



# 'It was me, but it was them that helped me': Exploring the issues for care experienced young people within higher education

Sharon Pinkney<sup>a,\*</sup>, Gary Walker<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Leeds Trinity University, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Leeds University, United Kingdom

## ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a small study investigating the experiences of care experienced young people in relation to higher education in England. The findings are based on a literature review, interviews with young people studying at one University as well as interviews with University support staff. It also includes data from two focus groups with young people in care. The research shows that their success depends on a complexity of factors. In terms of support, young people did not benefit from unspecified and generalised help, but ongoing support that was relational, characterised by genuine concern, human warmth and knowledge of the young person. In addition, the research emphasises that supportive adults need to be non-judgemental, available and responsive in providing practical help as well as emotional support. These supportive adults, together with the provision of financial support, combined with the student's own agency, resilience, internal drive and determination, provide a powerful set of factors that underpin success within higher education for care experienced students. Additionally this research provides further testament to the importance of enduring and trusting relationships for children in care.

## 1. Introduction

This article is based on a qualitative small-scale study investigating the lived experiences of care experienced young people in relation to higher education in England. In this study we use the term 'care experienced' as a term which is gaining currency and usage, particularly among the young people themselves as well as within some of the child welfare organisations that support these young people. We see it as a synonym for the more traditional terms such as 'looked after children', or children 'in care' but one that seems broadest, most inclusive and importantly captures the transience of care experiences among young people.

Only 6% of care leavers from England enter higher education, compared to 49% of the general population (Department for Education, 2018). As such they are one of the under-represented groups within higher education. Those that do enter higher education experience a range of issues that impact negatively upon their experience (Gazeley & Hinton-Smith, 2018). It is therefore important to seek the voice of young people in exploring the factors associated with care experienced young people's decisions about entering higher education, and for those doing so, what issues they face, and what kinds of support were found to be helpful. This study provides insights from both school-aged participants as well as those in higher education. It therefore provides a uniquely rounded view which foregrounds the voices and experiences of a broad range of participants in relation to educational aspirations

for higher education and sources of advice and support before entering and once attending university. The research questions were:

1. What or who makes the difference to raising educational aspirations for care experienced young people?
2. What attributes and characteristics do care experienced young people have that help them to achieve educational success?
3. What are the range of issues that care experienced young people need support with while they study?
4. What support approaches are most useful while they study?

## 2. Background and literature review

### 2.1. The attainment gap

The educational attainment gap, at all levels of education in England, between care experienced children and young people and their peers not in care has attracted the attention of academic researchers since the mid-1960s (Ferguson, 1966; Pringle, 1965). These early studies linked low educational achievement with material and social deprivation. As most children in care were from low socio-economic backgrounds this was considered the most significant factor in explaining their under-achievement. It was in the 1980s that the issue began to gain traction within government, policy and academic circles, and systematic research studies commenced in the 1980s (Jackson,

\* Corresponding author at: Institute of Childhood and Education, Leeds Trinity University, Horsforth, Leeds, LS18 5HD, United Kingdom.

E-mail addresses: [s.pinkney@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:s.pinkney@leedstrinity.ac.uk) (S. Pinkney), [G.D.Walker@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:G.D.Walker@leeds.ac.uk) (G. Walker).

1987, 1994). School test and exam results for care experienced children and young people have remained significantly lower compared to their peers not in the care system, and the latest figures from the [Department of Education \(2019\)](#) reflect this continuing gap.

The dominant policy discourse places responsibility for this gap on a 'failing' care system, predicated on the assumption that those responsible for care experienced children and young people should be able to compensate for any early disadvantage these children have experienced, and that professionals and carers need to do more in terms of offering different or better support and intervention to secure improved educational outcomes for this group ([Berridge, 2007; Stein, 2006b](#)). The academic research that reflects this discourse focuses on detailing the areas that social workers, teachers, carers and other professionals might improve in order to achieve the goal of better educational outcomes ([Jackson, 1987, 1994; Martin & Jackson, 2002](#)).

Concern about educational outcomes for care experienced children is not limited to England. [Berridge \(2007; 2012\)](#) reports that such outcomes are equally problematic in such diverse countries as the United States of America, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Norway and Spain. A recent meta-analysis of 17 studies (82% from the United States of America) by [Cassarino-Perez, Crousb, Goemansc, Montserrat, and Castellà Sarriera \(2018\)](#) supports the view that the factor most closely associated with educational success is placement stability. While their study did consider race, gender, level of mentoring received and type of maltreatment prior to entering care as other possible factors (which did not show as significantly relevant for educational success), it did not examine the long-term impact of the trauma the children experienced before entering care. [Geiger and Beltran \(2017\)](#) undertook literature review research and reviewed 29 studies that were mostly from the USA. This study provides a comprehensive review of the literature on foster care alumni experiences and outcomes in post-secondary education.

