Foster care and higher education

Sonia Jackson and Sarah Ajayi report findings from the first UK study of young people in care who go to university. They suggest that foster care could play a major role in enabling more looked after children to access higher education and complete their courses successfully.

It is still an exceptional achievement for a young person in care to go to university. There are no reliable figures but the most optimistic official estimate is that six per cent of care leavers now continue into higher education. This represents an improvement on the one per cent estimate of the Social Exclusion Unit in 2003, but still compares very poorly with the figure of 39 per cent for the general school population. Two retrospective studies (one of them reported in this issue) found that some care leavers who have had little success at school return to education in their 20s and 30s, but they are almost certainly a small minority (Jackson and Martin, 1998; Mallon, 2007).

This article draws on the findings of a prospective longitudinal study of university students who had spent all or part of their childhood in care and were still looked after by a local authority at the age of 16. The research aims were to find out how these young people achieved an educational level so much higher than most looked after children, how they fared once they entered university and how effectively they were supported by their local authorities. The study, known as By Degrees, was commissioned by an educational charity, the Frank Buttle Trust, and funded by a consortium of other charities and the Department for Education and Skills (DFES). The findings of the research are reported in more detail elsewhere (Jackson et al, 2003, 2005). In this article we focus on the role of foster care, both in helping young people to achieve the academic results required to apply for university entrance and in continuing to provide emotional and practical support during their time at university. We conclude by considering how foster care might be used more purposefully to widen participation in higher education by young people in and leaving care.

The By Degrees study

Participants in the study were all volunteers, referred by local authority lead officers for the education of looked after children or by leaving care teams. All local authorities in England and Wales were contacted repeatedly, asking them to put the researchers in touch with any young people in or leaving care who were known to have applied for places on degree-level courses. Despite expressing support for the objectives of the research, many local authorities responded that they knew of no care leavers proposing to enter higher education, and a few admitted that no young person in their care had ever gone to university. So although we cannot know if the volunteers were typical of all children in care who go to university, it seems probable that they represented a high proportion of this very select group. Over 90 per cent of those contacted by the research team agreed to take part in the study.

The criteria for inclusion were that the young person had been looked after for a year or more, was in care at the age of 16 and had been offered a place to study at degree level in a higher education institution. Three successive cohorts of university or college entrants were tracked through their university careers, the first group up to the first year after graduation, the second for two years and the third group for their first year only. All participants were interviewed face to face on the first occasion and on two or three further occasions, in some cases by telephone.

Despite initial doubts as to whether it
would be possible to recruit an adequate research sample, over 50 individuals volunteered to participate in each year. However, not all were eligible, some failed to take up their university places and others could not be contacted for interview so that the final achieved samples were 46 for the first cohort, entering university in September/October 2001, 37 for the second, and 46 for the third. One hundred and twenty-nine participants were still in contact with the research team when the study ended in 2005 and several of them are continuing to collaborate with the researchers to disseminate the findings.

To date this remains the only UK study of higher education students with a background in care but there is increasing interest in the United States in the barriers to college attendance for 'foster youth' and the problems they experience and a growing body of research-based literature. Despite the very different context, the findings of the limited available research are remarkably similar to those of the By Degrees study (Casey Family Foundation, 2003; Wolanin, 2005). Initial participation in post-secondary education by young people leaving care is much higher in the US than in this country (around 50%) but very few stay the course, with some studies reporting drop-out rates of up to 80 per cent (Elze et al., 2005). In most European countries drop-out rates from university are higher for all students than in the UK but there are no figures available for participation of young people from a background in public care.

**Characteristics of the participants**

Basic information about young people who volunteered to take part in the By Degrees study was obtained by means of a short postal questionnaire which was followed up for those who qualified for inclusion by a semi-structured interview in which they were asked to tell the researchers the story of their lives so far in their own words. This covered their birth family, the reasons why they had come into care as far as they knew them, their placement history, educational attainment and school experience, sources of financial and emotional support and what it was like to be a university student with a care background. We wanted to know if and in what way they differed from other children in care and to document their experiences of university life.

