A Study of Seven Looked After Primary School Children

Thesis

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A Study of Seven Looked After Primary School Children

Doctorate in Education (Ed D)

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of seven looked after children in two Scottish primary schools. The rationale behind this study is that if looked after children could be supported effectively during their time in primary school then they may be more likely to remain engaged with secondary school and increase their chances of educational success. Literature on looked after children has tended to highlight the barriers they experience in education. This thesis examines ways in which these barriers may be overcome. The main research question asked is: ‘What practices and approaches might be used to support looked after children to engage in learning?’ Subsidiary questions explore how looked after children are regarded by teachers, including the impact that the term ‘looked after’ may have on expectations, and what looked after children are able to tell us about the support they find most helpful.

This dissertation draws on socio-cultural theories of learning in order to identify perceptions underpinning support provided to looked after children. The wider theoretical framework incorporates resilience, inclusion, collaborative learning and children’s voice. This qualitative research utilises case study methods. It explores data gathered from looked after children (N=12), their carers (N=6) including, relatives, foster carers and staff in a children’s home and school staff (N=10) comprising teachers, support staff and members of school management teams. Through the use of individual case studies an insight is offered into the support needs of a small group of looked after children.

The main findings reveal that practitioners provide support in diverse ways. However, a common theme permeating the findings is the importance of establishing relationships prior to considering appropriate materials or programmes. In addition, the views of
children captured in this study emphasise the importance of supporting the development of agency in those who are looked after. The conclusions presented include recommendations for a change in focus of staff development activities for those supporting looked after children.
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I dedicate my research to the memory of my late husband Scott Horsburgh.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Personal Motivation

The research question in this study originated from a number of sources. These were related to the knowledge I acquired first as a practitioner in schools, then as a school inspector in Scotland, and also from my reading of research into looked after children and from the current political emphasis placed on ensuring looked after children are taught appropriately.

At the outset of this study I therefore wanted to explore an issue that had concerned me for a number of years. As a class teacher and later as a head teacher many review and planning meetings, considering the needs of looked after children, that I attended focused on the logistics of the child’s placement. Discussion would be focused on issues such as the care provided at home, attendance and general behavioural issues. In some instances, for example, if a child was living with carers in another local authority, considerable time was spent discussing the arrangements for transporting the child to school. When considering the teaching of looked after children within the context of the class the focus tended to be on their academic progress in relation to standardised assessments. Discussions often focused on the schemes of work they were following or level of additional support for learning that they were receiving. In some instances, issues related to behaviour management were discussed and educational psychologists would advise on strategies. However, this guidance often seemed to be at what I would term a strategic level. As a class teacher, I was often provided with strategies to manage a looked after child’s behaviour but no guidance as to how I could develop a better understanding of the possible causes of what was deemed as inappropriate behaviour. I felt that I had a limited understanding of how to identify and meet the educational needs
of many individual looked after children. This was in contrast to the staff development opportunities available to help me develop my understanding of the needs of other children such as those who were identified as dyslexic or those who were affected by attention deficit hyperactive disorder. However, as a practitioner, I felt that I required more detailed practical guidance in order to understand how I could provide effective support which addressed the social and emotional as well as the academic needs of some individual looked after children. Whilst the experiences described above occurred during my early career I would suggest that, to a certain extent, practitioners have similar concerns today. This assumption is based on my experience of working with a wide range of school staff across Scotland.

Between 2004 and 2013 in my everyday work as a school inspector I visited many schools and became aware that, in some establishments, practitioners seemed to be able to support various groups of vulnerable children more effectively than others. In 2008, I carried out an investigation into the ways in which schools supported lower achieving groups of pupils. The resulting report (HMIE, 2008) identified common characteristics of effective practice in raising achievement for the lowest attaining 20% of pupils. However, this enquiry was quite general and did not explore in any depth the educational needs of specific groups. In this study, I therefore decided to address this by focusing on looked after children in order to learn more about how best to support their diverse range of needs. In devising the main research question: ‘What practices and approaches might be used to support looked after children to engage in learning?’ I wanted to move away from the limitations and the problems faced by looked after children to the possibilities of what they might achieve.
Although I am interested in the personal and educational interactions that occur in supporting looked after children in primary school these exchanges are, to varying degrees, influenced by external factors. Thus, there is a need to take account of the wider political and social context which influences this support. In the following section, I discuss developments which have taken place in recent years in legislation and policy designed to improve educational outcomes for looked after children in Scotland where this study took place.

Legislation and Policy

In 2013 the Scottish Government stated that one of its key aims was that Scotland:

‘should be the best place for children to grow up in’ (Scottish Parliament, 2013).

However, statistics (O’Neil, 2016 and Scottish Government, 2017a) continue to show that for a significant number of looked after children in Scotland experiences appear to be less than positive. Whilst outcomes, as measured by academic qualifications, are improving for looked after young people they continue to be much lower than the national average. Further, it is contended that looked after children remain less likely than their peers to move into education or training or obtain employment when they leave school (Scottish Government 2017a; Barnardo’s, 2015; Duncan, 2013 and Happer et al., 2006). During the academic session 2015/16 of the 468 looked after young people leaving school only 40% achieved one or more qualifications at Scottish Credit Qualification Framework level five. In reporting these statistics, the authors (Scottish Government, 2017a) identified links between outcomes and the type of care placement that a looked after child had experienced. However, no reference was made to aspects of educational practice that may promote improved outcomes.
The discrepancy in attainment between looked after young people and their peers is of concern because of the considerable numbers involved. Official statistics (Scottish Government, 2017b) have shown that the number of looked after children increased year on year until 2012 when the total reached 16,248. Although numbers have declined over the last few years the total number at 31 July 2016 was 15,118; 46% of these were aged 11 or under. If Scotland is to be ‘the best place to grow up in’ for all children then ways need to be found of increasing the engagement of this specific group of vulnerable children and young people in school learning.

A number of factors have shaped the development of legislation related to looked after children. In 1948 legislation required local authorities to ‘exercise their powers with respect to the child so as to further his(sic) best interests, and to afford him opportunity for the proper development of his character and abilities’ (Children Act, 1948). This legislation arose in response to findings in the Curtis Report (Curtis Report, 1946) and the Scottish equivalent the Clyde Report (Clyde Report, 1946), which identified the poor quality of provision for children in care. The need to treat children in care as individuals was expressed in the Curtis report (Curtis Report, 1946) when the committee commented that:

‘we have been increasingly impressed by the need for the personal element in the care of children...’

It is interesting that the importance of considering the needs of individual children rather than labelling them as a homogenous group was clearly articulated in legislation almost seventy years ago. I shall return to this point later in this section when considering the extent to which more recent legislation relating to the care and welfare of looked after children has the potential to encourage labelling of looked after children.
A major change occurred in Scotland in 1961 when the Kilbrandon Committee was set up (HMSO, 1961). As a result of the work of the committee, the Children’s Hearings System was established (HMSO, 1968). The aim of the Hearings system was to take an integrated approach to care and justice. Each local authority established a Children’s Panel where lay members, under the guidance of the children’s reporter, made decisions about children who were in need of care and protection as well as those who had committed offences. This provided a new approach to responding to the needs of children who were experiencing difficulties. The system seemed to be based on a welfare model rather than adopting what some regarded as a punitive approach. It can be argued that it was at this point that the concept of childhood held by legislators shifted from what Ryan (2008) describes as the ‘conditioned’ child who is considered as a product formed by conditioning to what he describes as the ‘authentic’ child who is supported to make appropriate choices. This emphasis is, of course, backed by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)

Legislation (Children (Scotland) Act, 1995) describing the arrangements for public services for children who are considered to need protection and support incorporates key elements of the UNCRC (1989) into Scots Law. Again, reference was made to the interests of the individual child:

‘in all actions concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.’

Whilst the focus was now on welfare, there was limited mention of educational practice. Within this act the definition of looked after children is that they are in
the care of the local authority. Children who are looked after by the local authority are defined by the Act as falling into two categories which are:

- Looked after at home, where the child or young person is subject to a supervision requirement but still lives in their normal place of residence which is often the family home.

- Looked after away from home where the child or young person is subject to a supervision requirement with a condition of residency. In such cases the child or young person is cared for away from their normal place of residence, e.g. in a foster care placement, residential/children’s unit, a residential school, a secure unit or kinship placement.

These requirements and conditions are set through the Children’s Hearings System which is part of the legal and welfare system in Scotland. As can be seen from the above definitions looked after children are not, of course, a homogenous group as their circumstances and resulting educational needs will vary widely.

In 2009, legislation (Scottish Government, 2004a) was amended to include the presumption that all looked after children will be considered to have additional support needs unless otherwise assessed. However, by making this presumption I would suggest there may be a danger of engaging in categorical thinking and labelling a whole cohort of children. Building on the 2004 Act and subsequent amendments, the most recent legislation (Scottish Government, 2014a) continues to promote the assumption of additional support needs. By adopting this discourse of commonality, there may be a danger that those working with looked after children fail to take account of the diversity of their needs and simply assume vulnerability. To some extent, this seems almost to contradict the principle of minimum intervention within the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

As noted by Earls and Carson (1999, p. 72), this notion of children as: ‘immature creatures
whose needs must be met by parents or other charitable adults’ appears outdated. In addition, in adopting this stance, policy makers do not seem to be taking account of the concept of resilience (Luthar et al., 2014) and the fact that some looked after children are able to succeed despite early adverse experiences. Thus, it can be seen that a range of legislation and frameworks have been developed to support all children. However, as evidenced by the statistics presented at the beginning of this section they do not yet seem to be making a significant difference for looked after children and young people.

Focus of the Study

In undertaking this study, I address a perceived gap in the literature by carrying out a detailed examination of the classroom learning of seven primary school aged looked after children. Recent reviews of literature related to the educational outcomes for looked after children (O’Higgins et al., 2015, p. 5) emphasise the fact that:

‘being in care and low educational outcomes is partly explained by pre-care experiences, such as maltreatment and neglect.’

This would suggest that when considering how best to support looked after children to engage in learning there is a need to take account of social and emotional development and the ways in which this may impact on relationships in the classroom. However, much literature related to supporting looked after children has a very different focus. It centres on the need for them to improve their academic performance and thus examines strategies for developing cognitive capacity (Suggden, 2013; Liabo et al., 2012; Stoddart, 2012; Brewin & Stratham, 2011) with limited regard to the importance of social interaction in learning. For example, of the eleven studies contained in a review of interventions undertaken by Forsman & Vinnerljung (2012) four of the studies involved tutoring by university students, foster parents or volunteer teachers and in only one study
was there a possibility that the tutor might be the child’s class teacher. The effectiveness measures for all the interventions in the review were focused on a developmental model with outcomes being measured in relation to progress in reading or mathematics. In addition, the interventions appeared to take little account of the looked after child in the context of the classroom and the relationships that are formed there. Thus, in my study I aim to explore approaches used by practitioners on a day-to-day basis and the ways in which these take account of early adverse experiences.

My study differs from much of the existing literature as it focuses on the experiences of a small group of looked after children of primary school age. A considerable amount of literature has focused on looked after young people of secondary school age or beyond (O’Higgins et al., 2015; Sebba et al., 2015; Duncan, 2013 and Fletcher-Campbell, 1998). It details the lack of positive outcomes for these young people and, in places, factors which have supported them in their learning are identified. However, examples of success are limited. Thus, the rationale behind my research is that if effective support is provided early, in order to engage looked after children in learning in primary school, then there may be increased probability of this engagement being maintained during secondary education and beyond.

I adopt a case study approach to this research in order to gain an insight into the educational needs and associated teaching practices used with seven looked after children that I was not afforded as a practitioner where guidance provided took no account of factors impacting on social interaction in the classroom. In undertaking a case study my aim was, as suggested by Denscombe (2010, p. 5), to:

‘...understanding the complex relationship between factors as they operate within a particular social setting.’
Through the use of this case study approach my intention is to highlight issues that practitioners may want to take account of when teaching looked after children. I believe that by adopting this approach I will build on existing research such as that undertaken by Sebba et al. (2015) which identifies that teachers are the most important educational influence and that interventions need to be tailored to the characteristics and experiences of the individual. My research has the potential to address, in part, one of the recommendations made by Sebba et al. (2015, p.34) which suggested that there was a need to examine: ‘Specific approaches adopted by schools, teachers and/or carers.’ I consider that a key word in this quote is ‘approaches’ as I aim to gain insights to strategies and practice employed within two primary schools in Scotland as distinct from specific interventions. A case study methodology allows me to undertake a detailed exploration of how participants experienced and interpreted situations and events and how they actually behaved within the study setting.

In order to develop my understanding of the experiences of looked after children in the two specific primary schools, my main research question seeks to identify the practices and approaches that might be used to support looked after children who need further help with their learning. My subsidiary research questions explore:

- how looked after children are regarded by school staff including the impact that the term ‘looked after’ may have on practitioner expectation and

- what looked after children are able to tell us about the support they find most helpful.

In Chapter 2, in order to contextualise the study, I select and discuss a range of literatures related to: children’s early life experiences; attachment; children’s resilience; inclusive practice in schools; and issues surrounding labelling. I consider these core literatures to be the most significant in terms of positioning my research, formulating the
design of my study, and informing my research questions. A particular issue that I address is the way in which, despite experiencing difficulties, some looked after children do progress well and achieve appropriate educational outcomes. In Chapter 3 I describe the methodology and methods used to investigate my research questions. Given the interpretative nature of my study and my case study approach, the main data sources arise from documents, interviews and observation. My findings and data analysis are presented in Chapter 4 where a thematic approach is used to organise and obtain meaning and identify themes across the data. I present my findings through detailed accounts of seven looked after children. In Chapter 5 I further discuss my findings and identify specific strategies used by practitioners to teach looked after children in the two primary schools in the study. Chapter 6 concludes my study by considering the implications of the findings for understanding the needs of the seven looked after children in my study. Finally, the implications of the findings for policy and professional practice are considered.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

The concept of socio-cultural learning is used in this study to gain insights into the practices and approaches used to support looked after children to engage in learning. It is argued that learning is socially constructed (Vygotsky 1978, John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, Moll & Greenberg, 1990, Rogoff, 1990, 1994, 2003). Hausefather (1996) suggests: ‘school is primarily a social environment where people interact with each other and various cultural materials’ and Cole (1990) posits that: ‘All human activity takes place within this system of social relations.’ Thus, for those who, during the early stages of life, have not been supported to develop relevant social skills, the classroom may be a daunting place. Therefore, I felt it appropriate to examine socio-cultural aspects of learning when considering how practitioners attempted to ensure looked after children were included in the system of social relations obtaining in the classroom.

In this chapter, I review authors who have influenced theory, practice, legislation, and the specific heuristic lens that underpins the rationale and research design related to this study. I explore literature which discusses the background to the difficulties encountered by looked after children including the reasons why they become looked after. I examine and critique some of the models, including attachment and resilience, used in literature to portray and understand the challenges faced by looked after children. Solutions that have been proposed in literature, such as, professional development to support practitioners’ understanding of the needs of looked after children and the use of children’s voice in informing practice are also evaluated. In considering the expectations placed on teachers to deliver these solutions I discuss the role of Sociocultural pedagogy and the importance of social interaction between learners and their peers and their
teachers. Finally, I examine research concerned with the challenges related to issues such as attitudes, labelling and competing demands that teachers face in supporting looked after children.

2.1 Background to the problem: the reasons children and young people become looked after.

The determining condition for children becoming looked after is that the state, or those acting on behalf of the state have decided that these children are in need of care and protection. Thus, looked after children are not defined in law by their needs but by the place that they are required to live and the level of supervision provided by the local authority.

The term ‘looked after’ came into use in Scotland in 1995 with the Children (Scotland) Act (1995) and replaced the term ‘in care’. Within section 17 (6) of the act looked after children are defined as those who are:

- provided with accommodation by a local authority or
- subject to a supervision requirement made by a children's hearing

It is interesting that these definitions provide no insight into what it may be like to be a looked after child. As Hare and Bullock (2006, p.27) note:

‘Looked after children are an administrative group in that they are defined by law and state responsibility and not by need.’

In discharging its responsibility in relation to looked after children the Scottish Government adopts a welfare orientated approach to improving outcomes and supporting the wellbeing of children. In legislation (Scottish Government, 2014a) and
supporting framework documents such as Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2008a) there is an explicit commitment to promoting the welfare of children. Children become looked after because the state considers that without intervention they would not achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development. The Scottish Government developed 8 indicators of wellbeing in order to asses if a child is: Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included (SHANARRI). These indicators are used within the GIRFEC framework to undertake assessments where there are concerns for a child or young person under the age of 18. There is an expectation that professionals will work collaboratively using GIRFEC principles in order to support children and their families.

As noted in the introductory chapter of this study a child may be looked after at home or away from home. In both instances, the child will have been through the Children’s Hearing System and will be subject to a supervision requirement which means that there should be regular contact with social services. Where members of the Children’s Hearings system consider that, with the provision of appropriate support, problems will be resolved then the child may be looked after at home. In such instances, there is no ‘condition of residency’, contained in the supervision order. Official statistics indicate that there is a shift in the balance between those who are looked after at home and those who are looked after away from home, where there is a condition of residency. In addition, data (Scottish Government, 2017b) indicates that looked after children in Scotland tend to be younger than those in the rest of the UK. It is suggested that this is because of the focus on intervening early in the lives of vulnerable children. In 2016 25% of the children were looked after at home compared with 32% in 2012 (Scottish Government,2017c). This is interesting and raises questions about the resources that are provided to families to help them support their children at home. Logic would suggest
that if early interventions are having an impact the numbers being looked after at home may have, at least, remained static or possibly increased. However, there is the possibility that some children are being removed from home as professionals become more cautious as a result of high profile child protection cases.

The circumstances leading to children becoming looked after are varied, however, within legislation and across literature (CELCIS, 2016) the most common reasons cited are that:

- their parents cannot look after them;
- they have suffered physical, mental or emotional abuse;
- they may have complex disabilities or special learning needs;
- their parents misuse substances or lack what are considered to be effective parenting skills;
- some will have been trafficked or are seeking asylum; and
- in a small number of cases, they have been involved in criminal behaviour.

To gain an understanding of why children become looked after I turn to official statistics. However, although the statistics provide a clear account of where children are looked after the information about why they became looked after appears to be limited. In 2016 the official data (Scottish Government, 2017b) recorded reasons why 2723 looked after children were placed on the child protection register. In some instances, this was because there were concerns for more than one aspect of their wellbeing. The most common concerns were parental substance misuse (39%), domestic abuse (39%), and
emotional abuse (36%). However, I could find no indication as to why those who are not on the register became looked after.

There are various reasons why maltreatment may occur (Wasch & Evans, 2010). It may be because of intrapersonal factors related, for example, to parental immaturity, mental health difficulties or substance abuse. Interpersonal or family stresses related to difficulties in communication, problem solving, or conflict resolution may also be factors. In addition, there may be social reasons such as poverty or social isolation or exclusion or environmental factors such as noise or crowding may result in chaotic environments. Thus, it is unsurprising that The Centre for Excellence in Looked After Children (CELCIS) suggests that children who are looked after are amongst the most disadvantaged in society (CELCIS, 2016). Pinto and Woolgar (2015) posit that the impact of early adverse conditions may lead to looked after children developing emotional, behavioural and neurodevelopmental problems. This was supported by evidence from Bazalgette et al. (2015) who note that almost two out of five looked after children have been diagnosed with some form of behaviour disorder. In addition, looked after children have been identified as being approximately four times more likely to experience mental health issues than children who live with birth families (Bazalgette et al., 2015). Below I examine what the consequences of adverse life experiences may be for looked after children’s engagement in learning.

In considering early life experiences of looked after children a number of authors, for example, (O’Higgins et al., 2015 and Gerhardt, 2003) suggest that the impact of pre-care experiences such as maltreatment and neglect are likely to persist and have a long-term impact on educational outcomes. Some authors, for example Pollak et al. (2000), hypothesize that maltreatment appears to affect children’s interpretation and
understanding of emotional displays. In particular, those who have been subject to an extremely limited emotional environment experience greater difficulty in discriminating emotional expressions than do children who have not been maltreated. This may in turn influence the level of support required for them to engage in learning activities which rely on social interaction. Rogoff (2003, p.323) considers infants to be ‘cultural apprentices’ who look for, what she terms, guided participation. In literature, there seems to be a presumption that guided participation will take place in some form or other for all children. For example, Hausfather (1996, p.4) suggests that: ‘Guided participation was universal around the world’ and literature provides examples of the ways in which guided participation may vary from culture to culture. John-Steiner (1985) illustrates this by describing how children born in different cultures experience the world. An assumption made in developing a theoretical framework for this study is that as well as the variations in guided participation between cultures it is possible that it may exist to different degrees within cultures. If for infants and young children who are looked after, there has been a lack of guided participation then later in life they may experience difficulty in interpreting social and cultural clues, particularly those associated with learning in school.

Although the statistics related to outcomes for looked after children are concerning there is evidence that some looked after children do progress and achieve appropriate educational outcomes (Martin & Jackson, 2002). In considering factors that may contribute to this success I examine the literature on resilience in order to identify what a number of authors (Rutter, 2012; Dent & Cameron 2003 and Werner, 1993) term protective factors. Protective factors are those which are thought to counteract the impact of adverse experiences.
However, whilst exposure to adversity increases the risk of such problems it is important to note that not all children will be affected in the same way. Thus Woolgar (2013, p. 249) stresses the importance of considering the circumstances of individual children rather than making presumptions based on generic accounts. In the following section, I shall consider the potential impact of these difficulties in relation to children’s ability to engage in learning in different contexts. This is of significance for my study since, before considering how to engage looked after children in learning activities, there is a need for a clear understanding of why they may find such engagement difficult.

2.2 The challenges faced by looked after children and how these are understood in the literature.

In this discussion of challenges that looked after children face I intend to explore three main themes which appear to be prominent in my reading of the literature. The three areas are: development of social relationships; academic attainment; and the cohesion of support systems. I recognise that these are not the only challenges or that all looked after children experience barriers in all of these areas. In addition, there is a need to recognise that such challenges do not occur in isolation and that different facets of these challenges impact on each other.

First, I shall consider the importance of the development of social relationships, as identified by a number of authors, (Emond, 2014; Sempik et al., 2008 and Hodges & Tizard, 1989). Links are made between early adverse conditions and difficulties in developing social relationships which are important if looked after children are to be able to feel included in school and engage with others in learning. In considering the impact of emotional wellbeing on the lives of looked after children Bazalgette et al. (2015) interviewed 42 children in care and care leavers. The young people described feelings
associated with poor emotional wellbeing. These included an array of responses ranging from harmful behaviours towards themselves and others to self-isolating behaviours. It is understandable that such feelings may make it difficult to form relationships.

In seeking an understanding of why looked after children may experience relationship difficulties a number of authors (Scott, 2011 & Barth et al., 2005) have turned to attachment theory. Attachment theory can be seen to have originated in the late 1950s from the work of Bowlby (1969, 1973 and 1981) into the effects of separation and loss on children. He explored the impact of a child’s relationship with their primary care-giver on the child’s social and cognitive development. Bowlby considered that if the bond between the child and the primary care-giver was broken this would have a detrimental effect on the child’s psychological development. Ainsworth (1991, p. 38), who worked with Bowlby, described this as an ‘affectional bond’ where the care-giver or attachment figure is unique and could not be replaced by someone else. Scott (2011) posits that even if attachment experiences of looked after children are often less than positive, separation from the primary caregiver may still have a damaging impact on the child. However, the idea of one unique care-giver was controversial and attachment has been criticised for:

‘constructing mothers as solely responsible for infants and then for policing this caregiving’ (Duschinsky et al., 2015, p.174).

