Schooling and looked after children: Exploring contexts and outcomes in Standard Attainment Tests (SATS)

Dolores Davey and Andrew Pithouse outline the findings from a longitudinal case study which ran from 2002 to 2006 and explored the educational achievement of all the young people looked after (in foster and residential care) in one local authority in South Wales. Among this group were 14 young people at a point one year before taking their Standard Attainment Tests (SATS), which are applied universally in UK schools. They were then followed up to the age at which they could complete any General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams. Hence, the young people’s school history was tracked from the beginning of school Year 9 (sample age 13 years), at the end of which they took their SATS, through to the end of school Year 11 (sample age 15 years), at which point GCSEs are normally taken. This article focuses mainly on the outcome of the SATS and the looked after arrangements of the 14 young people in the year leading to these important tests. The authors’ concluding comments refer briefly to their Year 11 outcomes in order to indicate continuities and changes in attainment.

The SATs results are presented in a context of school attendance, the type and stability of care placements and education moves. Associations between schooling and separation are explored using an analysis of trajectories and outcomes that reveal how and why some young people clearly achieve while others do not. In doing so, the article seeks to add to studies and policy pronouncements in this field that too often represent looked after children by their collective statistical failure rather than by notable differences in educational outcomes and related circumstances.

Introduction
The special edition of this journal (Adoption & Fostering 31:1, Spring 2007) that focused on the education of looked after children offered insightful accounts of the educational careers of looked after children. In particular, the recollections by Collette Isabel Stadler revealed her unhappy and fractured ‘patchwork’ education while accommodated. Likewise, the article by O’Sullivan and Westerman tracked the achievements of looked after children from GCSE back through Key Stages 3, 2 and 1, and outlined the associations between placement moves and poor outcomes. By contrast, the special issue also reports success stories (Cameron; Jackson and Ajayi; Mallon) about the educational attainment of care leavers, notably those who go to university, as well as adults who have underachieved in the care system but enjoy academic success later in life. Such studies offer optimism while recognising that the educational progress of looked after children needs to be kept high on the policy and practice agenda.

This article seeks to add to this growing body of knowledge about public care and schooling by offering a longitudinal account of success and failure in education achievements in relation to placement contexts and histories. Although the sample may be considered small, the tracking of a cohort of young people from one authority for over three years allows for some illumination of key events and transitions that may concatenate around the educational career of the looked after young person.

Background
The sample of all children (n = 14) looked after in foster and residential care who would soon be completing secondary school Standard Attainment Tests (SATS) was drawn from one local authority in South Wales with notably higher levels of economic deprivation than UK averages. However, the local authority typified many of the councils in the region in terms of the environmental and social challenges arising from the long-term decline of heavy industry and a slow transition to a relatively low-skill, low-pay service economy with high male unemploy-
ment. In our discussion of these children, we avoid the term ‘in care’ which has negative connotations and in legal terms denotes only those young people subject to compulsory and voluntary admissions to care via section 31 and 20 respectively of the Children Act 1989. Instead, we use the more neutral term ‘accommodation’ to indicate a preference for services such as foster or residential care to be promoted as a partnership focusing on the child’s needs, rather than being unduly pre-occupied with parents’ shortcomings (see Ball and McDonald, 2002; Brayne and Broadbent, 2002, p 336).

We do not address here children’s developmental difficulties, family histories or structural effects (poverty, deprivation) that bear upon why those in our sample were accommodated in the first place. These are explored elsewhere (Davey, 2006; Roy, 2007). Instead we focus on the delimited sphere of schooling and education attainment where intervening variables, such as professional support, placement stability, pupil motivation and school receptiveness, are thought to be key factors in sustaining achievement, although the influence of peers and pupil culture is also highly pertinent (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003).