Comparing them with the care population in general, we found females were over-represented, particularly in the third cohort, of which 70 per cent were women. As Table 1 shows, the participants also included a high proportion of young people from a minority ethnic background. Overall, 16 per cent of the research participants had come to the UK as unaccompanied asylum seekers. This may partly account for the relatively large number (60%) who had entered the care system late, aged 14 or older. However, there were also some individuals (almost 20%) who had been looked after since early childhood.

Asylum seekers often differed in important respects from indigenous children, not only in race and ethnicity. They tended to be much more educationally ambitious than UK-born care leavers. Their birth parents were much more likely to have educational and professional qualifications and to have given the children a sense of the vital importance of education. Therefore it is possible that the more promising figures for children in care continuing into higher education being reported by a few local authorities may be artificially inflated by their presence.
Not surprisingly, the *By Degrees* participants had done much better at school than most looked after children, although, with some exceptions, their achievements were unremarkable compared with the general population. The average number of GCSE passes was nine for females and eight for males; 70 per cent in Cohorts 1 and 2 and 91 per cent in Cohort 3 achieved five or more passes with A*–C grades, compared with six per cent (at the time) for all looked after children. It is interesting to note that only four of the 129 research participants had attended high-ranking secondary schools (defined as 90% of pupils achieving five GCSE passes at A*–C grades) and many told us that they had been allocated to schools with poor academic records which had empty places. This point is addressed in the government Green Paper *Care Matters*, which states that in future local authorities will be encouraged to ‘navigate the system’, as parents do, to place children in care in top performing schools (Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

The academic difficulties of looked after children are often attributed to the shortcomings of their birth families and to pre-care traumatic experiences (Aldgate *et al*, 1999; Schofield *et al*, 2000; Berridge, 2007). There was no shortage of these in the histories of the *By Degrees* participants. The reasons why they had come into care conformed very closely to those given in government statistics for all looked after children. For almost exactly the same proportion – 61 per cent – abuse or severe neglect was the main reason why they were living away from home. Over 80 per cent said they had experienced some form of abuse. Other important reasons were alcoholism, drug misuse and mental illness, particularly of mothers. Many of those who came from overseas had been caught up in violent conflict and experienced extreme privation in the process of escape. Several gave us graphic accounts of travelling to the UK in the backs of lorries, arriving cold and hungry, only to be quickly abandoned by their escorts, and in some cases left destitute.

### Placement experiences

Students entered university from a variety of different living situations. Sixty per cent were in foster care or supported lodgings. Of the rest, most were living independently, usually in local authority flats, and a few were staying with friends and relatives. Only one participant went on to higher education directly from residential care. Most residential units still expect young people to leave at age 16, so even if, unusually, they were doing well at school at that point, their opportunity to continue in education was severely limited. Almost a third of the participants had spent time in children’s

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*Table 2*

Educational attainment of *By Degrees* participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cohort 1</th>
<th>Cohort 2</th>
<th>Cohort 3</th>
<th>All care leavers aged 16+ 31 March 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5+ GCSE A*–C</td>
<td>32 (70%)</td>
<td>27 (71%)</td>
<td>42 (91%)</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ GCSE A*–G</td>
<td>45 (98%)</td>
<td>37 (100%)</td>
<td>45 (98%)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ GCSE A*–G</td>
<td>41 (89%)</td>
<td>37 (100%)</td>
<td>38 (83%)</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ A level A–E</td>
<td>24 (52%)</td>
<td>22 (59%)</td>
<td>28 (61%)</td>
<td>not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ A/S level A–E</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
<td>14 (38%)</td>
<td>17 (37%)</td>
<td>not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ GVNQ pass</td>
<td>14 (30%)</td>
<td>7 (19%)</td>
<td>10 (22%)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ BTECH pass</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
<td>9 (19%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source for national figures: National Statistics Bulletin January 2005 based on 61,100 children looked after; 53% of young people who ceased to be looked after aged 16+ had no qualifications
homes, mostly for brief periods, and only one reported a positive experience. Others commented how difficult it was to study in the residential environment. Colin told us:

I was the only child in the home who went to school. I had work to do and the other kids would be kicking off, sometimes all night, and I had to go to school in the morning. The others had no motivation. The staff didn’t push them. One of the boys was doing well at school until he came into the home. He was really bright. But within five months he had given up going to school, had started smoking and was using drugs. The only person who helped me was the only educated one, the one with a degree . . . The location was half the problem. They should put children’s homes in a respectable area, not one where there’s scallys hanging round every corner.

Other accounts were less extreme, but almost all commented on the lack of opportunity to read or study and the absence of any interesting or stimulating activities in the home. This is a sadly consistent finding dating back to the 1970s (Berridge, 1985; Jackson, 1987).

Our respondents told us that staff showed little interest in their school experience beyond occasional enquiries about whether they had done their homework. Asked to what she attributed her academic success, Samantha said, ‘I was lucky – I’ve never been in a children’s home. That’s like being thrown on the educational scrapheap.’

By contrast, most of those who had a relatively long-term foster placement (two years or more) spoke very warmly of their foster families and the support and encouragement they had received from them. In some cases this was a late placement after a series of less successful ones. Boris and his brother were in and out of care for several years as a result of their mother’s alcohol problem, culminating in her death in particularly traumatic circumstances. They had seven different foster homes before their final placement, from which both went on to university.

Most of the participants had not attended school regularly until they came into care and reported that their attainment was well below what was expected for their age. The majority attributed their educational recovery partly to their own motivation but also, in large part, to the remedial efforts of their foster carers and
the feeling that there was somebody who really cared about what happened to them at school and wanted them to succeed.

Stacey came into care when her mother had a breakdown. She always wanted to do well at school:

*I didn’t want to be a drop-out and just settle for a job. I always wanted to go to university from an early age . . . I had this weird drive even though I had things on my mind.*

She looks back with gratitude to her foster home:

* Marian would do word games with me. I think that helped a lot. She was really encouraging and all for education. *

Dahlia was fortunate to have the same social worker from the age of four and a stable foster placement throughout her childhood. Owing to her mother’s mental illness she never went to school before coming into care:

... we used to ride around on the buses all day . . . So when I arrived with my foster carers when I was almost seven I couldn’t even read or write. And my foster mum, Monica, she read with me every night and every moment possible, so eventually I got to the same level as the children in my class.

Later Dahlia went to a Catholic secondary school, the same one that her two elder foster sisters attended, and can’t remember a time when she didn’t want to go to university like them, ‘the natural sort of step to take next’:

* Monica and Martin didn’t have the opportunity to go to university themselves but they’ve encouraged all three of us to work hard and make ourselves into something. *

Many of the research participants referred to the structure, discipline and consistency that they experienced in their foster homes, in contrast to the chaotic conditions in their birth families. Dahlia’s foster parents knew how to create an environment that harnessed the educational interest and success of their children:

* Martin and Monica are quite strict as foster parents . . . like I couldn’t go out on a school night; I had to stay in and do my work. I couldn’t watch telly like my friends were doing. At the time it does seem a bit annoying, but she just treated me the same way as her own daughters. I’m thankful to her because it just is a hard slog getting all the work done and then there was netball and orchestra to fit in as well.*

Sandra was placed with her grandparents after several episodes when her mother, who had an alcohol problem, left her alone in the house and she was severely neglected:

* Nothing is too much for them if it is to help my education. My granddad would always drive me around, and if there was hockey or netball tournaments he was always willing to help transport us or pick me up late from school if I was doing after-school classes. I was a bit disappointed with my A levels, because I thought I would disappoint them, but they said nothing I did could disappoint them.*