Over 40 years ago Rutter (1971) suggested that in certain instances, such as when a mother goes out to work, there was not likely to be a negative impact if the child received good care and established stable relationships with the substitute care giver. Thus, it was acknowledged by some researchers that a child could be attached to more than one person.
Although Bowlby described attachment as a system where there was feedback between mother and baby this was not a closed system and thus the influence of other factors needed to be considered. There is evidence to suggest that early maltreatment is likely to have a more significant impact on long-term outcomes than disrupted attachment (Smith & Walden, 1999). Ackerman and Brown (2010, p. 35) suggest that there is a need to move beyond exploration of the dyad of carer and child as the unit of analysis to consider variables related to:

‘background stimulation, social and physical disorganisation, and lack of predictability and structure in the home’.

As Bowlby (1940) chose to focus only on the relationship between the mother and child he did not take these environmental factors into account.

As noted earlier, in some instances of maltreatment there will be a number of interrelated factors. Therefore, to focus predominantly on attachment theory when considering why looked after children may develop relationship difficulties later in life has the potential to limit consideration of appropriate intervention strategies. Miller, et al. (2009) noted that children who experience early deprivation have an increased risk of developing attention problems, with rates being over 40% in some instances. More recently, research by Woolgar and Ballock (2015) found that in a considerable number of referrals to a national adoption and fostering agency reference was made to ‘attachment problems’ and in some instances, diagnoses of attachment disorders were made. Significantly the authors noted the absence of diagnosis of more common neurodevelopmental conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder even though the symptoms were detailed in letters of referral. The continued emphasis on attachment theory as a means of theorising relationship difficulties experienced by
looked after children may be due in part to the use of neuroscience to illustrate the impact of attachment (Gerhardt, 2003). Practitioners may give more weight to research which they perceive as being underpinned by scientific evidence such as brain scans.

By focusing primarily on the relationship between the child and mother attention is distracted from the social or economic resources that may be required to support the child and their family. There is also the possibility that when engaging in a discourse of attachment practitioners do not have a common understanding of the term. Whereas Bowlby and Ainsworth defined attachment as occurring between a young child and her or his primary care giver the term is now often used more loosely. For example, in their research into care and permanence planning Henderson et al. (2011, p.104) suggest that multiple changes in care placements:

‘can result in an inability to form secure attachments, sustain positive relationships and experience good outcomes both during and after care.’

Here the definition seems to have widened and it would have been helpful if the authors had explained their understanding of the term ‘secure attachment’ in this context, for example, how it differs from concepts such as ‘positive relationships’. Furnivall et al. (2012) cites a concern about a lack of a shared language related to attachment as one reason for undertaking a mapping exercise of attachment across children’s services in Scotland.

Another reason why attachment has become a prominent discourse when considering difficulties faced by looked after children may be because, over the years, practitioners have developed strategies, in the form of nurture programmes, to address attachment issues. Knowing that strategies and resources are available in the form of nurture programmes a child’s difficulty may be more likely to be labelled as attachment
rather than general behaviour difficulties which may not have associated resources available. In section 3, I shall discuss how such responses to the challenges of building effective relationships has been described in literature.

The next theme relates to academic achievement. Since Jackson (1987) first highlighted this issue thirty years ago statistics (Scottish Government, 2017a) have continued to show that looked after children perform less well than their peers on nationally accepted measures of academic attainment. This is important because educational outcomes along with factors such as health, life satisfaction and family life are a key indicator of a person’s well-being and progress (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2015). It is interesting to examine the way in which data regarding the attainment of looked after children is presented. On the one hand, if performance is compared to the general population, then looked after young people may be considered to be underperforming to a greater degree and there may be more of a political imperative to provide support. However, if the underperformance is less significant when compared to a similar socio-economic cohort of young people, this may present a more positive picture. It could be suggested that, if academic performance is deemed the most appropriate measure of success, there is a need to use both forms of comparison in order to acknowledge achievements whilst maintaining high expectations. This is of importance because of the impact that such messages may have on professional’s expectations of looked after children. Alternatively, it may be appropriate to question the use of such a narrow measure of success at all. The purpose of Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004b) is to enable young people to develop as: ‘successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens and effective contributors’. However, as yet, no account seems to have been taken of the last three capacities when measuring the educational progress of looked after children.
A number of authors have highlighted the challenges that looked after children face as a result of disrupted placements as they move between care settings. Authors such as Stoddart (2012) and Pears et al. (2010) recognise that the trauma caused by early adverse experiences and changes in placement can affect a child’s cognitive functioning and ability to focus in school. Findings in a study by Sugden (2013) emphasise the importance of stability of placement for continuity in education of looked after children. He explores specifically the ways in which a looked after child is supported to develop a sense of belonging within an educational setting. He notes the importance not only of interactions between a looked after child and the teacher but also between the looked after child and their peers. The study highlights the importance of making looked after children feel part of the class and school community thus taking account of wider social and cultural factors. The children interviewed in his study (Sugden, 2013) indicated the importance of the time spent during breaks with their peers. Findings such as this have informed my decision to adopt a socio-cultural perspective in my study in order take account of a range of factors when exploring how looked after children are supported to engage in learning.

If, in addition to a change in care placement a looked after child is required to move school then the level of uncertainty they experience is likely to increase. Hennessy et al. (2014) highlight the difficulties encountered when children are placed away from home in another local authority. In a small country like Scotland it is of concern that the 32 local authorities had different ways of dealing with these transitions. The authors suggested that some of the difficulties were related to legislation (Scottish Government 2009) which requires that when a looked after child moves between local authorities the receiving authority should undertake assessment to identify any additional support that the child may require. However, this does not always happen automatically and thus delays occur
in their enrolment into suitable provision. Stoddard (2012), in reporting on research undertaken in Canada, discussed the introduction of protocols to ensure that looked after children are not automatically moved to a new school when there is a change in care placement. These changes have implications not only for continuity and progression in learning but there is also the potential for gaps in knowledge to occur as children move from school to school. Because of this lack of permanency looked after children may find it difficult to form and maintain positive relationships and are likely to encounter additional challenges each time they change school.

Finally, an overarching issue for looked after children is related to the complexity of living within the care system. When a child becomes looked after she or he becomes the focus of an ‘integrated’ support system. An important issue within this system, where a range of professionals are expected to collaborate to ensure that the needs of the child are met, is the extent to which roles and responsibilities of individual practitioners are defined and understood by all those involved. Another important factor is the degree to which the child’s views and opinions on their needs inform decisions made within the support system.

In adopting a socio-cultural approach to this study, I aim to examine how looked after children learn with and from others. As part of this exploration I consider what it may mean to be included in learning with others. In examining the literature related to inclusion I consider the ways in which inclusive strategies and pedagogies are influenced by the values and beliefs of practitioners and policy makers. Earlier in this chapter I provided the definition of looked after children, as laid out in legislation; this definition defines this cohort of children by their place of residence. However, also noted earlier was the fact that within legislation there is also a requirement that all children who are
looked after are considered to have additional support needs unless proven otherwise. To explore the various ways in which the term ‘looked after’ may shape expectations I consider literature on labelling. Of particular interest is the ethics of this type of categorical labelling for such a diverse group of children.

Beginning in the 1990s, Fletcher-Campbell (1997, 1998) undertook significant work on the education of looked after children. Most of this work focused on children who were looked after in England. The aim of the original project was to: ‘make the invisible visible’ (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall, 1990, p. 187) and to collect data about those who had been received into care. It examined the educational arrangements, as opposed to simply looking at outcomes, made for these children and considered how well their educational needs were being met. Issues such as: low expectations of professionals; the diversity of needs amongst looked after children; lack of collaborative working between professionals; low value placed on education; and the disruption to schooling of looked after children were considered. These themes continued to emerge in literature for a significant length of time after they were first identified.

At a structural level, in order to bring cohesion into support for looked after children care plans are now required to be in place. It is the duty of the local authority, as corporate parents, to ensure that these plans include details of how a child’s learning experiences and attainment will be improved and who will be responsible for supporting this improvement. Whilst these requirements may mean that all aspects of a looked after child’s needs are recorded it does not necessarily mean that effective multi-agency working will be in place to implement the plans. Lack of collaborative working was identified by HMIE (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education) and SWSI (Social Work Services Inspectorate) who drew on inspection findings when producing the Learning with
Care report (Scottish Executive, 2001). This report noted issues similar to those identified by Fletcher-Campbell (1998). The authors found that social work and educational professionals had limited understanding of the contexts within which each other was working. This issue of lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities did not just apply across professions. Hennessy et al. (2014) carried out interviews with designated managers, who have responsibility to meet the needs of looked after children in their school. The interviews took place across four local authority areas and found that few of the designated managers were aware of their duties as detailed in government guidance (Scottish Government, 2008b). Thus, if specific individuals within a sector such as education are unclear of their roles and responsibilities in relation to looked after children it is not surprising that a common understanding across professions has not yet been achieved.

In reviewing the literature, it would appear that the organisational structures are not the only barriers but the views and beliefs of those in the organisation will impact on the way in which support is provided. Professionals’ low expectations of looked after children has been highlighted by a number of authors. On the one hand Aldgate, et al. (1992) suggested that social workers and care staff did not give sufficient attention to educational needs. Whilst findings from research undertaken by Francis (2000) indicated concern about attitudes of teachers and the low expectations they had of looked after children. Understandably, social workers might have placed a higher priority on care and welfare because of the professional and legal terms of reference of their role. Although low expectations of professionals have been identified in various pieces of research there appears to be limited discussion about the attitudes and beliefs underpinning these expectations. As noted earlier there is the possibility that the data which is used to highlight concerns about academic progress of looked after children also influences
practitioner’s opinions about the potential of individual looked after children. In turn, this may influence the extent to which practitioners involve looked after children in decisions about the support they are provided with.

In the same way that there appears to be difficulties in developing collaborative working between professionals the mechanisms to ensure that children’s views are represented within the system designed to support them do not yet appear to be well developed. A number of authors (Happer, 2006; Winter, 2006 and Thomas & O’Kane, 1998) have identified the need to take account of the views of looked after children themselves when considering how best to support them. Lundy (2007) suggests that different elements should be considered when assuring that children have the right to express their views. She considers that they should be given opportunities to express their views and be facilitated to do so. Furthermore, these views should then be listened to and acted upon appropriately. My study aims to address this need by adopting data gathering methods which provide looked after children with opportunities to offer opinions on how they can be supported. The findings of my study not only present the views of looked after children regarding the ways in which they can be supported but also considers some of the issues involved in obtaining those views.

In terms of children’s rights Winter (2006) argued that the existing framework, which was designed to provide measures of inputs and outcomes for looked after children in England, addressed the rights of looked after children to protection and provision. However, it did not allow for their participation rights to be addressed. She considered that what was missing in the assessment process was detailed accounts of looked after children themselves. In considering issues related to participation, I would suggest that the limited research with primary school aged looked after children may be because of
ethical constraints. In terms of ethical approval, research with children is categorised as high risk and often requires that specific measures be put in place. These may include, for example, a requirement to have someone else present during interviews with children. Researchers may be cautious about asking children for accounts of their experiences for fear of causing emotional harm. In section one of Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989), there is a requirement to ensure that children’s views are given ‘due weight in accordance with their age and capacity’. Here again the issue of perception arises as it is adults who decide the competency of the child. It could be argued that by being deemed to have additional support needs looked after children are being disadvantaged as this may influence an adult’s view of their competency. However, it may be that, like some adults, children may not always want to share their views and this should be respected.

2.3. The solutions posed in the literature.

As noted in the last section one of the challenges faced by looked after children is in developing positive relationships. The establishment of positive social relationships is not only important for general wellbeing but is also an important factor in ensuring inclusion in school. Within the literature this difficulty in forming relationships is often attributed to disrupted attachment and thus solutions are predicated on attachment principles. The prominence now given to attachment in the literature related to looked after children is illustrated in the report by Furnivall et al. (2012, p.7) which contains the ambitious aims of identifying how:

‘a greater focus on understanding attachment and supporting attachment-informed practice can support the delivery of key Scottish central and local government policies.’
The same report (Furnivall et al., 2012, p. 21) suggests that children who present with social and behavioural difficulties and who teachers find challenging are: ‘more likely to have had suboptimal attachment experiences’. With compelling language like this it is not surprising that practitioners look to attachment informed practice when considering how they can support the social and emotional development of looked after children.

This focus on attachment can be evidenced to some extent by the increasing use of nurture strategies (Boxall, 2002) designed to specifically combat the impact of disrupted attachment. Whilst these strategies are likely to be of value depending on how they are implemented they may actually act as a barrier to inclusion. For example, where looked after children spend part or all of a day in a nurture unit they have limited opportunities to develop relationships with their peers and the teacher in the mainstream classroom. In recognising this, some schools in Scotland have undertaken training in order to develop as nurturing schools rather than have a nurture base within the school. In addition, it could be suggested that by following a structured programme of intervention based upon the attachment and nurture models individual practitioners may lose their professional autonomy and not adapt their pedagogy according to the specific context of encounters with individual children.

As discussed previously, the concept of attachment relates to the process between caregiver and infant in which they respond to each other’s emotional states. However, this relationship with a key caregiver whilst of significance to the child’s development is only one aspect of adverse experiences that a looked after child may encounter. Thus, in order to understand how best to meet their needs there is a need to take account of the wider socio-cultural context in which they learn and develop. Although not specifically focusing on looked after children Ackerman & Brown (2010, p.40) posit that turmoil, such
as relationship instability, incarceration or substance abuse in a chaotic family environment may impact on various aspects of family functioning which may either directly or indirectly affect a child’s behaviour. In considering the cognitive development of children who have experienced such turmoil Ackerman & Brown (2010) suggest that there is a need to consider multiple factors. For example, academic achievement is not only influenced by intelligence and aspects of behaviour but also by factors such as motivation and social variables. By focusing on disrupted attachment there is the potential for practitioners to view the problem as residing in the child and viewing it as something that can be ‘fixed’ by the application of appropriate interventions. Guidance produced by CELCIS (Connelly et al., 2015 p.19) contains recommendations that:

‘Teachers and student teachers are given opportunities to learn about child development (and the role of attachment.)’

Whilst this may help teachers develop an understanding of the needs of looked after children there may be a danger that insufficient account is taken of a wider range of factors that may influence a looked after child’s engagement in learning.

Fortunately, not every looked after child who is exposed to adverse conditions or maltreatment will experience negative outcomes. In identifying the factors at play for those looked after children who do go on to lead fulfilling lives and engage in education a number of authors have highlighted the importance of developing resilience. Luthar, et al. (2014, p. 125) describe resilience as:

‘a process or phenomenon reflecting positive child adjustment despite conditions of risk.’
When considering resilience, a number of authors (Rutter, 2012; Dent & Cameron, 2003 and Werner, 1993) talk about protective factors which act as buffers to the effects of adverse experiences. For example, in their longitudinal study of 698 children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Werner (1993) identified protective factors at three levels. They considered that protective factors can be developed within the individual, within the family and within the community. The authors suggested that protective factors within individuals included a positive disposition; well-developed language and motor skills; ability to solve practical problems and often a special skill or talent of which the individual was proud. Nettles et al., (2000) discuss the role of the school in providing extra-curricular activities through which children and young people may be able to develop such skills or competencies. The idea that a trait such as a positive disposition may be a protective factor is also noted by Rutter (1985, p.600) who states that:

‘A protective factor may not be an experience at all; rather it may concern a quality of the individual as a person.’

This is echoed by Winkler (2014) who suggests that resilience is linked to an individual’s ability to reflect on and make sense of experiences rather than be overwhelmed by them. Whilst acknowledging that genetic factors are involved in protection against depression and anti-social behaviour, McCrory et al. (2010) and Rutter (2012) also emphasise that resilience is a dynamic process and genetic factors need to be considered alongside environmental factors.

In discussing the potential of social support as having a buffering effect Rutter (2012, p. 599) points out that:
'It is not the mere availability of friends and relatives that matter but rather the quality of a person’s relationships with other people and the use made of those relationships'.

In exploring the use of social resources in developing resilience in children and young people, Nettles et al. (2000) undertook a review of four projects. The authors considered that their findings demonstrated that school environments could protect or buffer the effects of adverse conditions. They identified aspects of school environments which acted as protective factors. These were: having high expectations, which is a consistent theme throughout the literature reviewed, organising opportunities for participation both in the classroom and wider school and providing care and support for the students. However, these factors identified are likely to be effective for all children not just those who are looked after.

Recently, CELCIS (2016) have highlighted the importance of promoting resilience and identified the need for staff development in this area. The issue of how schools should help encourage resilience in young people was noted by Woodier (2011) who lamented the lack of guidance as to how to put such recommendations into action. However, one author who did begin to explore what this may involve in practice was Henderson (1998, p.15) who talked about educators developing a ‘resilience attitude’. She suggested that:

‘This attitude involves searching for, nurturing, and reinforcing any scrap of resilience, and examining situations in which students or colleagues managed to outmanoeuvre, outlast, outwit or outreach adversity’.

Over recent years various developments have taken place which are designed to improve aspects of the system designed to support looked after children to engage in learning. Legislation has been passed which requires local authorities to take on the role
of corporate parent and schools are required to appoint designated managers for looked after children. In addition, in order to establish mechanisms for evaluating support for looked after children it became a requirement in legislation (Scottish Government, 2009a) that all looked after children should be considered to have additional support needs unless otherwise assessed. As part of this requirement assessments should be carried out and individualised education programmes should be in place to track the progress of looked after children. In addition to the introduction of these legislative requirements a common framework in the form of GIRFEC (Scottish Government, 2008a) has been introduced in order to establish a common language of assessment and support collaborative working.

In order to ensure that professionals possessed the required skills and knowledge to be able to work together effectively the Scottish Executive commissioned a report and training materials (Scott & Hill, 2004) from a group of agencies involved in supporting looked after children. The purpose of the materials was to support teachers, social workers and carers to develop relevant skills and knowledge of how best to support looked after children. The authors of the materials consulted widely in order to identify what should be included in the multi-disciplinary training course. Although it was intended that the materials should be delivered to multi-disciplinary groups as a coherent three-day course, a modular design was adopted as it was recognised that there may be a need to deliver it in different ways. One of the purposes of the training material was to encourage participants to develop an understanding not just of the roles of others but also their values and challenges that they faced in supporting the education of looked after children. In discussing the materials Furnival & Hudson (2003) emphasised that the intention of the training was not to equip professionals to:
“do each other’s jobs’, but to sensitisie them to what is possible within their own remit.’

Here there does appear to be an attempt to encourage practitioners to consider values and beliefs, in addition to formal roles and responsibilities, when working collaboratively to support children.

In analysing the elements of the system designed to support looked after children it would appear that the appointment of a designated manager as described above may simply be a bureaucratic device. Research undertaken by Hennessy et al. (2014) highlighted that of the designated managers interviewed across four Scottish Local authorities few of them were aware of the core tasks of their role. In addition, they were not always aware of the number of looked after children in their school. In January 2017 CELCIS undertook a survey of school staff supporting looked after children. Interestingly, the survey was intended for designated managers and focused predominantly on policies and procedures and the manager’s understanding of their responsibility in relation to the core tasks associated with their role. Thus, again the focus was on operational issues rather than on the establishment of positive relationships with looked after children. In recognising the need to support those working most closely with looked after children in school CELCIS (Connelly et al.,2015) produced guidance titled: ‘Improving the learning journey of looked after children.’ In this guidance, it was recognised that teachers need support in working with vulnerable children. It is suggested that the designated manager has a key role in providing this support but does not delineate what this may involve. Thus, on the one hand there is recognition that there is a lack of clarity regarding the role of designated managers yet these are the professionals who are charged with supporting those who work most closely with looked after children in schools. In section 4 I revisit
this issue when examining the expectations that are placed on teachers in relation to supporting looked after children in their education.

In recent years researchers (Morgan, 2009; Happer et al., 2006 & Harker, et al., 2003) have increasingly taken account of the views of looked after children when identifying effective ways to support them in their education. Across these studies supportive factors that young people themselves identified included: having people who care; experiencing stability; being given high expectations; and various motivational factors such as school commendation systems. An important element in the training materials mentioned above (Scott & Hill, 2004) was the consideration given to the views of looked after children. Exercises and video materials were used in order to support participants to develop an empathetic understanding of the challenges faced by looked after children and young people. The use of this video material could be considered to be a step towards representing the views and voice of looked after children and young people within the system that is designed to support them. However, although these materials were produced in 2003 there appears to have been no formal evaluation of their impact in improving provision for looked after children.

As noted earlier looked after children are not a homogenous group therefore it is important to listen to children’s voice in order to appreciate the uniqueness of their experiences. In a study of 159 looked after young people commissioned by the Scottish Executive (Who Cares Scotland, 2004) the correlation between teacher attitude and disengagement is highlighted. Whilst a significant number of young people referred to the importance of a positive relationship with teaching staff as a motivating factor in their education, 14% of those interviewed felt that teaching staff demonstrated a lack of understanding of the difficulties faced by those in care. Thus, it can be seen that teachers
have a key role in supporting looked after children along with all of their other responsibilities.

2.4 Expectations of teachers to deliver the solutions.

This study aims to highlight ways in which looked after children can be supported to engage in learning, particularly in collaborative learning with others. I consider that to do this there is a need to move the focus from those with bureaucratic roles to considering the expectations placed on those working most closely with looked after children in schools. Thus, my study focuses on socio-cultural aspects of support for a small group of looked after children. In doing so this research aims to identify ways in which those working most closely with these children can support them in their learning.

Socio-cultural theories of learning have been developed from the work of Vygotsky (1978) who postulates that cognitive development arises from social interaction and considers that for this development to happen there has to be guided learning within what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He considered that the environment in which a child grew up influenced the way in which he or she thought and what they thought about. Vygotsky posited that a significant amount of a child’s learning took place though interaction with a ‘skilled tutor’. The tutor does not necessarily have to be a teacher but may simply be someone who has more experience, in relation to the task, than the learner. As noted earlier this may be particularly significant for looked after children who may not always experience supportive environments or role models who are able to act as skilled tutors. In a similar way, when considering how learners are supported to increase their knowledge and skills Wood et al. (1976), used the metaphor of ‘scaffolding’. The term was used to describe the way in which adults’ support children to perform tasks that they could not complete alone. Although scaffolding is a commonly
used term it cannot be guaranteed that all practitioners use it to mean the same thing. For example, Newman et al. (1989) focus on the collaboration between the skilled tutor and learner. However, in practice I have often heard it used to refer to the way in which support is adjusted during an episode of teaching in order to align with the child’s level of performance.

The development of relationships is an important factor when considering how learning is supported. It is through the action and interaction that occur in relationships that beliefs and values are shared and developed and expectations formed. I would suggest that this is an important perspective as in delivering Curriculum for Excellence in Scottish schools teachers are expected to support the development of pupils’ health and wellbeing. Guidance provided to all teachers in Scottish schools (Scottish government, 2009, p.12) notes the importance of forming and sustaining good personal, social and working relationships in the development of wellbeing. It is suggested that:

‘Such relationships underpin successful learning, as they are the key to motivation and engagement with the values and ideas of Curriculum for Excellence.’

Thus, it could be suggested that Curriculum for Excellence is underpinned by a socio-cultural model of education and therefore it would be appropriate to adopt such a model when exploring how teachers support looked after children to engage in learning.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of Vygotsky’s ideas Rogoff (2003) suggests that in his work he focused on the development of academic discourse and tools overlooking other types of engagement that support children’s learning. Similarly, in discussing the wider context in which learning takes place Bal & Thorious (2012, p.4) suggest that:
‘Part of the process of becoming educated is becoming socialized to the cultural ways in which knowledge and skills are pursued, understood and performed in and outside of school.’

This seems to be an element that is absent in the support mechanisms that were discussed in the previous section.