[Rios and Rocco \(2014\)](#) conducted a similar USA-based small scale (24 participants) phenomenological study on The Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model. This important study looked at barriers and supports for this vulnerable and resilient group of young people. They highlighted the positive effect of specific support from individuals such as their teacher, relatives or a mentor. Mentoring and educational advocacy were identified as important in [Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, and Haggerty \(2016\)](#) who argued that the characteristics of mentors include that they should be consistent, reliable and build trust with the young people over time. Trust was explored by [Pinkney \(2018\)](#), who argues that building relations of trust between child welfare professionals and children and young people in their care is an important and complex dynamic within the child welfare landscape. In brief, her argument is that developing trust requires time, continuity of relationship and willingness to listen and take seriously the young people's concerns. She goes on to argue that in the UK context this is potentially problematic as this important relational work is squeezed by the impact of austerity, the burden of administration and managerialist imperatives. [Rios and Rocco \(2014\)](#) state that internal factors such as resourcefulness and help seeking as well as having an internal locus of control and being in charge of one's own actions were also important for success.

An innovative and impressively large project, nicknamed the YIPPEE (Young people from a public care background pathways to education in Europe) study was coordinated by [Jackson and Cameron \(2011\)](#) across five European countries (England, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary and Spain). The three-year research project focused on how opportunities for Looked After Children to access further and higher education might be improved. Some interesting findings emerged. For instance, in spite of the different social contexts of the five countries, young people in care shared similar characteristics in that the majority entered care from chaotic families where problems of drug or alcohol misuse, criminality or poor mental health were prevalent. Furthermore, in each country, it was found that the children's education was adversely affected by early disrupted schooling and gaps in their basic

education, not adequately compensated for by later schooling approaches, and by the low priority given to education by the majority of social workers and carers. Finally, common supportive factors emerged from all five countries: the stability of the care and school placement, carers prioritising education, and the presence of an adult with a significant investment in the progress and wellbeing of the young person.

A further study of interest and relevance is that conducted in Ottawa, Canada, by [Flynn and Tessier \(2011\)](#). They explored what they term "promotive and risk factors" (p.2498) as predictors of educational outcomes for 406 young people leaving care. They used psychometric testing and other measures to consider a range of factors, and concluded that gender (girls fared better), age (older youths were more successful), developmental assets, and self-care skills were significant promotive factors. Developmental assets were defined as "relationships, skills, opportunities and values that help guide adolescents away from risk behaviors [sic], foster resilience" (p.2499) and these were particularly important. In relation to risk factors, the findings confirmed that cognitive impairment and soft-drug use were significant. These findings support the argument that the quality of care provided can be an important factor in the educational trajectory of young people, although some factors may also be linked to the quality of the child's pre-care experiences. Similar findings were reported in an earlier study of 97 young people in care in Canada ([Filbert & Flynn, 2010](#)) which reported that higher levels of developmental and cultural assets promoted resilience within young people.

[Geenen et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Phillips et al. \(2015\)](#) conducted an evaluation of the USA Better Futures model which focuses on how to support foster children with mental health challenges into Higher Education. This programme includes individualized coaching for youth around key self-determination skills while working to achieve their goals. This study evidenced that outcomes were significantly improved by interventions including participation in a Summer Institute, individual peer coaching, and mentoring workshops. The authors argue that foster children with mental health difficulties can be helped to overcome compounded disadvantage to achieve in Higher Education with appropriate support and interventions. They argue that given the over-representation of mental health issues among young people exiting foster care, this aspect clearly needs more attention in future. In their study over 50% of foster children had mental health issues. Within the UK the rate was similar at 45% compared to 10% in the general population ([Department of Education, 2007](#), cited in [Driscoll, 2013](#)).

The Children (Leaving Care) Act in 2000 in England ([Department of Health, 2001](#)) reinforced that children in care should be supported and encouraged to enter further and higher education. The Act also provided financial support for young people in care to continue their education post 16. Taken together, these policy and research imperatives suggest a causal link between the poor educational outcomes and the care system. There is, however, an alternative discourse. This avoids linking the care system causally to outcomes, arguing instead that it may be unreasonable to expect the care system to compensate fully for the long-term impact of early abuse and disadvantage which many care experienced children and young people experience. Proponents of this perspective such as [Harker, Dobel-Ober, Berridge, and Sinclair \(2004\)](#), [Berridge \(2007; 2012\)](#) and [Stein \(2006a\)](#) argue that these factors may have a deeper influence upon the educational trajectory of care experienced children and young people than factors associated with the care system itself. Furthermore, this body of work argues that the focus on measuring narrow test and examination outcomes at a 'snapshot' moment in the child's education ignores any progress they may have made since entering care, and thus may give a false account of the impact of the care system. Briefly, the key argument is that the comparison between care and non-care experienced children and young people is flawed, due to their very different characteristics.

[Sebba et al. \(2015\)](#) in England found that young people who have been in long-term care do better than those 'in need' (living in challenging home circumstances and on the edge of care). They suggest that

care may protect the former group of young people educationally. This study is important as it compares the outcomes of two similar groups rather than comparing care experienced young people with all their peers not in care. In the USA context, Geiger and Beltran (2017) report on three studies that found that Foster Care alumni were twice as likely to drop out than low-income first generation students. They argued that the need to work to support themselves was strongly linked to this poor outcome. Their recommendations included giving priority to Foster Care alumni in work-study programmes.

