

Supporting the educational transitions of looked after children at Key Stage 4: the role of virtual schools and designated teachers

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been little research on the education of looked after children over the current school leaving age of 16, although the underperformance of this cohort at Key Stage 4 (age 14-16) has been the subject of considerable academic commentary. This paper aims to contribute to understanding of the ways in which looked after young people nearing the end of compulsory education can be supported and encouraged to continue in education and training.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were undertaken with 12 designated teachers for looked after children and four virtual school heads, as part of the first stage of a three-year longitudinal study following 20 looked after children in England from years 11-13 (ages 15-18).

Findings – Participants identified particular challenges in ensuring a successful educational transition for looked after young people in year 11 and expressed concern at the cumulative effect of multiple transitions at this stage on young people's lives. There appears, however, to be an increasing focus on and commitment to giving young people a "second chance" to acquire qualifications commensurate with their potential post-16. The comparative advantages and disadvantages of school and further education colleges for this cohort at Key Stage 5 are considered.

Practical implications – The implications of the forthcoming extension of the school leaving age for professionals supporting looked after young people post-16 are discussed.

Originality/value – The designated teacher for looked after children became a statutory role in 2009, and to date there has been little research on the role of these professionals, or the work of virtual schools.

Keywords Transition, Looked after children, Education, Leaving care, Attainment, Children

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The last decade has seen considerable legislative activity directed towards improving the educational outcomes of looked after children, with a particular emphasis upon narrowing the attainment gap between children in state care and their peers, initiated by the Social Exclusion Unit under the UK New Labour Government of 1997-2010 (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2003). Although statistics for the attainment of looked after children at Key Stage 4 show improvement over the last ten years (Department for Education (DfE)/National Statistics, 2011a; Department of Health/National Statistics, 2003), the gap between the attainment of looked after children and their peers has increased in that time, leading Berridge *et al.* (2008) to conclude that a substantial reduction in this differential is unlikely. Jackson (2010, p. 57) describes progress in this endeavour more generally in the last 20 years as "disappointingly slow". Despite the initiatives of the last decade, she concludes that "most of the underlying problems

identified by the Social Exclusion Unit [...] continue to blight the educational chances of looked-after children" (Jackson, 2010, p. 57) and that deficiencies in the care system militate against educational success for this cohort. Such deficiencies include capacity, turnover, leadership and resourcing issues in children's social care; failures in joint working among professionals; instability in children's lives in care; inadequate support in their education from carers who may be poorly equipped to provide it; low expectations on the part of social workers and teachers; and insufficient attention to children's emotional, mental and physical health needs (Ofsted/Social Services Inspectorate, 1995; SEU, 2003; Hibbert, 2006; Jackson and Simon, 2006; Berridge, 2007).

In the green paper *Care Matters* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006, p. 3), Alan Johnson, then secretary of state for Education and Skills, acknowledged that "the care system seems all too often to reinforce early disadvantage, rather than helping children to successfully overcome it", a situation he described as "inexcusable and shameful". Other commentators, however, have challenged the contention that the poor attainment of looked after children should be blamed on the care system (Berridge et al., 2008; Hannon et al., 2010) and there is increasing evidence that care improves outcomes for most children (Hannon et al., 2010; Wade et al., 2010). Berridge et al. (2008) have suggested that reference to "underachievement" should be replaced by the term "low achievement" in relation to this cohort, because children's entry into care is generally precipitated by factors which are in themselves associated with low-educational attainment. Furthermore, looked after children suffer four to five times the prevalence of mental health problems than their peers (DfES, 2007) and are ten times as likely to have a statement of special educational needs than children in the general school population (DfE/National Statistics, 2011b, 2012). Many children enter care late in their childhoods, with 31 per cent entering between the ages of ten and 15 in the year ending March 2011 and 12 per cent at 16 or older (DfE/National Statistics, 2011c). The attainment gap between looked after children and their peers is not unique to the UK: the YIPPEE project found a similar pattern in all five of the participating European countries (Höjer et al., 2008; Cameron et al., 2012). The UK is, however, the only one of those five to have paid significant attention to the participation of care leavers in higher education through specific policy and legislation providing care leavers with access to professional advice and financial support (Cameron et al., 2012, Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, Children Act 2004, Children and Young Persons Act 2008). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that educational outcomes for looked after children can be improved, with key factors including high expectations and individually tailored learning, stability of placement and education; encouragement of birth parents; help with schooling from foster carers; and being in care longer (Aldgate et al., 1992; Ajayi and Quigley, 2006; Connelly et al., 2008; Stein, 2008). With committed foster carers and appropriate and support from their corporate parent, some highly motivated and resilient care leavers can access and succeed in higher education (Jackson et al., 2005; Ajayi and Quigley, 2006; Jackson and Ajayi, 2007).

