male (HESA 2018). The larger discrepancy in our sample is perhaps unsurprising given that care experienced students are more likely to be women (Stevenson et al. 2020).

At the time the survey was conducted 39% of the sample were aged 20 and under, 51% were aged 21–24, six per cent were 25–29, and four per cent were aged over 30. These figures differ somewhat from the UK-wide university population in which 54% of undergraduate students are aged 20 and under and only 26% are aged 21–24 (HESA 2018). This difference may be accounted for by Harrison's (2017) finding that care leavers are more likely to follow a nonlinear pathway to university, and attend later than their non-care experienced peers. Although the ages of interview participants were not recorded, we noted their level of study; three were studying for foundation level degrees, 38 were studying at undergraduate level, and one was studying for a postgraduate qualification. Similarly, the majority of survey respondents (87%) were studying for undergraduate degrees, whilst seven per cent were undertaking a foundation year, and four per cent were undertaking postgraduate qualifications.

Most interview participants (n = 29) indicated that foster care had been the main form of care placement they had experienced, whilst five had been primarily in kinship care, five primarily in residential care, and three indicated that their main experience of care was being adopted. Foster care was also the most common type of care placement experienced by survey respondents. When asked which types of care they had experienced, 80% of survey participants indicated that they had spent time in foster care, 25% had spent time in residential care, 23% had lived in kinship care and eight per cent had been adopted. Qualitative findings suggest that moves between different forms of care were not uncommon - participants frequently described moving within and between different types of care placement. We return to this point in the findings sections, below.

The online survey did not ask respondents to disclose when or why they went into care, so survey statistics on this topic are not available. However, data collected from interviewees suggest that eight interview participants entered care aged five or under, 16 entered between the ages of six and 11, and 13 between the ages of 12 and 15. Five entered care for the first time aged 16 or 17. Where interview participants volunteered information about the reasons they were placed in care, issues of abuse and neglect were most commonly cited as determining factors. Other reasons included family bereavement, refugee status, and mental illness.

4. Instability and Moving Schools

Instability and change often overshadow young people's experiences of being in care (Sebba et al. 2015, Allnatt 2019). Over a four-year period, nearly three in five (58%) children in care in England experienced at least one home move (Children's Commissioner 2019). The instability caused by changing care placement is often exacerbated when children are also required to move to a new school (Sebba et al. 2015, Allnatt 2019, Williams et al. 2020), for example, in 2019, 330 children 'missed an entire term of school' due to disruptions in their accommodation whilst in care (The Children's Commissioner 2019). In line with these findings, a significant majority of our interview participants reported that their education was marred by frequent placement moves and, subsequently, disrupted schooling:

> *I'm not sure how many schools I was at… I went to some schools that I don't remember. I went to one in [Southern City]; one in [Midlands City]; one in [Northern City] and then one in [Northern Town]… I don't remember much of primary, just moving. But the times where I was at school longer was nice. (Nick)*

Such moves had negative consequences for learning, as described by Jayne:

> *I was moved about quite a lot … one place to another to another so I did miss some school. Then I went to short term accommodation, so I couldn't really stay there … they moved me to [final placement] and that's where I think I started being a bit more steady at school (Jayne)*

A number of interviewees described being asked to move school during crucial stages of their learning. Moves within formal examination periods could significantly impact academic results, and participants reported that practical assessments and coursework that would usually span two years, sometimes had to be undertaken in one. These participants felt that the added pressure of compressed assessment significantly disadvantaged them:

> *I was having to do my GCSEs in one year because I'd had to start again with different curriculums … I started about 25 different GCSEs (Jill)*

Disrupted schooling could have a devastating impact on academic confidence, and research shows that children perform educationally worse in the year after a school move (Rumberger 2015). After performing well in one school, Dawn describes losing focus and confidence after changing placements, schools and teachers. Dawn discussed the set-backs this caused for her, and the impact it had on her enjoyment of school:

> *I used to be all gifted and talented … as soon as I went into [New City], the quality of education was like [bleugh] – so I lost interest … I lost my confidence (Dawn)*

The Children's Commissioner (2019) reported that when young people moved school due to placement changes, new schools were on average 26 miles away, meaning that children not only left their teachers behind, but their friends, neighbours and supportive networks. This was reflected in our data, in which interviewees reported that moving home and school at the same time meant that they were tasked with forging new relationships in both settings simultaneously. For some, creating new social networks became more important than catching up on missed school work:

> *If you're moving from one school to another you're not thinking about the curriculum, you're thinking about trying to fit in … you just start fitting in then you move again … I never did any of the curriculum … I'll try and do it but I've got no idea what's going on (Harry)*

The ability to 'fit in' and make friends was cited by participants as being one of the most important factors in settling into a new school and could have related consequences for educational achievement. For many of our participants, the academic environment of a school, and the attitude of fellow pupils towards learning, played a part in their own educational engagement, as they endeavoured to balance their own motivations with the need to 'fit in' with peers. Some participants indicated that being placed in an 'academic' school environment with peers who were considered high performing had a significant impact on their own approach. For example, Clara explains that peers inspired her to take her education more seriously:

I didn't really care that much … when I started hanging out with some friends that were very high achieving and my grades weren't that great. I thought to myself, 'I don't want to be getting three As if they're getting six As', so I think that's when I started to try harder (Clara)

On the other hand, several of our participants reported that when moved to a school that was considered low performing, they found themselves influenced by peers who were less invested in academic attainment. This is particularly relevant as only around one in 12 children in care in England attend schools rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted, compared to one in five who attend schools rated as 'inadequate' (Children's Commissioner 2019). Lauren describes struggling to maintain motivation in an environment in which pupils tend not to 'do well':

It's harder to do well in a place where other people don't do well, because influence does matter a lot (Lauren)

Participants' school experiences demonstrate the acute challenges associated with navigating uncertainty, instability and unequal provision in an education system in which 'success' hinges upon consistent performance and linear progress. Their narratives also indicate that as well as being a place of educational achievement, school was considered an important aspect of their social lives, which had the potential to strongly influence their levels of self-confidence and ambition.

5. School as a Safe Place

In line with findings presented by Harker et al. (2003) and Cotton et al. (2014), school was frequently described by participants as a key source of support, and several participants discussed how important a stable school environment was to their sense of safety and security. These participants described the ways in which they sought to utilise school as a place of safety when other aspects of their lives were challenging. Jill described school as a space to gain respite from her home life:

I'd rather have been at school than at home … I'd be in school by quarter past eight and I'd often be there until five … it was my one safe place and if it hadn't been for the teachers, I wouldn't be where I was (Jill)

Participants reported actively seeking support and stability through the networks and resources available at school. For example, through finding allies in trusted members of school staff who were able to act as intermediaries, providing extra academic or pastoral support in times of crisis:

She got me through school … I think schools need more people like that … she did everything for us (Charlotte)

When moving to a new care placement, some participants described being encouraged to move to a school closer to their new address. However, as described by Charlotte and Jill, school could be a crucial source of support and moving to a new school could therefore create upheavals that were difficult to manage emotionally, as well as academically. Some participants described making concerted attempts to stay close to their trusted networks, but placements could not always be found in preferred locations and were dependent on availability: '*you get what's available at the time*' (Jayne).

Several were able to resist a move, choosing to stay at their current school. However, for Kirsty, seeking the stability of a familiar school environment incurred long commutes each day:

I had three foster homes, and each one got further and further away from my school. But I was really determined not to leave … they kept asking me all the time … I just said 'no'! (Kirsty)

For participants such as Kirsty, maintaining a stable connection to school was vital for the educational and emotional benefits it could provide. For many participants, school provided a sense of constancy within the context of a challenging family and home life; they therefore sought to maintain school as a place in which they could receive support and gain respite.