Fenella said of her foster mother:

* She’s lovely my mummy. She’s a great person, funny and entertaining. She was the best thing that could have happened to me. Her main ethic is ‘education, education, education’. She used to make me learn similes and metaphors, long division, fractions and decimals. She used to leave me sums to do when she went to work.*

When she was 16 her (foster) mother told social services that Fenella would be going to university. She felt that her (foster) mother was behind her ‘150 per cent’. Damien was born in Uganda and came to England when he was 13. He was placed with temporary foster carers because of conflict with his mother and the temporary placement turned into a very supportive long-term relationship:
Well, when I first got there, you know, I was really keeping to myself most of the time. But they kind of gave me my space. They gave me my room, they got everything I needed to study. You know, they didn’t say, 'As long as you study we’ll support you.' They just cared. I was given advice but not told what to do. They are really nice. And when they got paid they gave me some of the money to do the kind of adventurous activities I like to do, which tend to cost a lot . . .

I mean, they are proud of me, you know. They’ve come to presentations when I was getting awards and everything else. And they’re pleased.

 Asked why he chose the university he attended, he said:

I looked in The Times and this is one of the top universities, so . . . It’s far enough away from home for me to be able to do anything I want to do and close enough for me to go home and have Sunday dinner.

In his second year Damien was still phoning his foster parents every week and turned to them or his foster brothers whenever he had a problem. Although they had helped him financially, it was their emotional support that he valued most.

It is noteworthy that in over a third of the foster families one or both parents were graduates, a much higher proportion than among foster carers generally, of whom only five per cent have a qualification equivalent to NVQ3, and most left school with no GCSEs or O levels. There were also likely to be older children in the family who had gone to university and could provide practical advice as well as acting as role models. Even carers who did not have educational qualifications themselves were said by their foster children to value education highly and consider school very important. Many paid for educational equipment, such as books and computers, when the local authority was unwilling to do so, or fought for extra support in school or private coaching for children who had fallen behind due to interruptions in their schooling.

However, not all foster carers were in a position to help financially; many were dependent on welfare benefits or very low earnings (Triseliotis et al, 2000). A recent report by the Fostering Network found that three-quarters of foster carers are paid less than the minimum wage and 40 per cent only receive the fostering allowance with no element of payment, even though only 12 per cent work full time outside the home. Nearly 20 per cent are dependent on income support or Jobseeker’s Allowance (Fostering Network, 2007).

Some local authorities operate a policy, driven by their financial departments, of cutting off the fostering allowance on the young person’s 18th birthday, irrespective of the point they have reached in their educational career. It is perhaps too easy to feel critical of foster carers like the single woman whose allowance was abruptly ended on Stephanie’s 18th birthday, a few weeks before she was due to sit A levels. Stephanie had been in this placement for seven years but she was told she would have to leave at once to make way for a new foster child, for whom the local authority would pay. Stephanie experienced this as a devastating rejection. Not surprisingly, her A level results fell far below her predictions and she was fortunate that her social worker found her supported lodgings with a landlady who strongly encouraged her to persist with her educational aims and even persuaded the university to hold a place for her. Nevertheless, it was a year before she recovered sufficiently to start her course.

There are still some authorities where foster placements are ended even earlier. One young woman, aged just 17, was told that she would have to find her own accommodation at the start of her A level course because the placement was needed for a younger child. However, foster carers did not always fall in with local authority plans: some protested vehemently when inappropriately timed moves were suggested and succeeded in continuing to provide a home for the young person they were looking after.
Participants who were able to remain in established foster placements up to the point where they started their university courses had a much more ‘normal’ experience than those who left care earlier. Often foster carers would drive them to university and help to settle them in, just as most parents do. However, there were some sad accounts of ex-care students who had to struggle to transport their possessions on trains and buses and described how lonely and isolated they felt as they watched their contemporaries unloading fridges and television sets from the family car.