The 14 accommodated children had a right under the Children Act 1989 to expect the local authority to safeguard and promote their welfare and to make such use of services available for other children cared for by their own parents as appeared reasonable. Thus, continuity of local schooling with other local children is assumed to be a preferred option to sustain a child’s sense of identity, peer membership, school progress and motivation. However, concerns about poor attainment among looked after children are long standing and pre-date the Children Act 1989 (Essen et al, 1976; Heath et al, 1994) and continue to be so (Borland, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). The picture that has emerged over recent decades is that children in public care continually achieve less well than their peers (Barnardo’s, 2006; Jackson and Simon, 2006) and that this under-achievement embeds as the young person gets older and is thereby increasingly harder to remedy (Department of Health, 2000; NCH 2005).

Such issues are familiar to researchers, policy makers and practitioners, and a core objective of UK and Welsh government policy is to help looked after children do as well at school as other children (Department of Health, 2000; National Assembly for Wales, 2001a). In line with this objective, we focus here on school, placements and education outcomes and situate the findings in the context of other empirical research that supports, and in some cases challenges, the analysis derived from this single setting.

**The study**

**Research design**

In this study, particular attention is given to events within the looked after system, among them: placement stability, continuity of relationships, educational outcomes after assessment periods (SATS and GCSEs), educational stability, continuity and inclusion, and emotional well-being. A mixed-method approach was chosen, given that the emphasis was to be on informants’ perceptions as well as various institutional sources associated with pupil careers. A case-study research design utilising mainly qualitative exploration of routine and problematic aspects of individual lives was adopted (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The design was informed by Crotty’s (1998) epistemological model of (a) constructivism informed by symbolic interaction as the theoretical perspective with (b) grounded theory as the principal research methodology. Data collection methods drew on a variety of empirical materials including (c) interview, observation and documentary material. The qualitative case study approach (Padgett, 1998; Denscombe, 2002) allowed for a process of discovery that sought ‘authentic’ views (see Silverman 1994, p 8) from young people and their
social workers about why those who are accommodated tend to fare poorly in terms of educational outcomes. While there have been many research projects since the 1970s examining the consequences of residential and foster care on young people’s futures, we still know relatively little about their school experiences and education outcomes. Francis (2000, p 25) puts the point succinctly:

Although a wealth of information has been produced about many aspects of the lives of children who are looked after away from home, educational experiences of such children have usually been given limited attention.

The study therefore attempts to make sense of compelling and conflicting social facts, viz that we have a much-rehearsed policy discourse advocating ‘joined-up thinking’ to promote better education outcomes with regard to this group of young people, but outcomes for the sample and other looked after children remain much less favourable than for the majority non-looked after population in Wales and the UK. That said, our sample revealed quite divergent outcomes. In this article we focus largely on these and related contextual features rather than upon the views of the children themselves or the professionals, which are described elsewhere (Davey, 2006).

**Service features**
The proportion of young people in residential care would seem somewhat unusual as it is generally considered the least preferred option by most local authorities in Wales when children cannot live at home. However, the study authority was somewhat different to most in the region in retaining a relatively larger residential resource as part of a strategy to diversify placement opportunities. An initiative launched by the authority during the course of the study was the introduction of a Looked After Children Education (LACE) team. Similar to LACE teams in other authorities, it worked with looked after children aged 11–18, with a broad aim of ‘addressing educational underachievement’. The team (project leader, educational psychologist, education welfare officer, teacher, two sessional workers and an administrator) offered homework and support sessions, GCSE course work groups and residential outward-bound activities designed to develop cooperation, resilience and confidence. They also organised educational visits, including college open days, and regularly hosted ‘recognition of achievement’ events. As with similar projects, there was evidence of barriers that hampered cohesive working, particularly the workloads of social workers and teachers in mainstream settings that impeded attendance at meetings, joint training and planning (Hibbert, 2003; Harker et al, 2004).

**Data: interviews**
The young people were interviewed at key points in their academic careers between school Years 9 and 11. This
enabled the collection of their views before and after school examinations and generated insights into their perceptions of what might have assisted or impeded their school experience, achievement and educational trajectories.