As the focus of my study is on the ways in which looked after children can be supported to engage in the wider cultural community of the classroom, the work of Rogoff (2003) is of relevance. She introduces the concept of ‘guided participation’ in which the ways in which children are supported in their learning is underpinned by the values and practices of the cultural community (Rogoff, 1990). Importantly, guided participation involves a range of interactions which support learning in its widest sense. An aspect of guided participation that is of particular significance for looked after children is that of bridging meaning through social referencing. Rogoff (2003, p.285) considers that bridging meaning occurs between people as they modify their perspectives on a situation in order to come to a common understanding. Social referencing occurs when individuals attempt to gain an understanding of social situations from the expressions of others. Hedges & Cullen (2012, pp.929-930) consider that: ‘Peers are important contributors to children’s learning that are often overlooked.’ Thus, in line with Hedges & Cullen (2012) and Vygotsky (1978) when taking account of all social resources available I explored the type of support that looked after children consider their peers may be able to provide.

2.5 Challenges that teachers face in providing the solutions.

To some extent the approaches that teachers take in supporting looked after children are likely to be shaped by their values and beliefs. In turn, these values and beliefs are
likely to be influenced by the images that are portrayed of looked after children as underachieving and in need of additional support. Thus, to provide appropriate support for individual children teachers need to look beyond such labels. By labelling all looked after children as having additional needs there is a danger that the language used in legislation implies a deficit position. It could be suggested that this is a move, as described by Fitch (2002), from naming the children as ‘looked after’ to a position of social censure where they are defined as outside the norm by being deemed to have additional support needs. It could be suggested that over the years legislation has done little to emphasise the importance of focusing on the unique circumstances of each looked after child.

As noted in the introduction to this study, legislation (Scottish Government, 2009a) was amended to include the presumption that all looked after children will be considered to have additional support needs unless otherwise assessed. However, by making this presumption I would suggest there may be a danger of engaging in categorical thinking and labelling a whole cohort of children. Building on the 2004 Act and subsequent amendments, the most recent legislation (Scottish Government, 2014a) continues to promote the assumption of additional support needs. By adopting this discourse of commonality, there may be a danger that those working with looked after children fail to take account of the diversity of their needs and simply assume vulnerability. To some extent, this seems almost to contradict the principle of minimum intervention within the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. As noted by Earls and Carson (1999, p. 72), this portrays an outdated notion of children as

‘immature creatures whose needs must be met by parents or other charitable adults’
When discussing children’s needs, Woodhead (1990) suggests the term had become part of the everyday vocabulary of a range of professionals, policy makers and parents. He goes on to posit that the term ‘need’ conceals latent assumptions and judgements about children. In a similar vein, I would propose that beneath the presumption that all looked after children have additional needs are judgments based on particular views of childhood. These views may relate to a discourse of vulnerability and innocence where adults consider that children need to be protected. Woodhead (1990, p. 63) suggests that the term ‘need’ implies a sense of helplessness and places power with those charged with meeting these needs. In analysing data for this study, I attempt to look at the different degrees to which adults either retain this power or share it with children by involving them in decision making.

It could be considered that, rather than having the interests of individual children at the core of the legislation discussed, there is a danger of children becoming labelled for bureaucratic reasons. This presumption of additional support needs, whilst designed to ensure that specific records are kept illustrating how looked after children are supported, appears to take no account of degree of risk. As Panter-Brick (2002, p. 163) note many children who face adversity actually develop a high level of resilience. However, in defence of the requirement to consider all children and young people who are looked after as having additional needs, Francis (2008, p. 61) considered that it would be better to apply the term to all those who were looked after if it led to an overall improvement in their educational experience.

‘The potential benefits accruing from such measures appear to greatly outweigh the short-term hazards that may result from the stigmatising effect that some suggest would follow’ (Francis 2008, p. 68).
As Hjörne & Saljö (2013) suggest one of the purposes of labels or categories has been to describe learners in order to identify their needs and provide what was considered appropriate support. In addition, those with a specific label may attract additional resources to support them effectively in their learning. It could be argued that over the years such labelling has had a positive impact in raising awareness of professionals and parents on how to meet the needs of those with specific conditions. In order to develop appropriate strategies and materials there is a need to be able to delineate the condition. However, this is not necessarily as straightforward as it may appear. Rix (2016) has suggested there is a lack of consistency in the way children are allocated into categories of special educational needs. He considers that such assessment can be a lottery and can be influenced by the background of the professional undertaking the assessment. Hallahan & Kauffman (1994) suggests that:

‘Labels in and of themselves are not evil. How they are interpreted by others and by the labelled person determine whether they are harmful or ameliorative’.

Thus, it would appear that teachers not only have to ensure that they avoid their expectations being influenced by the ways in which looked after children are labelled they also need to consider how they balance competing demands to meet the needs of all learners within their class. It can be demanding to maintain a positive and purposeful learning environment for the whole class whilst giving focused attention to addressing the individual needs of specific children. In some instances, additional staff are deployed within the classroom to support specific children. However, this has the potential to exclude children as they may spend more time with the adult than working with their peers. Therefore, as noted in section 2.2 of this chapter, when considering the support
systems in place within the classroom there is a need to consider the dynamics and interactions between all of those in the classroom. The dynamics in the classroom will be influenced by the decisions that teachers make about how to organise their available resources in order to develop positive interactions with looked after children and engage them in learning activities.

Throughout this chapter the relevance of socio-cultural learning in the education of looked after children is illustrated. For example, in section 2.2 in the discussion of challenges faced by looked after children the impact of early adverse experiences on the development of social relationships is discussed. Next the influence of the values and beliefs held by practitioners on their practice was considered. In addition, the fact that current guidance to designated managers focused on operational issues rather than focusing on the development of relationships was illustrated. This is of significance because, as noted by Scottish Government (2009, p.12), good social and working relationships are central to motivation and engagement in learning. Most significantly, research (Morgan, 2009; Happer et al., 2006 & Harker et al., 2003) which took account of children’s views demonstrated that the children focused on interpersonal factors when identifying effective support mechanisms. In section 2.4 aspects of socio-cultural theories of learning which may support teachers to provide effective support are discussed. The various elements described above were used to inform decisions about data collection.

In the following chapter I describe how the focus on socio-cultural learning described above impacted on decisions relating to data collection. I detail how children’s histories were examined through case files and pupil profiles to develop an understanding of the ways in which their early experiences may have impacted on their ability to form social relationships. I explain why I undertook both interviews and observations in order to gain
an understanding of individual participants perspectives and to identify socio-cultural approaches that were adopted in order to support looked after children to participate in learning.
Chapter 3 Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodological principles and investigative procedures that underpin the study. The research design is set out in terms that will address the main research question: ‘What practices and approaches support looked after children to engage in learning?’ In addition, I intend to address the following subsidiary questions:

- How are looked after children regarded by their teachers?
- What can we learn from what looked after children tell us about their learning experiences?

To develop an understanding of factors that contribute to looked after children experiencing less positive educational outcomes than their peers, I felt it would be appropriate to investigate the individual experiences of a small group of looked after children. In order to identify an appropriate group of children I approached senior education officers in a large local authority in central Scotland. The schools in the study (Alpha and Beta Primary Schools) were identified as establishments where staff were supporting a number of looked after children from a range of care settings. These schools were located in an urban area where significant numbers of children were in receipt of free school meals. In Alpha Primary School 50.6% of children were eligible for free school meals and in Beta Primary school the figure was 49%. There was a children’s home located near the schools and children from this home attended both schools. Thus, I was able to include children who were looked after away from home in a children’s home as well as those who were in kinship and foster care. Details of those involved in the project
are provided in the following tables. Although there were twelve looked after children across the two schools two of the carers did not give permission for their children to participate. Of the ten children who were interviewed only seven were observed in class as one child relocated and staff in Beta Primary School did not think that it would be appropriate to observe two of the children in the behaviour unit.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>D.O.B.</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Documentati</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John*1</td>
<td>27-7-04</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne*</td>
<td>5-5-01</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne*</td>
<td>26-6-02</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>16-11-01</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>29-6-01</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy **2</td>
<td>8-3-01</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth</td>
<td>21-5-01</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>21-11-02</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David***</td>
<td>19-9-03</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian **</td>
<td>9-6-03</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 * These three children are siblings
2 ** These children were not observed in class
3 *** This child moved out of the school shortly after the interview
# Table 2 Carers Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carer</th>
<th>Associated Child /Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs A (Foster carer)</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs B (Grandparent)</td>
<td>Charlene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs C (Grandparent)</td>
<td>Wayne and Leanne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs D (Foster carer)</td>
<td>Kenneth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs E (Foster carer)</td>
<td>Bethany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr H (Head of children’s home)</td>
<td>Cheryl and Roy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Head teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Depute head teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Mrs X class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Mrs Y class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Miss Z class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Miss W support assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Head teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Miss R Looked after children manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Mrs T Teacher in support base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Mr S Class teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to maintain the anonymity of status of the looked after children a group matched by age and gender who were not looked were also interviewed. Data from these interviews was transcribed and used during the initial data analysis phase of this study. I felt it was important to do this to value the contributions of the non-looked after children. However, I did not intensively analyse data from the non-looked after group or compare it to data relating to looked after children. I felt that to do so would suggest I considered the experiences of non-looked after children to be the norm against which to compare looked after children. I did not consider that such an approach would have been ethically acceptable.

I aimed to undertake an interpretive approach to illuminate processes related to supporting seven looked after primary school children to participate in learning. I chose to adopt an interpretive approach because as Cohen et al. (2008, p. 11) suggest, positivism is not as successful in the study of human behaviour:

‘... where the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena contrast strikingly with the order and regularity of the natural world.’

Rather than considering outcomes such as examination results I wanted to look at factors that occurred early in a looked after child’s school experience that may influence longer term outcomes. In deciding to adopt an interpretivist approach I wanted to go beyond developing my own understanding by charting patterns of subjective understanding in order to achieve ‘Verstehen’. Hennink et al., (2011, p. 17) consider that Verstehen involves:
‘understanding the life of the people whom you study from their own perspective, in their own context and describing this using their own words and concepts.’

I was particularly interested in exploring relationships between the looked after children and those, including teachers, support staff, peers and family, who supported them in their learning in school. I chose to focus on relationships because previous research (Ubha & Cahil, 2014 and Garvin et al., 2012) has highlighted the difficulties experienced by looked after children in forming positive relationships. Happer et al. (2006) noted that when discussing supportive factors, looked after children had identified the importance of an adult who believed in them. I wanted to explore such relationships for seven looked after children as they engaged in learning activities in school. As Mason (2002, p. 56) notes, interpretive approaches encourage researchers to:

‘see people, and their interpretations, perceptions, meaning and understanding as the primary data source.’

This study aims to highlight why looked after children may find it difficult to engage in the type of learning that is valued by educational authorities for example, in collaborative learning with others. To date, much of the literature on the education of looked after children has considered their education from a developmental perspective. Such studies and reports have focused on school education as preparation for further education, learning and training where outcomes are measured by success in examinations. My study differs from others in that it focuses on socio-cultural aspects of support for a small group of seven looked after children. The decision to adopt this perspective was based on the observation that, as noted in my literature review (Chapter 2) one of the challenges faced by looked after children is the development of social
relationships. In adopting a socio-cultural perspective, I am attempting to build on the assumption that individual development is inextricably linked with the social, cultural and historical context within which it takes place.

By using observation, and engaging in discussion with participants, my aim was to explore ways in which some staff and looked after children employed social referencing whilst engaging in learning. In addition to considering the support provided by adults, I attempt to take account of the contribution made by others such as peers, in supporting looked after children in learning. I felt it important to examine the type of support that those whom looked after children considered their peers might be able to provide because as Hedges & Cullen (2012, p. 929) suggest, in some classes: ‘... interactions with peers may be more common than those with teachers’. In developing the approach, I explored underlying ontological premises. The term ontology, refers to the formal study and understanding of being and some authors (Gray, 2013 and Crotty, 1998) describe it simply as: ‘the study of being.’ At a simplistic level, ontological perspectives may be classified as realist or relativist. King & Horrocks, (2010 p. 9) propose that a realist would consider that the real world exists separate from us, and that the objects and structures in it are linked by cause and effect relationships. In undertaking social research, a realist may adopt quantitative methods in order to examine these relationships. Alternatively, Cohen et al., (2008, p. 61) consider that a relativist would consider the world to be less structured and more diverse and that an individual’s understanding of the world would be relative to their particular frames of reference. From this relativist perspective, society would be viewed as being open to a range of interpretations. Having begun my career in education as a physics teacher and having a scientific training, I might naturally have tended towards being a realist, who, as King & Horrocks (2010, p. 9) explain:
‘...subscribes to the view that the real world is out there and exists independently from us.’

However, as a head teacher and HMI having spent many years interviewing pupils, parents and staff in order to evaluate provision in a range of schools across Scotland, I do not believe we can form a view of the world or any part of it without taking account of cultural and social frames of reference. My position may be described as a relativist in that I believe that knowledge is a social reality, it is value-laden and in important respects constructed by individual and shared interpretations. This articulates with the socio-cultural perspective that I adopt in my study.

The next step was to define my epistemological stance and decide what may be considered to be valid evidence of the social reality of the participants. Mason (2002, p. 16) explains epistemology as the systematic study of:

‘...what might represent knowledge or evidence of the social reality that is investigated.’

This relates to how a researcher considers knowledge to be structured, how they can acquire it and communicate it to others. Epistemologically, I considered that it would be possible through discussion and observation to construct knowledge that guided me to an understanding of how school staff, carers and a small group of looked after children viewed educational support. As part of this process I considered how I would be able to demonstrate the validity of the data collected. Validity refers not only to the accuracy and precision of the data but also to its appropriateness in relation to the research questions. The participants all had first-hand experience of the process being investigated and were able to talk about their experiences of receiving or giving support and provide specific examples. Therefore, I considered that their contributions would
constitute valid data. The steps taken to ensure the validity of data and reliability of the research instruments used are described in more detail in section 3.6.

The principal task, then, was to use a step by step approach to collate, analyse and draw meaning from the diverse beliefs and feelings of the participants. To position these views in a theoretical framework, I had to identify my underlying assumptions. A key assumption was that the support provided for looked after children would be dependent on the ways in which participants interacted with each other. In view of this, as noted earlier, I considered it appropriate to adopt a socio-cultural perspective in this interpretive study. In section 3.3 of this chapter, when discussing the research strategy and design, I describe how I used observations to record the interactions of participants. In addition, I assumed that cultural beliefs and attitudes would directly influence the type of support provided. In order to develop an understanding of the beliefs and attitudes of participants and the ways in which these impacted on their actions I constructed interviews. To provide background detail as part of the case study I also examined relevant documentation related to the life and school histories of the seven looked after children.

3.2 Research Approach

As I wanted to complement previous research related to the education of looked after children by providing detailed accounts of the experiences of seven looked after children it was appropriate to undertake qualitative research. In planning the study, I was conscious of Mason’s (2002, p.8), suggestion that:

‘Qualitative research should be conducted as a moral practice with regard to its political context.’
In doing this, I had to take account of different roles, responsibilities and relationships of participants and the ways in which they related to each other. In addition, I considered the ways in which the roles individuals held might influence interpretation of social processes and practices that they engaged in. I wanted to produce research that practitioners could identify with because it focused on interpersonal relationships within the classroom rather than on roles and responsibilities as laid down in local and national policies. My aim was to produce a holistic and contextual understanding of practices and approaches that may be used to support looked after children to engage in learning. Thus, a qualitative approach, using case study methodology, was adopted in order to enable me to gain an in depth understanding of the issues related to the social, emotional and educational support for looked after children. My approach to this study was shaped by a perspective that there can be multiple realities which are dependent upon how an individual interprets events. I assumed that in my study the participants’ views were not fixed but shaped by their individual experiences, perceptions and beliefs and the meanings that they attached to these. In addition, I considered the participants to be social actors influenced by cultural practices; thus, participants’ experiences of being supported and providing support in a range of situations would influence their perceptions and opinions of what they saw and encountered. Therefore, I anticipated that there would be a range of perspectives offered (Schultz & Hatch 1996). I undertook interviews, observations and documentary analysis to collect data related to the views and experiences of participants. By using these methods to gather data it was my intention to add depth to the descriptions provided by participants. As I wanted to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of looked after children’s learning experiences it was important to capture the values and beliefs that underpinned the actions and
interactions. Therefore, interviews were an important element of the research design. King and Horrocks (2010, p. 11) consider that interpretative research involves:

‘... describing aspects of the social world by offering a detailed account of specific social settings, processes or relationships.’

To achieve this, as noted earlier, I adopted a case study approach in exploring the processes and relationships as described by a small group of looked after children, some of their parents and carers and staff in two primary schools in central Scotland. It is appropriate to undertake a case study when a researcher is aiming to answer “what”, “how” or “why” questions (Adler & Ziglio, 1996 and Yin, 1994). As the purpose of this study is to answer “what” questions, a case study methodology was considered to be appropriate.

Interviews were included as part of the research design in order to explore the attitudes and beliefs underpinning the practices and approaches of those supporting looked after children. Factors influencing values and beliefs such as of aspects of culture and policy requirements were considered. In addition, the children’s views of their learning experiences were gathered. I considered that the views and beliefs of the participants as expressed in interviews would represent the social reality of the support provided. Rather than viewing an interview as a research instrument, in line with Talmy (2011), I consider the research interview as social practice. Thus, during interviews, I engaged with the participants in social practices from which data was constructed. The resulting data provided representations of facts, attitudes and beliefs which were co-constructed between me and interviewees. Thus, there is articulation between my theory of methodology and the theoretical framework of the wider study. Below I describe my approach to analysing this data.
An inductive approach to analysing the data was adopted. Lodico et al., (2010, p.10) describe inductive reasoning as a:

“‘bottom-up’ approach to knowing, in which the researcher uses observations to build an abstraction or to describe a picture of the phenomenon that is being studied.’

In this study, I achieved this by undertaking an iterative process through multiple readings of the data. I drew on insights gained at each stage of the analysis to inform understanding at the next level of interpretation. In addition, I continually moved between different data sets, for example, from records of observations to transcripts of interviews to ensure that I considered the different meanings that might lie behind segments of data. I considered this an appropriate approach as my aim was not to test a specific theory but to use the data to provide explanations and build arguments to develop an understanding of how best to support looked after children to engage in learning. I interrogated the data in different ways to establish links between key themes and my research objectives. By engaging in an inductive analysis of the data my aim was to move from the particulars of the case study, to identifying more general issues and in order to do this, I used a grounded approach. Hennink, et al. (2011, p. 206) suggest that such an approach offers:

‘a process for textual analysis that is well suited to understanding human behaviour, and identifying social processes and cultural norms.’

By using a grounded approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) involving clearly defined analytical procedures my aim was to ensure transparency in the data analysis process.
3.3 Strategy and research design

I decided to use case study methods which aligned with my ontological position and the socio-cultural perspective adopted for this study. Case studies can be categorised in many ways; for example, Merriam (1998) uses the categories of descriptive, interpretive and evaluative. In undertaking this study, I attempted to go beyond the merely descriptive and undertake an evaluative case study combining description, interpretation and judgement. I consider the use of case studies to be an important aspect of my study as they offer the opportunity to illustrate how the themes were observed in the everyday experiences of the looked after children.

As noted elsewhere in my study looked after children are a heterogeneous group with diverse experiences, strengths and support needs and this was a prime reason for choosing a case study approach. In line with Denscombe (2010, p. 5), I felt this case study approach was appropriate because I wanted to:

‘... understand the complex relationship between factors as they operate within a particular social setting’.

To achieve this, I undertook what Adelman et al. (1980, p. 49) describe as: ‘the study of an instance in action.’ Cohen et al. (2008, p. 256) suggest that a single instance can be considered as: ‘a bounded system’ which offers: ‘a unique example of real people in real situations.’ The bounded system that I investigated consisted of each of the seven looked after children and those who support them to engage in learning in their respective primary schools. I considered that this approach would enable practitioners to identify more closely with distinctive examples, illustrating how support was provided in specific contexts. This focus on the rich detail of everyday life is considered by some authors (Nisbet & Watt, 1984 and Adelman et al., 1980) to be a strength of case studies.
However, areas in which case studies are open to criticism include those that are difficult to cross-check and may be too subjective and prone to observer bias. To address these criticisms, in sections 3.3.1-3.3.4 I describe the rationale behind my choice of data collection tools and in section 3.5 I provide a detailed description of the steps followed in the data collection and analysis process. By making explicit the decisions that guided the development and implementation of this study I aim to reduce subjectivity. I intend to illustrate how I attempted to avoid observer bias by demonstrating ways in which I engaged in reflexivity during data collection. To illustrate how aspects of my case study may be generalised in discussing findings I compare features of my study with those found in similar types of study.

Whilst previous research, for example (Sebba et al., 2015), offers practitioners an insight into what helps looked after children engage in learning much of the information was gathered through interviews only and did not involve observations of how the children participated in learning. By collecting information directly from respondents, I was able to interact with them and react to their responses. In line with Yin (1994, p. 8) I considered this to be in keeping with my epistemological stance, as oriented towards constructing knowledge and understanding of their views through discussion and observation. Through the use of case study, my aim was to highlight what Mason (2002, p.166) describes as: ‘social processes, or complex narratives or practices’ involved in supporting looked after children in their learning. Also, a case study approach provided the opportunity to give voice to a small cohort of looked after children of primary school age in order to obtain their views of how they can best be helped to engage in learning. By interpreting and evaluating findings I hoped to provide teachers and others such as classroom assistants with an insight into the educational experience and educational needs of the studied children. The strength of a case study is that it allows the use of a
variety of data and research methods (Denscombe, 2010). In the next section I go on to describe the rationale behind the choice of data collection methods.

3.3.1 Interviews

I chose to use interviews as a data collection method because I wanted to ascertain the opinions, feelings and experiences of the participants. In analysing the content of the data, my aim was to look at the relationships between what the participants shared in interviews and the ways in which they interacted with each other during the observations that I undertook. In some instances, participants, particularly members of school staff, explained their understanding of situations and provided rationales for their actions which would not have been apparent if I had only used observations to collect data. I decided to use semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1) as they offered the opportunity to ask subsidiary questions and encourage participants to elaborate on their initial responses thus providing a rich data source.

In discussing the parameters of interviews Denscombe (2010) suggests there are assumptions and understandings associated with interviews which are not usually applied to other forms of discourse such as conversations. Whereas a conversation may be informal and ‘free flowing’ there is an expected outcome from an interview. Hennink, et al., (2011) consider that interviews differ from conversations in that they have a purpose. A number of authors (Hennink et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2010 and Cohen et al., 2008), discuss another difference between a conversation and an interview by emphasising the role of the interviewer in structuring the engagement in order to draw out the interviewees’ views and opinions. This however only takes account of one side of the social interaction. Rapley (2001) goes beyond the idea of the researcher providing the structure and suggests that as it is a social encounter the interviewer and interviewee co-
construct the interview. In my study, I aimed to achieve a balance between directing the conversation in order to obtain responses to my interview questions and allowing participants to provide data by focusing on issues that were of significance to them.

Following Florian and Rouse (2009, p. 600) I considered that I would be able to gain an insight into teachers’ beliefs from the ways in which they spoke about their work and their students. As mentioned later in this chapter when discussing ethics, I assumed that in agreeing to take part in my study participants would be willing to share their views and beliefs with me. Intrinsic to this assumption was my belief that they would do so honestly. In addition, when discussing empowering children, Munro (2001) considers that the use of unstructured interviews allows the child, rather than the researcher, to decide what issues are important. The purpose of letting the child take the lead in this way was to obtain a clearer picture of the world as the child experienced it.