Walker (2017) builds upon this debate by exploring the complexities of educational attainment within the Looked After population by focusing on the role of a range of staff who support them, such as social workers, teachers and carers. His findings similarly challenge the prevailing research narrative in England about lower educational attainment representing a failure of the care system. This supports the alternative view gaining credibility that the long-term impact of pre-care experiences needs to be taken into account more when assessing progress. Walker argues for the importance of viewing the educational outcomes of care experienced children and young people within a wider context. This includes understanding how adults who support them interpret both the needs of young people, and what educational success means for them, alongside staff responding to institutional imperatives. In this way, the social inequalities that emerge can be understood within a more dynamic framework, and the attendant complexities and paradoxes emerge. These include, for example, staff taking a holistic view of the young person, balancing their socio-emotional needs with their educational needs, and grappling with the inherent barriers to effective multi-agency working.

This complexity is also reflected in a study by Rutman and Hubberstey (2018) in Canada, where the 20 care-experienced participants identified a range of helpful factors in explaining high school success. In summary, where schools provided a sense of 'normalcy' and predictability this led to young people gaining a level of control. Coupled with their own internal motivation, the presence of supportive and encouraging school staff, and constructive relationships between school and care staff led to increased likelihood of educational success. In contrast, external factors such as placement instability, and internal factors including mental ill health and the impact of past trauma mitigated against success at school.

## 2.2. Experience of higher education

The lower educational outcomes of care experienced children and young people provide part of the explanation why they are much less likely to move on to higher education. The reasons behind this low engagement with higher education are complex. Jackson, Ajayi, and Quigley (2005) study identified problems such as lack of information and advice when choosing universities and courses; placement or school changes during the crucial last few years at high school; uncertainty about financial support, and anxiety about accommodation arrangements. Furthermore, it has been widely acknowledged that young people leaving the care system are at greater risk of experiencing negative general outcomes than their peers (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Dixon, Wade, Byford, Weatherly, & Lee, 2006; Heath, Colton, & Aldgate, 1994; The Who Cares Trust, 2012). Care leavers may be continuing to come to terms with issues connected to their care and pre care experiences (Mendes and Moslehuddin, 2006). Stein (2006b) describes care leavers experiencing a process of accelerated and compressed transition into adulthood, denying them the normative process of gaining independence gradually and having the option of returning home if things go wrong during their University studies. It has been argued that care leavers who experience positive outcomes and lead successful lives, gaining qualifications and finding employment, do so against the odds (Dixon et al., 2006; Wade & Munro, 2008).

Those young people from a care background who do enter higher education seem to have certain common characteristics or

circumstances including internal resilience and self-reliance (Driscoll, 2013), personal motivation to 'prove' themselves or give something back and the presence of a supportive, encouraging adult (Dixon, 2016; Driscoll, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Furthermore, those young people who received clear information (Dixon, 2016) or who had stable care and school placements, together with satisfactory accommodation arrangements for university holiday periods as well as ongoing financial support were much more likely to move into higher education (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Even when young people from a care background do attend university; there is evidence to suggest they often experience ongoing difficulties. In a major five-year study by Jackson et al. (2005), while most of the 129 participants had enjoyed the experience and felt they gained new skills, they did experience such problems as: lack of information prior to starting the course, causing them to miss deadlines for applications for grants or accommodation; lack of financial support and funds affecting their social life and full engagement with university life; lack of support from staff at university and from their home local authority; and a lack of mental health support. Social isolation was a significant factor, and concerns about making friends were particularly important for this group of students.

Gazeley and Hinton-Smith (2018, p.962) found in their research that while additional support, such as near-peer mentoring for care experienced students in higher education did make a difference, it was important to measure 'success' in 'small steps', and that providing ad-hoc individual support was in itself insufficient. Their conclusion is that systems and practices within higher education institutions need to adapt to meet the needs of care experienced students more effectively.

In spite of these problems, the 10% dropout rate among the participants in the study by Jackson et al. (2005) was lower than the average (14%), a testament perhaps to their resilience and intrinsic motivation mentioned earlier. Drop-out was most likely to occur in the presence of at least three stress factors, emphasising the importance of good support mechanisms for these young people, even though some were reluctant to seek help, which could itself be a function of their determination to be self-reliant. In keeping with these findings, Jackson and Ajayi (2007) found that those young people from a stable and supportive foster care background who went to university tended to receive good ongoing practical and emotional support, including being able to return to the foster home during university holidays and the carers being persuasive in encouraging the young person to stay at university if they were considering dropping out.

A much smaller study by Bluff, King, and McMahon (2012) involving nine care experienced students at university used a phenomenological approach to identify three themes associated with the experience of these participants: a negative 'care leaver' identity which they felt brought stigma; a lack of positive role models; and being subject to 'corporate' parenting as opposed to what they termed 'normal' parenting, characterised by a lack of enthusiasm or support for their endeavours. Together, these themes impacted negatively upon their university experience.

Hollingsworth and Jackson (2016) reviewed the research by Jackson et al. (2005) as well as the three-year European project reported upon by Jackson and Cameron (2011) by using focal theory (which suggests that young people go through various changes in succession, addressing each new challenge one at a time). The findings reiterated that care leavers experience compressed and accelerated transitions, meaning they face multiple challenges simultaneously, such as starting at university, independent living, learning how to budget, managing relationships and moving from 'child' to 'adult' status often with the accompanying loss of support services. These inevitably impacted on their educational pathways as they experienced multiple sources of stress, and while those with a strong internal locus of control and good support mechanisms did well, others struggled with this avalanche of problems.