Of the 14 young people, three were unavailable for interview either because they chose not to be involved in the interview stage, or because their significant learning difficulties precluded them from participating. The remaining eleven participated in semi-structured interviews during school Year 9. Eight young people in the sample were then available for interview in school Year 10. In school Year 11 interviews with only seven young people (including a telephone interview) were possible, either because the young person had left the authority or was placed in a custodial setting. Predictably, the sample drawn from a population known to be transient reduced over time. Some respondents returned home or went to kinship carers (some only to be re-accommodated by a neighbouring authority), and some were placed in residential care miles away from the study authority and were difficult to reach or became unwilling to participate further. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using the constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of open coding whereby issues were categorised and emerging patterns were ordered into themes. This analysis highlights those areas in which the views of the young people converge and where they are different.

Data: documentary sources
Data were collected from the authority’s Looked After Children Assessment and Action Records, computer records and from individual social work case files. It was anticipated that this would include a range of material on care status, case history, placement type, length of time looked after, circumstances leading to being looked after, previous educational attainment and placement and school changes. Information on school attendance, school exclusions, statementing, past SATS achievements and current SATS results were collated at the end of each term via a pre-tested data collection instrument. This pre-coded form was completed by the social worker responsible for the 14 children. As in other school research, it was intended that these multiple sources would allow some comparison on pupil contexts, experiences and achievements (Gorard, 2003).

As found in other studies (O’Sullivan and Westerman, 2007), ensuring data quality proved a challenge. For example, information on earlier school testing (age 7) for most of the sample was simply not known by many of the social workers or schools. However, more information was available in respect of results for routine tests at age eleven. Seemingly, the movement of some of the young people in and out of care, together with changes of school, made tracking these youngsters’ achievements problematic for the authority let alone the researcher. Obtaining reliable data on children in the sample attending a pupil referral unit (PRU) was particularly difficult because of their often disrupted pattern of attendance overall. Typically, the children’s records were skeletal with sizeable gaps in relation to their education history. Such difficulties in securing information about education circumstances and outcomes perhaps reflect something of the priority accorded to the schooling of children who are accommodated (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, p 12).

Ethics
The ethics of involving children and young people in research requires careful consideration, particularly where they are being looked after by a local authority and by virtue of this could be considered highly vulnerable (Morrow and Richards, 1996). It was important that the young people in this study did not feel they had to participate (nor should they be excluded by pre-emptive professional discretion based on adult
perceptions that their interests would be better promoted by not being informed of such an opportunity). As with other research (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998), it was important for young people themselves to make any decision to be involved on an informed basis. As elsewhere, the process of identifying and approaching looked after children was time-consuming in relation to negotiating with adult professionals and carers who, understandably, wished to be satisfied in respect of research governance and safeguarding (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Heptinstall, 2000; Cree et al, 2002). However, it seemed a moot point as to whether some of the very protracted negotiations were as much to do with the uncertainty (if not defensiveness) of gatekeepers about what benefits might stem from a study into a field which, a priori, was deemed unlikely to yield encouraging news. Strong assurances of confidentiality and opportunities to comment on draft findings helped gain approval and access from social services and education.

Examining the outcomes: type of school and assessments
The 14 children in the sample attended eight different schools, although two schools, both comprehensives, provided education for seven of the total. The catchment area for one comprehensive included one of the local authority’s larger residential units. Notably, 11 of the young people at the start of the study were on roll at mainstream comprehensive schools within the authority; so, implicitly at least, they were included in community-based schooling. Three of the group attended a special school in the area for children with a range of learning disabilities. In addition, three young people attended a pupil referral unit within the authority at some stage during the study period.

School assessments: ‘achievers’, ‘statemented’ and ‘no results’
At the end of school Year 9, most of the young people (now aged 14) had completed what is known as Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum in Wales and were eligible to be assessed by Teacher Assessment and National Curriculum Tests and Tasks. This formal national assessment was obligatory for all schools and took place on a set week in May. Pupils can be ‘disapplied’ from the National Curriculum requirements and study an ‘alternative curriculum’. Two of the sample were statemented in respect of learning needs and were recorded by schools as taking this route. At the end of Key Stage 3 specific descriptors were used to record and monitor progress across the phases of schooling. National benchmarks (levels) were used to guide schools, teachers, parents and pupils about achievement. The general expectation was that the majority of pupils would attain level 5 in each individual subject (National Assembly for Wales, 2001a). Thus, levels 1–4 were seen as working towards the expected level 5, levels 5–6 indicated achievement of expected level and levels 7–8 as exceeding the expected level (National Assembly for Wales, 2001b).