3.3.2 Observations

I considered it appropriate to undertake observations to identify the actions and interactions of looked after children and those supporting them in learning. The data obtained from these observations was analysed in order to provide material to support interpretations and case studies of the children’s experiences in school. Using observations, my aim was to gain an insight into what Mason (2002, p.85) expresses as:

‘the ways in which the social phenomena occur or are performed in the context of a setting.’

This was of significance to me, because I felt that practitioners were more likely to engage with the findings of my study if they were presented in the context of the ‘real life’ classroom setting. In addition, I consider that not all knowledge can be constructed through interviews. For example, it is not possible to gain an understanding of how
participants occupy the physical space of a setting as they work in close proximity or at a
distance from others in the classroom. Therefore, observation tools were used in order
to obtain multidimensional data on the social interactions between looked after children
and those working with them in the classroom. Observations provide details not only of
what individuals say to each other but the emphasis that they place on their utterances
which may in turn provide insight to their intentions. Factors such as tone of voice and
body language used in interactions can support a more detailed interpretation of
meaning than simply listening to an account of the interaction during an interview. In
using observations as a data collection tool, I acknowledge the need to analyse my role in
both the data collection and analysis process. To achieve transparency in the process of
data collection, as far as possible, I set out in section 3.4.2 details of how I undertook the
observations and the potential impact my presence may have had on the setting.

I intended to use the observations to obtain what Geertz (1973) describes as a
‘thick description’; providing a detailed account of the phenomena being studied in the
context in which they occurred. For example, by analysing the detailed narratives, or
thick descriptions, provided by participants it was possible to identify unexpected themes
that may not have emerged had a close coded survey been used to gather data. I
obtained this data, which complemented what had been collected in interviews, in order
to understand the issue from different perspectives. I was aiming to do what Mulhall
(2003, p.308) describes as putting together a jigsaw puzzle, where each element of the
data represents a piece of the jigsaw which, when assembled, provides: ‘the picture on
the box’. In my study, there were seven related ‘pictures’ or case studies of looked after
children which are presented in Chapter 4.

3.3.3 Documentary analysis
In undertaking documentary analysis, my intention was to explore the life and school histories of the looked after children in the study. I wanted to gain an understanding of their early experiences and the ways in which these may have impacted on how they engaged in learning. I undertook documentary analysis of case files and pupil profiles to understand the biographies of the looked after children, as recorded by professionals, such as teachers and social workers. In examining these documents, I was looking at ways in which support mechanisms were formalised. A number of authors (Sugden, 2013; Stoddart, 2012 and Scott, 2011) suggest that early life experiences of looked after children also impact on their ability to engage in learning in school. Therefore, it seemed logical to undertake documentary analysis to gain an understanding of the early experiences of the children in my study. In addition, I wanted to explore what others had identified as the children’s strengths and the challenges they faced in their classroom learning. However, I recognise that the documents that I examined provide only one perspective on the reality of the lives of the children in my study.

3.3.4 Research Journal

In addition to the data collection methods described above I also kept a research journal, (Appendix 5). The journal was not simply an aide-memoire, to assist in recalling what I had seen and heard, but also a tool to support critical reflection (Schön, 1983). In line with my epistemology as described in the introduction to this chapter, I wanted to consider my relationship to the knowledge that I was uncovering. The journal enabled me to use an approach similar to that developed by Gibbs (1998) and Kolb (2014), who suggest a structure whereby the episode or event is initially described then the writer records how they feel about the event before moving on to consider what it means in relation to the research questions. One of the purposes of my research journal was to
support my interpretive and reflective reading of data. By recording my thoughts in a research journal, I could keep a record of what I thought the data represented and what I thought I could infer from it at different points in the data collection and analysis process. I intended that it should provide me with a tool with which to consider interviewees’ interpretations and understanding of how looked after children are taught. My aim was to use it as a device with which to formulate and understand the setting by documenting ‘hunches’ and developing and testing analytical ideas. In addition, the intention was to explore my role and influence when collecting and analysing my data. By recording my relationship to the data in this way I aimed to increase the transparency and reliability within the study. In the following section, I provide a detailed description of how the data was collected and analytical processes used to turn the data into evidence of specific findings.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to undertaking data collection there were formal constraints that I had to consider. In reflecting on the process of gaining permission from those that King & Horrocks (2010) refer to as ‘gatekeepers’ I recognise that I was in what could be considered to be a privileged position. As an HMI, local authority staff were probably more inclined to engage with me and support the collection of data than if I had approached them as an unknown research student. However, in negotiating entry to the schools I had to stress that the project was not linked to my role as an HMI or to inspection activity in any way at all. Although I was conducting the research as a doctoral researcher I was still conscious of what Hellawell (2006, p. 484) describes as a ‘power differential.’ I was conscious of the need to ensure that I did not allow professional expectations that I had developed as an HMI to influence my interpretations of what was
observed and transcribed. I achieved this by letting the participants shape the conversations and discussing issues that were of importance to them.

Matching my availability to times that suited those in school meant that the visits took place between November 2012 and October 2013 which was a longer period than I would have wished. One of the implications of this was that each time I undertook a visit I had to familiarise myself with the findings of the last visit. Whilst this did increase the time required for data collection it also provided me with the opportunity to regularly revisit the data and become absorbed in it. Observations were constrained by the school timetable; for example, I was not able to observe children in a less formal teaching setting such as an art or drama lesson. In the following section, I explain how the data collection tools were used to collect and analyse my data. In addition, I discuss issues related to validity and reliability.

3.4.1 Interviews

It is clearly important to establish a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee in order that respondents feel comfortable about sharing their feelings and experiences. How this is done will be affected by positionality, or the perceived power relations (Hennink et al., 2011 and Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) effective between interviewer and interviewee. As mentioned earlier, I was conscious of my role as an HMI and the potential impact this may have on perceived power relations. To address this, I spent time reassuring the head teachers that the study was not related to my role as an inspector. This was a less intrusive consideration when interviewing children and carers. In developing a positive rapport, I felt that my role as an outsider with insider knowledge enabled respondents to be open and honest with me in a way in which they might not have done had they been talking to someone they encountered on a regular basis. For
example, members of staff might not have been so open and honest about behavioural issues they had to deal with if they had been talking to one of their own colleagues.

Having established a positive rapport through informal and friendly talk at the start of each interview there was the possibility that respondents may stray into sensitive areas. This occurred during one interview when a grandparent detailed the very traumatic events that led to her granddaughter becoming looked after. As an experienced practitioner who has worked in areas of high deprivation and supported vulnerable families I was able to listen to and empathise with the grandmother without displaying shock or surprise. Having been exposed to similar situations in the past meant that I was able to deal with this without being emotionally affected. However, for others undertaking research into potentially sensitive subjects it may be advisable to ensure that de-briefing sessions with a mentor are available if required.

3.4.2 Observations

To build on to what participants told me during interviews I undertook participant observations. The key purpose was to see first-hand how looked after children were supported in the two primary schools in my study. Hennink et al. (2011, p. 173) suggest that during interviews, what they term as: ‘post hoc rationalization of certain behaviours’ may sometimes occur. This involves participants altering the way in which they describe their behaviours and beliefs to rationalise or justify them. A number of authors including Gray (2013) and Hennink et al., (2011) note the value of observations in highlighting differences between what people say and what they do. In undertaking observations, it was my intention to develop a holistic understanding, as described by Denscombe (2010, p. 207), in which I was considering the relationships between the participants within a specific cultural setting. A concern for me was that I wanted to observe without
influencing the dynamics of the encounters being observed, as described by Denscombe (2010, p. 197). I consider that I achieved this owing partly to the semi-open plan nature of the classrooms which helped to retain the naturalness of the setting where I could slip in and out of class unobtrusively. As the children were all seated facing the front of the class, by positioning myself carefully, I could avoid interaction.

In total, I spent the equivalent of five full days carrying out what Denscombe (2010, p. 208) describes as: ‘focused observations’ of children across the two schools. As three of the children were in the same class in Alpha Primary School, I could observe them simultaneously, which reduced the number of visits required. I undertook observations in five classes across the two schools. Over this period, I observed the children in different settings. In line with Mason (2002, p.90) I recognised that I would need to be selective in my observations. Thus, I focused on the ways in which looked after children engaged with staff, and with their peers and tasks within the classroom. I had not set out to test a hypothesis but chose rather to record observations at set intervals of five minutes, noting what the children were doing and how they were doing it. The observations included details of how the looked after children interacted with their peers and adults in the setting. I undertook what Cohen et al. (2008, p. 397) describe as semi-structured observations, because I wanted to adopt an interpretive approach to ascertain what practices and approaches might be used to support looked after children. The method chosen enabled me to capture continuous episodes of behaviour which ran over interval categories (Cohen et al., 2008, p.402). Each period of observation, in which seven of the ten looked after children who had participated in interviews were included lasted for half a day. I also observed children in an assembly and during playtimes and lunch breaks on two days.
I engaged in what Spradley (1980, p.59) terms ‘passive participation’, as I did not interact or participate in the activities but observed and recorded them on a note pad from an appropriate vantage point. In undertaking these observations, I considered both observer bias and observer effect. Pellegrini (2007) discusses the issue of observer bias and the observer being aware of their own expectations and knowledge of the participant which may influence observation and recording. In order to do this, I was conscious of the need to step out of my normal role as an HMI, where, during observations I focused on and evaluated specific issues. In terms of observer effect, I had to consider that children may react differently simply because of my presence observing them in the class. As noted earlier, I tried to reduce this effect by being visible in the school on a number of occasions prior to carrying out observations. I also agreed with staff that if, during my observations, any child began to ‘play to the audience’, I would leave the scene. In addition to undertaking formal observations of specific individuals in class, and other areas of the school, I also undertook observation by what I would term ‘absorption’, observing and reflecting upon the climate evident within the schools and associated aspects of routine relationships between individuals. In order to capture this accurately, I endeavoured to write up my field notes as soon as possible after each visit. Below I describe how I used documentary analysis to construct an account of the experiences of the looked after children in the study.

3.4.3 Documentary Analysis

Through reading and interpreting the documents I was aware of the need to take account of the context in which they were produced. For example, case notes would often include summaries of meetings in which a range of professionals discussed how the child’s needs would be met. I began the data collection by examining the care and school
records of the looked after children. This not only gave me detailed information about
the children’s backgrounds but also the type of support that they had received since
being designated ‘looked after’. As not all the children were from the education authority
in which I was undertaking the study it also enabled me to compare the documentation
and language used in different authorities.

I had intended to look at documents that were in the public domain, such as school
policies, however, neither school in my study had specific school policies relating to
support for looked after children as the relevant guidance was contained in more generic
policies. This was itself interesting because it suggested that the two schools did not
consider the needs of the looked after children to be significantly different from others
requiring additional support. This assumption was confirmed in discussion with the head
teacher and depute head teacher in Alpha Primary School. They appeared to subscribe to
the principle of universalism and expressed the view that they would not differentiate
between those who were looked after and those who were not when planning to meet
the needs of individual children. This was an interesting assertion which did not appear
to take cognisance of legislation (Scottish Government, 2014a) which suggests that
looked after children should automatically be considered to have additional needs.

I also examined materials, such as individual children’s case files, which would
normally be protected by restricted access provisions. To some extent these files
contained the same elements that Denscombe (2010, p. 219) considered could be found
in diaries. These were ‘factual data’ related to personal information such as date and
place of birth, as well as a record of meetings and decisions made regarding the care and
or education of the looked after child. Within the records ‘significant incidents’ such as
child protection issues or a move into care away from home were also recorded. In those
files, where a child’s opinion on a decision was included, it could be considered that, to some extent, ‘personal interpretation’ was included. However, they differed significantly from diaries in that they had not been compiled by the individual whose file it was, and in that there was a legislative requirement for the record to be kept. When undertaking this analysis, I was aware of the need to establish the validity of these files. Platt (1981) and Scott (1990) suggest criteria for establishing this validity are authenticity, representativeness, meaning and credibility. In terms of authenticity, as these files were being used as working documents at the time I accessed them, there was nothing that suggested they were anything other than what they were presented as. As to representativeness, Denscombe (2010, p. 222) suggests that the document should be complete to be representative. I would argue that the files examined, although containing gaps, could be considered to be complete in the sense described by Denscombe (2010). This is based on my experience as an HMI where I often came across incomplete records particularly for looked after children who had moved between schools and across local authorities. In relation to meaning within the files, from a relativist perspective I accepted that the content may be value laden according to the views and beliefs of the author. In addition, the descriptions and decisions detailed in the files were not necessarily the view of one individual but accounts from different contributors such as teachers, social workers, educational psychologists, health workers, parents or carers and the children themselves. I assumed that for pragmatic reasons the notes in these records were not contemporaneous but often written after the event. Although one person may have been responsible for collating the material in the file there was no one author for each. The records would have been an account of mutually agreed outcomes arrived at after discussion. In considering ways in which these accounts
may have been biased I recognised that some aspects of the proceedings may have been deemed unimportant and therefore excluded from the record.

In analysing material in the files, I considered two aspects of how the progress of the looked after children was recorded. Firstly, I looked at how success was measured, which was by monitoring progress as defined by attainment in academic subjects such as English and mathematics. I then examined the extent to which progress in social aspects of learning was noted. In doing this I was attempting to gain an impression of the emphasis placed on developmental measures compared to the account that was taken of socio-cultural factors.

In addition to examining case files I read the most recent progress report and profile for each child. The reports and profiles were compiled in June 2013 towards the end of the data gathering phase. The progress reports were written by class teachers and the profiles were written by the children with support from a member of school staff. Information in these files was considered in relation to data gathered in interviews. This was done to identify similarities and differences between what was recorded in files as strengths and areas for development compared to what children and their teachers mentioned in discussion. By contrasting and comparing the data in these documents I was able to gain an impression of the ways in which staff emphasised different aspects of progress when writing for different audiences. This analysis contributed to my understanding of how looked after children in this study were regarded by their teachers.

3.4.4 Research Journal

The journal entries were written within a few hours of each data collection event, so could be considered to be what Emerson et al. (2001, p.353) describe as: ‘more or less contemporaneous with the event.’ By using my journal in this way, I undertook an
iterative process whereby I could return to some members of staff and children to clarify issues that had arisen in earlier visits. This occurred during my second discussion with Bryony, from which I was able to draw on observations of her supporting nursery children engaged in transition activities.

3.5 Transcription and analysis of the data.

The transcription process began after the first visit and I chose to transcribe all the interviews myself. I decided to undertake an inductive analysis in which the themes are derived from the data and for which there was no pre-existing coding frame (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 218). I considered that the aim of the study required me to examine this topic from the perspective of the participants. Therefore, the coding frame was built by examining notes and materials that were rooted in encounters with children and school staff. In addition, this was supported by reference to important concepts and theories identified as I examined relevant literature. However, I recognised that it was not possible to undertake inductive analysis in a vacuum, and that I had to be aware of my theoretical and epistemological assumptions. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) I engaged in a stepped process of analysis. The key stages in this process are described below.

3.5.1 Familiarisation with the data.

Whilst I listened to and transcribed the recordings of interviews, I gradually familiarised myself with the data and its possible implications. I did this by noting thoughts and observations about the data and comparing them with the initial thoughts that I had recorded in my research journal during the data collection process. This involved listening to and transcribing each digital recording. I then produced word-processed transcripts for subsequent analysis. During this stage, I returned regularly to
the recording to clarify any aspects that were not clear on a first listening. Whilst this was a time-consuming process, I considered it a fundamental element in the design of the study and enabled me to become very familiar with the data. By listening to and revisiting the recordings I was able to gain a sense not just of what participants were saying, but also to note and sometimes explain the emphasis that they placed on specific issues. This was in keeping with both my ontological approach and my ethical priority of wanting to represent individual views as accurately as possible. In moving between my research journal and the transcripts I attempted to avoid the situation where, as Kvale (1996, p. 167) suggests, the transcript becomes an opaque screen between the researcher and the original live interview. Entries in my research journal enabled me to refer to the context in which the interviews took place ensuring that the words of the participants did not become separated from the context in which they were generated. This supported the way in which I made meaning of the text, for example, the level of commitment to supporting looked after children demonstrated by individual practitioners would not have been as apparent in the verbatim transcript alone. I considered that by working in this way I could identify themes that might not have been apparent if I had worked from a transcript produced by a third party. King & Horrocks (2010, p. 144) suggest that the three main threats to the quality of transcription are: recording quality; missing content; and ‘tidying up’ transcribed talk. Accordingly, I ensured that I recorded an identifying statement at the start of each interview. To capture what they describe as missing context, I made brief notes during and immediately after the interview. As I carried out the transcription I avoided the temptation to ‘tidy up’ the transcript, as I was aiming to produce an accurate version of what was said even if it may, at times, have seemed disjointed. This was problematic in a few instances where respondents spoke
with strong accents or used dialect. To ensure that the data was not separated from its context I ensured that I reviewed related field notes each time I transcribed an interview.

3.5.2 Generating initial codes

I began by interrogating the data to find meaningful units of text to which I could assign codes. Initially I divided my data corpus into different data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) for analysis. These were: documentation including information from children’s files; end of year progress reports and children’s profiles; observations of children in school; and interviews. The last data set was subdivided into the following sets in order to contrast and compare findings between different sets as well as looking for common themes across the data: looked after children; non-looked after children; teachers; support staff and carers. To maintain anonymity, I allocated a pseudonym to each respondent and used these throughout this report.

As I moved through the data analysis I subdivided some of the codes to capture subtleties of difference, for example, the code ‘relationships’ became ‘relationships’ and ‘reassurance’. The type of comments that were coded as ‘relationships’ related to dialogue where the teacher was engaging with the child to ascertain the frame of mind they were in and how things had gone so far that day. Those that were coded as ‘reassurance’ were where the teacher was providing the child with reassurance that a task was not too difficult and that they would receive support, if required, to complete it. Following Florian and Spratt (2013, p. 128), the codes identified were not discrete; rather each event attracted multiple codes. For example, in a few interviews the codes of relationships, effective communication and knowledge of needs were simultaneously allocated to the sections of data where staff described the ways in which they supported looked after children.
3.5.3 Searching for themes

In analysing the data to identify themes, I used thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78) consider that because thematic analysis is not associated with a specific theoretical framework, unlike discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983) or grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), it provides a flexible research tool. By adopting this flexible approach, I attempted to avoid what Janesick (2000) terms ‘methodolatry’, where the method used rather than the contents or substance, becomes the main preoccupation. I did not consider that themes would simply ‘emerge’ (Ely et al., 1997, pp. 205-6) from the data but that I would have to take an active role in constructing them by selecting, editing and interrogating the data to support arguments related to my research question and creating links. Thus, themes were identified which captured important aspects of the data related to the research questions. In most instances for something to be considered as a theme it had to appear several times across the data set. However, I did not attribute the importance of the theme only to the frequency with which it occurred. Following Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 82) I considered that the ‘keyness’ of a theme was related to the extent to which it captured something significant in relation to the research question. A key element to working in this way was the need to retain flexibility. To achieve this, I continually revisited the data to ensure that I was accurately interpreting and communicating participants’ contributions. In order to develop an understanding of the extent to which these themes were of significance specifically for looked after children I referred back to the transcripts of interviews with children who were not looked after. I wanted to go beyond the literal and begin to identify underlying ideas and assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, I engaged in interpretative work as I developed the themes with the intention of moving beyond description and so was able
to produce an analysis that incorporated a theoretical rationale, whilst at the same time taking steps to ensure the reliability and validity of data.

3.5.4 Reviewing, defining and naming themes.

The next step involved ensuring that the themes worked in relation to both the coded extract and the complete data set. In my pilot study, when coding data, I used the tracked changes facility in a word processing program. I considered that it would have been unwieldy to use this in my main study because of the volume of data. Therefore, I used Nvivo (version 10) program (QSR International n.d) which provided the facilities of electronically collating and coding data into the themes which I had identified. By dealing with the technical collation in this way I was free to immerse myself in the data. As I identified and described themes I could examine emerging issues from different perspectives.

Although the technology enabled me to store and retrieve data easily it did not allow me to look across several transcripts at once and I reverted to paper copies in order to do this. This was most helpful when looking at all segments of data related to individual children, or when looking at the interviews with teachers in one or other of the schools. I adopted a mind-mapping strategy to make meaning from this data. This involved grouping codes under relevant themes and then positioning the themes on the map in such a way as to illustrate how they related to and impacted on each other. This was an iterative process in which the groupings and suggested relationships changed during the period of analysis. Eventually, I was able to define each theme clearly and establish the aspects of data captured by each theme.
3.6 Validity and reliability

In considering the validity of my study I needed to be certain that my procedures for data selection and collection were appropriate and would yield relevant information about phenomena I was investigating. By detailing the reasons for choosing specific data collection methods in section 3.3 of this chapter my aim was to demonstrate validity. I aimed to increase the content validity of the data by ensuring that respondents could share everything that they felt was important. I did this by scheduling interviews flexibly, with the school being given a list of those I would see on each visit, to ensure that respondents were not rushed, and interviews were spaced well apart and did not have to be curtailed because of time constraints. In considering the location of the interviews and the need to ensure that participants felt comfortable I took account of both their physical and psychological comfort, as described by King & Horrocks (2010, p.42). An advantage of holding the meetings in the participants’ own schools was that they took place on familiar territory and hopefully in conditions that made them feel at ease. In addition, the interviews took place in a quiet area where participants could talk to me freely without being overheard by anyone else.

In engaging in personal reflection, as described by Hesse-Biber & Leavey (2005, p.146), I was particularly conscious of what Hitchcock & Hughes (1989, p.56) term ‘advocacy.’ As some of the participants could be considered to belong to a vulnerable group, I had to take care not to treat them preferentially. This issue of researcher values or axiology is discussed by Ponterotto (2005, p. 131) who considered that:

‘The researcher should acknowledge, describe, and “bracket” his or her values, but not eliminate them.’

As described earlier a tool used to achieve this was my reflective journal.
By carrying out interviews, observations and documentary analysis I aimed to increase validity through methodological triangulation (Cohen et al. 2008). The intention here was not to compare the data from different sources but to provide a rich and detailed set of layered data from different sources. This proved important in compiling what I considered to be balanced case studies of the seven looked after children. Had I only drawn on documentary evidence, descriptions of some of the children may have been more negative than was achieved by including data from interviews and observations. For example, in one instance the reports relating to a looked after child portrayed an individual who demonstrated considerable social, emotional and behavioural difficulties yet during interview he presented as being able to engage in a calm and focused way when considering the type of support that he found helpful. This led me to a more detailed interrogation of the documentary data in order to consider factors such as the purpose of the report and chronology. It also ensured that I placed appropriate emphasis on this evidence when interpreting the wider data set.

I chose to use conversational style semi-structured interviews (Hennink et al., 2011, p.109) so as to reduce my influence on responses and increased reliability. The aim was to support respondents to focus on issues related to looked after children that were of importance to them, without being overly directed by the imposition of a series of pre-determined themes. Throughout the conversations my aim was to be non-judgmental and so avoid impugning the reliability of the data. Thus, I often simply acknowledged what had been said with comments such as ‘ah ha’ or ‘I see.’ At other times, I would repeat a respondent’s phrase and then seek confirmation or clarification.
Although the decision to include children in interviews was primarily an ethical one, it could be argued that it also contributed to the reliability of the data. Pinkney (2011, p.273) considers that:

‘Children’s participation is often negotiated and mediated via professionals, who assess and make a judgement about the child’s level of understanding.’

Had I relied only on adults’ perception of children’s views this may have reduced the reliability of data as it would have added another layer of interpretation between the child and the researcher. After each interview, I made brief notes relating to the context and to record any significant issues that arose that I may have wanted to follow up at a later point. These notes were then recorded on a contact summary sheet for that visit (Appendix 4). By doing this I was aiming to bring consistency and rigour to the process and ensure that it was undertaken to a high professional standard.