The first Scotland-wide survey of care experienced students in colleges and universities (O'Neill, Harrison, Fowler, & Connelly, 2019)

supports these findings by illustrating that students face huge complexity in their personal lives, which coupled with processes and systems often experienced as bureaucratic, disempowering and traumatising can have a significant impact upon students' access to, and retention within higher education. To address these, students in the study reported that reliable, consistent relationships with a trusted member of staff were very important, as was the presence of practical support such as all-year round accommodation, financial support and advice workers.

### 2.3. Personal attributes including resilience

Resilience and the personal attributes of young people are of increasing interest to researchers. What several studies have noted is that some young people are able to overcome obstacles and adversity in their upbringing (Harker et al., 2004; Smith & Carlson, 1997). Concepts such as self-efficacy and self-esteem are closely linked to resilience. Self-efficacy has been defined as the belief that individuals have agency and can shape what happens to them. This is linked to personal qualities such as determination and perseverance which relates closely to educational success (Lee & Bobko, 1994; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Rutter, 1987, 2012).

Berridge (2017) applied a social ecology model of resilience to analyse a study of 26 young people in care within secondary school in England. He links Ungar (2011) work on resilience with the sociology of childhood literature relating to children's agency. Importantly Ungar argued that the focus should be on facilitating environments and interactional processes rather than individual attributes. Berridge identified four broad groups of young people including 'stressed/unresolved' who were experiencing ongoing difficulties such as in their relationship with carers or birth parents. The second group were 'committed/ trusted support' who had most success and had found stable secure, loving placements with families. This group are most likely to have high levels of emotional support and unconditional love, including being treated as part of the family. The third group he identified were the 'private/self-reliant' who placed emphasis on privacy and being in control to overcome adversity, they had mixed outcomes in relation to educational success. The final group were 'disengaged' and presented a challenge to education and social workers. They were in school but mainly for the social benefits and peer support. Members of group three and four also enjoyed school as an escape from difficult home lives. They generally wanted to escape labels of being 'in care'. Berridge acknowledged that not all young people fit neatly under these headings and there is some overlap. This study reinforces the importance of stable and secure loving relationships which helps to build resilience, and that emotional issues need to be supported before children in care can make good use of educational opportunities.

The typology used here is reminiscent of that developed by Stein (2005) who identified three groups of care experienced young people leaving care: those who were doing well (termed 'moving on'), those with some problems but nevertheless managing to cope overall (called 'survivors') and those experiencing significant struggles (named as 'being a victim'). Stein (2005, p. 27) also emphasised that promoting resilience for care leavers means "providing stability and a sense of identity, assisting with education and holistic preparation, enabling more gradual transitions from care, as well as providing more help for young people after they leave care".

Our study aimed to straddle these three themes (the attainment gap, experience of higher education and personal attributes) by exploring the views and experiences of young people prior to, upon entering and during higher education.

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of participants.

Focus group one: 6 participants	Focus group two: 9 participants	Individual interviews (students): 8 participants	Individual interviews (staff): 2 participants
Age range 14–17 4 females 2 males 6 White British	Age range 17–24 1 female 8 male 9 White British	Age range 18–30 7 female 1 male 6 White British 1 Asian British 1 Afghanistani 8 Non-disabled	n/a 2 male 2 White British 2 Non-disabled
5 Non-disabled 1 Physically Disabled	8 Non-disabled 1 Learning Disabled		

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sample and methods

This small-scale young person centred qualitative research project took place between May and August 2017. It was focused around one university and one metropolitan local authority in the north of England. Within the university, individual semi-structured interviews took place with eight undergraduate or postgraduate students with care experience, one of whom had recently graduated, with the other seven still studying at the time of data collection. Within the local authority, two focus groups were conducted, one with care experienced young people still attending school ( $n = 6$ ) referred to as focus group one. The second group (focus group two) comprised of care experienced young people who had left school ( $n = 9$ ). Therefore, the voices of a total of 23 young people were reflected in the data. In addition, individual semi-structured interviews took place with two members of university staff involved in supporting care experienced students, one of whom was care experienced. Table 1 below provides more detail on the characteristics of the participants.

The two focus groups meant that the voices of care experienced young people still attending school, and who are currently considering their options for education are captured (focus group one), as well as the voices of young people who did not go to university (focus group two). Uniquely, this provides an important broader context for the individual interviews with the young people who were studying at university.

Questions asked of the focus group participants sought to gather information on who or what keeps them focused on educational aspiration and wanting to achieve; on how their care experience has helped them with their aspirations; on what advice they would give other young people on how to stay positive; and on the barriers they have faced to having positive educational aspirations.

For the individual interviews with university students, questions sought information on their course and year of study; their journey from being in care to university; the main factors influencing their decision to apply for university; who supported and encouraged them; the personal characteristics they think helped them apply for university; the particular issues that they needed help and support with at university; and the kinds of support and advice they found helpful during their studies.