While it is recognised that the recording of SATs and GCSE results may not fully measure or capture the progress made by children in their schooling, it is nonetheless a standardising indicator of educational outcomes that allows some comparative measure between those accommodated and those not in the looked after system and, at least, a basis for examining difference in relation to achievements. We of course recognise that an over-emphasis on academic standards, results and ‘performativity’ may reveal little of the educational career as process (Coffey, 2001; Harris and Ranson, 2005). Similarly, there may be limited insight to be gained about how children experience learning by administering tests and comparing results (Gorard, 2000; Gorard and Smith, 2003). We also very much agree with Berridge (2007, p 4) that the social construction of official statistics means their interpretation is by no means ‘clear cut’. Nor can such sources reveal the likely risk factors and causes surround-
ing underachievement in education that are likely to find their roots in structural disadvantage, poor parental support and maltreatment leading to being looked after, as well as any institutional failures in the care system (see Berridge, 2007, p 8). That said, routine systematic data collection is important to assess whether basic outcomes are improving, staying the same or deteriorating. Examination outcomes may be a blunt instrument for assessing an individual’s achievements but in the absence of a more formative and summative standardised diagnosis of a child’s academic strengths and weaknesses, we remain with the limitations of what we have.

Thus, within our sample we could note three distinct sub-groupings which we categorised according to Key Stage 3 outcomes as: ‘achievers’, ‘statemented’ and ‘no result’. Bracketing their achievements in this way allowed us to develop some comparative insights into their schooling and care backgrounds. In so doing, we note that research which categorises children’s experiences via thematic constructs (for example, Packman [1986] used the terms ‘villains’, ‘victims’ and ‘volunteered’ in an analysis of professional decision-making about whether or not children were admitted to care) has a long history and can offer much heuristic value. However, we also recognise the adult-imposed nature of such categories and their location in competing welfare discourses that may both idealise children or cast them as a troubling ‘risk’ in need of control (Stainton Rogers, 2001). For our part, the categories ‘achievers’ ‘statemented’ and ‘no result’ seek only to offer some analytical purchase without polarising the young people concerned on some invidious measure of social worth. Thus we situated them according to examination outcomes as follows:

• Sub-group A comprised five males and one female (5 fostered, 1 residential), all of whom achieved Key Stage 3 tests results ranging from one pupil at level 4 to two at level 6. These were termed ‘achievers’.

• Sub-group B comprised one male and three females (1 residential and 3 fostered) who did not take SATS due to an educational statement which indicated that they would not be expected to achieve any levels. However, only two were officially recorded as being ‘dis-applied’. These were termed ‘statemented’.

• Sub-group C comprised two males and two females (3 residential care, 1 fostered) who were not statemented and did not take SATS. One of the four had achieved well in earlier school tests at age eleven and potentially should have done better than average at age 14. Two of this group had never achieved the expected level throughout their schooling and no previous results were available for the fourth young person. These were termed ‘no results’.

The three sub-groups were then analysed further in relation to interview data across the sample which revealed a chequered school background for most. Drawing on related studies (Jackson and Thomas, 2000; Jackson and Sachdev, 2001), the aim of the interviews was to collect information about what the young people saw as the presence or absence of key factors influencing their school experience and academic achievements. Looked after children cannot be considered as a homogenous group, but for analytical purposes, it was useful to locate data within the above three categories in order to seek some comparative purchase.