Initiatives to improve the educational attainment of looked after children

Recent developments in local authority practice were spurred by the Children Act 2004 section 52, which amended the Children Act 1989 through the insertion of section 22(3A). This section states explicitly that the local authority's duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their care includes a "particular duty to promote the child's educational achievement". Statutory guidance imposes an expectation that fulfilment of a local authority's duty under s22(3A) will be "monitored rigorously by a senior manager in the local authority (e.g. a Virtual School Head)" (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2010a, para 17.5). This role is not a statutory requirement and it is unclear how many authorities currently employ this model, although the Department for Education states that it intends to publish this information on its web site. The Virtual School Head Toolkit (DCSF, 2010b, p. 4) advises that:

The virtual school head role should be undertaken by a person with substantial, current or previous senior level experience of supporting vulnerable children in educational settings, preferably including experience of school senior leadership. The post should be at Head of Service or Assistant Head of Service level and have direct links with the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for

Children's Services. It is recommended that the virtual school head role is integrated with that of the Looked After Children Education Service to form the virtual school.

The Toolkit identifies the three key areas of responsibility of a virtual school head as ensuring there is "a system to track and monitor the attainment and progress of looked after children"; ensuring that "all looked after children have a robust and effective personal education plan and access one-to-one support, including personal tuition where appropriate"; and championing "the educational needs of looked after children across the authority and those placed out-of-authority" (DCSF, 2010b, p. 4). Some virtual schools support children to 16, but others include older young people (Berridge *et al.*, 2009). An evaluation of the virtual school model in 11 pilot authorities concluded that virtual schools were successful in prioritising the education of looked after children (Berridge *et al.*, 2009).

A key aspect of the virtual head role comprises advising and supporting designated teachers for looked after children, who hold the primary responsibility for promoting the educational attainment of looked after children within schools. Some local authorities introduced designated teachers for looked after children in response to a joint circular issued in 1994 (DfE and Department of Health (DoH), 1994) and the role was recommended as best practice in 2000 (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and DoH, 2000). By 2007, 61 per cent of primary schools and 72 per cent of secondary schools had a designated teacher for looked after children (Lewis *et al.*, 2007). The role was placed on a statutory footing through the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 section 20, following recommendations in the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (DfES, 2007). From 1 September 2009, governing bodies have been required to appoint a designated teacher and to ensure that they undertake appropriate training. Statutory guidance for England (DCSF, 2009) states that "the designated teacher should have lead responsibility for helping school staff understand the things which affect how looked after children learn and achieve", including promotion of "a culture of high expectations and aspirations"; ensuring young people are involved in setting learning targets; and ensuring that carers "understand the importance of supporting learning at home" (DCSF, 2009, p. 5). The designated teacher is also required to undertake a key role in enabling children to make a smooth transition to a new school or college (DCSF, 2009, p. 5) and to manage engagement with relevant people and agencies outside the school, including carers, social workers and the local authority virtual school.

