
Educational success for children in public care: advice from a group of high achievers

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ABSTRACT

Research over the past 20 years has consistently shown that children in public care fall behind at school, seldom achieve good qualifications, and are much less likely than their peers to go on to further or higher education. However, a small minority of looked-after children do well academically. This paper examines the opinions of 38 high-achieving young people who spent at least a year in residential or foster care on what they think are the best ways to enhance the educational experience of looked-after children. An evaluation of four key questions from a semistructured interview highlighted the importance of foster carers, residential workers, social workers and teachers in providing support and encouragement for academic achievement. On the other hand, many of these individuals emphasized their dislike of being 'singled out' by the teacher. A third of the participants believed that negative stereotypes and low expectations of children in care among professionals and care providers were major obstacles to their educational success. Over half the sample reported that in many children's homes basic necessities such as books, a desk and a quiet place to do homework were lacking. In addition their opportunity to engage in outside interests and hobbies was severely limited. By contrast, for these individuals foster care had provided better opportunities. On entering higher education the majority of the participants had faced severe problems. They stressed the need for continuing financial support and adequate year-round accommodation, because, unlike most students, these care leavers usually have no parental home to return to during university vacations. A third of participants also felt a strong desire for a 'guardian angel' to support and encourage them during their time at university. The paper concludes that the views of these thoughtful and resilient individuals should be taken very seriously and translated into improvements in policy and practice. Official guidance now highlights the importance of education for looked-after children, but changing attitudes and priorities at ground level presents a major challenge.

INTRODUCTION

To date research on successful ex-care people has been notably sparse (Jackson & Sachdev 2001). This is partly attributable to the difficulty of locating such individuals when they leave the care system and have

no further contact with social services, and partly because most looked-after children do not succeed educationally. Indeed, the educational attainment of children who are, or have been, in care is significantly below that of the general population. This remains true even when they are compared with other

disadvantaged groups or with children living in deprived areas (Heath *et al.* 1989).

For example, over three-quarters of those who leave care between the ages of 16 and 18 do so without any qualifications at all (Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Broad 1998) compared with fewer than 1 in 10 of the general population. Moreover, although there has been a slight improvement recently, still only 6% of children in residential or foster care are successful in obtaining five or more GCSE passes at Grade C or above, a threshold of educational attainment which was identified by the National Child Development Study as the dividing line for 'escape from disadvantage' (Pilling 1990). This compares with just over half the general population (Department of Health 2001). Comparing the proportions continuing into further or higher education we find a similarly bleak picture: 12% of children looked after by local authorities are in post-16 education as against 68% of the age group as a whole.

Other indicators also highlight the educational disadvantages experienced by those in the care system. They are far more likely than others to be without a school place for extended periods following a change of placement, and are also at high risk of exclusion (Blyth & Milner 1998; Blyth 2001). Ward (1995) and Berridge & Brodie (1998) reported that in some residential units none of the children attended school and that this situation was often passively accepted by staff.

In a longitudinal study of children entering care in a Midlands authority over a four-year period, Evans (2000) found that looked-after children were 13 times more likely than others to have a statement of special educational needs and all those with statements were in special schools, whereas the majority of those in their own families go to mainstream schools. Gordon *et al.* (2000) in a re-analysis of the OPCS disability survey showed that the nature of disabilities among children in care was far less severe than for those at home, yet those not in care were much more likely to attend ordinary schools. Even within mainstream schools a high proportion of looked-after children are allocated to special units which offer limited opportunities for academic achievement and are inevitably stigmatizing (Galloway *et al.* 1994).

How can we account for these consistently depressing findings? Although the volume of published research on the education of children in care is still not large, and was almost non-existent before 1987 (Jackson 2001), there is substantial agreement on some of the factors responsible for low attainment.

Research reviews by Borland *et al.* (1998) and Jackson & Sachdev (2001) concluded that, although the family background of looked-after children played a part, the care system itself must accept a major responsibility. In particular the low priority given by the majority of social workers to education has been repeatedly highlighted in studies dating back to the 1970s (Jackson 1987), and most recently by Francis (2000). The tendency for social workers to regard education as somebody else's business was documented in detail by Fletcher-Campbell & Hall (1990), and later research shows that the Children Act Guidance (Department of Health 1991a,b) and the emphasis on education in the Looking After Children materials (Department of Health 1995) achieved little improvement.