3.7 Ethics and limitations

In the literature on ethics, several authors suggest a range of protocols that should be followed to ensure quality. For example, Denscombe (2010, p.331) notes that social researchers are expected to conduct their research in such a way as to ensure that it:

- ‘protects the interests of participants;
- ensures that participation is voluntary and based on informed consent;
- avoids deception and operates with scientific integrity; and
- complies with the laws of the land.’
In protecting the interests of participants, I ensured the status of the looked after children was not revealed by involving a wider range of children in the study. To provide all participants with the same explanation I described the study as, ‘looking at how schools support children in their learning’ (Appendix 2) without specifically mentioning looked after children. I feel that this was ethically justified in order to maintain the anonymity of the looked after children. It was also an appropriate description of what I was doing, since I also interviewed a group of non-looked after children. As the contributions from the non-looked after children were also analysed, I consider my procedures to have been ethically sound, in that I was valuing and utilising all contributions.

Appropriate steps were taken at different stages of the research to ensure that participation was voluntary and based on informed consent (Appendix 3). Throughout the data collection process, I was conscious of a need to ensure that I adhered to the processes agreed in my ethics proposal to the Open University’s Ethics Committee. Prior to each interview I ascertained that participants were happy to go ahead with the interview and have their responses recorded. When possible, after each field visit I met with the head teacher or the depute head teacher and gave them a brief overview of progress. To avoid deception and operate with integrity I ensured that at each stage of the design and implementation of the project choices were detailed and justified in my study to ensure transparency. Furthermore, by recording these actions and decisions validity was enhanced. In designing the research to ensure that it complied with the laws of the land, two areas of particular concern were child protection requirements and data protection. The first was met by interviewing children in school, in a space where other adults and children were present, but at a distance, so at to maintain confidentiality. On data protection, I ensured that the recordings were stored digitally and password
protected as soon as possible after each interview. My field notes were also stored securely in accordance with the stipulation contained in my ethics proposal.

Procedural aspects are only part of the ethical structure of this study. Groundwater Smith & Mockler (2007, p. 204) caution against confusing ethics with efficiency and stress that: ‘ethics is associated with morality, which again is informed by values’. Ethically, for me, it was important to involve looked after children in interviews rather than simply observe them in order that the research, as far as possible, was undertaken with them rather than on them. This decision was underpinned by the principle of justice and children’s right to participate as described in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). An anticipated outcome of this study was that practitioners would consider the findings and where appropriate revise and develop their practice in supporting looked after children to engage in learning. Thus, it was desirable to include looked after children in the study because as McLeod (2010, p. 67) notes:

‘consulting with the young people who use a service can improve its design and delivery.’

Protocols as laid down by the Open University and the British Educational Research association dictate that when undertaking research harm should be avoided. However, I wanted to go beyond avoiding harm and consider who would benefit from my work. I judged that there would potentially be indirect benefits to the participants as their involvement in discussions might afforded an opportunity to reflect, from their individual perspective, on how looked after children are supported in their education. I aimed to achieve this by ensuring that I allocated sufficient time for each interview. I
then followed up with participants on subsequent visits to ensure that they had appropriate opportunities to share any further thoughts that they may have had.

There is a growing literature (Hooper and Gunn, 2014; Kellett, 2010 and Percy-Smith, 2010) on the importance of involving looked after children and young people in research which supports improvements in their education and wellbeing. However, there is a need to acknowledge that not all looked after children are willing or able to share their views. To gain a wider range of perspectives it may be that research which analyses the views of looked after children regarding effective support for their learning is required on a much larger scale.

Ideally it would have been beneficial to interview the parents or carers of all twelve looked after children but, understandably, owing to the sensitive nature of the subject some declined to be involved. In the same way, the data would have been enhanced further if I had undertaken observations of all looked after children in the cohort. However, it was suggested by staff in Beta Primary School that some children working in the support unit may not react well to my presence. I took their advice and did not observe these children and conducted the interviews in another part of the school.

While the study does not aim to offer a solution or definitive answer to a problem it does highlight the views of a small group of looked after children and the staff and carers who support them. Using thematic analysis these views were used to construct reliable data on desirable practices and approaches to supporting looked after children to participate in learning. These views, along with other data, are presented and discussed in the following two chapters.
Chapter 4 Findings

Introduction

The following case studies are presented to illustrate how the themes were observed in the everyday experiences of seven looked after children. These were compiled by using documentary analysis and evidence from discussions in order to provide the background/chronology for each child. They were designed to illustrate aspects of the social context within which looked after children were supported and the specific relationships between the different themes. Examples of each looked after child’s experience of learning was drawn from discussions with staff and children. This was merged with evidence from observation to compile each profile. These case studies are intended to provide the reader with a vicarious account of the looked after children’s experience of school. I am aware that by beginning each profile by documenting the personal situation of each looked after child I may appear to be taking a negative stance. However, the intention is not to make judgements but to provide an insight into what it means to be looked after for this group of children. The focus within these profiles is on the ways in which these children are supported to develop confidence through successfully participating in learning with others and becoming effective contributors within the class and school.

Bethany

Background

Bethany was ten years old. During interviews and observations, she presented as bright and confident and talked with apparent ease and enthusiasm about aspects of her life in primary school. Notes in her file indicate that in the past life had been traumatic for her as she had suffered neglect and witnessed domestic and alcohol abuse. She had
transferred to Beta Primary School from a school in another local authority two years previously when she had moved to live with her present carers. Although she had been in care for several years Bethany still had contact with her birth family.

Bethany’s perspective

In discussion with me Bethany talked enthusiastically about different activities that she was involved in at Brownie Guides, including providing a humorous account of a less than successful baking activity. Here she seemed to be demonstrating an ability to laugh at her own mishaps. When asked about aspects of work that she enjoyed, Bethany talked enthusiastically about the series of books that she was reading. In doing this she was able to talk confidently about aspects of the plot and writer’s style and to make inferences beyond the literal. However, she spoke less confidently about mathematics. In describing who might support her with difficult aspects of mathematics, Bethany referred to her teacher and friends in the class. During the discussion, she reflected back to a time when she was in a mathematics group with children a year older than her. She explained that there was not a high level of support from peers while working in this group, and identified a possible reason:

‘Well I was only primary six then I don't know if that helped me I wasn't with all my friends and I wouldn't chat like I didn't know any of the primary sevens.’ (25-2-13)

In this instance, the dynamics of the group seemed to present distinct barriers to collaborative working. On reflection, it would have been interesting to explore whether Bethany was referring to social chat or discussion of the mathematical tasks. Being able to talk through mathematical problems is an important way of developing understanding and in order to do this she would need to have been included in the group. However, in
this instance she seemed to regard herself as isolated, as she was not working with
friends in her year group. This appeared to illustrate the importance of social and peer
support in her learning. When talking about her progress in mathematics slight self-
doubt seemed to creep in, for example, she commented:

‘I’m in the highest mathematics group which isn’t... I don’t think I should
be because I am not that good at it.’ (25-2-13)

In discussion, Bethany tended to be thoughtful and very honest about her
achievements and areas for development. She did not hesitate to identify what she
considered to be her strengths, and those areas with which she needed support:

‘Well I really enjoy art and gym and language they’re like the most the
easiest subjects I do. I don’t usually need help with them, and maths are
the really tricky ones.’ (25-2-13)

Interestingly the subjects that Bethany said she enjoyed because they were easy were
also those that, according to comments on her school report, she was applying herself
very well in and making good progress. Despite Bethany identifying mathematics as being
tricky, her teacher and carer considered this to be an area in which she was progressing
well. Whilst she gave an indication that that she was progressing, she expressed self-
doubt:

‘Like well right now we’re doing decimals and things so that’s probably the
hardest bit. I’m on a higher book I’m in the highest maths group which
isn’t I don’t think I should be because I’m not that good at it.’ (25-2-13)

Here it was interesting because although Bethany had evidence that she was progressing
well as she was in the top group she appeared to doubt her ability. This seemed to
contrast with her views of her progress in other curricular areas. It raised the question for me of the discrepancy between a child’s view of his or her ability in a subject and the way in which an adult may report the child’s progress in the subject.

Bethany in the context of the classroom

Comments in Bethany’s school report for the session 2011/12 showed that she was making good or very good progress across all curricular areas. In addition, she was considered to be developing most learning attributes well and was always motivated, she tried to overcome difficulties and behaved responsibly. Evidence from her class work supported this, for example, her written work in mathematics indicated that she achieved a high level of accuracy in most aspects of the subject. In other areas of the curriculum such as English Language and topic work her written responses to tasks indicated that she had a secure understanding of the work being covered. Other comments on her school report indicated that she had a positive outlook to her work and understood what it took to be able to work with others in a group. In addition, she was described as: ‘a popular member of the class who had an excellent attitude.’ Notes in her file recorded that she attended a number of after school activities and was ‘developing well.’ However, there was no indication of what the author meant by ‘developing well.’ It was unclear if this progress was measured in relation to the trauma she is likely to have experienced in the past, or against specific milestones for a child of her age.

Support strategies

In discussing the types of support that were provided for Bethany in relation to mathematics, her teacher considered that she was developing a better understanding of when to seek help. This was supported by Mrs E, Bethany’s carer, who described how Bethany had started to talk to her teacher about the areas she found challenging in
mathematics. She considered that through these conversations the teacher had not only helped Bethany to develop skills in mathematics but also to become more confident in her own abilities. When asked about the range of strategies that were used to support Bethany to engage in learning her teacher described her as resilient and not requiring specific support emotionally or academically.

When responding to a question related to the support that she received in school Bethany did not refer to aspects of the curriculum but talked about the ways in which she was made to feel part of the school community. She explained how she was supported when she arrived at Beta Primary School:

‘What helped me is that I had a buddy; that, actually, did help me. Because then they got to show me [things] and then I made so many friends.’ (25-2-13)

It could be argued that her suggestions for providing a buddy could be offered to any child who moves between schools at times other than traditional points of transition. However, as these are reflections on her personal experiences as a looked after child, I would suggest that they are of significance. This is supported by Stoddart (2012) who emphasises the importance of ensuring social support for looked after children who experience school changes.

When asked about the support that she received in school Bethany focused on the ways in which she could take responsibility and contribute to the wider work of the school rather than how others could help her. She described how she did this by supporting the transition of nursery children as they moved to primary one: ‘It just shows how responsible I can be’ (10-6-13). When undertaking her duties as a buddy to nursery class children she appeared bright and cheerful interacting confidently with both her
peers and the nursery class children. She took pride in organising the art resources efficiently in order to ensure that the younger children could access them easily. Bethany demonstrated considerable patience when supporting the nursery children to practice writing their names. She adopted a calm tone and used supportive and encouraging language. When discussing her role as a buddy to younger children she was clear about what she wanted to achieve: ‘I just want them to be safe during school’ (10-6-13). In interview, when it was suggested that she seemed to like organising things Bethany confirmed this:

‘Yes, I like organising. It may sound silly but I don’t like joining in with stuff; I like to be out doing what I want and organising it.’ (10-6-13)

Whereas some of the other children described in case studies in this chapter influenced situations by choosing not to participate, Bethany appeared to do this by efficiently organising others. In terms of practices which support looked after children Bethany is given opportunities to gain a sense of self-worth by supporting others. Importantly she considers that the tasks she is engaged in are relevant and of value to others.

Adult’s perspective

In discussion, her carer, Mrs E, focused on the ways in which Bethany had developed socially and emotionally since going to live with the foster family. Apparently at first, she seemed to find it difficult to interpret social cues, for example, she would not seem to understand when someone was joking. She did not share her feelings easily and would not discuss issues and concerns when she had been upset by events at school. Mrs E described how the focus of support provided by the family was initially in helping Bethany to socialise with other children of her own age. At first, she did not want to join clubs or
organisations in the local community. However, after being encouraged to attend the local Brownie Guide pack for four or five sessions she now attends on a regular basis.

Mrs E noted that whilst the ongoing contact between Bethany and her birth parents was encouraged there were difficulties associated with it. She explained that there were times, such as during the previous Christmas holiday, when contact meetings were cancelled which was disruptive and upsetting. However, when discussing Bethany’s measured reaction to this she noted: ‘...the way she copes is amazing’ (25-2-13).

This sense that Bethany was coping well was echoed by the looked after children’s manager who did not consider that there were any ‘issues’ and she went on to describe Bethany in the following way:

‘...she just gets on with it, she seems fine emotionally, educationally, everything. Yes, there are absolutely no issues there at all. There’s nothing that’s coming out emotionally for her; then her relationships are all stable with peers and adults. So, she doesn’t take up any time at all.’ (13-3-13)

These comments were intended to be positive and illustrate how well Bethany was progressing. However, I was left with the impression that the various issues associated with having looked after children in school took up what was considered to be valuable management time.

Illustrated in this case study is a child who, despite experiencing early adverse conditions, is progressing well in school. She gives the impression that she has developed positive relationships with her peers and teachers and does not appear to require what would traditionally be termed ‘additional support’ in school. In the following chapter, I shall explore further some of the issues raised in this case study. These include the
importance of support for transition; consideration of group dynamics and the significance of the development of agency for looked after children.

Charlene

Background

Charlene was eleven years old and in her last year at Alpha Primary School. She was a lively girl who engaged easily in conversation and appeared to interact confidently with her peers and staff in school. She had moved from a school in the same local authority almost three years previously when she and her sister went to live with their maternal grandparents. She had been on the child protection register due to physical neglect and injury, and emotional neglect. In her file, it mentioned that in the past there had been parental drug use and issues of domestic abuse; she had apparently witnessed an assault on her mother by an adult male. Mrs B. Charlene’s grandmother shared the fact that Charlene’s mother had been, and was at the time of the study, in prison for drug offences. She also explained that the father had died from a drug overdose in what she described as suspicious circumstances. Prior to his death, Charlene’s father had custody of her and her sister. According to both her grandmother and school staff she had settled into Alpha Primary School well. Although Charlene and her younger sister had, according to written records, experienced various trauma earlier in their lives, their grandparents had been a constant feature throughout. The importance of this type of family support in promoting social and emotional skills is referred to by the OECD (2015).

Charlene’s perspective

When asked about who might help her if she found tasks difficult she suggested that she was confident about asking for help when she found things difficult. This was supported by my observations; Charlene worked independently for sustained periods of
time, but also worked collaboratively to complete group tasks. When discussing
arrangements for group work she described how the teacher used a computer program
to generate different groups for various activities in the class. Charlene considered that
this was a positive factor as working with different people helped her to build her
confidence. When talking about aspects of work that she found difficult, she cited both
friends and the teacher as providing support. She described the support strategy
employed by the class teacher:

‘Em well, sometimes if it’s a really, really hard one (mathematical problem)
that I really can’t work out, she’ll just tell me to leave it and go back later.’

(8-2-13)

Charlene’s teacher appears to reduce the pressure by encouraging her to return to the
problem after successfully completing other parts of the task. This seems to increase her
confidence before she goes back to tackle the trickier problem. This idea of returning to
work to try again is captured in her profile:

‘I particularly enjoyed doing tessellation and I am pleased that I persevered
even when it’s tricky. I am proud that I have managed to become more
confident in my numeracy and not think that I can’t do it when I know I can
if I try.’ (Academic session 12-13)

In discussion, Charlene identified the importance of confidence in the learning process.
The school had provided her with several opportunities to develop her confidence; by
performing to others and taking responsibility for aspects of school life. She noted these
opportunities when reflecting on her personal achievements in her profile:
'I have become more confident at speaking in assembly and at shows. Two of my greatest achievements were when I became part of the pupil council and eco committee. I enjoy organising activities for younger children. I was successful when I got my house captain badge. These things have built my confidence and I am really grateful of all these things. I am really pleased that I got a main part in our school show.' (Academic session 12-13)

It may seem unusual for an eleven-year-old to focus on the importance of confidence. This may, however, stem from the fact that capacities at the core of Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004b) include being a confident individual. Alternatively, as this had been identified as an area for development by school staff and her carer, she may have taken this on board and accepted opportunities to develop this trait. The language of adult policy making appears to be filtering through to Charlene here. Interestingly some of the activities mentioned by Charlene are those which provide her with opportunities to help others or contribute to the wider life of the school. This theme of enabling looked after children to support others as well as being supported occurs in other case studies and is examined in the following chapter.

Charlene in the context of the class

Charlene’s report from the previous academic session recorded that she had made good or very good progress in various curricular areas. It was noted that she displayed mainly positive learning attributes but lacked confidence at times. During the time that she was observed in class, as part of this study, she settled to most tasks quickly and focused for sustained periods of time. She appeared to have a good understanding of what was expected of her. For example, at the beginning of an English language lesson involving the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) she volunteered
responses indicating her understanding of both the learning intention and success criteria that the class had agreed for the lesson. As part of an activity in the language lesson Charlene read her work out aloud confidently and with expression. She listened carefully to others and asked relevant questions. During a brief session on mental mathematics she completed tasks quickly and offered correct answers to several questions. In both English language and mathematics Charlene was working at what might be considered an appropriate Curriculum for Excellence level for her age and stage. She demonstrated an appropriate level of skill in the use of ICT as she confidently used a drawing package to combine images and text in order to produce a poster.

In her profile, Charlene reported that she worked best when working alone, but that she could also work as part of a group. In class, at the beginning of the lesson, she sat with others on the carpet and listened attentively, for most of the time, to the teacher’s explanation of tasks. She chatted briefly to a friend before going off and settling quickly to work. She seemed to engage comfortably with her peers, for example, when designing a cartoon character, she engaged in social conversation with the boy sitting beside her whilst still focusing on the task. In addition, she seemed to be able to move from one activity to another without losing focus. For example, after morning break although she was late back to class, as she had been helping to set up computers for younger children, she simply picked up where she had left off and continued designing a cartoon character.

When the class went along to the school hall to practice for the end of term service Charlene chatted in a relaxed manner to a small group of friends. She settled quickly and participated enthusiastically in the singing practice, confidently performing a duet at the beginning of the concert. She read clearly and confidently when sharing two of her memories of her time at primary school.
Support Strategies

From information provided by her grandmother, and the notes in Charlene’s file, it was apparent that she had experienced considerable loss; her father’s death and her mother being imprisoned. Her grandmother raised this as a significant issue and spoke positively about strategies the school had put in place to support her granddaughter. These included being part of a specific programme, ‘Seasons for Growth’ (Seasons for Growth, 2017) designed to help children cope with loss and bereavement. Mrs B felt that the flexible nature of the programme was helpful and Charlene was able to speak to a support worker after the formal programme had finished if she felt the need to. The availability of such a support programme provided reassurance for Mrs B in supporting Charlene and her sister through this period of their lives.

Her teacher felt that providing Charlene was confident that she understood what was involved in a task then she often required minimum support. The teacher noted that at times there had been the need to ‘chunk down’ tasks to make them seem less daunting. The success achieved through persevering with a task seemed to impact on Charlene’s confidence. Based on observations, she did indeed appear to be a child happy to tackle new challenges with appropriate support. This sense of giving children time and space to resolve issues was also evident when Charlene described how emotional support would be provided to individuals in the class. She explained that if a child was upset then they would be given ‘time out’ rather than having to tackle the problem immediately. This involved, for example, spending time with a support assistant or simply being allowed to sit on their own until they were ready to address the issues.

Charlene’s grandmother considered that being given various opportunities to perform in school, had helped Charlene to develop confidence. She was clearly proud that
Charlene had successfully auditioned and been allocated a role in the school pantomime. In addition to performing in the school pantomime Charlene had learned how to play the keyboard and played in the school rock band. She had also achieved success out of school when she was awarded a medal for success in a dancing examination. In addition, the school had secured funding to enable Charlene to attend an activity week at a local outdoor centre. This opportunity clearly had a positive impact as she recorded it in her profile as one of her main achievements outside school. By facilitating Charlene’s participation in these types of activities the school were, of course, providing opportunities for her to develop resilience and relationships with her peers outside the classroom.

Adults’ perspectives

Mrs B, Charlene’s grandmother, was very forthcoming during the discussion. She provided a full account of Charlene’s home situation. It was clear that Mrs B appreciated the ways in which various members of staff in the school had supported her in the role of carer. She felt that she could talk to any member of staff if she had concerns about Charlene. She described the staff as approachable and always willing to help:

‘I could come here if there was anything that ...I was worried about I could come and like I –even reception and that.’ (8-2-13)

This open communication appeared to be a significant factor in building trust between those in school and Charlene’s carers. This may be of particular importance for kinship carers such as Mr and Mrs B who may not have had the same level of support, particularly financial, as foster carers received form a range of organisations (Children First, 2017).
When talking about Charlene Mrs B. focused on the ways in which she had developed resilience. It was difficult to establish the extent to which this resilience was personally derived or as Mrs B suggested due to the support provided by school staff:

‘Yes, very resilient, what she’s been through I mean that child should have behaviour problems but she really hasn’t you know.’ (8-2-13)

As I discussed in Chapter 2, in examining the impact of disrupted attachment Scott (2011) suggests that looked after children are likely to experience emotional and interpersonal difficulties. Therefore, it is not surprising that this is a concern for Charlene’s grandmother.

In discussing the philosophy behind the type of support provided for Charlene and her family the head teacher and deputy head teacher focused on the ways in which they had, over the previous ten years, worked to develop what they defined as a nurturing school. They described how support was structured to develop a nurturing approach throughout the school rather than the traditional model of having a nurture base within the school. For example, at times staff from the local children’s home would provide support to children within mainstream classes rather than extract them. The headteacher talked about having a school that was ‘rooted in really good values and relationships’ (14-2-13). It was evident from the discussion that she recognised the importance of being non-judgemental in order to develop positive relationships between staff and parents and carers. She was of the opinion that all children should be valued equally and that looked after children should not be treated differently to any other children. She considered that what was important was that individual needs were identified and met.

A recurring theme in this case study is that of developing confidence. Charlene’s grandmother and teacher spoke of the opportunities that she had had to develop her
confidence in different ways. Charlene clearly considered it as an important attribute and provided examples of how through achieving success in various aspects of school life she had become more confident.

John

Background

John was eight years old and slightly built. He had attended Alpha Primary School since enrolling in Primary One. His file indicated that he has suffered physical abuse and neglect and lacked self-care skills. John had been on a supervision order since he was at nursery which meant that the local authority was responsible for ensuring that he received appropriate support. He was initially cared for by an aunt. However, at the time of this study he was in long term foster care with a family who lived outside the school’s catchment area. John’s file stated that he knew why he was looked after away from home, and that someone had discussed with him the decisions made at his last review. The file did not indicate however the extent to which he was involved in making these decisions. He had supervised contact with his parents twice a week. John was reported as commenting that he would like to be at home with mum and dad because he loves them but did not want to smell again or wear dirty clothes. For any child, this must present an extremely difficult conflict of needs.

John’s perspective

During conversations, John’s gaze wandered; he constantly fidgeted linking his fingers and wringing his hands. However, he engaged enthusiastically in conversation, talking at length about his experiences of school. John indicated that he got on well with his carers and described the friends he had in school. It appeared that those supporting him set clear boundaries and he seemed to like the fact that he was not often reprimanded at
home, but knew that there would be consequences if he broke rules. He described clearly what these consequences were and seemed to consider them to be reasonable. This ability to reflect and make sense of his experiences was something, as noted in Chapter 2 of this study, that Winkler (2014) considered to be an important factor in the development of resilience.

When talking about difficult work, John discussed the value of peer support. He mentioned that his friends supported him and helped him to calm down when he lost his temper in the playground. During observation in class John appeared to achieve an appropriate balance between focusing on his written language task and engaging in social chat with the other three children at his table. John’s carer felt that he was not good at accepting praise. That said, when John talked about improvements in work he was visibly pleased and grinned widely. John focused on his handwriting when talking about developing skills and persevering with challenging tasks:

‘Back in primary three it was quite big. So, at summer I practiced every day.’ (20-2-13)

The theme of achievement ran through the conversations with John, his carer and his teacher. Each talked about ways in which he had improved his handwriting, which was something he has been working on both in school and at home. John had a clear understanding of how he needed to improve and therefore was able to take responsibility for this aspect of his learning.