Staying the course
Foster families were named as an important source of support, particularly during the first year, by almost all of the participants who had experienced a good foster placement. Some of the research participants found it very hard to settle into university life and often said they might have dropped out without the encouragement and support not only of foster parents but also of older foster siblings. Many, like Damien, went home to their foster families every weekend in the early stages, as well as in the vacations. By the second year they had usually made friends and moved out of university accommodation into shared houses and flats, but continued to keep in close touch with their former foster carers by telephone and, increasingly, email. In the final interviews with Cohort 1 participants, four years after they started their courses in 2001, foster carers were still likely to be placed high on the list of the five most important people in the young person’s life.

Picking up the pieces
Despite their success in obtaining university places, many of the students struggled to cope with the academic demands of their chosen courses. They tended to attribute this to the frequent interruptions to their education caused by the volatility of their birth families, changes of placement and periods out of school. In addition to gaps in their knowledge, many of them referred to a lack of basic study skills and difficulty in organising their work. This showed up particularly after the first year when longer and more complex assignments were set. Being a slow reader was a problem that was often mentioned, sometimes attributed to lack of encouragement to read and limited access to books in childhood (Griffiths, 2000). One student, despite having done very well in the early part of his course, was so daunted by the prospect of a third year dissertation that he decided to opt for an HND (Higher National Diploma) instead of a degree. Among the first cohort only half passed all their assessments at the first attempt and those who had come to university by the ‘non-traditional’ route – GNVQ or BTech – seemed to have the most difficulty. Some students became discouraged and considered dropping out. In these cases the foster family often played a crucial role in encouraging them to persevere, and almost all did so. For the few who gave up the struggle, support from a foster family was even more important in enabling them to overcome the experience of failure and maintain their self-esteem.

Students with a close, continuing relationship with a foster family were less likely to leave university prematurely than those living independently before they started their courses. This is perhaps surprising, since the latter group would have had more experience of managing everyday living and budgeting and might have been expected to be more competent at managing the practical aspects of university life. However, it illustrates the great importance of the emotional support offered by foster carers.

Being able to return to a foster home during vacations significantly reduced the stress of college life. Students who lived independently were inclined to use the holidays to work full time in order to reduce indebtedness or save money for the following year. As a result, they sometimes returned for the new semester already tired, leaving them less able to cope with the next tranche of academic work.

Problems in foster care
It would be misleading to suggest that foster care, as experienced by the By
Degrees participants, was problem free. Foster placements were reported as varying widely in quality. Muddah was a refugee from the war in Liberia. He twice asked to change placement because his foster carers showed so little concern for his education and there was nowhere in the house where he could study, but his first move was out of the frying pan into the fire:

_I went to a second foster carer, she wasn’t very nice; she wasn’t support at all in my education side, she don’t know how good I am in school, what is my homework; she never asked so always I feel very bad. It’s like they don’t care, it was just about giving your pocket money, your bus fare, your lunch money; they don’t know what’s going on with me with my education, what I’m finding difficult, whether there is any help and support available for me . . . because I know if there was I could do even much better in my GCSEs._

He contrasted this strongly with his third foster placement, where the children of the family were all at college or university and spent a lot of time talking to him about it. This reinforced his ambition to continue in education as far as he could go:

_I’m not clever; I find studying very very difficult. I just work hard because I want to get somewhere, and my foster carer was very interested in my education. It was part of everyday life. Five days a week Monday to Friday, every day she need to know my homework, she need to see my books, she need to speak to my teacher._

By the time of his final interview Muddah was speaking fluent, grammatical English and flourishing socially and academically, with continuing support from his former foster carers.

