Education and self-reliance among care leavers

Claire Cameron reports results from a study on the use of services by a group of young people who have left local authority care, where the proportion holding educational qualifications is above the average for care leavers. Using the concept of self-reliance, she explores how care leavers managed and directed their educational participation and achievement against a background of a lack of financial, familial and inter-personal support. The article suggests that care leavers, who have often developed self-reliance skills in highly disadvantaged circumstances, can be misperceived by professionals as being ‘difficult’.

Introduction

The education of children in and leaving care has acquired a policy prominence within the UK after many years of neglect. In 2005, of those leaving care, 43 per cent of young people had at least one GCSE or GNVQ, but only six per cent had five GCSEs graded A*-C. This is about one-fifth of the proportion of all young people gaining five A*-C grades at GCSE. More than half (56%) of care leavers had no qualifications at all, which is seven times as many as other young people leaving school with no qualifications (Office for National Statistics, 2005). Information on higher levels of qualification such as A levels or university degrees was not recorded for care leavers (Department for Education and Skills, 2005: Table 4).

Explanations for the low level of educational attainment include many adverse factors, such as that children who enter care are highly likely to have had disrupted and impoverished early childhoods; and once in care, they often experience numerous changes of placement and school. Major changes in their lives disrupt participation in examination courses, and historically, social services staff have placed insufficient emphasis on the importance of educational participation for children’s future lives (Bebbington, 1998; Broad, 1998; Jackson et al., 2005). In recognition of this, the Children Act 2004 placed a new duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of children they look after.

While the educational outcomes for care leavers are documented, relatively little is known about how young people who have left care perceive educational participation and attainment and how those who do achieve educational success manage to complete their studies, although there is some evidence from retrospective studies (e.g. Jackson and Martin, 1998; Jackson et al., 2005; Mallon, 2007). This article examines these issues further, drawing on data from a larger study of care leavers and other young people ‘in difficulty’ aged 17–24 years and their use of health and other services.

The article argues that care leavers often have a considerable degree of interest in and commitment to education, and that central to their eventual success is their own motivation and initiative-taking, referred to here as ‘self-reliance’. Self-reliance has two dimensions: having confidence in oneself to manage one’s own affairs; and preferring not to have help. These dimensions can operate either simultaneously or independently. Some people are happy to accept help and be independent – or are ‘interdependent’; others distrust offers of help following repeated experiences of being ‘let down’.

The concept of self-reliance used here is close to Stein’s (2005) discussion of ‘resilience’ in care leavers, in terms of their capacity for overcoming the odds and recovering from adverse circumstances and debilitating relationships. On the basis of a review of studies of care leavers, Stein argued that they fell into three groups: those who were ‘moving on’, those who were ‘surviving’ and those who were ‘victims’ of their care experience in

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their current lives. Those care leavers with most resilience were likely to be in the first and second group and less likely to be in the third.

However, in contrast to resilience as used by Stein, which sees care leavers as developing capacities to withstand structural, organisational and familial difficulties, the concept of self-reliance used here incorporates an active dimension. It refers to the young person’s own sense of agency in decision-making and action-taking. Self-reliance is familiar to many care leavers, who have often had to take responsibility for family members beyond that expected of their age peers. It also has normative dimensions associated with independence in that it is widely expected of adults living away from others. Care leavers tend to live independently at a much younger age than their contemporaries (Dixon and Stein, 2005). But self-reliance can also have a negative dimension: being overly self-reliant can be interpreted either as rejecting help from professionals or as lacking the personal resources necessary to accept help. In using the concept of self-reliance, this article endeavours to locate the specific educational experiences of care leavers in terms of available resources within the context both of society’s expectations of young people generally and of the emerging rights and participation agenda among service users of all kinds.

The study

The data in this article are drawn from a larger study (Cameron et al., forthcoming), which had three main data sources: i) literature review; ii) secondary analysis of large-scale datasets to situate care leavers on a continuum of all young people; and iii) an interview study of 80 care leavers, 59 young people ‘in difficulty’ (but not previously looked after in public care) and 29 key service personnel. The aim of the study was to compare the experiences of young people who had been looked after by local authorities with those who had had difficulties but had not been in local authority care, focusing in particular on young people’s access to and use of health, education, housing, employment and other services. A key objective was to identify features of young people’s lives that facilitated service use.