When talking to John about things he did well he suggested that he was good at helping others. At this point I felt that it was perhaps significant that most of the looked after children described in my case studies had explicitly stated that they liked to help others. Whilst many children are likely to gain satisfaction from helping others it is not
usually something that they explicitly state they are good at. This is further discussed in the following chapter in relation to the development of agency.

John in the context of the classroom

In his school report for 2011-12 it was recorded that he was making good academic progress and demonstrated good numeracy skills. It was considered that he applied himself well and displayed appropriate learning attributes. He was described as popular and able to work well with others. However, in the report to the Children’s panel in addition to stating that he was in the middle group for mathematics and language it was noted that he lacked confidence. It was reported that he experienced mood swings and there could be a deterioration in his behaviour related to contact with his parents. On these occasions, his behaviour became erratic and he had outbursts which affected his relationships with other children. What I found of interest here was the difference in emphasis in the reports for the two audiences. The report to John’s carer, Mrs A, was predominantly positive whilst the report prepared for the Children’s Panel focused on issues of concern. I wondered if the reasons for this were because, as Hjorne & Saljo (2013) suggest, institutions may use specific language to define more clearly barriers to learning and ways in which they might be addressed. I then began to reflect on the extent to which the different language used in the two reports may influence the perception of those involved in supporting John. I propose to revisit this theme in Chapter 5.

Support strategies

In describing the strategies that she used to support John, Mrs Y was clear that there was a need to be flexible and make allowances for the behaviour of a looked after child:
‘I think there are some differences in what we do with children like John. So, I think, because you know the kinds of backgrounds they've had, you have a few more exceptions for them.’ (14-1-13)

She then talked about the strategies, such as giving him time out, that were used to help him control his behaviour. Here the emphasis was not on the child’s difficulties but on the ways in which adults could provide support. On the one hand Mrs Y appears to demonstrate an understanding of the impact of early adverse experiences but also appears to be making presumptions about looked after children when she refers to ‘children like John’ (14-1-13). Whilst there was recognition that it might be appropriate to make allowances, there was also an acknowledgement of the importance of setting firm and consistent boundaries. This may be important, not just for John, but also in guarding against any perceived preferential treatment within the class. I explore this tension in the next chapter when considering the challenges faced by teachers in providing appropriate support for looked after children.

Describing the ways in which she worked to support John in class, his teacher mentions several aspects which exemplify the use of what I have termed ‘bridging strategies’:

‘Um yeh I’m just being aware when he might want – TLC (tender loving care) or, might need a bit of time to himself to calm down. Sometimes actually ignoring is another –because quite often when he gets into these, in really angry moods em he won’t even speak to you em you know we’ll go through all the restorative chat to find out what’s happened. How he’s feeling but but em you know if nothing is coming it means he is not in a place to talk and he’s in his own space.’ (14-1-13)
This idea of ‘just being aware’ or ‘tuning in’ to a child’s needs is one that appears in the accounts of teachers in other case studies in this chapter. Again, this is something that many effective practitioners may do routinely, however, in Chapter 5 I shall explore why this may be of importance for looked after children.

Mrs. Y described one way in which she took account of John’s needs when organising class activities. Whilst she recognised the advantages of collaborative working, she acknowledged that the dynamics of the group must work well to achieve these aims:

‘I suppose the other thing is working in groups. You know while we always encourage everyone to work with different people it would be just making sure, you know in class that you know they’re paired up with the right people so that there’s not going to be um you know … friction.’ (14-1-13)

During the interview, it became apparent that in considering group dynamics the teacher was not simply trying to avoid conflict but also to promote positive social engagement between the group members. As noted in Chapter 2 the importance of supporting looked after children to develop social relationships has been highlighted by a number of authors (Hodges and Tizard 1989; Sempik, et al. 2008 and Emond, 2014). The issue of group dynamics was not one that was addressed explicitly in the literature that I reviewed. However, as it was a theme that arose in this and other case studies I shall revisit in the next chapter.

Adults’ perspective

Mrs Y, John’s teacher described him as: ‘...quite bright’ (14-1-13). In using this description, she focused on his potential rather than listing only development needs.
When talking about John, his carer shared that: ‘He struggles with strong emotions and is volatile.’ (15-1-13)

Together, John’s teacher and carer considered effective communication to be important in providing John with a secure environment, ensuring consistency of response. His carer noted:

‘I was approached by the teacher at the start of term. She asked for ideas as how behaviours are managed at home and we discussed the use of consequences.’ (15-1-13)

This demonstrated an example of effective practice in line with recommendations in legislation (Scottish Government, 2006). Mrs A felt that there was good communication between home and school. She noted that the process was not one way. It involved staff listening to her views when deciding how best to support John. This included providing different types of opportunities to communicate with staff in both formal and informal settings. John’s carer described ways in which Alpha Primary school did this:

‘The school is very child centred. Soft start, (where parents join their children in class for the first half hour of the day) makes it very easy to approach teachers. Open days... class... and also school open days. You can meet other parents and build trusting relationships to enable the boys to integrate into the community.’ (15-1-13)

Whilst the development of relationships is a key theme in my literature review, the focus tends to be on the challenges that looked after children may face in developing positive relationships. Here, the attention moves from the children to highlight the need to develop trust amongst those who provide support. In addition, as highlighted by Rutter
(2012), when talking about children, an important factor to consider is the quality of the relationship. I shall revisit this alternative perspective on the development of relationships in the next chapter.

John’s carer clearly felt that Alpha Primary school had been successful in supporting him to integrate with his peers. Because he was settled and familiar with routines and expectations, she felt he did not have to test out people continually. She summed this up succinctly: ‘He has more room in his head for learning’ (15-1-13). In line with Scott (2011), it would appear that John is able to engage in the exploration required for learning because he feels secure and supported.

His carer commented:

‘It is a very nurturing school. John expects more of himself and the school recognises achievement. He got most improved handwriting (award) and was recognised at assembly.’ (15-1-13)

Another clear illustration of the ways in which John was taking responsibility for his actions, and seeking appropriate support from adults, was described by the class teacher. She explained that a few months previously John had gone to her just after the children had been dismissed for lunch. When asked why he had gone back to the classroom John apparently replied:

‘I just feel really angry and I know it’s not going to be a good lunch. Can I please just eat in here?’ (14-1-13)

The teacher then describes how in discussion with John she ascertained that it was what he considered to be a ‘little deal’ (as opposed to a ‘big deal’) and was related to issues out-with school. She agreed with John that it would be best for him talk to his
carer about it and then telephoned Mrs A to let her know that he was upset. The impression given in interviews with John’s teacher and carer was that there were appropriate strategies in place to support collaborative working. They both appeared confident that by working together effectively they could support him to achieve. The focus was on further developing academic achievements and social skills. A significant aspect of this collaboration was that John was involved and as a result was clear about what he was trying to achieve. He appeared to be motivated by these goals which as Ackerman & Brown (2010) suggest is an important factor in supporting the cognitive development of looked after children.

Cheryl

Background

Cheryl was almost twelve years old and had been enrolled in Alpha Primary School for about a year. She had previously attended a residential special school, located in another part of the country. Since moving to Alpha Primary School Cheryl had been living in the local children’s home, this was situated amongst social housing close to the school. The reasons for being taken into care were not noted in the parts of her file that were examined for this study. Apparently, no information about educational progress had been passed on at the point of transition. This is not unusual, as noted in Chapter 2 of this study (Hennessy, 2014) there are often such difficulties when children move between local authorities during their time in care. It was recorded in her file that she was dyslexic but apparently was unwilling to accept support. However, there was no detail of the type of difficulties she experienced or the strategies that she might find helpful. It was noted that she could be verbally aggressive with her peers and was not always ready to accept when something was her fault; when she became frustrated apparently her manner
towards her peers became abrupt. This behaviour would appear to be in line with that
detailed by Bazalgette et al. (2015) when describing responses of looked after children
who were considered to have poor emotional wellbeing. It is not unusual for
practitioners to include such descriptions in children’s profiles. However, the value of
such description without reflection or analysis by the author could be questioned as there
was no indication as to whether or not the behaviour was context specific. There were
only brief details of her life outside school. A befriender was in place who met with
Cheryl every Saturday; although Cheryl did not mention this herself. Notes in the file
recorded that out of school she enjoyed horse riding and would like to work with animals
when she is older.

Cheryl’s Perspective

In conversation, Cheryl’s responses were cautious. Her replies to my questions were
brief; however, I did not consider this to be sullenness as described by others, rather I felt
that she was being guarded in what she wanted to share. She discussed homework and
home carefully, not mentioning any aspect of the children’s home. Whilst comfortable to
talk she was measured in her responses, providing information on her terms. This was
understandable; any child may be reluctant to want to share their thoughts and feelings
with an unfamiliar adult. When talking about what she was good at in school she first
hesitated and said: ‘I don’t mind reading’ (8-2-13). She then provided a detailed
description of the plot of the book that she was reading in class. I found it interesting
that when telling me about what she was good at in school she did not mention her
musical achievements. In her personal profile, Cheryl had noted that she was proud that
she has learned to play two instruments; developing skills in guitar playing and as the
drummer in the school rock band. As noted by Nettles (2000) in my literature review
providing opportunities for such participation beyond the classroom can help develop resilience in looked after children.

There may have been a number of reasons why Cheryl did not mention her achievements in music, perhaps she did not perceive it to have the same value as a subject such as literacy. This difference between what she, in common with some other children in this study, talked about as being an area of strength compared to what was recorded on the personal profile was intriguing. In the next chapter, when considering academic attainment, I discuss the role of profiling in involving the seven looked after children in their learning and supporting them to develop a clear understanding of their strengths and areas for development.

When asked about who would help if someone was unhappy at school, Cheryl responded: ‘Just talk to your friend’ (8-2-13). However, when moving the conversation on I asked if she herself had friends who would listen in this way she did not respond at all, closing that part of the conversation down. Throughout, the exchange remained rather stiff, with the air of an interview rather than a conversation. It was difficult to tell if she was using silence in the interview to consider her views or to ponder my hidden intentions (Lewis 2010, p.19) or if she simply did not want to respond. This emphasised the difficulties associated with taking account of ‘children’s voice’ in research. Regardless of the planning of a research strategy, it will only be possible to capture ‘children’s voice’ if they want to share their views and opinions with you.

Cheryl in the context of the classroom

During most of the observation periods Cheryl presented as quite ‘flat’, showing little or no enthusiasm for the activities she was engaged in and appeared to be on the boundary of classroom activities. When the class gathered on the carpet she positioned
herself at the edge of the group, leaving a small space between herself and the others. Indeed, such behaviour was common to a few of the looked after children observed in this study. In most class activities, she sat at an individual desk to one side, near the front of the classroom. When I asked, the teacher explained that Cheryl sat there because that was where the plug for her laptop was. She did not seem to have considered that the laptop could have been run on battery power. It seems somewhat perverse that a mechanism for supporting her learning could act as a barrier to the development of social integration. Cheryl did not distance herself, however, from others when working in a small mathematics group with the support assistant. Here, she appeared relaxed working cooperatively with another child and contributed answers confidently. When reflecting on her learning in her profile Cheryl had stated that:

‘I feel I work best when working alone, but I can also work as part of a group. If I am stuck I am confident in asking for help from the teacher.’ (Academic session 12-13)

Interestingly, a number of children interviewed for this study did indicate that they preferred to work in small groups. At times when working on her own Cheryl lent forward, and let her hair fall in front of her face, obscuring her work from others. It appeared to me that she was possibly cocooning herself and her work from others and avoiding interaction. On reflection, it would have been interesting to ask her why she did this. Cheryl seemed to be more at ease in the playground where she engaged with a few other girls. During observations, she appeared to be involved in the group and chatting in a relaxed manner with her peers.

In a rehearsal for an end of term assembly Cheryl appeared to join in the singing readily. However, when trying to encourage the children to do their best, the class
teacher commented: ‘You want to make your parents proud’ (7-5-13) which seemed to take no account of the different home and family contexts of children in the class. At this point Cheryl visibly raised her eyes to the ceiling but made no comment. Although teachers may work hard to support vulnerable children in different ways, unguarded comments may sometimes remind children of the ways in which they are different. Similarly, I was surprised that the class teacher asked those children receiving free milk to raise their hands up. Indeed, schools in Scotland are required to ensure the anonymity of those in receipt of free school meals. This emphasised for me the importance of teachers being specifically aware of their individual responsibility in implementing aspects of policy. At this point during the data collection process I felt a tension between my role as a researcher, who was there to listen and observe, and my instinct as an HMI which would have been to discuss the issues with the teacher to support an improvement in practice.

Support strategies

In her profile, when describing herself as a learner, as noted above, Cheryl expressed a preference for working alone. She acknowledged that she could conform to the more accepted norm of working in a group. The emphasis here appeared to be on socio-cultural aspects of her learning. In contrast when discussing support for Cheryl the teacher focused on practical resources. The class teacher felt that the use of a laptop and writing program had had a significant impact on helping to develop her literacy skills. The focus was clearly on improving academic attainment. This observation was different to those made by most staff during interviews as it focused on curricular support in a form which might inhibit social interaction. However, there was evidence that suggested that
the support had had a positive impact. Cheryl acknowledged this in her profile when she wrote:

‘I am particularly proud of my improvement in my writing. I can share all my ideas and write lots. My net book has helped me with the spelling of words which has helped my confidence.’ (Academic session 12-13)

There was no indication in her profile as to whether her increased confidence was related to the improvement in the technical aspects of her writing or in the ability to share her ideas more effectively. Here the interplay between improving academic attainment and supporting children to develop positive social relationships is interesting. In the next chapter, I explore the difficulties faced by teachers in achieving an appropriate balance of the two types of support.

Adults’ perspectives

The class teacher shared that she was not aware of all of the reasons for Cheryl being taken into care. Mr H the head of the local children’s home did not consider a lack of detailed information about personal circumstances always to be of importance. As he commented during our conversation: ‘All you need to know is that life is tough,’ (8-2-13). This may reduce the likelihood of labelling based on preconceptions, however, access to full background information is arguably helpful in assessing and planning to meet a child’s needs. The difference in priorities illustrated here appeared to be similar to those identified by Jackson (1988) when discussing factors which contributed to the low attainment of children in care. Cheryl’s class teacher warned me that it may be difficult to interview her; that she may be incommunicative and respond in an abrupt manner. The head of her care home framed his view in a slightly different way:
‘Because Cheryl’s issues are manifestly different she manifests them in a different way. She is more subdued and sullen... she’s not being problematic.’ (8-2-13)

How these interpretations are nuanced is interesting. Whereas one focus seemed to be on the problematic nature of Cheryl’s behaviour, the other considered the behaviour not a problem even if undesirable. These almost polarised views of the one child appear to go from viewing her as being a child who causes problems to seeing her as a child who may have a problem. These comments provided more information about the views held by the adults providing support than they did about Cheryl. As noted in Chapter 2 there is research (Francis, 2000) which highlights disquiet about teachers’ attitudes towards looked after children. The ways in which such views impact on expectations are considered in the following chapter.

Leanne

Background

Leanne was ten years old and in her penultimate year at Alpha Primary School. She had siblings who were also looked after and who attended the same school. She presented as an inquisitive girl who engaged enthusiastically in conversation about her experiences of primary school. She had been living with her grandparents for over three years and there had been social work involvement with the family since her birth. Leanne’s grandparents declined to be involved in my study. In her school file, it was noted that she needed regular, consistent and safe contact with her parents, and to receive a consistent level of care. Unfortunately, there seemed to be a lack of detail and insight, in the file, that would have been helpful given that she was in care. The only indication of what was meant by a consistent level of care related to physical care. This
was supported by a single recommendation that she attend routine health and dental appointments which would be desirable for all children, not only looked after children.

Leanne’s school report for the academic session 2011-12 noted that she had made some progress during the session although in the same document her learning attributes were described as not yet being well developed. In the reports to parents and carers issued by Alpha Primary School learning attributes were reported on using descriptors such as: ‘tries to overcome difficulties’ and an evaluation of the frequency with which there were demonstrated by the child. The terms used to describe the extent to which the attributes were demonstrated were: ‘always, mostly, sometimes and rarely.’ It was reported that for most of the time Leanne was motivated; took responsibility for her own learning; showed a positive attitude to homework and behaved responsibly. Her report indicated that she sometimes tried to overcome difficulties, worked independently or showed confidence. It was considered that she rarely shared her ideas or worked well with others.

In aspects of literacy and English language, it was considered that Leanne was making good progress in reading and that she could read texts fluently when she applied herself. She was described as making some progress in writing and listening and talking as she could spell most common words correctly and was gaining confidence in writing stories. Her strengths appeared to be in art where her progress, effort and application were described as very good.

Leanne’s perspective

When asked about what she was good at and enjoyed in school, without hesitating, Leanne explained that it was reading and went on to provide a detailed description of the book she was reading. Interestingly, she did not mention art at all. Leanne identified
both her teacher and group members as sources of support with difficult work. She gave
the example of how her peers might help her to tackle tricky words in reading and with
aspects of her times tables. In addition, she mentioned using ICT to support her in
aspects of learning such as spelling and numeracy. Here Leanne moved the focus of the
conversation to the different ways in which she supported others. She talked about how
she helped her cousin, who was a year older than her, to read questions in mathematics.
This appeared to provide her with a sense of achievement as she emphasised that
although she was younger she could provide the support. This idea of a looked after child
not always being the one requiring support but also seeing themselves as someone who
can provide support is examined in Chapter 5.

The theme, introduced by Leanne’s teacher of things being ‘on her own terms’ was
echoed when Leanne talked about playing with her friends at break time. She described
the game they played which was one that she had introduced:

‘It’s a game I had in my head. No-one else played it before, but I made it
up.’ (8-02-13)

She went on to explain that it was always her and her friend who took the key roles, as
vampires, in the game. During this part of the discussion she went to great lengths to
stress that she had created the game and seemed to gain considerable satisfaction from
the fact that she was able to share something that was hers.

Leanne in the context of the classroom

At the beginning of the observation period the children in Leanne’s class were
engaged in paired and small group work in mathematics. She was involved in a game
with another pupil and once the teacher had explained the rules the girls began playing
the game. After winning the first game Leanne caught the attention of another child to share her success. This was done in a reasonably low-key way which did not distract the other child for any length of time. Leanne did not appear to be boasting but seemed pleasantly surprised by her success. During this time, the teacher was moving from group to group chatting to the children about the numeracy aspects of the games. After ten or so minutes the groups changed and Leanne partnered another girl when playing the next game. The pair spent a few minutes in discussion before agreeing the strategy that they would use in the game. At one point when one of her opponents made a wrong move Leanne restated the rules in a clear but calm way, the child accepted this guidance and the game moved on. At the end of the session the class organised themselves to go to assembly.

In the assembly hall Leanne settled quickly, sitting on the end of a row and chatting quietly to the girl beside her. After a few minutes, she began throwing a piece of paper at the person in front of her; this set off a chain reaction as that person then threw the paper at the person in front of them. This stopped when the assembly began. Leanne did not join in with the first song but sat quietly and appeared to be watching those around her. For about the first fifteen minutes Leanne sat twirling a lock of hair, fiddling with a bracelet and appearing to listen intently. She then started to chat to those around her and pretended to hit the boy behind her with her bracelet. When the boy was told off by a member of staff Leanne began watching the presentations again. However, after five minutes she began flicking the bracelet again and was told off by the support assistant who was sitting on a chair close to her. After another ten minutes Leanne spoke to the support assistant about a child who was distracting her, she then moved to sit beside the assistant. Here she seemed to be removing herself from distractions as she appeared to
watch the rest of the performance intently and joined in with the final song. On returning to class Leanne went to the support assistant to ask for a plaster for a cut on her knee.

After break time, the deputy head teacher was taking the class who were all involved in silent reading. Then Leanne’s group moved to the carpeted area and settled quietly to work with the depute head teacher. She sat and listened while others talked about the books that they had chosen and then speaking quietly shared a few details about her book. At the end of this activity Leanne showed the depute her finger and told her that it was sore. It was suggested that she wrap it in a paper towel. The class teacher returned about five minutes later and before leaving the class the depute spoke to Leanne to check that she was alright.

The class teacher explained to the children that they were going to do some more mathematics and would need to work in pairs. Whilst listening Leanne unpeeled the plaster on her knee and fiddled with the paper towel that was wrapped around her finger. However, once the instructions for the activity had been given she quickly identified a friend to work with, collected resources and focused on the game.

Support strategies

When asked about the ways in which she supported Leanne in school Mrs X focused on supporting the development of positive relationships. She talked at length about ways in which she tried to support Leanne to develop skills necessary to work effectively as part of a group. This involved providing her with opportunities to work with another child and a support assistant rather than in a larger group. The teacher described why she had to consider group dynamics:
‘Leanne has issues with her temper. She has a very bad temper. Mm, when she loses her temper it is very, very, difficulty for her to come back.’

(14-01-13)

She went on to emphasise the extreme nature of Leanne’s outbursts and the impact this had on other children. Mrs X provided an example of how she would take soundings to gauge Leanne’s readiness to engage in learning either independently or in collaboration with others.

‘I am aware of her and I am aware of how she is feeling and I am aware of maybe her temper rising. So, she sits very near me in class and em I think I’ve often got one ear on the conversation so that I can sort of judge if I need to …So she sits near me and I am careful about who she sits near.’

(14-01-13)

The teacher went on to describe well-rehearsed strategies that she used:

‘Also, em, I might just take a little, five minutes to do a reading book with her and say it’s time for your reading this morning Leanne here we are and then praise her when she’s done good reading and by the time she’s … finished her reading she’s forgotten what her temper is.’ (14-01-13)

Another strategy described by the teacher was what I have described as: ‘turning a blind eye’ to what might be deemed unacceptable behaviour. For example, after an unsettled break time, when Leanne refused to join the rest of the class to listen to a story the teacher explained that rather than insisting she join the group she would leave her sitting on her own. She then described how:
'it'll take her ten minutes to shuffle across to join us on the carpet but she'll get there. However, it will be on her own terms.' (14-01-13)

In the next chapter, when considering the importance for looked after children of establishing positive relationships, I shall return to some of the support strategies described by Mrs X.

Adults’ perspective

In the areas of numeracy and mathematics Mrs X, the class teacher, recorded that she was impressed with the work that Leanne had done as she was able to approach new concepts with confidence and was becoming more accurate with her times tables. In addition, she noted that Leanne enjoyed a challenge and worked hard to solve mathematics problems. In most other areas of the curriculum she was considered to be making good progress, the exception was art where her progress, effort and application were described as very good. When considering factors related to supporting Leanne Mrs X described the importance of developing trust. She detailed how this might include providing physical reassurance:

‘I put my arm around her a lot, things like that. Things {pause} and I think that works because I am fond of her.’ (14-01-13)

Here the teacher appears to see it as a natural reaction to provide physical reassurance and does not question the appropriateness of her actions. However, because of concern about adherence to child protection guidelines, not all professionals are as confident about providing physical reassurance to children and this is something that is discussed in Chapter 5. While the teacher believed that Leanne had significant behaviour difficulties she made it clear that she still expected Leanne to engage appropriately; that she would
be disappointed if Leanne 'let her down.' So, whist she was prepared to make allowances she still had certain expectations. Mrs X felt that her role as class teacher made it easier to build trust with Leanne; more so than for others who did not spend prolonged periods of time with her. For me, this raised the question of the emphasis placed in legislation (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) upon the function of the looked after children manager as opposed to class teachers. This is an issue that I explore in the following chapter.