Abby, a young woman of outstanding academic ability, who eventually achieved ten GCSEs with As and A*s and three A levels with top grades, had two very unsatisfactory short placements and was then placed with a single woman who looked after several younger children. Because the foster carer was white, social workers repeatedly tried to move Abby to a black family, including a week before her GCSEs. She resisted, not because she was happy in the placement, but to avoid disrupting her exam preparation. The foster carer took no interest at all in her achievements and made her eat by herself in a separate room from the rest of the family. Her main support came from a school friend’s mother, who gave her a computer to work on for her A levels, and her Further Education college tutor, who encouraged her to apply to a top university which offered her a place to read law.

Having no contact with her birth or foster family and inadequate financial support from her local authority, Abby found university life a struggle. The university prohibited paid work during term time and her social worker’s idea of contributing to her academic expenses was £15 a term for books, about a tenth of what she needed. As a black woman in an overwhelmingly white environment she felt very much alone and at one point was depressed to the point of needing hospital treatment.

A few carers, perhaps because they had had bad experiences of school themselves, ridiculed educational aspirations and actively undermined the young person’s efforts to do well, for instance by playing loud music or turning up the sound on television when they were trying to revise for exams. They usually did not see it as their business to attend parents’ evenings or school events. Many foster homes were very busy, noisy places, with people coming and going all the time and little opportunity for reading or concentrated study. Shared bedrooms, especially with a younger child, were unsatisfactory places to do homework. Most problems were reported as having occurred in earlier placements, in contrast to a final successful placement, which provided the launch pad for the young person to apply for a university place.

The local authority as corporate parent

The possibility that children in care might continue into further and higher education was envisaged as far back as 1946 by the Curtis Report (Curtis, 1946; Jackson,
2006), and their right to do so was firmly stated in the Guidance to the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health, 1991). However, when this study began there were still wide variations between local authorities in the extent to which they had taken this responsibility on board. Some provided generous support for accommodation, educational expenses, field trips, study visits abroad and computers; others appeared to begrudge every penny (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2003). The two local authority surveys conducted as part of the study found an improvement following the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 but that still left many students struggling to make ends meet, and often working long hours in low-paid jobs to cover their basic living costs, leaving too little time for their academic work. They were rarely able to put anything aside for contingencies, with the result that any unexpected expense could present a crisis. Unlike parents, local authorities often seemed unable to react to appeals for help with any sense of urgency. For example, one young woman broke her only pair of glasses a few days before important exams. When she asked her social worker for help to pay for a replacement she was simply told, ‘It’s your responsibility – you should have had a spare pair.’ Since student accommodation was often situated in crime-prone areas, having a computer stolen or damaged was another frequently reported problem. It could take several weeks or even months before the local authority would agree to replace it, during which time the student might have great difficulty in completing assignments and accessing the internet.

Here again many foster carers provided invaluable support, and in addition sometimes offered extra funds or loans to enable students to give up paid work during term time in their final year to allow them to concentrate on completing assignments and revising for exams.

**Good fortune or good planning?**

Because this study did not include interviews with participants’ social workers, other than for recruitment purposes or to re-establish contact with missing respondents, it is not possible to tell how far the successful foster placements occurred by chance or as the result of a well-considered plan. Most of the young people thought they had just been lucky. If they had been placed with carers who were thought especially likely to recognise their educational needs they had certainly not been told about it. There is no doubt that, for the 60 per cent of the participants who were in foster placements, carers and their families played an important part in helping them to do well at school, encouraging their aspirations, prioritising school work and educational activities, smoothing their path to higher education, and providing often much needed support through their university courses. It is not clear, however, if the social worker had identified their potential and made the placement with that in mind, or if their academic ability only became apparent afterwards.