The relatively small numbers of looked after children, coupled with the diversity of their experiences and needs (Rutter, 2000; Stein, 2006a; Fletcher-Campbell, 2008), means that numbers of looked after children in any individual school are likely to be low, and teachers may be inexperienced in managing the particular challenges presented by looked after children. To date, there has been very little evaluation of the role of designated teachers (Berridge *et al.*, 2008). The research undertaken suggests that although most designated teachers are keen to focus support on individual looked after children, and welcome input from social workers to help them to do so, some were not consulted in advance about taking on the role (Hayden, 2005). None of the ten designated teachers in Hayden's study were given additional time or resources to fulfil their role. In a study by Barnardo's (Hibbert, 2006), 55 of the 61 children in care surveyed were unaware that their school should have a designated teacher for looked after children. Over half of the children in Harker *et al.*'s (2004) study had no knowledge of the role, and few were able to identify their designated teacher. Some young people appreciated the support of the designated teacher but a reluctance to be singled out could limit the extent to which young people would engage with them (Harker *et al.* 2004). Fletcher-Campbell (2008) considers that the different facets of the designated teacher role may best be undertaken by more than one individual and that these children need individually tailored plans and a flexible approach to their negotiation of an education system that operates to established norms of progress.

The dearth of research evidence in relation to designated teachers reflects a wider lack of research in relation to the role of schools in the lives of looked after children (Berridge *et al.*, 2008). This is a significant gap, given that teachers are the adults most commonly cited as being supportive of their education by looked after children (Harker *et al.*, 2004) and that school can play an important role in promoting resilient adaptation and providing a "normalising"

environment for vulnerable children (Gilligan, 2000; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Newman, 2004; Cameron, 2007). Fletcher-Campbell and Archer (2003) studied the reasons for poor attainment of looked after children at Key Stage 4, using data from 12 local authorities and seven case studies. Their findings highlighted the use of inappropriate educational placements which denied young people the opportunity to gain suitable qualifications, the importance of stability of care and educational placements, and the effect of unmet special educational needs on care placements. The study also concluded that preoccupation with their leaving care arrangements could affect students' focus in year 11.

Jackson (2010, p. 56) describes a "strong, and damaging, assumption" that level 2 qualifications represent the highest attainment to which looked after children can aspire, and points out that there remains no government target for participation or attainment beyond year 11. There is no statutory equivalent to the designated teacher for looked after young people in further education colleges, and although the introduction of the pupil premium has prompted payment of greater attention to this group in further education colleges, the support available appears to be patchy and the mechanisms through which it is delivered remain unclear. With the forthcoming raising of the school leaving age to 18, both schools and further education colleges need to ensure the educational needs of looked after children aged 16-18 are met.

Method

In the light of the difficulties in improving educational outcomes for looked after young people at Key Stage 4, coupled with the forthcoming extension of the school leaving age to 18, the research project reported here focuses on the way in which young people might best be supported in their transition to further education. Young people are the primary focus of the research, which employs a longitudinal design. In total, 20 young people were interviewed in year 11 and follow-up interviews are being conducted in years 12 and 13, to elicit care leavers' own perspectives on their educational journey and the support available to them. Young people were accessed through two local authorities who agreed to facilitate the research. Safeguards were built into the access arrangements to ensure that very vulnerable young people were not included, but in order to include a diverse range of young people reflecting the population of looked after children the only inclusion criteria were age and looked after status. Ethical approval was obtained from the Association of Directors of Children's Services as well as the two local authorities and the author's university. The designated teachers of all the young people who were in school were invited to participate and 12 teachers were interviewed. Additionally, four virtual head teachers of local authorities to which the young people were in care were interviewed to provide a contextual and strategic overview of the virtual school system. This paper reports on the views of professional participants.