The interesting feature of this case study is the difference in Leanne’s behaviour as described by her teacher and that observed during the study. In describing the strategies to support Leanne the focus had been on what was considered to be problematic behaviour with no explicit mention of the positive impact that the strategies may have had. This emphasised for me the importance of drawing on different data sources to produce a balanced account of a child in the context of the classroom.

Wayne

Background

Wayne was almost twelve years old and in his final year of primary education. He had been on supervision since he was two years old due to alleged physical abuse and neglect and was now living with his maternal grandparents. He had regular contact with his birth mother under supervision of social work services. At the time of the study two of Wayne’s siblings also attended Alpha Primary School. One sibling was living with Wayne and their grandparents, and the other was placed with a foster family. He also had a cousin who attended the school but was not a looked after child. According to his teacher, having these relations in school created a tension. Prior to the data collection period, Wayne had been attending Alpha Primary School part time due to what his
teacher described as unpredictable behaviour. According to notes in his file there were periods when he had aggressive outbursts and his behaviour was volatile. It was reported that: ‘he could display behaviour which was a danger to him and others’, for instance, ‘he could become aggressive towards others when upset.’ While he was attending school on a reduced timetable he was also attending a local authority support centre, where a tailored educational programme sought to address his social and emotional needs. However, it would have been helpful to have had more detail of this programme to understand the specific purpose of the support.

Records indicated that there was an agreed plan in place which recommended that boundaries be set with a consistent approach from all adults. In terms of expectations on teachers to meet the needs of looked after children this raises an interesting question. I wondered if the consistent approach that was advocated for Wayne was any different to that which a teacher could be expected to take with all children. Although a plan was in place it did not describe in any detail what constituted a consistent approach and this was left to the teacher and support assistant to negotiate. It seemed that the school had provided Wayne with support to help him address issues related to behaviour and relationships. There was evidence in his profile, and in the conversations with both Wayne and the support assistant, illustrating how he was now establishing appropriate relationships with other children. For example, in his profile he noted it as a personal achievement that he had taught other children to play rounders. This provides an example of how the school had provided opportunities for Wayne to achieve out with the classroom which, as Nettles et al. (2000) suggests, is one way of supporting the development of resilience.

Wayne in the context of the classroom
In class, during observations, Wayne was constantly on the move. He orbited others as they sat at their desks, occasionally stopping to chat to individuals or small groups, but he did not appear to belong to any one group. Neither staff nor other children, however, appeared to find difficulty with Wayne’s behaviour, it did not seem to disrupt the otherwise purposeful working environment. In view of this it could be suggest that notes in his file had tended towards a very negative portrayal of his behaviour. The records seemed to imply that prior to planned interventions he was unable to form relationships at all rather than describing the different degrees to which he did engage with others. This caused me to question the purpose of such notes which focused predominantly on areas for development rather than noting strength which could be built on. The apparent bias towards recording perceived deficits is something that I shall explore in more depth in the following chapter.

During the first classroom observation Wayne arrived in class late. His first point of contact was Miss C the support assistant. He joined a reading group, but initially sitting on a table at the edge of the group rather than with the other children. After a few minutes, he moved to sit beside Miss C. It was as though he wanted to explore and be part of the group but also to be close to a care-giver in the form of Miss C, as described by Scott (2011) when discussing exploration and proximity seeking. This type of behaviour was repeated during observations. However, in most instances Wayne eventually joined learning groups but not always at the same time or in the same way as the other children. I wondered if the support assistant and class teacher made a conscious decision to ignore this behaviour to achieve the more significant outcome of him participating in the task. This example of avoiding focusing on negative behaviours is the type of behaviour that is recommended in the quality indicators developed by CELCIS (2015) to help schools improve the experiences of looked after children.
Adults’ Perspective

Wayne’s class teacher and Miss C. seemed to be prepared to be flexible in meeting his various social and emotional needs. They had identified various trigger points which caused him to become agitated in class and agreed that at these times the support assistant would take him to work elsewhere. To be able to work in this way, Miss C considered it important to have support from the class and head teacher. She believed that there was a need to support each other as adults. During interview, the head teacher of Alpha Primary School spoke highly of Miss C and the ‘intuitive, flexible way’ in which she worked with Wayne. The impression given here was that the staff trusted each other’s judgement and the head teacher was clearly happy to give leeway for support staff to work in this way. In discussion, Miss C did not focus on what could be considered to be problematic behaviour. She considered that listening to and then taking the lead from Wayne was of paramount importance. She described how his drawings were an indication of his developmental age and how she sometimes used these to explore issues with him. Rather than attempting to analyse the drawings she used the subject matter as a starting point when taking soundings to gauge Wayne’s mood.

Miss C, talked about how she took an area of Wayne’s interests, in this instance baking, when planning activities. She asked him to lead a group and help younger children to weigh out ingredients. This not only gave him an opportunity to consolidate his numeracy skills but also had the effect of increasing his self-esteem: ‘They looked up to him for the right reason’ (15-1-13). This activity seems to have provided Wayne with the opportunity to engage in group activities and have a positive impact on the dynamics rather than be on the periphery. I gained the impression that Miss C firmly believed that Wayne as someone who could achieve given appropriate support.
Wayne’s perspective

Wayne talked in detail about strategies that he used to manage his anger:

Sometimes, if I stay calm and speak to an adult while I can before an outburst, I’ll get help for a couple of minutes and I’ll be able to take my anger out like playing football or whatever. (1-3-13)

Here Wayne seems to be able to reflect on his learning and identify appropriate support strategies. He appeared to want to show that he was responsible and in control. He was clearly able to discuss how his temper impacted on his behaviour. It was interesting that he likened his outbursts to that of a much younger child:

‘Most of the time I can be mature but I can be very immature when I’m angry and be like a primary one and nursery people in that year’ 1-3-13)

He seems to view loss of temper as a developmental issue in associating it with younger children rather than an issue of temperament where people of all ages may have outbursts. During conversation Wayne displayed a good understanding of his own learning preferences. He noted that he enjoyed working independently in literacy. In his profile, he stated that:

‘I find it easier learning one to one or in a mixed group. I can work on my own in numeracy but I need a bit of support in my literacy, for example, my reading.’ (Academic session 2011-12)

Wayne did voice concern about the unknown, talking about having less enthusiasm for things not experienced:
‘I’m not too keen on a lot of things yet ... I’m not really too keen on them yet because I’ve not really done much of them... I like my work if I know it is about and that, and I know I can do it.’ (1-3-13)

In the conversation, he went on to talk about how his teacher helped him to cope with this and approach new material. Wayne detailed how the teacher suggested relevant strategies to help him to break down tasks and persevere with them. This involved taking a break from a task and spending some time playing a computer game before returning to the task. This appeared to be another example of ‘chunking down’ a task in order to make it less daunting for the child.

Importantly, Wayne was also aware of his strengths. From the way in which he spoke he clearly enjoyed mathematics, particularly mental mathematics, and evidence from progress reports suggested that he had made progress in this area. He appeared to feel comfortable with the predictability of literacy and numeracy tasks. In discussion, he told me that: ‘...it has been my thing since primary one.’ (1-3-13) Here he seems to be developing a sense of himself as a successful learner. In working with a member of staff to produce his profile, Wayne appears to have been reflective and realistic when contemplating his learning and achievements. He considered that one of his greatest achievements was attaining his yellow belt in Tai Kwon Do.

Support strategies

From observations, it appeared that staff took good account of Wayne’s learning preferences and provided opportunities tailored to these. Miss C the support assistant played a significant role in supporting Wayne to complete activities in mathematics. During one observation, Wayne appeared unable to focus and so she provided carefully judged prompts to support him. These prompts took the form of supportive statements
such as: ‘We have to write the sum out like this first’ (7-5-13). Although the use of the imperative here may suggest an authoritative tone, in this instance the use of ‘we’ rather than ‘you’ gave the impression that she wanted Wayne to collaborate with her in the task.

While there were expectations that Wayne would participate in learning, the adults appeared to recognise that they had to put in place structures to help him achieve this. The success of this support appeared to be dependent on effective communication with the teacher and classroom assistant agreeing when it would be appropriate for Wayne to work in the support base rather than the class. The impression that I got from my discussions with staff was that a key feature of the support was that it was provided in a flexible way to respond to Wayne’s needs.

In talking about her work with Wayne, Miss C described how it was rewarding to see his progress. However, it was clearly not an easy task and she stressed the need for consistency of response no matter how a child was behaving. She appeared to feel that this had been noticed by Wayne who had, apparently, at one point said to her: ‘You’re always smiling, even when I am bad’ (15-1-13). This type of comment is in accord with research findings (Happer et al., 2006) and testaments from young people (Johnston, 2017) which suggest that an important factor for looked after children in achieving success is to know that someone believes in them.

Miss C also provided an interesting glimpse into how staff may feel constrained by the now accepted norm of not making physical contact with children in school. When talking about the place of affection in her working relationship with Wayne, she was somewhat apologetic when she stated that: ‘If a child like Wayne gives you a hug you need to respond’ (15-1-13). As noted earlier, Miss C was not the only member of staff to raise this
issue. As there are times when a young child will seek physical contact as reassurance that their teacher likes them this is likely to cause a dilemma for teachers who believe that child protection guidance prohibits physical contact. I return to this issue in chapter 5.

Kenneth

Background

Kenneth was almost twelve years old, small for his age and wore thick lens glasses. In his school file, it was noted that he had difficulty with spatial awareness due to problems with his vision. There were no details recorded of the specific impact of this impairment. According to notes in his file he had suffered from severe physical neglect and apparently displayed sexualised behaviour. He was first taken into care in another local authority area in 2006 when he was five years old. He had been living with his present carers and attending Beta Primary School for three years.

Records of assessment meetings suggested that Kenneth found it difficult to make meaningful friendships and had no sense of personal danger, although what this actually entailed was not explained in the notes. He apparently required a high level of adult support to cope with learning difficulties as he had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). However, in assigning this label presumptions about the definition of ADHD seem to be made as there was no explanation of either his specific needs or the type of support that may be required. Kenneth’s school report for session 2012/13 indicated that whilst making some progress in most curricular areas academically he was working at about five years below his chronological age. These assessments were made against nationally developed achievement benchmarks. From comments in his report he seemed to be achieving most success in aspects of language related to talking
and listening. His report suggested that he had difficulty with motor skills which affected his writing ability. His teacher confirmed this when explaining that he had been following an occupational therapy programme in order to address this. It was recorded on his report that he was motivated and showed a positive attitude to learning for the majority of the time. However, in a number of areas (working independently; sharing ideas and working well with others; showing confidence; taking responsibility for his own learning and behaving responsibly) it was indicated by means of ticks in predetermined boxes that he only did these things sometimes, as might be the case for many children. The implication of this was that he had considerable development needs, and so it may have been helpful for Kenneth and those supporting him if his report had included suggestions for next steps in these areas.

Kenneth’ perspective

When I asked what he thought was the best thing about Beta Primary School, at first, he said he did not know and then he stated that: ‘It’s awesome and I am being good’ (25-02-13). He then described how he was able to earn stickers if he completed tasks and when he had five stickers he was allowed to use the computer. In describing what he enjoyed most in school Kenneth said that he enjoyed text book work and then clarified this by noting that it was text book two that he was working from. On being prompted he confirmed that this was a mathematics text book but was not able to say which aspect of mathematics he was working on. When asked about who might help him if he found any of his work difficult he initially said that the teacher would help him and the added that all of his adult helpers would help him. He then said that he liked to play a mathematics game on the computer and appeared to be quite proud that this was a game that he could play without support. Kenneth also said that he liked reading and when asked
about what he read he responded ‘books’ without providing additional detail. As his report suggested that he was achieving well in aspects of the expressive arts I asked him about art lessons. He responded: ‘Yes sometimes we do that and sometimes we do baking on Wednesday’ (25-2-13). This exchange was interesting as he did not seem to be able to describe the specific content of any curricular area. I was beginning to get the impression that although Kenneth could focus on the goals of his activities such as receiving stickers and being allowed to play on the computer he was not clear about the precise steps that he had to take to achieve these. It was, however, difficult to ascertain if he was not aware of the specific skills that he was developing or if he was just not able to articulate them. This led me to reflected on the extent to which he would be able to be involved in evaluating and celebrate his progress in learning if he was not able to talk about specific tasks.

Kenneth in the context of the classroom

Kenneth spent most of the school day working on an individual programme of work in a support base. Although there were other children in the base Kenneth did not seem to have opportunities to work collaboratively with them. His teacher explained that Kenneth worked independently on core tasks in the support base, and opportunities to develop social skills were provided during gym lessons.

‘His integration has been, it’s been em the gym or any social things that they have been doing. He’s not able to integrate for mathematics or language because he’s not at the stage where he can.’ (11-2-13)

I gained an insight into the ways in which Kenneth could be distracted by others during a second discussion with him and one of his peers, Roger, from the support base. The conversation focused on their recent transition visit to secondary school. Kenneth
tried hard to focus but was constantly distracted by Roger who was rather excitable and appeared determined to side-track Kenneth by making him laugh. At this point, I wondered if this was typical of their behaviour in the support unit and was the type of evidence that was used to suggest that Kenneth was not able to integrate with others.

Kenneth did not join his peers for mathematics and English language as Mrs T did not consider these subject areas offered opportunities for social integration. Here there seemed to be a lack of creativity in considering how Kenneth’s needs could be met. The possibility of him working on an individualised programme alongside his peers, which does happen in some primary schools in Scotland, did not seem to have been considered. Staff appeared to be aware of the need to support the development of good personal, social and working relationships in order to promote wellbeing (Scottish Government 2009, p12). However, the proposed strategies did not seem to be predicated on the presumption of inclusion as promoted in legislation (Children and young people (Scotland) act 2014). I gained the impression that it was considered that different aspects of Kenneth’s development would happen sequentially. Once his cognitive abilities were sufficiently well developed then he would be provided with a wider range of opportunities to develop his social skills. This approach is reviewed in the next chapter where it is considered in relation to literature which suggests the importance of supporting looked after children to develop positive social relationships (Rutter, 2012 and Nettles et al., 2000).

Support Strategies

In discussing the ways in which support for Kenneth was structured in school, his carer Mrs D, shared with me the details of the various issues that she had discussed with school staff. These related mainly to the management of his behaviour and there was limited
reference to supporting academic development. The majority of Mrs K’s contact with school appeared to be through the head teacher rather than those who worked most closely with Kenneth in the classroom.

When describing how Kenneth’s progress was reviewed Mrs T, his teacher reported that:

‘We have educational reviews every few months and the whole team gets together, and I’m included in that which is really good.’ (11-2-13)

Instead of considering herself to be a key player in reviewing Kenneth’s progress, his teacher seemed to be grateful to be invited to these reviews. This struck me as interesting as most of the teachers interviewed seemed to consider that they were the key professional in providing support and therefore the people best placed to contribute to such meetings. This is examined in more detail in Chapter 5 when the specific roles of school staff with responsibility for supporting looked after children are considered.

I found it interesting that when asked about support with his work Kenneth suggested that he found it helpful to work with other children. He talked about this in general terms rather than referring to assistance with specific tasks. This brief exchange caused me to consider two specific issues. The first point that I found interesting was that although he appeared to have limited opportunities to work collaboratively he still recognised the value of working with others. In considering this in more depth I then began to wonder to what degree it was assistance with tasks that he appreciated and to what extent was it the company of other children that he valued. Sugden (2013) notes opportunities to develop relationships often occur during breaks with peers. However, when describing what he did at playtime Kenneth explained that he played with his friend Roger and they: ‘ran around like crazy’ (25-2-13). It did not sound as though this activity
offered opportunities to develop relationships with peers apart from Roger. The importance of interaction between children to help individuals develop a sense of belonging was noted in Chapter 2 (Sugden 2013). In the next chapter, drawing on evidence from this case study, I explore factors that may promote or inhibit such interactions.

Adults’ perspectives

In discussing Kenneth’s progress in school Mrs D mentioned that he liked watching cookery programmes and she felt that:

‘...this may lead to something as he is not very academic.’ (4-2-13)

This comment was representative of the overall tone of the interview with his carer as she focused predominantly on what she regarded as deficits rather than trying to identify strengths that could be built on. Here I reflected back to research (Happer et al. 2006) which reported that those who had been in care consider factors that made a positive impact were having people who care and being given high expectations. The factors that may influence the aspirations of carers such as Mrs D are discussed in the following chapter. 

In discussion, the teacher in the support base in Beta Primary School described the children that she works with as ‘department children’ (11-2-13). This form of labelling may be intended to differentiate this cohort from those in mainstream classes and indicate that they require specific support. It may simply have been an administrative label as traditionally, in Scottish schools, departments or units of this type attracted separate funding and were resourced differently to mainstream classes. Whatever the reasons behind the use of the term it is the potential impact that is important to consider.
The following comment, made by Mrs T, also suggests a tendency towards a deficit model.

‘Well Kenneth doesn’t integrate much, again, he misreads social situations quite drastically. He can get himself quite angry, quite worked up.’ (11-2-13)

It is not clear for whom this is drastic. It would seem that Kenneth’s difficulty in integrating with others is not through a lack of desire on his part but through lack of opportunity. It appears that decisions were made for Kenneth rather than with him and are based on the adults’ views of what he would be able to cope with. There could be a danger here that his programme of work was so measured that he did not have opportunities to experience challenging tasks. Mrs T seemed to consider that it was acceptable to expect less from Kenneth and others who worked in the base:

‘So, he’s doing, he’s still doing the curriculum but it’s more basic in our department. It’s tailored to his needs.’ (11-2-13)

In compiling this case study my overall impression was of a child who had a limited understanding of how he was progressing in school. Kenneth could measure his progress in terms of the rewards that he received but he was not able to describe his progress in relation to specific skills and knowledge. In the following chapter, I consider the type of support that looked after children may require to be able to reflect on and contribute to their learning experiences.

**Summary**

The case-study data presented in this chapter illustrates various ways in which school staff and carers supported looked after children in school. In some instances, this support
was provided directly to the child and at other times the support was given to the carer to enable them to help the child.

If, as Watkins (2005, p. 48) suggests, ‘learning is constructing knowledge with others,’ it is important that teachers consider how to engage looked after children in learning with their peers. The data suggests that various elements need to be considered to achieve this. The first step, as seen in a number of the case studies, was to take soundings in order to gauge readiness of individual children to participate. This may be of significance for looked after children who, for various reasons, may find it difficult to engage with others. Thus, it is important that teachers use effective bridging strategies; that they consider social dynamics to ensure that looked after children are able to engage in learning activities with others. The looked after children interviewed indicated that they valued support from their peers and opportunities to work collaboratively. In addition, children suggested that they valued opportunities to support others and contribute to the work of the school. Enabling looked after children to develop a sense of belonging by providing such opportunities may support their development as agents in their own learning. Indeed, working collaboratively and developing agency is discussed by Hapborg (1998) and specifically by Watkins (2005, p. 51) who considers that:

‘In classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are active agents and more engaged.’

In the case studies in this chapter, empirical data illustrate the importance of the views and beliefs of professionals in shaping cultures which are supportive of looked after children. An interesting feature of these pedagogic cultures is the willingness of practitioners to spend what may be considered a significant amount of time building relationships with looked after children before attempting to engage them in learning.
The opportunities for the children to interact and learn with others were facilitated to different extents depending on the contexts. This was enabled in different ways but I would suggest that an important first step in this process is that of taking soundings.

In the next chapter links between the themes identified in the data and aspects of the literature are discussed.
Chapter 5 Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The central question in this study sought to determine what practices might be effective in supporting looked after children to engage in learning. In this chapter, I draw on evidence from the seven case studies to analyse and discuss the strategies used to support different aspects of engagement in learning. I then consider what the data presented in Chapter 4 can tell us about how looked after children are regarded by teachers. In deliberating on this question, I consider the ways in which the term ‘looked after’ may shape expectations. Finally, I discuss the contributions of the seven children and synthesise the messages that they shared about their learning experiences.

5.1. Practices and approaches that might be used to support looked after children to engage in learning

The data gathered for this study and presented in the case studies in Chapter 4 illustrates various ways in which the seven looked after children were supported in their learning. The documentation examined and accounts provided by staff suggested that a high percentage of the children (five out of seven) in this study presented with emotional and behavioural problems and had trouble in developing social relationships. This is consistent with prior research (Scott, 2011 and Greig et al., 2008). Comments from children’s reports illustrated the different degrees of difficulty that the children had in establishing relationships. These ranged from children who apparently found it difficult to share ideas or work collaboratively with others to those who were reported as presenting erratic or volatile behaviour and were verbally or physically abusive to others. The difficulties they experienced and the ways in which they were supported to overcome these were unique to each child and the context within which they were working.
However, these findings are of concern because as Farmer et al. (2011) suggest children with behavioural difficulties who have negative relationships with teachers may not be viewed positively by their peers. Patterson et al. (1992) suggests that this may lead to children with behavioural difficulties being rejected by their peer group and denied interaction with prosocial peers. An examination of the data in my study suggests that there may be different stages and strategies involved in supporting looked after children to engage in learning. These included: ascertaining the readiness of individuals to engage with others; using bridging strategies; consideration of group dynamics; the development of friendships beyond the classroom and enabling carers to support looked after children. These are explained and discussed below.

5.1.1 Taking Soundings

As illustrated in the case studies in Chapter 4, all the looked after children included in this study differed in the extent to which they were ready and willing to engage with others in learning. Therefore, as suggested by Sebba et al. (2015) there was not likely to be one way of supporting them but rather a set of guiding principles. In analysing interview transcripts, what was notable were the ways in which two of the teachers interviewed talked about the strategies they used to gauge the readiness of looked after children to engage with others in learning. Where teachers discussed such strategies at length they tended to be referring to those children who were described in reports as experiencing high levels of social and emotional difficulties. As Bretherton (1992) suggests processes involved in learning can be stressful as the task may be unfamiliar and a child may fear making mistakes or failing. This may be particularly significant for looked after children who as Winter (2015, p.2) notes may have experienced relationships that are: ‘fractured, chaotic, frightening, violent and abusive.’
Grieg et al. (2008, p. 16) suggest that sensitively attuned guides such as teachers will be alert to signs of anxiety. Data in my study illustrated how two of the staff interviewed and observed took specific steps to develop an understanding of the needs of the looked after children that they were supporting. The behaviour of these two members of staff was similar to that described by Rogoff (1994, p. 215) when discussing models of teaching and learning in families from different communities. When talking about the adults she noted that:

‘they provided orientation and suggestions and generally maintained themselves in readiness to assist the child’s direction of activity, while they simultaneously engaged with the group (not exclusively with the child).’

The two teachers talked about being aware of or ‘tuning in’ to a child’s needs in different ways. For example, the way in which Mrs X described how she was aware of Leanne’s moods and had: ‘one ear on the conversation’ (14-01-13) to gauge Leanne’s mood. In a similar way, John’s teacher talked about: ‘just being aware when he might want TLC’ (14-1-13.) In my field notes I expressed my impression of what I observed as: ‘taking soundings’. What made these initial exchanges between the teachers and looked after children different from routine classroom practice was the length and depth of the engagement during which the teacher appeared to be establishing a positive rapport with the child. In this study, the practice of what I have termed ‘taking soundings’ is used to describe the relationship building stage that could be considered as precursor to engagement of looked-after children in learning with others. This appeared analogous to the pedagogical practice of checking that a pupil was ‘ready to learn’ (Lewis & Norwich, 2001). During observations both Mrs X and Mrs Y engaged with Leanne and John in this way whilst maintaining an overview of the rest of the class.
In some instances, for example when encouraging Leanne to join the rest of the class, the teacher’s behaviour appeared to involve social referencing which Rogoff (2003, p.286) describes as:

‘the process of seeking information about how to interpret ambiguous situations from the expressions of others.’