Among other factors identified as contributing to educational difficulties and low attainment are the instability of the care system (Jackson & Thomas 2001), past experiences of abuse and neglect, low expectations of carers and teachers, for example the outdated assumption that education is completed at 16, the poor quality of residential care and the inadequate education and training of staff. Untreated mental health problems, often arising from past trauma, also play a part, usually manifesting themselves in difficult behaviour, which in turn puts looked-after children at high risk of school exclusion (Cairns 2001; Williams *et al.* 2001).

On the positive side, some young people in care do well at school despite other problems. Stability of placement is a great advantage, though not sufficient in itself, and remaining in the same school when a placement change is unavoidable is important in providing continuity and often a safe haven in a chaotic life. Attending school regularly whatever else is going on is a prerequisite for academic success, but not always given sufficient importance by social workers (Fletcher-Campbell 1997). The educational background and expectations of carers is highly significant, as would be expected from the general educational literature (Lucey & Walkerdine 2000). The majority of successful care leavers acknowledge a debt to well-informed foster carers, often encountered quite late in their care careers, who supported and encouraged them (Jackson & Martin 1998). Heath *et al.* (1994) also found that the educational level of foster carers was the most important factor in enabling children in care to catch up with their peers.

It is clear that children who succeed against the odds have to be highly resilient in the three ways identified by Fraser *et al.* (1999) – being successful despite

exposure to high risk, sustaining competence under pressure, and recovering from trauma – and this was found to be true of the group studied by Jackson & Martin (1998). Gilligan (2001) emphasizes the value of a resilience-led perspective in enabling looked-after young people to succeed in education. Some fortunate children may have a secure base, stable care and continuous relationships – Gilligan likens them to a tree with deep roots. But the risk of disruption is so high for most young people in care that they need to develop a network of supportive relationships which can provide a point of reference and a sense that somebody cares about them and their progress. One important way that this can happen is through activities and leisure pursuits, both in and out of school, which bring them into contact with people outside the care system and can give them a sense of achievement and self-efficacy. Gilligan offers a wide range of suggested activities, but they all need adult support to sustain them, which has too often been lacking in the past (Rees 2001).

A VIEW FROM THE RECEIVING END

The present study is based on an opportunistic sample of people who had spent a year or more in care and met the basic criterion for educational success of obtaining five or more O-level or GCSE passes at Grade C or above. Accessing high-achieving ex-care people is extremely difficult, and all possible means were used to encourage potential participants to contact the researchers. The sample was recruited via letters and articles in newspapers and by an insert in the magazine *Who Cares?* A total of 250 people initially expressed interest in the research and of these 101 who met the threshold for inclusion completed and returned a 90-item questionnaire detailing amongst other things their school and care experiences, higher education, employment, current life situation, and family and personal information.

The postal survey showed that there was a subsample of individuals who had achieved a relatively high standard of education, and were now mostly well established in good careers with their own homes and comfortable life-styles. No reported study has focused in detail on successful care leavers and asked about what has made them successful, though there is a substantial literature, mostly very depressing, on the typical careers of care leavers who do not achieve educational qualifications (Stein 1994; Biehal *et al.* 1995; Broad 1998).

This study focused on a subsample of participants selected on the basis of their attainment of A-level passes or the equivalent. All eligible individuals who could be traced were interviewed: 12 men and 26 women, with a mean age of 26 years. Twenty-five had also obtained a first degree, several had a Masters degree and one a PhD. The 38 people who were selected for interview are referred to in this paper as 'high achievers'.

The in-depth semistructured interviews typically lasted two to three hours. Open-ended questions were employed to explore the participant's family, care, school, higher education and career experiences. All interviews took place in the participants' own homes and were taped and transcribed. The results of this study are reported in detail elsewhere (Jackson & Martin 1998). At the end of the interview each participant was asked for his or her personal advice and recommendations on how social work and care practice could be improved in order to enhance the educational experience of children in residential and foster home settings and also at school, college and university.