The teacher participants came from 12 institutions in eight local authorities, comprising six mainstream schools, one academy, one private and two maintained special schools and two alternative providers (or pupil referral units), one maintained and one private. All the mainstream schools included sixth form provision. The three state-funded non-mainstream institutions took young people to the age of 16, but the two private institutions included young people up to 17 and 19, respectively. Of the seven mainstream schools, two were faith schools (one Christian and one Jewish) and two were girls' schools. All five of the non-mainstream institutions were mixed, although the two private schools had only boys on roll. All the designated teachers interviewed had experience of young people looked after by a number of different local authorities, enabling them to compare practice between local authority areas.

The experience of participants in the designated teacher role varied widely. Two were new in the post at the start of that academic year, whilst the most experienced post-holders in the mainstream schools had been designated teachers for nine and ten years, respectively. Consequently, the number of looked after children that participants had worked with ranged from three to around 150. Most participants held a senior post within the school hierarchy and only one was part-time, and he was semi-retired from a senior management position. All had reduced or no teaching loads in light of their additional responsibilities. Of the non-mainstream institutions, the head-teacher took responsibility for looked after children in three and a deputy

head in the other two, although the private institutions did not recognise a named designated teacher role as such. All the non-mainstream institutions had higher proportions of looked after children on roll than the mainstream schools and therefore even where the post was not officially designated, staff often had considerable experience and expertise in the education of looked after young people. Table I summarises the roles and experience of the teacher participants.

The virtual head-teachers (Mr Brook, Ms Lea, Ms Mason and Mr Steel) all came from urban local authorities. Three had extensive teaching experience, one as a head-teacher, one as a deputy head and the other progressing to the local authority's behaviour management service. The fourth virtual head was an educational psychologist. The local authorities had different structural arrangements, with one virtual school being part of the School Improvement Service, and the others placed in Looked After Children services or social care, but in one case the work was contracted out to a private company, which employed the virtual head-teacher.

Findings

Virtual heads recognised that for policy reasons local authority focus has tended to be on Key Stage 4 attainment, and the prevention of young people becoming "NEET" (not in education, employment or training). This has perhaps been at the cost of attention to post-16 provision for looked after young people who attain reasonably well at 16 and to encouraging young people who have not fulfilled their academic potential to enhance their educational qualifications at Key Stage 5. Ms Lea explained, "Maybe they don't achieve at year eleven, but they may by the time they get to year thirteen, and that's never included in the target". Analysis of the data suggested an emerging recognition that young people can often make up considerable ground at Key Stage 5, and commitment to enabling them to do so. Mr Brook stated:

it is very important to try and give [...]. young people [...] a second chance post-sixteen [...] young people who haven't really done very much at all [...] with support, by seventeen, eighteen, have managed to sort of find their feet and begin to gain some [...] qualifications.

Table I Teacher participants^a

Name (school)	Post held	No. of LAC (worked with time in post)	School profile
Mr Black (Ravenscourt)	Assistant head-teacher	3 (4 years)	Mixed voluntary aided faith school
Mr Brown (Woodhall)	Part-time, pastoral leadership role	c150 (10 years)	Mixed academy
Ms Carmine (Redhouse)	Head	2 (2 years)	Private mixed alternative education provision
Ms Coral (Seaview)	Deputy head	9 (2 years)	Mixed pupil referral unit
Mr Green (Fairfields)	Assistant head-teacher	10/11 (18 months)	Mixed community school
Mr Grey (Stonehouse)	Head	c140 (28 years)	Mixed special school, learning and behavioural needs
Ms Gold (Queen's)	Assistant head-teacher	7 (5 years)	Girls' community school
Ms Olive (The Grove)	Head	c70 (7 years)	Private mixed special school, educational/behavioural/social needs
Ms Rose (Garden House)	Inclusion and learning support manager	4 (6 months)	Girls' community school
Ms Tan (Sunnyhill)	Head of Care	c150 (15 years)	Mixed community school educational/behavioural/social needs
Ms Teal (Meadowpond)	Inclusion co-ordinator (senior management)	25-30 (9 years)	Mixed foundation school
Ms White (Clifton)	Inclusion leader, upper school	5 (6 months)	Mixed voluntary aided faith school