For the two central university staff member interviews, the questions focused on gaining their views about the main factors in care experienced students' decisions to attend university; the main issues with which care experienced students need support; the main areas of support that are offered by the university; and key elements of the role of university Personal Tutors in supporting care experienced students.



### 3.2. Ethical considerations

In accordance with the ethical research principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000) permission to carry out the project was gained via formal university ethics procedures, which also approved the data collection tools such as the interview schedules. The focus group participants were recruited from two existing groups organised by the local authority with access negotiated via two gatekeepers (the group coordinators) who were known to and trusted by the participants. The group coordinators were instrumental in taking time to share with group members information sent by the researchers ahead of the interviews, and in advising the researchers on shaping the questions and approaches to data collection to ensure good quality data was collected. It was also significant in enhancing the quality of the data that the two researchers had met the two groups of children and young people before collecting the data for this project, as this helped to develop trust between participants and the researchers.

In order to set up the individual interviews with students, the researchers contacted course leaders with a covering letter providing background information to the project and asked them to share this with their students. In addition all students attending the university were contacted to ask if they were care experienced and willing to participate in our research. This variety of self-identification and targeted recruitment aimed to avoid any possibility of stigma while offering the widest possibility for potential participants to take part in the study. The two members of central university staff were contacted directly and agreed to be interviewed. For all participants, the local authority, university and participants involved have been anonymized, and pseudonyms have been created to protect identification.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Once all the data collection was completed, they were transcribed verbatim. The research questions were used to frame the themes chosen through which to analyse the data. These themes were conceptualised and written using open language, so as to avoid too narrow an interpretation of the data. The themes were then applied to the relevant sections of the data, and any unexpected data which might not align directly with these themes were also noted. In this way, although the research questions were used as the main focus, emerging themes and narratives were also noted.

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1. 'I wanted to be the best that I could'. Research question 1: What or who makes the difference to raising educational aspirations for care experienced young people?

Several themes emerged from the data in terms of what helps in raising educational aspiration. The first significant theme was the importance of internal factors which included self-determination to succeed and escape their background, wanting to prove people wrong, resilience, having an end goal, keeping focused and being stubborn to succeed against the odds. One participant in focus group one summed this up by saying 'Look into the future, not into the past' while student Maria, studying early years teaching, reflected:

*I'm very determined... there's never been a time that I can remember that I didn't want to be a teacher. I knew that I wanted it, and I was going to do it.*

Discussing a range of difficulties she faced as a child, Ruth, studying Psychology at Masters level, described her 'incredible determination to get over and overcome all those hurdles' while Karen, studying English and Creative Writing, spoke of how she developed a sense of wanting something better than the negative life she had experienced:

*I was ambitious, I wanted to be the best that I could in order to get away from everything I'd seen and I'd been through.*

A further element of this internal drive was that of proving people wrong, 'showing the world' and a keenness to escape their backgrounds. This was strongly linked to agency, determination and strength of these young people which are all qualities helping them overcome earlier adversity. Tracy, studying Psychology, talked at length about her experience of being abused by her mother who suffered from mental health issues. She described being from a poor working class background but wishing to leave that behind and overcome the obstacles. She had high expectations for herself despite the extreme difficulties:

*...in backgrounds like mine it is very normal to kind of just fall pregnant or go into a life of crime...drug addiction or gambling...Yeah I don't want to be like them.*

This strength, resilience and drive to escape their backgrounds were evident in a number of the interviews. Our findings support those of earlier research (including Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Driscoll, 2013; and Dixon, 2016) about the importance given to resilience and determination to succeed. The findings echo those by Berridge (2017) as they reflect elements of the 'private/self-reliant' group who he describes as maintaining a quiet determination to succeed. Within Stein (2005) classification, the participants in our study were 'moving on' with their lives and preparing for their futures.

A second major theme emerged in relation to external factors, including having someone who believes in them and is positive, thereby instilling self-belief, being in a settled and long-term placement, and understanding that Higher Education attendance will lead to better prospects. Khaled, studying Social Work, summed up the first point well:

*You can only be motivated if somebody's motivating you...it was me, but it was them that helped me.*

The value of a settled placement and forming deep relationships with carers was exemplified by Paula, who studied Criminology. She described the impact of this stability by stating:

*It's benefited my life...I never wanted to disappoint them or upset them.*

Significant external people who helped with educational aspiration identified by the participants included carers, teachers, personal advisors (for care leavers), social workers, family members, and a school counsellor. This wide range of people provided encouragement, instilled self-belief and gave practical help and support to the young people in care.

Khaled, who lived in residential home after arriving in England as a refugee from Afghanistan remembered a particular key worker at the home who:

*helped me so much. He used to sit down with me and he used to study with me. And that encouraged me to learn more and more.*

Karen recalled an English teacher at school who spotted her talent in English, and who consequently:

*was just literally helping me throughout the process, because my application for uni and college was so hard.*

The two key factors here: an internal determination and resilience, together with the presence of external factors such as a settled placement and the presence of supportive and encouraging adults, appear to work together to create a powerful momentum for educational aspiration and success. Unsurprisingly, given the sample of participants who are already studying at University, the 'committed/ trusted support' group identified by Berridge (2017) are clearly represented in this study. These are young people who benefited from consistent support who in Stein (2005) typology, demonstrated that they were 'survivors' by using the support available combined with their own determination

to forge or plan success for themselves.