The current article is based on data from 80 care leavers who participated in the third part of the study, and were interviewed between May 2004 and June 2005. Recruiting them was a protracted and difficult process (Wigfall and Cameron, 2006). The intention was to recruit a broadly based sample of care leavers through contacts with 13 local authority leaving care teams across England. Fifty-four care leavers interviewed were clustered primarily in four main areas (one each in the north west, north east, London and south of England), designated as ‘case studies’, from which the other interview respondents were subsequently drawn. Twenty-six care leavers came from non-case study areas.

Staff in leaving care teams were asked to give care leavers information about the study, using the research team’s materials, and to obtain permission for the researcher to contact them. A time gap of at least 12 months was needed between recruitment and interview to allow for care leavers to experience using services. Periodic questionnaires were sent in the interim, with completion rewarded by incentive vouchers. This process helped to build a relationship between the care leaver and the research team and thereby reduce the possibility of study participants losing interest. Over-sampling was used in the questionnaire phase of the study to allow for attraction, with a target set of 60 participants to be achieved in the final sample. In the event, very few of the original sample dropped away or failed to turn up for appointments, resulting in a final sample one-third larger than originally envisaged.

In-depth interviews covering family background, evaluations of local authority care experiences, informal sources of support, use of formal services and future prospects were completed face to face and recorded for later transcription. ¹ Data about service use were coded and entered

¹ All respondents were asked for a preferred pseudonym; these are used in this article.
onto SPSS while NVivo ‘attributes’ were assigned to data about the young people, enabling tables to be easily generated. Analysis was structured initially around the interview schedule questions, although not exclusively: transcripts were coded for data pertaining to questions that emerged in other sections of the interview. For example, questions about accommodation moves frequently generated data about the reasons for moves, such as difficulties with the neighbourhood or educational choices. Analysis then proceeded on a thematic basis, looking in all cases for evidence of the operationalisation of concepts identified from the wider literature on services of potential relevance for care leavers’ experience. Self-reliance was one of these concepts.

The sample of care leavers: some characteristics

The intention to achieve a broadly based sample was achieved. However, care leavers interviewed were more likely to be girls (69%) or from a minority ethnic background (31%) than would be expected in the populations of young people as a whole, or of young people in or leaving care in England.2 The average age of study respondents was 19 years, with most respondents clustered between 18 and 20 years. Twenty-five per cent of study care leavers described themselves as having a disability of some kind, including learning and physical disabilities. Average age for entry into care was 14 years. Overall, respondents were more likely to have entered care between the ages of five and 15 than looked after children as a whole (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

Study care leavers had experienced a range of placement types and length. The most common was long-term foster care (40%), followed by a mixture of foster care and residential care (25%). The remainder had been in and out of care during their childhood, or had had short-term episodes in residential or foster care or had been fostered by relatives. Just over one-third (39%) of study care leavers were living in a council or housing association social tenancy at the time of interview, and just over a fifth (23%) were living with others, with or without support. The remainder were living in a variety of housing projects, residential homes and lodgings, and nine per cent were in private tenancies. Half of care leavers were living in accommodation where they had some autonomy and could ‘shut their own front door’. Of this group of 40 care leavers, 30 were living alone, nine were living with other people and only one had a formal support service connected to the housing provider.

The relationship between autonomy and having enough support can be problematic. Having autonomy in one’s accommodation could be an indicator of self-reliant managing of daily life, or it could mean that the care leaver has insufficient support and feels isolated. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of care leavers thought they had enough support (from all sources including family, friends and formal services) for their daily life, but one-quarter (25%) thought they needed more.

Another indicator of being self-reliant could be the extent to which help from others is sought. When asked about their approach to sorting out problems, over half (58%) of care leavers said they would feel OK asking someone else for help, but a third (35%) said they preferred to sort out their own problems, as exemplified by Becca (20 years, white female), who said, ‘I don’t really like asking other people for help.’ In terms of the two dimensions of self-reliance, the first response could be considered having an interdependent orientation to help, and the second to preferring to act alone.

Furthermore, nearly half (49%) of the care leavers said they did not have any friends or family they could turn to for support. Among those who did identify such sources, almost three-quarters (71%) of care leavers mentioned a parent. These findings suggest that a sizeable minority of care leavers are reliant on their own

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2 The proportion of care leavers from minority ethnic backgrounds reflected the populations in the geographic areas selected for the study.
resources, whether by preference or habit, in addition to formal services. However, 61 per cent of the total of care leavers thought their life was easier at the time of interview than a year previously.