Note: ^aPseudonyms for teachers and schools are used to maintain anonymity

It was apparent that this period of young people's lives was regarded by professionals as critical to their long-term success, and that there were both opportunities and particular difficulties associated with the transition to further education for looked after young people. Participants identified a number of characteristics of the looked after population, which created particular challenges in ensuring a successful educational transition at 16, including the high proportion of late entrants into care and behavioural issues. There was widespread concern at the cumulative effect that multiple transitions might have on the attainment of looked after young people in year 11. There was evidence of developing practice in response to the need to adapt to the forthcoming change in the school-leaving age and to support young people who attained well at GCSEs to reach their potential, as well as to address the needs of those who struggled to engage. However, participants also expressed concern at the likely effect of anticipated structural and fiscal changes to the relationship between schools and local authorities. These issues are addressed in turn below.

Key challenges in transition planning

Late entrants into care

In line with national statistics, virtual heads dealt with a transitory population and a large proportion of children entering care in adolescence. A significant advantage of the virtual school system was evidenced in enhanced communication to schools of the background and needs of new entrants into care and better links between social care and education. Another benefit was the ability of virtual heads to work constructively with schools, to challenge them and hold them to account, as well as to support social workers to do so, attributed by participants to their senior status and educational backgrounds. Both groups of professionals highlighted the fact that children entering care in year 8 or later were likely to have a history of instability in their personal lives and their education, including considerable involvement in and understanding of the procedures leading to their entry into care. As a result "they are a lot angrier" (Ms Lea) and "there are all kinds of things that need to go in first before there's going to be any kind of fruitful learning or engagement" (Ms Mason, virtual head). One local authority had experienced a significant influx of young people into care in year 11 as a result of gang activity, and some young people, even in year 11, "couldn't really engage in education, let alone exams, at all" (Mr Brook). Participants also pointed out that raising aspirations in children from families with no background of university education requires working with young people from the start of secondary school, which was often not possible for late entrants into care. The ability to advocate for young people was a key attribute of designated teachers and virtual heads, and both groups highlighted their work in ensuring appropriate school placement, monitoring attendance and preventing exclusions.

The role of schools in transition planning

Notwithstanding references in the statutory guidance (DCSF, 2009) to helping young people make a smooth transition to college, liaison between designated teachers and further education colleges appeared surprisingly limited. For some schools, contact of any kind with colleges seemed to be quite a recent development. Accordingly, although some participants were aware of the post of safeguarding officer in colleges, there was little or no concrete knowledge of what support might be made available for looked after students. Further education colleges were seen to be to a certain extent in competition with schools, and there was perhaps at times a measure of mistrust of the further education estate, although schools acknowledged that colleges offered courses that they could not. Colleges also varied as to their willingness to communicate with schools: one, for example, communicated through their marketing department rather than allowing direct access to tutors. For the most part participants appeared to regard liaison with colleges as the responsibility of the leaving care team and Connexions, and schools did little more than send the student's academic record and references on request. Some schools undertook transition planning work with their looked after children – Meadowpond, for example employed teaching assistants to take young people to visit or undertake sessions at the local college – but with the young person's transfer to the leaving care team, schools became less involved. No designated teachers appeared to have been included in pathway planning, an area

which was identified as a weakness in their authority by two of the virtual heads, with a third virtual school having no involvement because it stopped at 16. Schools were particularly likely to be excluded from transition planning when a young person was looked after by a different local authority than that to which the school belonged, and the local authority were looking closer to home for further education provision.