‘Achievers’

There were six ‘achievers’ out of the 14 youngsters who obtained an official SAT result. Perhaps not surprisingly, they were the ones who had a stable care placement and had good attendance at school. An example of this was a young woman (YP1) who stayed in the same foster care home and at the same school over the research year; her attendance at school was 99.77 per cent. Her SATS results and levels were:

English 5, Maths 5, Science 4. Simi-
larly, a young man (YP2) who had also been in the same care placement and at the same school during the study year had an attendance of 88.12 per cent. His SATS results were: English 5, Maths 6, Science 6. Five of the young people who achieved at SATS were living in a family placement and one in residential care. It was notable that five out of the six stayed in the same school during the academic year, but three had care placement moves in this year. Social work agencies have in the past been criticised for rating care placement needs over a child’s education interests (see Blyth and Milner, 1997), but it was not possible to identify from records and interviews how (or if) the balance of needs and interests was determined in relation to these particular children. However, continuity as described above does appear to be a feature of the more successful examination outcomes.

Young people who were engaged in the school process and had a grasp of the expectations surrounding the tests by which they were to be measured did reasonably well. It is interesting to note that for the six who took their SATS tests, there was information recorded on earlier scores of five of the youngsters for national tests at the end of their final year in primary school. This was less the case for the other two groups. It is not clear how this information came to be validated and recorded on the information systems held by social services and education. However, it is possible that placement stability and advocacy over education (particularly carer/parent) contributed to school progress being more fully encoded in organisational records (Jackson and Sachdev, 2001).

One of the six achievers who scored least was a boy in residential care (YP3) who did not gain a score in English but obtained scores in Maths (3) and Science (4). There was no information on his previous results in national tests. On a more positive note, his attendance was 91.48 per cent. His keenness for school was corroborated by his school reports. In interview, he was able to grasp and verbalise the social benefits of education as well as having a coherent understanding of expectations in terms of measurable outcomes. He took pride in his achievements, appropriately so given that he had missed the first two years of secondary school, which was explained by his residential care worker and corroborated in case notes as, ‘the inability of the professionals to find a suitable school placement’. His attendance (and research interviews) revealed an enthusiasm for school and it is disappointing that his progress and interest were not a matter of more deliberate involvement by those involved in providing his care. He was unable to sustain his ‘achiever’ status through to Year 11.

A shared aspect of all six young people was that they described (and adults corroborated) hobbies and interests in which they were involved outside of school that added to their cultural and educational capacities (see Gilligan, 1999). This capacity for stimulating and creative interests outside of school distinguished them from those in the ‘no result’ group.

‘Statemented’

The relationship between being looked after and having special needs is an interesting one, as a disproportionate number of accommodated children have been identified with special needs and have been subject to the statementing process (Hayden et al, 1999). Official sources have long noted that as many as one in five looked after children had a statement compared to 2.9 per cent of the non-looked after population (Social Services Inspectorate/OFSTED, 1995; Department for Education and Employment, 1999). Four out of the 14 young people did not take SATS because they had been statemented or were exempt due to special needs. Three out of the four were girls living in foster care. The average school attendance for this small group of girls was 91 per cent. Two of these young women were described as having severe learning difficulties and the third having a visual impairment. All
three stayed in the same care placement and same school during school Year 9.

For this group of young people, having special needs did not appear to disadvantage them in terms of stability of placements or attendance at school. Two of the young women (YP7 and YP8) were interviewed; both were from highly disruptive family backgrounds. They spoke favourably about their current education experience and cited the support of their foster carers as well as their long-term plans to stay in their placement and school setting as contributing to their sense of contentment. Both young women were able to describe a full and active social life from which could be noted the acquisition of friends, social skills and self-esteem.

The fourth member of this group was a boy (YP10) who presented a different picture. He was accommodated in residential care and statemented because of his serious behaviour problems. His attendance at special school over the first year of the study was recorded as 24.87 per cent; both his care and education placement had changed during the year. The case records revealed a number of fixed-term exclusions pointing to a problematic educational trajectory. Brodie (2001, p 19) suggests a link between statementing and exclusion, with between 12 to 18 per cent of those excluded either having been statemented or going through the statementing process. It was evident from this study and from research more generally (Blyth and Milner, 1997; Brodie, 2001) that, to avoid a spiral of inactivity that leaves them educationally and socially excluded, children who are statemented with behavioural difficulties in the early years of secondary education need to experience specialist intervention that offers consistent and creative planning.