6. Stigma and Responsibilisation

Participants' relationships with school were nonetheless complex, and for many school was an environment where they experienced feelings of both safety and alienation. Stigmatisation was a significant theme in participants' narratives of school. Many had at times felt stigmatised by other pupils, members of staff, and the wider community of parents and families associated with school life. For Katya, stigmatising comments from other pupils focused on the reasons that she was placed in care, and the misconception that children in care must have done something 'wrong': '*everyone assumes either your parents do drugs or you've done something wrong and that's why you're there*' (Katya).

Some participants reported being treated with disdain by the local community in which their school was situated. David remembers being ostracised by his friends' parents for the reputation that his family held:

There was just always trouble around my family … we didn't fit in at that school. I remember friends asking their parents 'Can Dave come round?' 'No. No. No he can't'. Stuff like that, so that's why I didn't like primary school (David)

In line with research by Mannay et al. (2017) and Berridge (2012), participants in our research reported that teachers and care professionals often had limited aspirations for their futures and sometimes treated them adversely because of their background:

I was always told as a kid 'you'll never amount to anything, you'll end up in prison' (Jack)

Such messaging had a powerful effect, and in combination with educational struggle, could leave a lingering lack of confidence that took years to overcome. Alison described failing her exams in school and waiting a number of years before finding the confidence to return to education, via a further education college 'for naughty people':

I had to go and take the exams in school. Failed all of those. And then didn't try again … one day I came across [New College] … they did courses for naughty people …I had to fight for it but I ended up going and it was absolutely amazing (Alison)

Alison's experience, in common with a number of participants, expresses both educational struggle, and the drive to resist low expectations. This was a theme reflected in survey responses; 23% of our survey participants indicated that they were their own 'biggest champion' in the transition to university. Several survey and interview participants emphasised that they had to rely on themselves to make academic progress and ensure their needs were met. Findings suggested a sense of internalised, individualised responsibility amongst several participants, who felt they were in control of their own pathways, and conceptualised self-reliance as an important life skill:

I think you can make your own path and go back and forward and it's like a map and there's not just one route, you've got loads of choices and you're the master of your choices (Nick)

Even if you have a poor background … you can get ahead. I have come a long way and that's only on my own two feet and my own skills (Jess)

Alison and others described having to 'fight for everything in care', and considered the drive to overcome low expectations a motivating factor to achieve educationally. Such motivations have been explored by Allnatt (2019), who noted that participants aimed to 'prove others wrong' if they expressed doubt about their educational aspirations.

Interview participants tended to be acutely aware of the poor educational expectations around being in care. For example, Gabriella described being eager to outperform the low expectations that she believed were set for her by others, and sought to distance herself from

the identity of 'care leaver', and the stigma that it invoked. Gabriella and others were also forthright in their declarations that they themselves were not a 'stereotypical' care leaver. In this respect, Gabriella seemed to have internalised damaging societal narratives about children in care:

> *I was brought up right! Probably just to ignore everyone's stereotypical thoughts on a Care Leaver because I think that's one thing I tried to prove everyone wrong … even though I'm a Care Leaver I'm not a stereotypical Care Leaver with issues (Gabriella)*

Overall, participants' narratives suggest that the struggle for educational achievement was sometimes compounded, and sometimes motivated, by prevailing social stigma experienced in care, school and the surrounding networks. Further, they sometimes expressed a sense that it was individuals' own responsibility to overcome the challenges associated with care experience, and to move forward under their own steam.