4.2. *'When I become a social worker... I can reflect back on my experiences'. Research question 2: What attributes and characteristics do care experienced young people have that help them to achieve educational success?*

In addition to the internal resilience and determination to succeed already discussed, a third related theme that emerged from this study is the link between care experience and course choice. Six of our eight student participants chose courses which could be said to be related to their early and care experiences (two psychology, one social work, one youth and community, one criminology, one early years teaching). This strong relationship between care experiences and course choice was articulated by four interview participants and several of the focus group members. Aiden, a member of the university staff involved in supporting care experienced students and himself care experienced reflected:

*I often find that care leavers...tend to go into caring professions.*

In this next extract Khaled explains why he wishes to become a social worker:

*In future hopefully when I become a social worker then I can reflect back on my experiences and then... I've been through the situation and I know how the young person, the child, will be feeling at that moment. I know because I felt that way.*

Other participants similarly articulated that they wished to use their experiences to help others in the future. Our study evidences strongly that course choice is closely related to childhood experiences for this group of young people. This was similarly reflected in the study by Mayall, O'Neill, Worsley, Devereux, and Ward (2015) who conducted interviews with 11 social work students who had been in care. The students had been cautious about disclosing their care status on their application form, and once on the course, were selective about who they told. Issues in the curriculum caused alarm and stress, such as hearing tutors explain that unless a child attaches to an adult at a very young age, they are 'doomed', even though this was not the experience of these students; or being told in lectures that care experienced children and young people are more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs. Furthermore, when planning placements, they were unsure whether or not to disclose their care status, and were concerned that a placement may trigger negative memories. More positively, they had been encouraged by someone close to them to apply for the course, and had carefully considered their readiness for social work before applying. They were strongly motivated to study social work by their own care experience, and it was often a prime motivator. Despite their fears about potential stigma, all felt that their care experiences would help them be empathetic and effective practitioners.

This key new finding in our study – that of the strong relation between care experience and the chosen course of study – raises some compelling issues for consideration. Similarly to Mayall et al. (2015) we would advocate that support is proactively offered to care experienced students while also acknowledging problems of stigma and fear of disclosure about care experience may mean that support is not always taken up. It is particularly important that universities provide additional and sensitive support for students within curriculum areas that are more likely to attract care experienced students. A more complex understanding of the needs of this group of students suggests that support has to be offered to all students alongside specific staff development and training for personal tutors and support staff who can then proactively support these students. Staffing and resources to support students via counselling and wellbeing services are also essential for progression and retention of these students.

4.3. *'We think when students progress to university, job done!' research question 3: What are the range of issues that care experienced young people need support with while they study?*

The findings indicate that once care experienced young people arrive in Higher Education, there can be a tendency to assume this is a success in itself and that no further support work is needed. Aiden summed this up by stating:

*In social work terms, we think when students progress to university, job done!* He went on to highlight how ongoing support is essential to retain care experienced young people in Higher Education. The participants in our study identified four key areas they needed help with: ongoing mental health issues, continuity of care, accommodation and finance. Each will be discussed in turn.

First, it was clear that some participants were continuing to deal with their emotional and mental health difficulties arising from their childhood experiences as they moved into their late teens and twenties. Given that 45% of care leavers experience mental ill health (Department for Education, 2007, cited in Driscoll, 2013) this may be unsurprising. Salazar (2013) study includes a Survey of Casey Family Program scholarship recipients in the USA. The study similarly highlights ongoing struggles with mental health and relationship issues. This group of young people relates closely to the 'stressed/unresolved' and 'disengaged' groups within Berridge's typology discussed earlier. The data from our study provides further evidence of the need for ongoing support with emotional and mental health issues. Aiden said:

*There are lots of issues with young people in care around abandonment or loss. They lose their birth family, they lose their parents, they lose their friends, they often move multiple times.*

Ruth, who is a postgraduate student aged 30 provided a representative position when she said:

*it makes it absolutely harder for somebody like me... who suffers from anxiety, to be able to succeed to an equivalent level as somebody else who didn't have those experiences.*

This strongly supports earlier research by Stein (2006a) about the long tail of difficulties caused by earlier experiences. Ruth also presented a sophisticated argument for the power of curriculum and the way that she was able to use her studies to gain self esteem as well as to reframe and validate her earlier childhood experiences:

*One of the things I've learned on this course is just looking at things from the viewpoint of not just the individual, but looking at it from a social perspective, and outwards in. it's been unbelievably helpful to me in so many ways...and it's less blaming on me.*

This participant provided strong evidence of the ongoing difficulties encountered post care and how these experiences can affect them while they study as well as throughout their adult lives.

Secondly, lack of continuity of care was identified as a significant issue. Nicola, studying Nutrition, commented that she had difficulties with this once she moved to study at University, and her relationship with her foster carers fundamentally changed:

*Yeah, I lived with them right up until I moved to uni, but in my case pretty much once their funding stops so did the parenting. I just felt like a lodger.*

Thus there is a danger that even where young people have experienced stable, settled and supportive foster or care home environments, they may be quickly propelled into much more independent and isolating circumstances, leaving them vulnerable to loneliness and loss of support networks.