Characteristics of participants

How representative are these high achievers of children that go through the care system? It could be that the method of participant recruitment resulted in an over-representation of people who were successful because they came from a 'sunken middle class' background, similar to children from working class homes who passed the 11-plus (Jackson & Marsden 1962). However, this hypothesis was disproved by analysis of information on the birth families of participants who, with two exceptions, came from highly disadvantaged families typical of the general care population (Bebbington & Miles 1989). Nearly all their parents lacked any educational or occupational qualifications. When we compared outcomes for these people with a group from similar family and care backgrounds who had not met the criterion for inclusion in the study, we found that the comparison group conformed to the typical profile of adults formerly in care and could generally be described as socially excluded.

In other ways the background of those interviewed for the study was also similar to that of other children in care. Similarities in background and adversities are evident when the high-achievers group is compared with a group of people with no or very few qualifications (10 males and 12 females, with a mean age of 25 years) who had also participated in a follow-up

study (Jackson & Martin 1998). The ethnic background of the high achievers was quite close to that of the comparison group: 55% (64% of low-achievers group) categorized themselves as White British, 8% (9% of low-achievers group) black (African-Caribbean), and 36% (27% of low-achievers group) were of Asian, Chinese or mixed parentage. Of participants who knew the reason why they had come into care, an identical proportion (29%) from both groups gave physical or sexual abuse as the principal cause. There was a similar percentage in the two groups of children who entered care at age 12 or over, although females in both groups were more likely to have begun their care career later. This was particularly true of low-achieving women, of whom 67% came into care aged 12 or over.

It does not appear, therefore, that the high achievers had been more fortunate in their birth families or pre-care experiences than those in the low-achieving group or in the care population generally. So what had enabled them to do so much better educationally? We think it likely that these individuals, with their wealth of practical knowledge and experience, can provide a unique insight into the factors that make for school success, or more often failure, and can offer us useful advice on ways to improve child care practice and enhance the educational opportunities of looked-after children today. Although there is more concern and interest in this question than ever before (Jackson & Sachdev 2001), we are still very far from achieving equal chances for children in public care.

FINDINGS

Being like other people

We asked all our respondents: 'What would you say are the three main things that should be done to improve the opportunities for children in care to do well in school?' Nearly everyone stressed the importance of 'normalization' in children's day-to-day lives. They wanted to be the same as other people, not standing out amongst their peers as different or peculiar. They suggested that looked-after children should be given the freedom and support, and also the finance, to take part in outside hobbies and interests. This would help them to socialize confidently with their peers and help them to feel less awkward and inhibited about themselves. This recommendation is illustrated clearly in the quotations below. (To protect

the identities of the participants in this study, all names have been altered.)

'I felt that in the care system . . . you don't really tend to meet everyday people, and that's obviously when clubs and societies outside of school are quite good. Like Cubs or Girl Guides really because you're out in a different environment and that obviously would affect how you see things.' (Harriet Jackson, a social worker)

'I think they should be given more money to spend for their educational things, like say if they wanted to go on an outdoor pursuit course.' (Yuk-wah Wong, a degree student)

'With my drama, music, sport, I needed to have the encouragement and resources. So if someone was in that position, I would make sure they had the resources and didn't feel out of it in terms of their clothing and their mixing with friends.' (Bryan Good, a social service manager)

'It's not just about education, it should be like making it more normal for them to have hobbies and things. When people are thinking of education they should be thinking about developing the whole of that person.' (Frances Cairns, a degree student)

Encouragement from others

The most frequent advice given by our sample was to emphasize the necessity for a child to receive positive encouragement from significant others. Seventy-four per cent of participants stressed the vital importance of residential carers, foster carers or parents showing an active interest in their education and giving them support and encouragement to do well. As one participant put it:

'It's about staff encouraging and taking an interest in the children they care for, and even if the kid isn't motivated to keep on trying to get them to do their best.'

This might seem obvious. However, many of the participants remarked on the exceptionally low expectations and lack of interest in education among the staff in the residential homes where they had lived. Brenda Kerr, now a residential social worker herself, felt that anything she had achieved was entirely through her own efforts: her children's home had done nothing to help:

'I needed someone there for me and to praise me when I did something right . . . there was no positive reinforcement, there is hardly any at all in the care system.'