7. Pathways to University: Navigating Challenges

While teenagers in the Global North generally celebrate turning eighteen as a key life event, for those in care, turning 18 is frequently marked by ageing out of care and becoming a 'care leaver'. Paulsen and Berg (2016) describe this as 'sudden adulthood'. In common with findings by others (Stein 2012, Schofield et al. 2017, Field et al. 2021, Palmer et al. 2022), our interview respondents reported that the support that they received from their local authority reduced 'drastically' when they turned 18:

> *Once you're eighteen, the support drops a whole lot, drastically, then it's like 'oh wow, you're an adult now, you've got to figure it out … mostly on your own from that time (Ada)*

The structure of the education system in the UK means that young people often turn eighteen whilst still completing qualifications necessary for entry to university. A number of our survey participants (n = 52) made use of the 'Staying Put' initiative before moving to university - this initiative was introduced in England by the Department for Education in 2013 and states that Local Authorities must provide assistance to help young people in education to remain in foster care up to the age of 21. One advantage of the initiative is its potential to reduce the disruption that 'ageing out' of care causes during crucial educational moments. However, a significant number of our participants were not able to secure Staying Put arrangements, and were forced to find alternative accommodation upon turning eighteen. For these young people, studying became complicated by other factors associated with independent living:

> *I was going to college. I had to get bus passes and food and everything and then I was coming home and cooking for myself. It was really hard … I would have wifi so I could do my work and not have food. That's how much I have worked hard to get to university (Gulru)*

As well as being financially impacted by their drastic change of circumstances, these participants reported that alternative accommodation was often situated some distance from their established networks of support. In addition, respondents noted that government benefits to cover living expenses made it difficult to maintain their studies alongside other everyday costs. When competing against everyday expenses, such as food, electricity and water, respondents reported they were sometimes left unable to procure even basic study essentials, such as stationary and wifi. Jayne explains:

> *You'd already got your water, your gas, your electric, your TV licence and everything to pay … then you had to pay for your bus fare to college out of that. Sometimes I didn't go just to save money (Jayne)*

The added pressures associated with turning eighteen placed additional burdens on young people during a critical time in their education pathway. Often participants were managing competing stresses simultaneously and were unable to fulfil their educational potential because of additional strains they faced. For some participants, achieving lower grades than predicted resulted in rejection from their first choice university:

> *I was meant to get A*AA for my offer for oxbridge … I didn't get them through all the things that happened at sixth form. They couldn't change the offer but they said that if I retook the year they'd defer my offer … it was more complicated because a) I didn't want to stay with that [foster] family longer than I had to and b) I'd have to find funding … because I would be over 18 (Connie)*

Unconditional offers from universities were sometimes described as a lifeline which offered stability for those who were facing extreme uncertainty. The promise of certainty could have unintended consequences however, and some participants found their university choice was motivated by their immediate circumstances as opposed to longer term goals. David describes accepting the first place he was offered. He later regretted not holding out for a more prestigious offer:

> *I was living with my friend's parents … because my situation with my foster carer broke down … at the point where I was applying for uni … I just felt rushed … it's probably not the best degree to have … I took the unconditional because I thought three years of accommodation, three years of money (David)*

In line with findings by Pinkney and Walker (2020), our interview participants suggested that they had fallen between the gap of further education and higher education due to a lack of information and support from education providers and social services. Not doing well at school, whether due to school moves or other circumstances, could cause significant feelings of failure, even for participants who subsequently made significant educational achievements:

> *I have gone through life affected by circumstances beyond my control believing I was stupid. I have fought my way through this system and finished my degree with the highest first result in my year… I have come to learning late in life with very little support (Ash)*

As noted by others (Harrison 2017, Brady and Gilligan 2019), interviews confirmed that several respondents took nonlinear pathways to university. For instance, Harry 'tried doing youth work for a bit' before realising that 'there wasn't much of a future in it'. Harry was supported by a friend's parent to go back to education as a mature student:

> *I didn't get no GCSEs or anything at school. Well I got Ds, Es, Fs and Xs. His mum said she'd help me … so I learned how to do applications and things, so then I applied for college myself … after a few months I applied for uni (Harry)*

Harry's experience was typical of several participants who had low confidence in their academic abilities due to childhood experiences, and initially did not believe university was a possibility. Whether or not their early experiences of education were positive, the majority of participants experienced significant challenges on their course to university. As the findings above express, these were associated with instability and educational disruption, social stigma, financial hardship, and the burden of self-reliance.