A third area where this group of students needed ongoing support related to accommodation, especially during the holiday periods. This was particularly important within their first year and first term. Nicola explained:

*It was difficult to explain why I wasn't home at Christmas, why I was in [city] for Christmas Day.*

This supports earlier research by Jackson et al. (2005) who highlighted this issue. Our research shows that fourteen years later, within the UK context, accommodation remains problematic. Gazeley and Hinton-Smith (2018) reported on similar problems faced by care leavers entering higher education, including financial constraints, social isolation, and issues associated with accommodation, especially during the holiday periods, such as isolation if they stay on alone, or having nowhere to live if they have to relinquish their room during the long summer vacation. They proposed that the lack of a family network is likely to exacerbate the problems associated with the sudden transition to higher education.

The fourth issue identified by the participants related to finance. Tom, one of the staff members from the university central support team for widening participation, stated that:

*On the financial level, it's difficult, because I think that care-experienced young people are often quite cash-rich, because there are grants and bursaries available. But...often the care leavers will want to save that money and put it away for the future, because financial stability is something that might have been lacking in their lives.*

Shamila, studying Youth and Community Work, captured this dilemma, as well as the issue of having to learn how to budget once she received her funding in a lump sum, when she stated that:

*This whole loan thing and paying your own rent it was really hard for me. I mean, I'm probably better off, but I kind of felt like 'Oh my God, if I don't pay my rent, this big amount, how am I going to make it last?' So that's been hard. That's what I'm learning.*

Finance was a factor identified by several participants and particularly the importance of ongoing financial support. Student Maria exemplifies this by explaining why this is central: 'because I have to pay for everything myself, and the cost of living and everything'.

The complexity around finance is captured well here. On the one hand we heard young people explaining how they were worried about finance and this was a reason cited by focus group members for not wanting to go to university. Paradoxically, and not unrelated, is the observation that the young people can be reluctant to spend because of fear about financial stability. The other related issue is that of these young people wishing to escape their background and stigma of being 'in care' may mean they do not self identify and may not receive financial or other support available to them at university.

Taken together, the four key areas of need found in our study - mental health, continuity of care, accommodation and finance, represent a potentially toxic mix of complex and overwhelming stressors, especially as it is possible that care experienced students can find themselves grappling with more than one or even all four of these issues simultaneously. This serves to reinforce the point made earlier that identification of care experienced students on entry to university and of the particular problems they face, and timely offers of support to address these problems, seems critical to their ongoing higher education success.

#### 4.4. 'It is okay to have needs'. Research question 4: What support approaches are most useful for care experienced students?

Participants identified a number of supportive factors during their studies at university. Ruth's assertion that 'you need somebody to try and help make you aware that you have needs, and that it is okay to have those needs' acts as a relevant starting point. In other words, recognising one's needs and having those needs validated is an important first step in gaining support.

The first significant source of support identified by the participants was the personal tutor at university, so long as they were supportive,

accepting and offered ongoing pastoral support. Karen valued her personal tutor for:

*listening and not belittling me...she treated me like an adult and didn't ask for more details...it was nice to have that adult relationship.*

Tracy and Shamila emphasised the importance of having a personal tutor who knew them well and reacted quickly to sudden changes. Tracy stated her personal tutor:

*has always known me as a very ambitious, proactive, high-achieving student who will never miss a session...suddenly this year I just stopped. She was the first one to notice...she was asking if I was okay.*

Secondly, a further university-based source of support, described by Nicola was the central University wellbeing team. She reflected on how she found support with her ongoing mental health issues from this team:

*I got involved with them quite recently because I hadn't had any support since I left home with my mental health. And I found that really useful.*

Other university staff were also identified as helpful, usually particular subject tutors who took an interest in the student's progress.

Thirdly, the role of other students in being friendly and supportive was also mentioned by some participants. This informal source of support provided valued help to complete assignments to a good standard as described by Khaled:

*this particular person...he'll tell me in detail what to do and what not to do. And that's another kind of support.*

Nicola, who stayed in her university city for Christmas as she was unable to return to her foster home during the holiday period, went on to describe how this situation was rescued:

*one of my flatmates stayed home and he made us Christmas dinner, which was quite nice.*

She went on to say that this was important, as she may have been on her own at this important holiday period. These two examples illustrate the importance of universities have robust induction programmes that allow new students to get to know others in their cohort or year of study, who can then act as informal yet significant sources of support.