**Educational participation and achievement**

Study care leavers were more likely to have educational qualifications than care leavers nationally (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). This may be due to higher qualified care leavers being more likely to volunteer to take part in the study or it may be because study participants were reporting qualifications obtained after the end of compulsory schooling, which is when national data are collected. Barn *et al* (2005) used a similar age range for a study of care leavers and ethnicity and found that 27 per cent of care leavers aged 16–25 had no qualifications while 47 per cent had at least one GCSE graded A*-G. Table 1 shows that 66 per cent of study care leavers had some educational qualification on leaving school or attained prior to interview. Just over a quarter of the care leavers had attained target GCSEs of at least five A*-C grades. Just over one-third had no school leaving qualifications or had only special certificates for short-term courses which did not have the status of qualifications.

Many study care leavers were participating in education after the end of compulsory schooling. At the time of interview, half of the respondents were involved in some form of education or training or had taken practical steps towards achieving this, such as applying for places on courses. Twenty-eight per cent of care leavers were on a course, 14 per cent were on work-based training and a further ten per cent were between courses, or waiting for courses to begin (see Table 2). However, this still left a sizeable proportion of care leavers (nearly half) who were not in education at a time in their lives when continuing education is, for most young people, a major activity. In 2003, among the general population of young people in this age group, more than half (55%) aged 17–19 were in full-time education, tapering to 22 per cent of all young people aged 20–25 (Office for National Statistics, 2005). However, it is not possible to compare study care leavers with all 19-year-old care leavers. While local authority returns to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) state that 59 per cent of this group are in employment, education or training, the figure for participation in education is not given separately (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

**Assistance with education**

Care leavers were asked what they were doing currently, whether attending college was part of their thinking and who, if anyone, had helped them gain entry to college. To ascertain what helped with education, two methods were used. First

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**Table 1**

Educational qualifications as reported by care leavers – numbers and percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–4 GCSEs (any grade)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ GCSEs (any grade)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target GCSEs (grades A*–C)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None*</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*None includes three care leavers with severe disabilities, one with GCSE equivalent qualifications from Burundi, and awards below GCSE such as NVQ level 1 and special certificates.

**Table 2**

Current educational engagement among care leavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Care leavers</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-based qualification</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-levels</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short course qualification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between courses</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-based training</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short course no qualification</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day centre</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the NVivo attribute data on individual background, such as placement type, were cross-tabulated with having qualifications or not. Second, the discursive data were searched for evidence of assistance given with education from adults working in formal care and education support services. Two are examined here: foster carers and social workers; others may be relevant, such as teachers or birth parents. Although care leavers were not specifically questioned regarding support for educational attainment and participation, data on this emerged when they were requested to give examples of support from formal services. Care leavers holding qualifications and those currently participating in education were then compared with those without qualifications and not currently participating.

**Foster care and foster carers**

Nearly all (90%) of the care leavers who held educational qualifications had at least one placement with foster carers. Long-term foster care was to an extent important to acquiring educational qualifications. Forty per cent (N = 32) of care leavers overall had had a long-term foster care placement, but the proportion was larger, at 50 per cent, among those with educational qualifications. This is consistent with the well-established conclusion that a family base better supports educational achievement than an institutional one (Biehal et al., 1995; Department of Health, 2001; Schofield, 2002).

Too few respondents had had long-term residential care or schooling to make meaningful comparisons on placement type. Where care leavers had had a mixture of placements on a long-term basis, they were more likely not to have educational qualifications. Thirty-eight per cent of those with no educational qualifications had experienced this type of placement history, compared with 20 per cent of those with educational qualifications.

While it is likely that those with long-term foster care experience are also those with fewer educational and other difficulties, the association of long-term foster care with higher educational attainment was striking when examining the highest achievers at GCSE. Table 3 shows that 24 (of the 32) who had lived in foster care on a long-term basis had five or more GCSEs or target GCSEs of five or more A*-C grades.

A comparison of care leavers with educational qualifications with those without, focusing on their comments about foster carers, including whether they were still in touch at the time of interview, showed that the former group were more likely to have broadly positive views of their foster carers (61%) than the latter (48%).

However, during interviews very few spontaneous comments were made about foster carers’ involvement in education. Only four respondents mentioned foster care as positively supporting educational achievement, for example providing an environment in which educational participation and success were valued and resources made available for study. Ellie (18 years, white female) said:

“They [foster carers] made me go to school, came out with four As. If I hadn’t gone to foster carers I don’t know what would have happened.”