These are areas in which there is significant potential for virtual schools to facilitate smooth transitions arrangements for young people, and where necessary advocate on behalf of young people, but virtual heads currently report varied practice. Mr Brook, whose virtual school extended beyond 18, considered that the authority had good contacts with local colleges, but in the other local authorities the transition was more problematic. Mr Steel had recently started to focus more on post-16 work, as the virtual school was being extended to 18, but in the other two authorities post-16 education was the responsibility of a different team. Of those, Ms Lea felt that there was good communication between the two teams, but Ms Mason commented that one of the local authority's priorities was "a better system for continuity between school age children and sixteen plus", because "when you look at what actually happens when they come out of the virtual school [...] then it kind of just gets lost".

Designated teachers in non-mainstream settings – usually the head-teacher – were much more focused on transition planning than their colleagues in mainstream schools, but this was something they undertook for all their children. They were acutely aware of their status as provision of "last resort" for the children entrusted to them, and the Pupil Referral Unit heads considered that some schools were pleased to hand over the young person and unwilling to engage further. In some ways there is much that the mainstream sector could learn from such providers, because they have long been used to dealing with resistance by colleges to taking on the young people from their institutions: as Mr Grey observed, "They only want the straightforward ones at college, it's cheaper". A number of participants from alternative providers would have liked to provide ongoing support to 18 for young people, but plans for at least one special school to extend to 18 had been scuppered by funding cuts.

All non-mainstream institutions focused on providing the social skills young people would need to cope in college and were adept at putting together packages that would allow a gradual transition to provide some continuity at the outset. The importance of managing such transitions is demonstrated by the fact that four of the eight young people who had moved from school to college at the end of Key Stage 4 had dropped out or been excluded at the time of the year 12 interviews, suggesting an urgent need for virtual schools to extend beyond 16 and work to engage further education colleges.

Multiple transitions at 16+

A number of participants expressed concern that preparation for GCSE qualifications often coincided with planning for leaving care and moving to college, exacerbating the considerable stress young people were already under. Mr Brook described "a triple whammy, in terms of disruption", referring to young people leaving school, moving from foster care to semi-independent accommodation, and losing their social worker in moving to the leaving care team. Ms Lea termed it a "flashpoint", when "all of a sudden all our really good kids don't want to go to school anymore" and Ms Teal observed, "It's awful, sometimes [...] December onwards in year eleven, you sort of watch it unravel". Designated teachers recognised that sometimes it was unrealistic to expect looked after young people to perform to their maximum academic potential in the face of placement disruption, when their grades were likely to be their "last priority" (Ms White). Ms Gold had advocated successfully through the virtual head for young people to remain in placement post-16 to limit such disruption.

Some participants were concerned that recent funding cuts had resulted in increased pressure being placed on young people. Young people placed out of borough were sometimes told that if they did not achieve the GCSE grades required for sixth form entry, they would be relocated to their home borough to attend college, losing their carer, social worker, school and friends. Such pressure was likely to trigger "all sorts of anxiety, all sorts of acting out, and all sorts of very challenging behaviour [...]" (Ms Teal). Similarly, Mr Steel observed

that young people placed in therapeutic residential care homes outside the authority were brought back into the authority after year 11, again necessitating a change of care and education placement.

In general local authorities endeavoured to avoid placement changes during Key Stage 4, in accordance with regulations[1]. However, the extent to which representation from the virtual school was included in placement decisions varied. Virtual heads sometimes considered that they were not always consulted appropriately, Ms Mason recounting, for example, a young person being moved from a residential home into another area a few weeks before their GCSEs, and taking no exams at all as a result, although they had been predicted to do "really well":

[...] it was a response to a kind of a crisis, but it wasn't the sort of crisis that couldn't have waited a little bit longer [...] we were not part of the decisions, it's all part of this thing where different teams are making different decisions.

Such examples highlight the importance of the virtual head holding a position of seniority within the local authority and wielding influence in both social care and education, to ensure that decisions take into account all aspects of a young person's life.