Others painted a similarly grey picture, for example:

'Simple things like encouragement is what's lacking in basic institutions like children's homes . . . also emotional support.' (Sara Druce, an information technology consultant)

Characteristics of carers

One explanation given for the lack of encouragement by residential staff and many foster carers is that they are educated to a very poor standard themselves, and do not understand the importance or the methods needed to achieve good qualifications. Our subjects strongly stated how essential it is to employ well-educated, qualified carers if we want children to do well. One young woman commented:

'I think there needs to be legislation for residential care . . . there is no reason for not having qualified workers, workers who can build your self-esteem and encourage educationally . . . and it should extend to foster care as well.' (Rebecca Duffy, a psychology graduate, studying for a Masters degree)

Despite the lack of an association between the occupational or educational level attained by birth parents and the level achieved by their children, the degree of interest and importance placed on the child's education by birth parents was in some cases a major motivating factor in their drive to succeed. Even in a situation where the parent had died 10 years previously, or where there had been no contact for many years, there was still a strong aspiration to achieve educationally and make their parents proud of them. It is well established that parental interest and belief in the value of education is of great importance (Osborn 1990; Taylor 1991; Lucey & Walkerdine 2000), but the remarkable finding from this study is that it remains so powerful regardless of parental absence. It did not seem that social workers and carers were aware that parents might be potential allies if they hoped to motivate children to do well at school.

The contribution of social workers

Over a quarter of participants emphasized the importance of having a good relationship with their social worker. Most stressed the need to be able to contact the social worker freely for support and advice, and conversely that the social worker should regularly contact the young person and show a genuine concern for their welfare. It cannot be assumed that because there are no overt problems the child does not need social work support. These points are clearly made in the two contrasting examples below:

'My social worker at the time I never saw because he assumed everything was OK because I seemed to be a stable person, but I wasn't, I was anxious. I could have gained by having the situation monitored more closely.' (Shara Mookerjee, a civil engineer)

'My social worker is brilliant, if I want anything I ring her and she'll chase things for me, or help me sort things out, or speak to people for me. She's a person who if you are stuck in a corner she's there for you.' (Reena Landon, college student)

Attending school regularly: the importance of continuity

Several studies have shown that many looked-after adolescents attend school intermittently if at all (Blyth & Milner 1996; Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Berridge & Brodie 1998). Indeed, over a third (37%) of the high achievers reported their worries about the *laissez-faire* attitude shown by carers in residential homes towards school attendance. Schooling is frequently missed due to care appointments or by the move to a new school in the middle of a term. Truancy is tolerated, barely remarked on. Charlotte James, who graduated with a good degree from a prestigious university, commented:

'Mothers know if they don't send their children to school they are breaking the law . . . well I think the law should be the same for children in care. I missed years of school. But the general attitude is that it doesn't matter if you go to school or not.'

Bella Somers, who is now a successful counsellor, agreed:

'The importance of school is not highlighted enough, and people just presume that because children are in care and because they've been abused that they should be taking time off and sent to those therapeutic places . . . but if they missed two years of their school at the age of 13, they can't go back to school when they're 15 and just carry on and when you're put into care everybody thinks it's normal to change schools. I think that's the most disruptive thing that can happen.'

Geoffrey Johnson, a university lecturer, made the same point emphatically:

'One of the key things is stability, it's not to move kids unless it's absolutely necessary, and if you are going to move them don't move them from their school. Another problem that stems from the lack of encouragement to attend school is the high amount of truancy that is not corrected in many residential homes.'

Some respondents linked the problem of truancy to the issue of normalization. Their recommendation was to make it as unacceptable for looked-after children to truant as it is for those who are not in the care system. Bryan Good argued that school attendance should be enforced and made the norm by fostering an educational home environment:

'I think education needs to be looked at as part of the whole care package really . . . it was too easy not to be interested or go out to school.'

Stereotyping and discrimination

Nearly a third of our sample (32%) stressed the need to overcome negative stereotypes of looked-after children. It is generally assumed that children in residential or foster care are there because of personal deficit of character or behaviour, when most come into care as a result of family circumstances and through no fault of their own. In addition many children are discriminated against and made to feel they are of inferior intelligence. Harriet Jackson highlighted these points:

'I think in terms of the stigma attached to being in care, lack of opportunities available, they are automatically seen as being underachievers anyway. Trouble makers as well . . . I remember somebody saying to me "You're in care because you're naughty" and it's like you're immediately set up to fail.'