8. Discussion

Schools are primarily concerned with the supervision and socialisation of children (Rose 1999) which they are expected to perform while ensuring the employability and economic viability of future citizens (Wilkins 2012). The education and grading of children can therefore be seen as a nurturing of 'future becomings' focussing on the citizen that is being made, rather than the child that is (James 2011, p170). School achievement is underpinned by the promise of meritocracy, assuring pupils that those who put in the most effort, will be rewarded with the best results (Darnon et al. 2018). Within the spirit of bettering

their outcomes, children and young people are encouraged to overcome circumstantial inequalities by sheer hard work (Keddie 2016, Darnon et al. 2018), which can be demonstrated by scoring well in competitive and ranked qualifications (Davies and Bansel 2007). Educational success is thereby celebrated as meritocratic. Yet the experiences of care leavers indicate that education is in fact embedded with inequality and unmatched opportunities which favour those who are already advantaged (Mijs 2016). There are gross disparities between the educational offerings of different schools and neighbourhood settings and therefore, the presentation of education as an equal opportunity is disingenuous (Keddie 2016). Standardised testing does not take into account that educational experiences are not standardised, and that schools are not equal. Indeed, children living in disadvantaged areas are much less likely to have access to schools which are rated as 'good' or better by the UK education regulator Ofsted (Gambaro et al. 2015, Children's Commissioner 2019).

The small numbers of care leavers enrolled in higher education highlight the disadvantages of this group and, accordingly, our participants reported that they overcame significant barriers to reach university. The language of 'resilience' is used to discuss the outcomes of those who defy the odds in circumstances such as those faced by our participants (Stein 2006, Gilligan 2007, Bottrell 2007), yet, as our findings express, these individuals often do well in spite of their experiences and not because of them. By celebrating success as meritocratic, and embracing the hard work put in by individuals to achieve well, we allow for blame to be attributed to those who fail, rather than to the structures and systems which offered them few alternatives (Mijs 2016). This is thoughtfully articulated by Willetts (2006, p237) who notes 'that to lose out in a society because of bad luck is painful enough, but to lose out because you are assessed as being without merit is far worse'. Yet educational success is celebrated as an individualised achievement and so, when individuals are not able to achieve a standard that was expected of them, it is considered a personal failing, rather than a result of systemic and structural inequalities (Bottrell 2007, Darnon et al. 2018). In passing the responsibility of educational attainment to young people, we are also excusing the mechanisms that make educational attainment difficult to accomplish. Our paper therefore considers the factors that contribute to the disadvantage experienced by children in care who compete against their peers in standardised assessments whilst also managing complex trauma and frequent instability. Despite sharing the belief that hard work would pay off (Wilkins 2012), some participants reflected on the additional burdens that they carried as a result of being in care and commented that provision was often not equal; Jayne's quote highlights, 'you get what's available at the time'.

As noted by others (Stein 2012, Field et al. 2021, Palmer et al. 2022), turning eighteen while in care is often viewed with trepidation. Our participants reported that ageing out of care presented additional difficulties which hampered their educational outcomes. For instance, after winning a conditional offer to an Oxbridge university, a major upheaval during Connie's A-Levels meant that she missed out on predicted grades and lost her place. She was thereby held to account by a system that did not fairly recognise her disadvantage. Dominant narratives of meritocracy mean that young people, like Connie, are considered to have lost out to deserving scholars who 'tried harder' rather than acknowledging that she and others were disadvantaged by circumstances beyond their control (Keddie 2016). In this way, meritocracy is used to legitimise social inequality and to support the notion that advantage is earned rather than inherited (Keddie 2016, Darnon et al. 2018).