Ms Mason had experienced children being moved into semi-independent accommodation at 15, a practice she described as "madness", although Mr Brook acknowledged that resource implications played a part, explaining:

Sometimes [...] a placement will change from foster care to semi-independent because it's felt that the young person is ready for that. Sometimes [...] the young person is just not making use of the foster placement, and it's felt that really there is no point in putting the resources where that foster carer could be [...] working with another young person, just bed blocking almost.

Although specialist leaving care services have been associated with increased entry into further education, employment and training (Hai and Williams, 2004; Dixon *et al.*, 2006), there was some evidence that moving to the leaving care team could be a source of considerable anxiety, a concern borne out in some of the interviews with young people. Mr Brown referred to young people feeling as if they had been "dropped" when they transferred to the leaving care team, in line with the findings of Fletcher-Campbell *et al.* (2003) that this transition may be associated with continuity problems in education. Some participants expressed concern that in some local authorities the leaving care team appeared to be staffed by unqualified support workers. One local authority had disbanded their leaving care team in favour of social work continuity, which was regarded as successful by professionals.

School or college?

Professionals considered that the decision as to whether a young person would be best advised to remain at school or move to college at 16 had to be taken on an individual basis. Designated teachers generally considered that remaining in school offered significant pastoral advantages for looked after young people in terms of continuity of relationships, a safe environment and on-going support. However, there were two principal barriers to young people remaining in school: the availability of suitable curricula and young people's willingness and capability to accept the constraints of school when set against the perceived freedom of colleges. A number of participants expressed concern that it would not be fair to allow students into the sixth form if they were not sufficiently academically able or prepared. Somewhat ironically, the introduction of preferential access to high-performing schools for looked after children may have lessened the opportunities for some to remain in school. All seven mainstream schools involved in this study had admissions criteria for sixth form entrance. All also offered some vocational courses, the widest range being available at the academy, but these were relatively limited compared with provision at colleges. Some schools made considerable efforts to arrange a suitable curriculum to enable looked after young people to access their sixth form. Ms Gold, for example, had supplemented a childcare course in school for one young woman with additional study at college, to fill her timetable and because she struggled to conform at school. Similarly, Ms Teal could arrange for joint attendance at Meadowpond and the adjacent special school.

Designated teachers took pride in the fact that almost all of their students continued in education post-16, but they and virtual heads reported high college "drop-out" rates. Designated teachers

were also concerned as to how well vulnerable young people would cope with the social demands, greater level of independence and reduced support that they considered would be their lot at college, whilst acknowledging that for others, the school environment was no longer able to contain their behaviour and meet their desire for independence.

Discussion

Unsurprisingly, given looked after children's generally poor educational outcomes, growing up in state care correlates strongly with social exclusion in adulthood (Stein, 2006b; Jackson, 2007). The vulnerability of such young people in the current economic climate, together with the raising of the age of participation in compulsory education or training to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 (Education and Skills Act 2008, Part 1 and Education Act 2011, s74), renders attention to educational transition at 16 and the support of care leavers' further education of particular importance.

This study is also being conducted at a time when the population of children in care is rising (DfE, 2011c), notwithstanding swinging cuts to local authority budgets, which have disproportionately affected children's social care, especially in authorities with high numbers of looked after children (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2011). Participants to this study had experienced significant budget cuts and at least one virtual school was at risk of closure. One participating virtual school had lost its dedicated year 11 transitions officer in budget cuts, and funding to reduce care leavers who are NEET had run out in another. However, it is also a time when the developments of the last decade are beginning to produce tangible results, with increasing numbers of care leavers accessing higher education (Jackson, 2010). Virtual heads in the study were aware of the need to refocus some of their work, from "supporting those young people post-sixteen, who look as if they are going to fall out of everything" (Mr Brook) to ensuring that able students fulfil their potential at A level and in higher education. As their results improve, looked after young people are able to access a wider range of educational institutions, requiring greater knowledge and expertise on the part of their corporate parent. Virtual schools that extend to 18 and beyond are uniquely placed to offer continuity of support to young people throughout their education career, regardless of changes of education and care placement and geographical moves across local authority boundaries.