Fourthly, the ongoing support of the carer was also important for some participants, while others mentioned the role of local authority workers such as personal advisors. For instance, Paula recalled receiving help with her final year project from a member of staff from the Care Leavers' Council she attended. She contacted him in something of a panic, and she recalled:

*the guy...was like 'Right, so you break it down. Stop stressing, you'll be fine.' Whenever I spoke to him, he'd ask me how I was getting on.*

Taken together, all of the above examples reflect the importance placed by participants on receiving practical as well as emotional support. Tom described how he encourages care experienced students to take on a student ambassador role within the university which he has seen:

*gives them really very strong employability skills. It's unlikely that care-experienced students will have the same networks...that you can talk to and get work experience. So we try to really skill them up.*

Finally, students repeated their belief that their own positivity and determination played no small part in their success at university. Ruth summed this position up well by saying 'I have just this burning thing that I will not let my past get in the way', while Nicola articulated it as a desire to control her own destiny:

*When you're in foster care you don't know what it's like to be in control...you don't know what it's like to live your life until you get away from that.*

More recently researchers have been casting their nets even wider and looking at students who are estranged from families and this will include a high number of Looked After young people (University of Cambridge and Stand Alone, 2015). In this study of 84 students, 31% had sought help from a Lecturer and 77% had found the support helpful or somewhat helpful, while 36% had sought help from their university student support services and 90% had found this helpful or somewhat helpful. This research has implications for the student support model for this group of students within Higher Education with many students providing feedback that the student wellbeing services are often difficult to access and more information needs to be provided to all students about available support.

In summary, a range of people within the university and within the local authority where they grew up in care were identified as supportive to care experienced students. Practical as well as emotional support was valued by the participants, who also identified opportunities to develop employability skills, as well as the students' own determination to succeed as relevant factors.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. Limitations of the study

This was a small-scale study, with a relatively small sample size of 23 young people and 2 university staff members, centred primarily on one local authority and one university. Furthermore, focus group two was predominantly male, while females comprised seven of the eight individual interviews with university students, and this may have skewed the findings. Therefore, caution is needed in generalising from the findings. A larger sample size from multiple local authorities and universities, with a good range not only of gender, but also of ethnicity and (dis)ability would strengthen any future research endeavours. Nevertheless, the varied nature of the participants in this study, in terms of age and gender adds richness to the data. Significantly, through the focus groups the study also captures the voices of those who are still thinking about university and those who decided not to attend.

### 5.2. Key findings

The findings from our study echo those of Jackson and Cameron (2012), Driscoll (2013), Dixon (2016), Geiger and Beltran (2017) and Hollingworth and Jackson (2016) whose research identified internal self-reliance and determination, as well as supportive others as important factors in success within higher education. It is important, however, to acknowledge the complexity of the findings from this study. The findings strongly support that for these young people with non-traditional educational trajectories, higher education may not be an option at the usual age but they may return to this, with support, at a later stage once they have worked through their options and processed their childhood experiences. For those entering university, there is complexity around understanding that issues such as finance is not solely related to lack of money. Some care experienced young people have sufficient funding but feel reluctant to spend it due to a desire to maintain a level of financial security as a counterpoint to their emotional security.

In terms of support, young people did not benefit from unspecified and generalised help, but ongoing support that was relational, characterised by genuine concern, human warmth and knowledge of the young person. In addition, our research emphasises that supportive adults need to be non-judgemental, available and responsive in providing practical help (including assignment-focused assistance) as well as emotional support. These supportive adults, together with the provision of financial support, the availability of, and encouragement to accept, opportunities to develop employability skills (and self-confidence), combined with the student's own agency, resilience, internal

drive and determination, provide a powerful set of factors that can underpin success within higher education for care experienced students. Finally, this research provides further testament to the importance of enduring and trusting relationships for children in care.

### 5.3. Implications for policy and practice

This research has implications for a number of areas related to policy and practice. Firstly, in relation to the student support model for this group of students within Higher Education. Many students have provided feedback that the student wellbeing, counselling and mental health services are often difficult to access and more information needs to be provided to all students about available support. This information is often presented at the start of study during induction and fresher's week but the evidence is that it needs to be repeated and available regularly during study as information overload at the start may mean crucial information about support is missed. This also points to the need for induction to be an embedded and ongoing activity rather than a one-off event at the start of study. This has clear implications for the organisation of induction to University.

Secondly, significant sources of support included the personal tutor at university, so long as they were supportive, accepting and offered ongoing pastoral support. This has implications for the training and staff development for personal tutors and related support staff in University to ensure they are able to provide proactive, sensitive and relevant support for this group of students.

Thirdly, the role of other students in being friendly and supportive was also mentioned by some participants. This informal source of support provided valued help, to complete assignments, for example. This has clear implications for induction and fresher's week activities as making new friends is key to success for this group (as well as many other) students. Related to this there are implications for creating positive learning environments where students support one another via peer learning and build communities of learning and trust. The significance of extra curricular activities has been noted. For example, one of the staff in our study noted that encouraging care experienced students to take on a student ambassador role within the university helps them increase confidence and self-esteem as well as gaining valuable employability skills. Involvement in sports was important for at least one of our participants and helps with forming strong friendships. These activities are often promoted during induction and care experienced students should be encouraged to join clubs and societies as well as take on student representative or ambassador roles.

Fourthly, was the importance placed by participants on receiving practical as well as emotional support. This is related to the importance of ongoing support from Care Leavers Council, foster carers, their Personal Assistant and so forth. A factor identified by several participants was the importance of financial support and bursaries to enable them to study.

These implications are important to future policy and practice in supporting care experienced students in being successful in their studies. Taken together they indicate the need for proactive ongoing support for this group of students while they study. It is likely that these implications for study support are relevant to other groups of students and in particular for universities concerned with widening participation and access to university.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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