It is well established that a substantial proportion of children in care have very low self-esteem, which is partly due to their experiences of abuse and rejection by their families (Schofield *et al.* 2000), but also to the negative stereotypes inflicted on them by society. Unlike other forms of prejudice, such as race or sexual orientation, which are discussed at length in the media, the public is mainly unaware of the discrimination faced by looked-after children. As one female graduate student expressed it:

'Children in care . . . should be talked about and it shouldn't be a thing to be ashamed of and something you'd prefer your peers not to know. I think the best way to deal with stigma is to actually talk about it and maybe produce children's literature to help other children understand it better.'

A few of the participants also commented on the need to ensure that teachers are aware of the unfair labels of disruptiveness or low intelligence often given to looked-after children. It is important for teachers to help children recognize their true potential as valued individuals.

This point is made clearly by Keith Picton, a graduate now working in Whitehall:

'I think we have to get across to the pupil that the fact that they are in care makes no difference to their educational ability. I think there is a sort of mind set which says because you are in care you are not actually going to achieve or do very much.'

Practical resources

Over half the sample (58%) commented on the startling lack of practical resources in children's residential homes. Many homes lacked basic necessities such as books, a desk or a quiet room in which to do homework or study. Harriet Jackson talks of the hurdles she had to overcome in order to do her homework:

'There was no desk at the home. If I worked I used to get a plank of wood and just work on there from the bed.'

Natasha Gates, a young undergraduate student, described a similar negative experience of residential home life:

'Well I think there needs to be a time set aside for people to study, because I don't think many homes actually do that . . . and there needs to be the right type of environment, like I never had a desk where I could work or anything like that. There wasn't like a room where you could sort of go and you knew fine well it would be quiet to be able to study.'

As Patricia Morton, who is now a senior social worker comments:

'There should be books and there should be a desk, there should be a work area that is quiet where they can go and read and do homework and things.'

It appears that this issue critically needs to be addressed in order for children to be given a chance to achieve their potential. It might be argued that our respondents were in children's homes some time ago and everything has changed now. There certainly have been improvements, but Rees, in the course of very recent research on the educational environment provided in residential units, found exactly the same problems that these high achievers experienced – a boy obliged to do his homework on an upturned drawer, essential stationery having to be bought from pocket money, the only reading matter in any of the homes a tabloid newspaper (Rees 2001).

By contrast, foster care was much more likely to provide good study facilities. For example, Laura Shales, who is now working as a teacher, talks very positively about the facilities provided by her foster parents:

'We used to have loads of books, and a bookshelf, and you'd go to the library and pick books for yourself. I'd go to bed early to read.'

Over a quarter of the sample advised that intensive one-to-one teaching should be provided to the child whenever it is needed:

'You are not going to be able to concentrate on learning and studying [with so many upsetting things going on in your life]. It should be a foregone conclusion that you get extra tuition.' (Rebecca Duffy)

Teachers, schools and school support

In response to the question 'What changes would you like to see in the schools themselves to improve the opportunities of looked-after children?', 76% of the sample said that they would like to see more support from teachers. For example, Keith Picton advises that:

'It is important for teachers to know that individual pupils in a class are in care, because they do need extra attention, they do need looking after to make sure that they are not being bullied or pressured.'

Furthermore, as Darren Smith, a housing support worker, says:

'The teachers should have a more sympathetic attitude towards children who are in care and recognize that they have some special needs. And often it's just making time to listen.'

Although acknowledging that greater support from teachers is needed, 45% of the sample, as we said earlier, also wanted to stress that care must be taken to avoid stigmatizing the child or making them feel picked out in any way. As Cerina Begum, a law student, notes:

'I think that's a double edged one. 'Cause you don't want to single people out. You have to think creatively about what that individual person needs.'

Visits by social workers at school were strongly disliked. Shara Mookerjee, a civil engineer, told us:

'Make sure that social worker visits and things are done way out of school time, and out of school property so they are never noted within school as being abnormal.'

On the other hand, most of our respondents emphasized the importance of good communication between the school and social workers and carers. Ronan Sands, a training officer, noted:

'There needs to be a good information link in terms of keeping schools informed of what's going on with the child generally, and indicators as to why the child might not be achieving.'