Looked after young people's educational needs cannot be addressed separately from their holistic care (Berridge, 2007; Jackson, 2010), but virtual schools are also well-placed to co-ordinate work and ensure effective communication between education and social care, particularly in relation to transition planning. Virtual heads acknowledged that this group of children are unlikely to be a priority for head teachers in schools, but felt that significant progress had been made since the virtual school system was instituted in the sensitivity with which schools responded to the needs of looked after children. This is just one way in which virtual schools can ensure that corporate parenting is able to provide the personal care and individual attention young people need. Another is through ensuring that social workers are equipped to act as educated, knowledgeable parents would, including in understanding the complex qualifications available at 16 and over and working with further education colleges. Virtual heads were able to take a very personal interest in "their" children, including attending personal education plan meetings where appropriate, organising achievement or celebration days and offering personal guidance to young people considering application to university.

Conclusion

This is a small study, and findings are advanced with acknowledgement that the professionals who participated are not necessarily representative of all post-holders. Teachers agreeing to take part in a study such as this are likely to be highly motivated by the challenges of the role and particularly reflexive in their professional practice. Nonetheless, concerns expressed by designated teachers about the options for post-16 study for those who are not eligible for traditional sixth form study at AS and A2 mirrored some of the issues raised in the Wolf report

(Wolf, 2011) concerning the need for greater flexibility of provision for 16-19-year olds. Virtual heads in particular stressed their conviction from experience that young people could often make up the deficiencies in their educational qualifications at Key Stage 4 if facilitated to do so and there is much that could be done in this regard. The key priorities for local authorities should be ensuring that virtual schools extend to 18 or beyond to enable improved transition arrangements from school to college. Consideration should be given to the efficacy of the leaving care team model in comparison to prioritising continuity of social work support at a time of multiple transitions in young people's lives. If the current reforms lead to a wider range of qualifications available in schools post-16, this may enable more young people to remain in a familiar and supportive environment, but it is imperative that attention is paid to support for this cohort in further education colleges and in new educational institutions that are not under the control of local authorities. Whilst the size of further education colleges may render attention to the individual needs of young people more challenging, there are fewer such institutions in each local authority and they are likely to include significant numbers of care leavers by virtue of their size. There is therefore considerable scope for virtual schools collaboration between virtual schools and further education colleges, but this is an area in which research is lacking.

The government's announcement of its intention to make the post of virtual school head statutory is welcome. This study suggests virtual schools can play a valuable role in enabling local authorities to fulfil their statutory duty to promote the educational attainment of looked after children. On the evidence presented here, the virtual school model can promote communication and co-operation between social care and education; ensure that the educational of looked after children is given high priority within local authorities and schools; and facilitate the translation of corporate parenting policy into individual attention to the unique needs of young people. In particular, if extended beyond 16, virtual schools may provide invaluable continuity through educational and social care transitions. Care leavers remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in society (Stein, 2006b; Jackson, 2007): as Ms Lea reflected, "This is a specifically vulnerable group that's not going away [...] whatever the problems are they come with all of them, so if you can get things right for this group it just helps everywhere else really".

Summary of implications for policy and practice

- Poor educational attainments correlate with social exclusion in adulthood.
- The vulnerability of looked after young people is exacerbated by the current economic climate and the raising of the age for participation in education or training.
- Recent legal and practice reforms have increased opportunities for care leavers to access higher education and virtual schools can contribute to this by facilitating cooperation, championing young people's educational needs and maintaining support as care leavers move to adulthood.
- The educational needs of looked after children cannot be addressed separately from their holistic care and support for older teenagers is needed in educational institutions outside local authority control.

Note

1. See the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, regulation 10 for more detail.

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