Matthew (18 years, white male) had completed A levels at the time of interview, despite disruptions in his home life, and was waiting to find out if he had obtained sufficiently high grades to take up a place

![Table 3](image-url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of care</th>
<th>Educational qualification</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5+ GCSEs (any grade)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Target GCSEs (grade A*-C)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostered by relatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘In care’ episode/s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term foster care</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term mixed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term residential</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term foster</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term residential</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in his preferred university. He had been supported through the final stages of schooling by his foster carers, both of whom were teachers, and he planned to stay with them during the university vacations as a private arrangement. Several young people referred to foster care as being part of a ‘normal’ family. It may be that where foster care works well, and a child feels part of ‘normal family life’, educational participation is supported because school attendance becomes an unremarkable and normative expectation.

However, 12 (out of 51 with educational qualifications and any foster care experience) young people had had negative experiences of foster care, and in two cases this directly affected their education. In both examples, the foster carer reportedly questioned the young person’s academic abilities, suggesting that he or she was ‘thick’ or ‘stupid’ and was not capable of going to college, despite having obtained GCSEs, but should instead go to work and pay rent. Other complaints concerned foster carers being overly strict, differentiating between birth children and foster children, and foster placements which were culturally inappropriate, such as a mixed-race young person being sent to Asian foster carers although herself unaccustomed to Asian cultural practices. Ekua (21 years, white female) explained that she attained her GCSEs despite lack of support from her foster carer ‘because when I was at school I did work and I did pay attention’. Arguably Ekua was being self-reliant; and also exercising resilience (Stein, 2005).

Social workers
Respondents’ references to help from social workers often confused social workers while in care with leaving care workers once they had left. For the most part, comments discussed here refer to social workers while in care. Few comments were made about social workers helping young people to remain in education or pursue educational goals. Overall, 17 of the 53 study care leavers with some educational qualifications said they could ‘talk to’ their social workers (in general) compared to five of the 27 without qualifications. This may reflect a more confiding relationship with social workers established by care leavers who achieved educational success (already more likely to be in long-term foster care).

However, twice as many (18 out of 53) care leavers with educational qualifications said they ‘didn’t like’ their social workers relative to those without qualifications (4 out of 27). Many of the comments under this heading concerned not being able to confide in social workers, having trust betrayed, not being listened to and being coerced into specific action in the face of threats. For example, Chanu (20 years, Asian male), said ‘sometimes they frighten you with losing the flat or being sent somewhere else, so that you behave yourself’. The fact that some care leavers still attained their educational qualifications, despite failings in this type of support service, suggests that for some young people, having a trusting and confiding relationship with a social worker is not critical to educational success.

In some cases, social workers had actively supported educational plans, such as the worker who helped to argue Lulu’s (18 years, white female) cause when the local authority planned to withdraw financial support for her college course. Jonathan (20 years, white male) cited his local director of social services as a source of support when he gained a university place after doing voluntary work within the department. But in other cases, lack of conviction in a young person’s goals was evident. Ryan (18 years, white male) was pressured by his social worker to go to a college she maintained was more suitable than the one he had favoured since the age of ten. Ignoring her advice, Ryan was proud to have come out with ‘alright grades’ contrary to her predictions: ‘She said I wouldn’t last two months there.’

Self-reliance
Among those currently attending college (which included further education, university, sixth-form college or other vocational college), the predominant themes in response to questions about how they arranged entry and managed participation were self-reliance and taking the initia-
tive. Fourteen of those in college recounted examples where they had been the principal agent of their educational direction and success.

Among these 14, examples given of self-reliance included getting ‘myself through school’, exhorting all care leavers to ‘have a reality check and get on with it’, following up information and going unaccompanied to enrolment days, ringing up universities and applying through UCAS, and realising that:

*I needed to be in education, or in a job where I could get a career out of it. I want to do something with my life because I have seen how bad it can be with other people.*

Some mothers with young children were attending college and this group was especially self-reliant. As Sarah A (22 years, white female) explained:

It is a lot of homework…’cos you come home and you have to cook. And then after you’ve put them to bed you just want to sit down, but then you’ve got loads of homework. Yes, it does keep you busy.