Kevin Anderson, a computer programmer, agreed:

'Basically the care staff should liaise well with school teachers. Teachers should attend case conferences and be involved in the life of the young person in care.'

While extra support in school would be welcome, most participants wanted to feel accepted by their

peers as 'normal', and stressed the need for sensitivity about the way in which help is given.

Support for everyone not just the chosen few

In response to the question 'Would you say that this support should be available to all children in care or just those who are more able?', there was a virtually unanimous view that additional help should be available to all children regardless of ability. For example, Bella Somers commented:

'If you're going to be selective and say it's only people who are academically clever who get this support, you're stereotyping people who are in care again, and putting them into two groups of failures and successes.'

The issue of negative stereotyping needs to be addressed in order that all children in care, regardless of ability, may feel valued as unique individuals who can be a success in whatever they decide to do in life. For example, Cerina Begum comments:

'Everyone's got potential in one way or another. It might not be paper qualifications but they might have other things that you can't ever see on paper. So I think, for example, if somebody's really good at music or art that should really be encouraged and extra time given to them.'

Encouragement for higher education

In response to the question 'In moving into higher education what should be done differently and why?', 74% stressed that more financial help was needed, and 45% highlighted accommodation problems, particularly during vacations. Shara Mookerjee noted that social services are often unaware of the norms of the university or college, that during the vacations most students go home to their parents, and consequently are expected to leave the halls of residence or student houses during these times. She commented that instead of paying for the individual to stay alone during the vacations in student accommodation, which can be a very lonely and dispiriting experience, it would be far better to provide them with their own flat. This would also overcome their vulnerability to homelessness. Patricia Morton, a teacher studying part-time for a PhD, found herself with nowhere to go one Christmas vacation whilst completing her undergraduate degree, and in desperation spent the three-day holiday sleeping in a railway station. As Gareth Mason, a student on a teacher training course, says:

'If you're in higher education and all you're worried about is where you're going to live next summer, it's not going to help your performance at all.'

If ex-care students are to complete their courses successfully, social services should provide them with appropriate accommodation and sufficient money to cover living costs all year around.

Geoffrey Johnson, the university lecturer, has seen the problem from both sides:

'I think there's got to be support for kids who leave care and go on to university. I mean real practical support. They need money. They need somewhere they can go back to for help. They need people they can rely on for advice. All the sort of things that ordinary undergraduates take for granted, that they get from their family.'

In some cases, individuals such as Keith Picton, for example, had been fortunate enough to live in an area where good after-care was practised:

'I had a lot of support from social services, and they did everything they could in terms of financial assistance to help me you know, maintain the flat and have a reasonable time at university. They gave me assistance with books so that my grant would actually go on accommodation costs. Once they got an individual who was going on to higher education they weren't just a number or another case in a filing cabinet, they were an individual who had individual needs and they were addressed individually.'

Thirty-two per cent of participants also mentioned that emotional support and encouragement continued to be needed during higher education. An example of how a good social worker relationship can provide this kind of support was given by Wai-lin Chan, a first year engineering student:

'A social worker is still important because she used to see me, not that often, but she kept in touch . . . and whenever I had trouble say with studying I knew I could pick up the phone and she'd be there for me.'

A 'guardian angel'?

Most of the high achievers spoke of a special relationship with at least one person, within or outside the care system, who made time to listen to them and make them feel valued. This individual often acted as a mentor or a role model, and helped to motivate them to work hard at school and to go on to university. Previous research also indicates that a positive role model in the child's life setting who is willing to spend time with them fosters resilience (Maluccio *et al.* 1996). Of course the child is an active participant in this process. For example, Anya Zamora, a degree student, commented:

'I've been lucky really because I've always singled somebody out and I've always clung to them for a bit of extra support. I've always had some special person in my life to back me up, and I think a lot of kids in care don't have that.'

It was also noted that a mentor should have a consistent relationship with the child over time and should follow that child through to adulthood.

'I think there needs to be a significant person, an advocate if you like for the child, who speaks with them, who knows all about that child and that child's needs, potential and strengths and weaknesses.'