Several participants recognised in retrospect that they had given their carers and social workers a hard time and had been regarded as oppositional and over demanding. It is interesting to note that a study of young people in difficulties, including care leavers, found that some of those who were most self-directed and motivated to continue their education came into conflict with social workers or people in authority because they appeared unwilling to fall in with other people’s plans or accept advice (Cameron et al., 2007). Some foster carers seemed better able to appreciate and value independent-mindedness and self-efficacy than professionals. There were remarkable stories of foster carers who had taken on young people of this kind, who seemed headed for disaster, and stuck with them through successive crises and incidents of unacceptable behaviour, from which they had finally emerged, contrary to all predictions, as happy and successful young adults. Engaging, or in many cases re-engaging, in learning always played a large part in this process.

**Foster care as an educational resource**

‘Support’ for education is often discussed in rather simplistic terms, as if it were only a matter of helping with homework
and attending the school concert. The detailed accounts of their foster care experience provided by the *By Degrees* participants made it clear that successfully promoting their educational attainment, as required by the Children Act 2004, was a delicate and sensitive task demanding a high level of skill and determination from foster carers. With young people who had entered care as asylum seekers they often had a head start, in the sense that most of those we interviewed had a clear sense that educational success was their best hope of integrating into British society. They were confident that if they worked hard enough higher education was within their grasp. For many, the importance of education had been emphasised by their parents from early childhood (Jackson *et al.*, 2005). Children from British working-class homes, like the majority of those in care, had often absorbed a different message, that school had little to offer people like them and universities were remote and frightening places. Developing their confidence and motivation as learners might need years of patient encouragement and small experiences of success, and above all establishing a home environment that stimulated and supported education in the wider sense.

This is not something to which local authorities have given any priority in the past, and there are still major problems in the recruitment, training and support of foster carers. The Green Paper *Care Matters* proposes a tiered system of foster care, with enhanced payments for those who look after children with ‘complex needs’, apparently meaning those with severe behavioural, health or learning difficulties. It does not seem to envisage specialist placements for unproblematic young people with particular talents or abilities who cannot live with their birth families. However, this could be an effective way of moving beyond the shrinking pool of foster carers of the traditional type, which is essential if children are to be offered a choice of placements suited to their individual needs. As yet we have made little progress in that direction. Ian Sinclair commented in his overview of fostering that the basic characteristics of foster carers are ‘surprisingly similar’ to those identified in the 1950s and 1980s (Sinclair, 2005, p 151).

We suggest a new form of fostering for young people who come into care around the age of 14, like many *By Degrees* participants, or who are not in a stable placement at that stage. ‘Education foster carers’ could be recruited, contracted and paid to offer an educationally rich environment, to work closely with schools and to steer the child/young person through GCSEs, A levels and higher education. There would be no expectation that either or both foster parents should give up work – indeed it would be a bonus if they had their own careers. Some people, including many professionals, could be attracted by foster care with an explicit educational remit, even if they had not previously thought of conventional fostering as something that they might do. For older adolescents the arrangement might be closer to supported lodging, but whatever the starting point there is no reason why it should not develop into a warm, affectionate relationship, as for so many of those we interviewed.

**Conclusion**

Going to university is rapidly becoming a normative experience for children living in their own families, but for most of those looked after by local authorities, like other children from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, it remains a remote dream. The difference is that local authorities have a special responsibility towards children and young people separated from their parents, a responsibility to ensure that being in care makes a positive difference to their life chances. The best way to do this is to enable as many as we can to continue their education to the highest possible level. Evidence from the *By Degrees* research project suggests that foster care can be a key resource for widening participation and opening up opportunities for this group of educationally and socially excluded young people. Foster care should be seen as an integral part of the education system, as important as the school, if not more so, in enabling children to fill...
the gaps caused by irregular attendance and lack of stimulation in their early years. Foster families can play a crucial role in raising aspirations, enabling young people to achieve the qualifications they need to access further and higher education and supporting them through their degree courses. A few local authorities have taken on that message and achieved large increases in the numbers of their care leavers who obtain useful qualifications and take up university places, but too many are stuck with an outdated model of foster care in which education is somebody else’s business.

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