Self-reliance also took the form of self-development. One young woman, DG (18 years, white) said she had ‘seen a great improvement in myself since attending college’. Another young man had demonstrated self-reliance in serving both his own interests and those of his younger brother. Ian (24 years, black African male) and his brother had arrived in the UK as unaccompanied asylum seekers. Ian wanted to set a good educational example for his brother. He received no help from carers to negotiate entry to college or university; he did not tell his university tutor about his background and found claiming housing and other benefits so traumatic he took out expensive personal loans to pay rent and living expenses while at university.

Among those young people not currently attending college, the study revealed eleven examples of self-reliance related to planning for education or skill development. This was a group interested in self-improvement. As Tee (22 years, black African) with two young children said, ‘achievement comes from you. I’m just waiting for the right time to get back into college’.

Many of the young people in this group had started college and then either changed subjects or institutions or stopped going altogether. Negotiating change was something that was largely self-organised. John A (18 years, white male) found out about a training scheme through a friend and changed from a subject about which he was unenthusiastic to one he was confident he would enjoy. Simon (20 years, white male) had never previously contemplated becoming a student, but was:

*thinking about enrolling in college again to complete my painting and decorating courses… Just so I’ve got a little bit more experience because that’s basically what I want to do… [I’ve been] asked… to start up a business… [and] I like to do things that challenge us.*

Similarly, Sam (24 years, white female) said:

*I don’t want to go to college [to train to become a social worker, but] if I have to go to training, then I’ll do it… I think I need to do something about it. And then when I choose what I want to do then I think the services… will help me.*

Other young people anticipated college as something in the future after they had sorted out other difficulties and could ‘move on’, or, as Darren (18 years, white male) said, had ‘saved sufficient money just to keep me going when I’m up there’. The image of the care leaver as self-reliant principal agent vividly emerges through these accounts.

**Lack of support**

Self-reliance needs to be considered within a context. The care leavers in this study were often self-reliant *and* managing with limited support for education from formal services. Fourteen of those currently participating in education and 17 of those not currently in education reported one or more incidents of lack of
support, either for their current education or for their plans for education in the future.

Among those in education, a major difficulty was inadequate and fragmented financial support, particularly for those in further education who also bore sole responsibility for housing costs. For example, Angel (18 years, black African female), was ‘not getting the support I need at the moment’, even though she was at college studying for A levels. She was entitled to neither income support, nor Education Maintenance Allowance\(^3\) because she was also working part time to gain relevant work experience in social services before going to university. Lulu (18 years, white female) claimed that she would be pressured to work full time to pay her rent and bills, thereby jeopardising both her college course, and subsequently the opportunity of a university place, if social services forced her to go on Jobseeker’s Allowance rather than supported her financially.

Lack of support from foster carers and social workers has been noted above. Other examples where support appeared lacking included the Connexions service, reported to be unhelpful when approached; difficulties with accommodation which got in the way of completing college commitments; and shortage of affordable child care that had temporarily halted four young mothers in their pursuit of further education plans.

However, the most basic lack of support was an inadequate school education while in care. Sev (18 years, white male) was on work-based training. He echoed the perspectives of many care leavers with few or no qualifications when he said:

\[
I\text{ haven’t actually come out of care with any kind of education. I went to college but it didn’t work out. I didn’t finish my course. I couldn’t actually deal with the situation.}
\]

Care leavers not currently in education cited even more instances when support had been lacking, drawn from an equally wide range of sources. Nine of this group reported dropping out of college, due to a variety of problems: funding, housing, family difficulties, homelessness, lack of incentive from workplaces, inadequate preparation for the course, or recognition that the course was not the right one for them.

Becca’s experience (20 years, white female) illustrates what can happen when financial support evaporates. She had been studying for a diploma, with no financial support, when her application for a £30 a week grant to help with travel costs was refused. To meet her rent obligations she ‘had to pack in college to be able to keep the flat on’. Dropping out of college for her was a ‘dream being taken away’. In the same way, Victoria (19 years, white female) had been caught between educational ambition and independent living. She said:

\[
\text{There was problems . . . I was living as an independent in that flat and going to college, which was hard. It was really difficult. And I couldn’t cope with it.}
\]

When interviewed, she said she had not ‘really got time to study’.