Other participants recommended that the role model or mentor should play a very active part in the child's life and form a close bond with her or him. For example, Sara Druce, a postgraduate student, states:

'I think the role model or mentor is somebody that you'd see on a weekly basis, that comes to your home or you could go to them or whatever. You'd do stuff with them or they'd take you to museums and art galleries, places of interest, or go away with you for a weekend . . . that they were there for you and knew where you're coming from.'

A third of the sample mentioned the continuing need for a mentor or a friendly adult who understands what they are experiencing during higher education. What they seemed to have in mind was not another professional but someone more like an educational godparent, outside the care system, who would take on this task as a voluntary activity and form a special relationship with an individual young person over many years. As Norris Price, a graduate and a high flyer in the business world, said:

'What you need is good advice and a lot more support while you're in university . . . You need a guardian angel to get you through.'

CONCLUSION

Much of what the high achievers in our study told us echoes the findings of research studies over many years (see, for example, Jackson 1987, 1994, 2001; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Borland *et al.* 1998). However, it surely has a particular force and urgency coming from people who have first hand knowledge of the many obstacles to educational attainment within the care system, and who have succeeded in overcoming them. Some of the participants in our study went to great lengths to contact us and arrange interviews at considerable inconvenience to themselves. They felt a strong desire to help change things for the children who come after them.

Although some of them recognized the structural weaknesses in the care and education systems that contributed to their difficulties, their advice focused on children and young people's everyday experience. To summarize:

- Going to school is the normal experience of children, and those in care should be as much like the others as possible. Regular school attendance should be assumed and enforced.
- Looked-after children should be given the maximum encouragement to participate in school and out-of-school activities. This is another aspect of normalization and promoting resilience. Financial considerations should not be allowed to stand in their way.
- Children in care should be given opportunities to meet and spend time with people outside the care system.
- Social workers and carers should take a keen interest in education and convey that to the child by providing good facilities for study and showing appreciation for achievement.
- Foster carers and residential workers need better educational qualifications themselves if they are to promote young people's educational attainment.
- The educational environment and practical resources for study in residential units require urgent attention.
- Schools and teachers should be better informed about the care system. Good communication between social workers and schools is essential.
- Low expectations about the ability and potential of children in care need to be challenged.
- Young people in higher education need continuing support, financial, practical and emotional.

There are clear implications for social work in each of these recommendations. Firstly, all our respondents agreed that education should be given the highest priority in making decisions for children in care. Placement moves, if unavoidable, should be coordinated with the school timetable so that they do not occur in the middle of term or disrupt school or leisure activities. Meetings involving children should always be arranged out of school hours. The school needs to have information in order to provide appropriate support, but the information must be used sensitively to avoid singling the child out in any way.

The low educational level of many residential workers in this country, compared with other parts of Europe, is well known, and can only be addressed at policy level. However, fieldworkers could take an active interest in the quality of educational and re-

creational facilities provided for children in residential units and alert managers to shortcomings and opportunities for improvement. Even without additional money, far more effective use could be made of resources already available within the education service and the community, as Rees (2001) has pointed out.

Much more attention should be paid to the educational experience and attitudes of foster carers. They should be quite clear that promoting children's educational attainment is a major part of their role and they should be given maximum support in achieving that aim – for example by ensuring that they have financial resources to pay for extra tuition, encouraging interests and activities, and paying for school trips and outings without having to wait for authorization from social services. Regardless of the child's current level of achievement (which has usually been depressed by breaks in schooling and painful experiences), there should be an expectation that he or she will continue in education to the age of 18, and if possible go on to further study or training.

For those who do obtain university or college places (at present no more than 1 in a 100), the local authority should recognize its responsibility as a corporate parent to celebrate their achievement and give them the same level of practical support and encouragement that a good parent would.

The UK government now recognizes that education is the key to social inclusion and a decent quality of adult life for children who have to live apart from their families. The guidance issued jointly by the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment (2000) provides a sound basis for progress, and the implementation of the Children Leaving Care Act 2000, which requires local authorities to keep in contact with care leavers and offer financial support for those in full-time education, should mean fewer problems in future for ex-care students. But policy initiatives do not invariably result in significant improvements on the ground. The only people who can really tell us if the educational experiences of looked-after children have changed for the better are those at the receiving end. We should listen to them.

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