‘No results’
There were four young people with no results (two girls and two boys). All had changes to their placement and education settings during or towards the end of the school year 2001–2002. In the first year of the study, one young woman (YP11) left residential care and returned home to a family member who obtained a residence order. She also left her comprehensive school in March (being told by the family member that it was too far to travel), which she described as ‘the best school in the world’. She did not attend any school for the remainder of that academic period, from March to July – some four months.

The second young woman (YP12) had been placed in five different schools from age nine to eleven. At the time of the first interview she was placed in residential care and attending a local comprehensive. Her attendance over the first year of the study was 26 per cent and she did not attend for her SATS assessments. She claimed that nobody in the residential unit sought to ensure she went to school and that none of the other children there went to school either.

Within this group there were two young men (YP13 and 14). YP13 was in remand foster care at the time of the first interview. He appeared bright, polite and intelligent and spoke positively about going back to school and ‘making something of himself’. The data reveal school exclusions in the previous two years. His attendance score for Year 9 was 35.78 per cent and he did not take his SATS assessments as he was in residential care outside the local authority area during school Year 9 and thereafter entered a secure unit. His earlier achievements in national tests when aged 11 revealed above-average scores, but a recent history of spiralling poor behaviour had left all academic potential unfulfilled.

The second young man in the group (YP14) had a long history of being accommodated. At the time of the first interview he was in residential care. Organisational records reveal 24 care placement moves and a variety of schools and education settings interrupted by a spate of fixed-term exclusions, culminating in a recent permanent exclusion. He was at the time of his first
interview on roll at a local school but not attending or involved in any alternative provision. There was a plan for tutoring within his residential home but this was not in place at the time of interview. School and care placements had both changed during school Year 9, which made continuity and assessment difficult for him.

**Attendance**

Data on attendance via school records were gathered at the end of the spring and summer terms in Year 9. Attendance at the end of the year showed clearly that there were several in the sample with nearly complete attendance records. Not surprisingly, the young people who did not have changes to their schooling had the best attendance. Those who were either largely disengaged from education and whose attendance was well under 50 per cent and those who were either excluded from school, in a pupil referral unit or no longer on roll were, predictably, statemented or with no results. It was noticeable that some of the young people who did not achieve in tests had high rates of authorised absence. In other cases, the reasons for authorised absences were not clear. Incomplete recording suggests that school systems for logging absences were not always reliable. Neither were there any additional measures put in place to ensure that closer monitoring occurred for looked after children.

**Different care placements: different outcomes**

There are inherent problems in attempting to compare residential care and foster care (see Clough et al, 2004), hence the findings in this study do not allow more than some tentative observations about the impact of different arrangements. In school Year 9, young people in foster care generally had better attendance at school than those in residential care. While the size of the sample allows no generalisation, it did seem that those in residential care had less success in school compared with those in family settings. Of course, we should not overlook the pre-looked after experiences of some young people in residential placements, as well as their continuing circumstances and problems, which might militate against stability and school achievement. That said, residential care should not become some ‘last resort’ but rather a purposeful aspect of a service system that seeks to be a ‘responsible parent’ (Hayden et al, 1999; Colton et al, 2001). Yet, several respondents who were or had been in residential care commented that they were never clear which adult would be their ‘champion’ vis à vis school and education. They also believed that some residential workers either would not or could not help them with their homework and that workers did not ‘know about what was going on at school’. The need for clarity over role and responsibility was a prominent if implicit theme within the interview material, especially the need for an effective and durable advocate in relation to school matters.

**Stability and instability: care and education moves**

Stability in care and education placements has frequently been cited as an important factor in school achievement (Stein, 1994; Jackson and Thomas, 2000; Jackson, 2002; Berridge, 2003). At the start of the study in school Year 9, all 14 of the young people were viewed in official records as placed in a care and school placement that was appropriate, although for only nine was this considered to have been organised on a planned basis. Given the claimed appropriateness of the placements, it was interesting to note how many young people had changes in Year 9. Table 1 shows placement and education moves; those experiencing placement moves are also in the same (opposite) box as those with education moves; thus, it was rare for young people not to have a linked experience across both sites.