Financial problems also stopped Anita (18 years, white female) from going to college because she ‘hadn’t been able to crack the funding’. She had begun a course but left to take on a job because the subject was not what she wanted to do. If she now walked out of her job, she predicted she would face six months without benefits and nothing to live on before she could contemplate a return to education. The prospect of future debt incurred through studying was also off-putting. Cheyenne (20 years, African-Caribbean female) described herself as motivated by money. She wanted to become a social worker but doubted her ability to cope with:

\[
\text{university, three years of studying and unnecessary debt and [I] might not have}
\]

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\(^3\) EMA is a benefit payable to young people from poorer backgrounds and designed to support participation in further education.
a job at the end of it. If someone could tell me I’d get no university debts I’d be more inspired to go.

Some care leavers reported a perceived lack of support from college authorities themselves. Mel (19 years, white female) was frustrated to be kept on menial tasks rather than permitted to take on the full range of required activities for her hairdressing course, and Nikita (18 years, Asian female) lost her college place following her absence for an urgent family trip to Bangladesh, despite having notified the college in advance. Naomi (21 years, black African female) reported being denied a place on an access to social work course until she had ‘proved’ herself to the tutor by first attending English, maths and IT courses, even though she already held GCSEs in these subjects. With two young children, Naomi had had no choice but to apply to the local college; she commented that she was ‘really struggling in getting into [the course] . . . it’s really getting me down’.

Three other care leavers had secured college places but failed to take them up. Billie (18 years, white female) blamed her lack of schooling, claiming she ‘needed teaching first, because I didn’t know very much’ while Frankie (19 years, white female) was let down by her social worker who had not registered her in time. The third was Ekua (21 years, white female), whose foster carers told her she should work in McDonalds rather than follow through her original plan to attend college.

It is possible that during interviews, care leavers were highlighting their own contributions rather than those of others when considering their use of services and their evaluation of support. Nevertheless, the consistency of these examples shows how care leavers were strongly influenced either to take up education, or not to do so, by the degree of support from formal and informal sources, as well as from financial and organisational sources. Those young people currently not in education were by no means uninterested in self-development, as evidenced by the sizeable minority who had tried attending college courses in the past or intended to do so in the future.

Possible changes: lessons from care leavers

The group of care leavers interviewed for this study were better educationally qualified at GCSE level than care leavers as a whole. The findings therefore give valuable insights into the levels of support needed to achieve such educational outcomes. In contrast to the policy rhetoric about this group, which emphasises their problems (cf, Department for Education and Skills, 2006), a significant number of study care leavers held an ‘education ethic’ that underpinned their desire to study and to achieve educational success.

In many cases, the key to success was reliance on their own resources, taking the initiative, rather than relying on any external sources of formal support, regardless of availability.

In practice, support for educational participation was often substantially lacking. The obstacles were both structural, particularly for those attending further education colleges, who struggled to achieve their educational goals while trying to balance access to welfare benefits and independent living, and also interpersonal, from professionals responsible for providing opportunities and support in colleges, and from social workers.

By exploring care leavers’ views of and experiences in education, the evidence from this study suggests that there are valuable lessons to be learned for the policy agenda of widening participation in education. The first step might be to recognise the value of interrogating current policies on housing, financial support and educational participation from the perspective of care leavers who, without family support, have had first-hand experience of trying to negotiate further education in the face of earlier poor school experience. A second step might be to acknowledge that for care leavers, like other young people, pathways through major institutions and service areas may not be linear. Their progress may advance and recede in waves, over time building knowledge and skills on some fronts while facing new problems on others.
Conclusion
In many areas of their lives – access to support, sorting out difficulties, dealing with living arrangements, resolving health problems – study care leavers were largely reliant on themselves. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that care leavers expressed their educational participation in self-reliant terms as well. However, as noted in the introduction, increasing educational attainment for care leavers is now a policy target. Ensuring children’s educational participation while in local authority care is a condition of being a ‘corporate parent’. One might expect therefore, that formal services such as foster care and social services would be highly proactive in working with young people to ensure educational participation and success. That this was not often reported by care leavers may reflect a time lag between policy and practice; it may reflect poor professional practice; or it may reflect care leavers’ construction of themselves as principal agents rather than partners in their management of present and future service use. If the latter applies, this may suggest that professionals need to adjust their ways of working to ensure that self-reliance is valued as a normative, contextualised approach to addressing care leavers’ orientations towards formal service use, without also implying that support is not needed. Furthermore, they need to guard against interpreting self-reliance and self-advocacy, which are functional in the longer term, as difficult behaviour. Endorsing this view, care leavers in the study praised their leaving care workers where they both ‘understood’ the young person’s self-reliant approach and also provided practical and emotional support when required.

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