In accessing higher education, our participants had secured a key social marker of 'success', yet their narratives often painted a complex picture of instability, educational struggle, and perceived failure. Ash describes believing that she 'was stupid' instead of attributing responsibility to the systems that had let her down. Considering educational success as equally accessible thereby served to further stigmatise those who were unable to overcome significant disadvantages. Although stigmatising messages were invoked defiantly by Gabriella, Jess and others as motivation to 'prove everyone wrong', the notion that education provides possibilities to dissolve disadvantage also dilutes the perceived responsibility of the state and the services that should be supporting children to thrive (Liebenberg et al. 2015). Nick uses the analogy of a map to illustrate the possibilities presented by accessing education and confirms 'you're the master of your choices'. Meanwhile Jess states, 'even if you have a poor background … you can get ahead.' Such views are prevalent in neoliberal societies. Yet, by viewing education as a tool which can be harnessed to equalise disadvantage (Mijs 2016), we inadvertently place the possibility and responsibility for success directly onto individuals (Wilkins 2012).

Seen in this way, the discourse of meritocracy has the negative outcome of stigmatising those who have seemingly not grasped the opportunities that were offered to them. Instead, meritocracy purports the idea that the disadvantaged may choose to 'get ahead' and thereby excuses systemic inequalities (Wilkins 2012, Keddie 2016). Framing educational advantage as meritocratic thereby places responsibility for failure onto those who are most disadvantaged and instead protects the rights of others, often born with significant financial and social advantage, who are able to assert that they won their roles and privileges fairly. We therefore advocate for wider academic debate about the myth of 'meritocracy' to move responsibility away from individuals and back to the structures and networks that prohibit their access.

9. Conclusion

Our research sought to explore the experiences of care experienced students in higher education. Since releasing our early findings (Ellis and Johnston 2019) there has been an increased focus on care leavers in policy and the landscape of higher education is gradually shifting to expand support for care experienced students (Ambrose, et al. 2021). This paper considers the early educational experiences of this cohort, highlighting significant educational inequalities experienced by children in care, and young people leaving care.

Our findings confirm that children in care often experience multiple placement moves which make achieving educationally much more difficult (Sebba et al. 2015, Allnatt 2019, Hanrahan et al. 2019, Williams et al. 2020). Our participants described the destructive effects of school moves and reported that these sometimes disrupted their learning to such an extent that they were unable to achieve a standard that had previously been expected of them. Disruptions to the curriculum were destabilising, putting young people at risk of becoming demotivated, and losing confidence in their abilities. The stigma that Jack and others experienced as looked after children and served to individualise their perceived educational failures, whilst the societal imperative to be resilient and self-reliant had the effect of responsibilising participants for their inability to manage mainstream education under extraordinary circumstances.

Our research found that stability was further challenged when participants reached the age of eighteen and were forced to live independently (Stein 2012, Girling 2019). Additional financial constraints associated with independent living hampered educational achievement and participants described managing studying costs alongside everyday living expenses. The language of 'resilience' is sometimes used to describe the success of those who outperform expectations under challenging circumstances (Stein 2006, Gilligan 2007), but to place onus of navigating instability and other educational hardships onto individual young people has the effect of masking the injustice and harm that is done by systems that are unable to provide supportive and stable living and learning environments (Baker 2019). We concur with other commentators that 'caution' should be exercised around the application of resilience (Harrison 2013) and its celebration, which juxtaposes those who can 'bounce back' against those who are unable to manage extreme adversity (Bottrell 2007). The finding that children in care and care leavers navigate pronounced hardship and adversity should instead be considered as a matter of urgency. As it stands, the provision of

educational opportunity is used to legitimise inequality and imply that advantages are earned rather than inherited (Keddie 2016, Darnon et al. 2018). We argue that instead of problematising children on the margins, systems and structures should seek to problematise their own practices and make important adjustments so that children and young people are given adequate opportunities to achieve.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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