Only six of the 14 young people at the end of school Year 9 were in the same care placement and attending the same school. Five out of the six were in the same care placement and attending the
same school two years later at the end of the study. Thus, continuity of education, residence and carers existed for less than half the study sample.

Outcomes and inclusion
The categories of ‘achiever’, ‘state-mented’ and ‘no result’ have been used here as a device to explore care and school circumstances in relation to education outcomes. It is notable that all of the young people who at the start of the study were living in residential care experienced a transient and difficult period between school Years 9 and 11, with limited stability in their care placements and a lack of continuity in their education. Half of the young people who in Year 9 were in foster care left that placement and went on to experience specialist (out of authority) residential care or custodial care. Those young people who had poor school attendance in Year 9, or were changing school or care placements, typically did not re-establish a secure care placement and engage effectively in education thereafter.

Of the six achievers, it is known that two gained results in line with national targets for GCSEs and both went on to ‘A’ level studies. Both had stable care and school placements from the beginning of the study as well as good school attendance. Two other SATS achievers did not gain GCSEs within either the national or looked after children target (Department of Health, 2000; National Assembly for Wales, 2001a), but both started college courses post 16, although one subsequently withdrew. Of the two remaining achievers, one young person did not achieve any GCSEs and spent periods of time in a young offenders institution and the outcomes for the other are unclear as s/he left the looked after system.

While caution needs to be exercised given the small scale of this qualitative study, we can note that when pupils did not achieve in SATS because of being disengaged from school, it was unlikely there would be a positive outcome at GCSE level. All of the young people who were categorised in the ‘no result’ group for SATS continued with a ‘no result’ for GCSEs. This group also evinced characteristics such as criminal activity and teenage parenthood that predict deepening social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003).

The findings from this study would suggest that there needs to be revision or reform of the systems for monitoring, encouraging and supporting young people much earlier in their school careers. Jackson and Simon (2006, p 51) are clear that ‘the seeds of success or failure in GCSE are sown at least four years earlier’. It is also imperative that there is a more coherent and systematic way of collecting and sharing information on young people and their educational needs. The findings from this study indicated that too often the Key Stages attainment data were not systematically encoded and there did not appear to be clear protocols to establish whose responsibility it was to track, record and act on information. Also, there was some uncertainty between social services and education as to whose duty it was to check the destination of the data, such as when records were passed between school and the pupil referral unit, or when a child moved schools. There was no clear accountability about whose duty it was to check the aggregation and scrutiny of such data so that interventions, services and care outcomes can be better appraised.

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Summary
Data are presented here in a relatively unproblematic way insofar as we have drawn upon officially recorded material, which may betray both organisational construction and interest (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). Data represented in this way does not convey the less visible world of the child’s actual experiences at school and being accommodated. The representation of young people in relation to their legal status and aggregated features, as captured in official records and statistical codes, cannot describe the lived experience and the embodied social world and affiliated identities of the looked after child, explored elsewhere (Davey, 2006). Here, we have sought to emphasise aspects of organisational processing and key events in order to search out comparable and divergent features of placements and school careers. While the case study has been small in scale, we have sought continuities for our findings in related UK research in order to claim some broader provenance for our analysis. Thus, our study would seem to suggest continuing challenges for professionals in children’s services. These collect around three key points. First, there is insufficient monitoring of accommodated children in respect of school histories, transitions and trajectories and consequently a lack of reliable information. Second, the propensity towards low educational achievement for many accommodated children is matched by a lack of strategic and conceptual capacity by providers to build innovative mechanisms that promote stability and/or compensate for its absence in the histories of those entering (and re-entering) accommodation. Third, the desirability of generating positive school attitudes and social capital in vulnerable children through well-anchored relationships with effective carers and pro-social peers is much more easily described than realised. In summary, the design of a service matrix of strategic, operational and interpersonal capacities and commitments that can address these deficits remains the core challenge for the local authority in our case study and doubtless many others across the UK.

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