On one occasion Mrs X seemed to be interpreting the readiness of Leanne to engage in learning not only from what she said but also from non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions. This process could be considered to be intuitive and something that practitioners may engage in automatically. However, an important element in the instances described in this study appeared to be the time that was taken to interpret and analyse these cues in order to make appropriate decisions about how to engage individual looked after children in learning.

The looked after children observed in this study were not passive in these social exchanges and did not always follow the teacher’s suggestions. This is similar to the situation described by Rogoff (1994, p.213) when talking about engagement in communities of learners. She noted that the relationship between adult and child is asymmetrical and although the overall direction and leadership is provided by the adults at times the leadership is provided by the children. When considering the theme of ‘taking soundings’ it appeared that an important element in this engagement process was that children had the opportunity to observe for themselves what was involved and then decide at which point they felt ready to participate. An example of this was when Leanne initially sat apart from her peers before eventually joining the group. This is similar to strategies used by younger children and described by Danby et al. (2012) where, before making requests to be a friend, they spent time observing the social environment. As
Poulou (2014, p. 987) suggests, a learner’s perception of the environment influences their behaviour. It could be suggested then that giving children who may be anxious about engaging with others time to evaluate the situation is important in ensuring that they feel in control. Thus, when ‘taking soundings’ and responding flexibly’ the staff described in this study appeared to be supporting children to become more comfortable with their learning environment and thus reducing anxiety (Donohue et al., 2003).

One interpretation may be that by taking soundings and engaging in social referencing teachers were also supporting looked after children’s emotional regulation as described by Gerhardt (2012). Here the importance of recognising feelings such as anger or anxiety in order to adjust both expectations and the type of support provided was of considerable importance. By providing support and taking the lead from individual children Mrs X and Mrs Y appeared to be supporting the children to feel safe and to belong before trying to engage them in learning. This was done as the member of staff engaged with the individual child and demonstrated that they were concerned about them and prepared to adapt activities to suit the child’s social, emotional and educational needs at that time. The importance of this relationship building is explored by Jennings & Greenberg (2009, p. 501) who suggest that:

‘Inadequate relations with a teacher may lead to dislike and fear of school and over time may lead to feelings of alienation and disengagement.’

They go on to posit that this is particularly important for younger children for whom less than positive experiences might impact on relationships with teachers and peers in the future (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, p. 501). This would support the premise of this thesis that it is important to make special provision for how looked after children are supported in the early years of education.
During interviews, some of the practitioners emphasised that they needed to be very patient when building relationships with looked after children. First, they ensured that they devoted sufficient time to engaging with the looked after child to ascertain their frame of mind. An example of the length of time that teachers spent in providing such reassurance was provided by John’s teacher when she talked about engaging in ‘restorative chat’ (14-1-13) to find out why he was upset. From discussion with staff it was apparent that there had been no formal training in this type of engagement.

Respondents appeared to be drawing on tacit knowledge which Elliot et al. (2011) suggests is bound up with a practitioner’s goals, beliefs and values. The headteacher of Alpha Primary School seemed to capture this when she described Miss C as working in an: ‘intuitive and flexible’ (4-2-13), way with Wayne. This theme of actions being underpinned by beliefs is revisited in section 5.2 of this chapter when considering how looked after children are regarded by teachers.

In describing engagement in learning Kovalainen & Kumpulainen (2007) consider factors such as who initiates and participates in different ways at different stages of the interaction. Rather than Leanne or John making approaches to gain entry to a group their teachers appeared to be acting as intermediaries and taking on the role of sensitive coach (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In taking soundings, the teachers appeared to be gathering evidence before deciding on appropriate strategies to support the children to be autonomous and make choices about how they engaged in classroom activities. Jang et al. (2010, p. 589) describe autonomy supportive teachers as those who support learners to develop autonomy by:

‘looking at issues from the learner’s perspective; identifying and nurturing needs; and providing appropriate challenges.’
Throughout the data in Chapter 4 of this study there was evidence of teachers using these strategies as they engaged in what I have described as taking soundings. It might be suggested that practitioners who engage in taking soundings as a precursor to being autonomy supportive (Reeve et al., 2004) have a positive impact on learner engagement.

5.1.2 Bridging strategies

Once a teacher had taken soundings to gauge a child’s readiness to engage in learning in some instances she might then use what I have termed ‘bridging strategies’ before encouraging them to engage with their peers. In analysing the data, I identified two such strategies which I termed ‘breathing space’ and ‘time out’. When given ‘breathing space’ a child was allowed to take longer to engage in activities than other children. Examples of how this strategy was used are detailed in Leanne’s and Wayne’s case studies. Providing breathing space allowed the child to reflect thoughtfully before deciding how or if they would participate. Evidence from observations and discussions undertaken in this study suggested that in most instances children did decide to participate after a short length of time.

Another strategy used by some of the teachers in my study was that of giving children ‘time out’. In giving looked after children ‘time out’ from an activity the teacher appeared to be making judgements related to the child’s ability to persevere with a specific task. The child was not expected to complete the task in one session but was allowed to take breaks and return to complete it later. It could be suggested that by being flexible in this way teachers were simply adopting a laissez-faire approach and avoiding conflict with children who were reluctant to engage in learning. However, in discussion with children for whom this had happened, such as Charlene and Wayne I had the sense that they felt
that this made the tasks less daunting for them. In addition, it appeared that this strategy supported the development of resilience as captured in Charlene’s comment:

‘I am pleased that I persevered even when it’s tricky. I am proud that I have managed to become more confident in my numeracy and not think that I can’t do it when I know I can if I try.’

The findings support those of Rix et al. (2009, p.91) who when discussing pedagogical approaches used to include children with special educational needs noted a common theme as:

‘the powerful role the teacher played in shaping interactions and influencing learning opportunities through these interactions.’

An important point to acknowledge is that it takes time for a member of staff to engage effectively in taking soundings and bridging strategies with individual looked after children. In order to be able to do this there must be support from members of the wider school community as discussed later in this chapter.

5.1.3 Group dynamics

A number of teachers referred to the importance of considering the dynamics of the group when engaging children in learning. For example, Mrs X explained that she had to consider the impact of Leanne’s temper on other children when deciding on the composition of groups. This may be of significance for looked after children as they may take longer to establish social networks, often joining a school part way through their primary education. As noted in the literature review, looked after children may be more likely to have experienced disrupted lives, making it more difficult to make and sustain relationships. A possible reason for this is discussed by Axford (2008, p. 12) who
considers that it is common for looked after children to express their difficulties by being
aggressive or insensitive to other children who may respond in a hostile rather than
welcoming way. So once the teacher considered that a looked after child was ready to
engage in learning they then had to judge who it would be appropriate for them to work
with. For example, Mrs X noted that she gave careful consideration when deciding who
to sit Leanne beside. In addition, Mrs Y noted the importance of making sure that
children were paired up with the ‘right people.’ At times, this might be an adult or one
other child rather than in a larger group.

From the child’s perspective, Bethany expressed concern about group dynamics when
she described how, during the previous year, she had not felt part of the mathematics
group. She went on to explain that this was because the other children were all a year
older than her and they didn’t chat to her. This not only had the potential of limiting
opportunities to develop positive relationships but also to develop mathematical thinking
though discussion with others.

5.1.4 Developing friendships

As noted in Chapter 2 Rutter (2012, p.599) highlights the importance of social support
for looked after children. When considering the development of social relationships
Danby et al. (2012, p.67) suggest:

‘sharing things within a peer group, ‘team’ or ‘club’ can work to create
interactional space for friendship.’

School will not be the only place in which these friendships are developed; many will be
formed in social settings in the community including though organised activities. Chan &
Poulin (2007) posit that multi-context friendships tend to be more stable and enduring
than single context friendships and suggest that building on school-based friendships may strengthen the quality of the friendship and therefore increase the stability. This may be particularly significant for those looked after children who may for various reasons find it difficult to form and sustain relationships. This was something that three of the carers offered different perspectives on. Mrs E talked about supporting Bethany to make friends at Brownies and Mrs A described how she had organised play sessions with school friends for John. Mrs B focused on the financial support that had been provided to enable Charlene to attend school camp. These activities provided all three children with opportunities to participate in out of school experiences with their peers which might then form the subject of shared conversations in school. The strategies that carers use and the support they access in order to organise such activities was not something that was discussed in the literature that I reviewed. Arranging for children to attend various classes and groups in the community, such as Girl Guides, may be relatively straightforward. However, arranging for them to invite classmates’ home may be more difficult as Mrs A. explained when talking about how she had to first establish networks with other parents. The practicalities involved in making such arrangements are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

5.1.5 Involvement of Parents and Carers in supporting looked after children

A significant theme discussed in my literature review was the importance of cohesion of support systems particularly the importance of collaboration between school staff and caregivers. Research (Cheung et al. 2012 and Pears, et al. 2010) suggests that caregiver involvement is central in ensuring academic success for looked after children. In a toolkit designed to support practitioners in engaging parents in children’s learning Education Scotland (2017, p. 30) identify that:
‘A strong home-school partnership is critical to narrowing the attainment gap for looked after children’

Whilst the document provides a list of reflective questions for practitioners, these tend to focus on procedures and operational issues related to, for example, how information is provided and how carers are involved in decision making. What the guidance does not specify is the need to establish positive relationships with the carers as illustrated in the account of Mrs B. Charlene’s grandmother. Implicit in her account was the impression that she felt comfortable dealing with a range of staff in the school. Her comment that this even included staff in reception was significant as such staff often act as gatekeepers. Without the establishment of positive relationships and trust it may be more difficult for staff to approach sensitive issues such as the need for additional funding for activities such as attending school camp. Impressions gained in interviews with John’s teacher and carer were that they were working collaboratively to support John. An important element in developing this collaboration was identified as effective communication to ensure consistency of response. Mrs A. appeared to particularly value informal opportunities to communicate with staff. She gave the impression that she felt that her views and opinions were valued.

I felt that Mrs A, John’s carer, provided a valuable insight into an aspect of parental engagement that had not been highlighted in the literature that I examined for this study. Research (Ridge & Millar, 2000) indicated the value of friendships for looked after children and Mrs A highlighted the strategic issues involved in arranging opportunities for looked after children to meet with their peers outside of school to develop social networks. As she did not live within the school catchment area John did not, as a matter of course, see his school friends in his local community. She described
how in order to address this she made use of existing opportunities such as soft starts and other school events, for example, information evenings or school concerts, to meet and get to know parents of John’s school friends. Having established links with other parents only then was she able to arrange for John to participate in activities with friends out of school.

The data gathered in this study has provided opportunities to consider different facets involved in supporting looked after children in learning. The key message that appears to permeate the data is the importance of relationship building. The findings corroborate the ideas of other authors, for example, Winter (2015) and Ryan (2012) who have emphasised the importance of building positive relationships with looked after children and young people. However, the relationships that are formed will be dependent upon how teachers view looked after children. This is of concern because, as highlighted in the literature review for this study previous research (Francis, 2000, p. 30) has indicated that:

‘teachers needed to develop a more positive view of the abilities and potential which these children possess.’

Below I consider what the evidence in Chapter 4 suggests about how teachers in this study regarded the looked after children that they were supporting.

5.2 How are looked after children regarded by teachers?

In considering how looked after children were regarded by teachers I first wanted to explore the ways in which the use of the term ‘looked after’ shaped expectation. The term looked after is a construct which relates to where and by whom a child is looked after but tells us nothing more about the specific needs of individual children. In advising that all looked after children should be considered as having additional needs, presumptions are being made by policy makers. Whilst these assumptions may be
correct for many looked after children they do not necessarily apply to the whole population. Legislation (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) states that looked after children should be considered as having additional needs but leaves institutions to define the nature of those needs. Interpretation then is open to individual teachers and schools. Measures of ‘looked afterness’ are not diagnostic they relate to where the child lives and who they live with and tell us nothing about the specific strengths and areas for development of individual children. The challenge here appears to be to ensure that messages in legislation and national statistics, which tend to focus on deficits, are balanced with guidance on the importance of having high expectations for looked after children.

5.2.1 Influence of the term ‘looked after’

Whilst there were some references in the data that may have indicated that practitioner’s and carer’s expectations of behaviour and attainment were shaped by the term ‘looked after’, these were tenuous and tended to be implied rather than stated directly. Both Mrs B and Mrs E seem to indicate that in view of the trauma that Charlene and Bethany had experienced they would expect them to exhibit social and emotional difficulties. For example, Mrs B. expressed surprise that considering her early life experiences her granddaughter did not exhibit behaviour problems. Both Mrs E., Bethany’s carer and the looked after children manager expressed surprise at the way in which Bethany was coping with her new situation. These comments were intended to be positive and illustrate how well Bethany was progressing. However, it could be suggested that implicit in these comments was the expectation that looked after children would experience difficulty and require a high level of support in school. At the same time, a presumption appeared to be in evidence; because Bethany presented as resilient and
able to cope well it seemed to be taken for granted that she did not require support.

Whilst Mrs Y, John’s teacher, did not refer directly to the fact that he was looked after she states that: ‘I think that there are some differences in what we do with children like John’ (14-1-13). She then goes on to indicate that exceptions were made because of the background circumstances which could be interpreted as the fact that they are looked after. There was a possibility that these views might impact negatively and limit expectations of what could be achieved. However, this did not appear to be the case with Mrs Y.

In Chapter 2 of this study it was noted that research (Morgan, 2009 and Happer et al., 2006) highlighted that young people who had been looked after identified the importance of being given high expectations when discussing effective support strategies. It was therefore reassuring that many of the teachers in this study talked positively about and focused on the potential of the looked after children in their classes. For example, John’s teacher described him as: ‘quite bright’ and focused on his progress in aspects of English rather than on areas for development across curricula areas. Mrs X shared that she was impressed with the work that Leanne had done and Miss C appeared to be pleased that Wayne’s self-esteem was increasing as a result of leading activities with younger children. The encouraging language used during interviews appeared to demonstrate that these practitioners had high expectations of the looked after children they were supporting.

5.2.2 Teachers’ perspectives on looked after children

In analysing interview transcripts, it appeared that the teachers who seemed to engage in what I have termed taking soundings and then used bridging strategies were also those who talked positively about building relationships with individual looked after children. Mrs X described the importance of developing trust when working with Leanne.
Miss C focused on engaging Wayne in tasks which would support the development of resilience and self-esteem. Furthermore, John’s teacher focused on the emotional support that he may need and recognised that there may be occasions when he required time to himself when he was upset. In the conversations with these teachers the focus was firmly on socio-cultural aspects of learning rather than the development of cognitive skills and abilities. Here there appears to be an association between the teacher’s goals, values and beliefs (Elliot et al., 2011) and their readiness to draw on tacit knowledge when attempting to engage looked after children in learning.

An interesting feature was the use of terms designed to encourage collaborative working between an individual child and a member of staff. Examples included when Miss C said to Wayne: ‘we have to write the sum out like this first,’ and when Leanne’s teacher uses the phrase: ‘here we are’ when using a brief reading activity to help Leanne calm down. In both instances, the adults appeared to be sending messages about wanting the child to engage in a joint endeavour with them rather than instructing them to undertake a task. An important element that was captured in observation notes and my field diary was the reassuring tone and unhurried nature of these exchanges.

In scrutinising the data to ascertain how teachers regarded looked after children, a theme that emerged was that some practitioners felt that looked after children may be in need of physical comfort and reassurance. However, whilst appearing to be comfortable in using supportive language as described above a tension arose in relation to providing physical reassurance. Miss C provided an interesting glimpse into how staff may feel constrained by the now accepted norm of not making physical contact with children in school. When talking about displays of affection in her working relationship with Wayne, she appeared somewhat apologetic when she stated that: ‘If a child like Wayne gives you
a hug you need to respond’ (15-1-13.) In using the expression: ‘a child like Wayne’ Miss C. seemed to be referring to his background and the circumstances that led to him being looked after.

As evidenced in the case studies, Miss C was not the only member of staff to raise this issue. In talking about the need to develop trust when providing support for Leanne Mrs X noted: ‘I put my arm around her a lot, things like that …’(14-1-13). In discussion with both practitioners the impression that they gave was that because of the circumstances of being looked after these children were more in need of physical comfort than other children. However, the practitioners interviewed appeared to be uncertain about the appropriateness of providing such support for fear of contravening child protection guidelines. In fact, in published child protection and safeguarding policies at national (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2017 and Scottish Government, 2014b) and local authority level, for example (City of Edinburgh Council, 2015) the focus was on training staff how to recognise, report and record concerns about a child’s welfare. In the selection of child protection policies reviewed for this study there was no explicit guidance to practitioners on the appropriateness of physical contact with children. However, I am aware from personal experience that messages advising practitioners not to have physical contact with children is delivered in what is termed safeguarding training at establishment level. It could be suggested that this guidance, whilst there for valid reasons, may constrain practitioners from supporting the emotional needs of looked after children. It could be argued that a failure to respond to a child’s needs for physical comfort constitutes neglect as defined in national guidance (Scottish Government 2014) the definition of which includes: ‘failure to respond to a child’s basic emotional needs’. 
5.2.3 Recording and reporting progress of looked after children

The positive and encouraging tone adopted by most practitioners during interviews was not always replicated in written documentation. In analysing the documentation related to recording the needs and progress of looked after children I was surprised by the limited and often negative nature of the information contained in the various reports. In some instances, reports contained jargon, such as ‘appropriate learning attributes’ which could be open to a number of different interpretations. Imprecise terms such as ‘some progress’ were used to describe progress in aspects of core subjects without providing any reference points. In places, it was difficult to ascertain the evidence that underpinned some of the judgements made. For example, there was no indication of how a teacher decided if a child had demonstrated a learning attribute ‘mostly’, or only ‘sometimes’. At times, generalised statements were made and labels applied such as Kenneth being described as having ADHD yet no explanation being provided of what the implications of this were. It was hard to see how the records provided the sort of information that would be helpful in identifying the difficulties that the children were experiencing and the sort of support that might have been valuable. The reports did not appear to take account of the social nature of learning and often omitted details about the contexts in which developments had taken place. For example, when it was reported that Cheryl was dyslexic but unwilling to accept support there were no details of the specific nature of her difficulties or what type of support she had refused. As noted by Rix & Matthews (2014, p. 1438) reporting on individual development without reference to context: ‘misses out the majority of key issues relevant to their support and development.’ What was of interest was the difference between these formal reports compiled for the Children’s Panel, where decisions were made about the level of supervision required for the child, and reports to parents and carers. For instance, in the
first John was reported as being in the middle group for language and mathematics and lacking confidence. It was also reported that he experienced mood swings. In contrast, in the report to his carers no mention was made of the group he was in but simply that he was making good academic progress and that he displayed appropriate learning attributes. This raises the question of why the language was nuanced differently, making the report to carers appear more positive. On the one hand, the author may have perceived a need to shape the content differently for the two audiences. Alternatively, the reports may have been written by different practitioners. Whatever the reason for the discrepancy it is an issue that seems to warrant further investigation.

5.3. What can looked after children tell us about their learning experiences?

5.3.1 Engagement in discussions

The data in the case studies illustrates that looked after children of primary school age are capable of discussing and providing an insight to various aspects of their learning experiences. The majority of the seven looked after children engaged actively in the interviews and appeared to be relaxed about discussing their learning. The exceptions were John and Cheryl. Physically John appeared restless and fidgety, but this did not impact on his engagement, as he talked enthusiastically about areas in which he was achieving success. As noted in Chapter 4, Cheryl was the only child who appeared to be guarded in her responses.

The seven children talked about who supported them in their learning and the progress that they were making. An advantage of using semi-structured interviews was that each child was able to focus on aspects that were relevant to them. For example, Kenneth concentrated on the rewards that he received for completing tasks while Wayne talked in detail about the strategies he used to manage his behaviour and the support
that he was given to do this. Some children such as John talked about support with very specific skills while Bethany talked about broader issues such as integration and transition although she did not use this terminology. Across the case studies some common themes emerged such as the identification of friends as sources of support with learning and the value of having tasks broken down into more manageable elements. Significantly four of the children focused on the ways in which they could support others in addition to discussing how they were supported. In addition, individuals raised issues such as support for those moving to a new school during an academic year rather than at traditional points of transition. Below I discuss these issues in more detail.

5.3.2 Identification of support figures

Five of the children in this study indicated that they found value in working collaboratively and appreciated support from their friends despite the fact that they did not always find it easy to integrate with others. Interestingly, Kenneth was one of the children who indicated that he found it helpful to work with other children although opportunities to do so appeared limited. When John described how friends helped him with different aspects of his work he mentioned that that at times they also helped him to calm down. Much of the literature examined for this study highlighted the importance of this type of peer support in learning. For example, Rix et al. (2009, p.91) suggest various ways in which peer group interactive approaches are effective in supporting learning. The authors noted that: ‘effective use of peers involves making skill development socially meaningful.’ As noted in Chapter 2 Sugden (2013) suggests that such interactions are not only beneficial in academic terms but also to the development of children’s attitude to learning and their views of their own competency, acceptance and self-worth. Whilst this type of support would be of benefit for all children it may be of significant value for
looked after children who may for various reasons, as identified by Bazalgette et al. (2015), have low self-esteem.

While the term often used in academic literature is ‘peer support’ the children interviewed in this study referred to support from friends rather than peers. After reflecting on the data, I felt that they were not simply using the words interchangeably. Whilst peers are contemporaries they are not necessarily also friends. As Ridge & Millar (2000) suggest:

‘Choosing one’s own friends, rather than accepting those chosen for you, is part of “growing up” and becoming an independent person.’

This was highlighted in a section of the interview with Bethany when she talked about the difficulty in engaging in discussion with other members of her mathematics group, who were a year older than her. As she did not specify what inhibited the dialogue, I could only speculate that it may have been the lack of familiarity and trust that often accompanies friendship but is not necessarily a prerequisite with peers. In contrast, when discussing her progress in learning Charlene suggested that working with different people provided opportunities for her to develop confidence. So, while one child felt comfortable when working with a range of peers the other appeared to prefer to work within established friendship groups. This emphasises the importance of identifying individual needs when considering how to structure support.

An unexpected finding was that when discussing who supported them in their learning four of the children moved the discussion on to talk about the ways in which they supported others. For example, Leanne was very keen to tell me about how she helped her older cousin with aspects of his work. This struck me as important because in focusing on the support that looked after children may require there is the possibility that
what they can offer to others may be overlooked. In analysing this I felt that there were two aspects to the issue. The first was as described in section one of this chapter, where Bethany, through her involvement with the transition programme for nursery children, appeared to some extent to be doing what Rogoff (2003, p.52) considered people of different generations do when they engage in sociocultural activities which is to:

‘make use of and extend cultural tools and practices inherited from previous generations.’

The second was that, by engaging in what would be considered valuable activities of supporting others, individual looked after children were able to develop confidence. Interestingly, it was only Bethany who focused on integration into the wider school community as opposed to the class. Sugden (2013, p.377) noted that: ‘The child must feel that they are part of the school which they attend.’ A clear illustration of this was provided by Bethany who described how, soon after her arrival, staff at Beta Primary School had arranged activities which enabled her to become familiar with her new surroundings and the institutional and social practices within the school. This seemed to represent an example of helping a looked after child to develop an understanding of cultural practices and procedures at a whole school level. For most children, knowledge of the different roles of individuals and of what happens where in a school is built up over years. Bethany’s experience was similar to that offered by transition programmes that are in place for children moving from primary to secondary education. Dunn (2004) suggests that such transitions can be particularly difficult for children who change schools or, like John, attend schools outside their local community. This may apply particularly to those children who are looked after away from home. However, as Bethany identified there are effective ways of supporting these transitions for looked after children.
5.3.3 Progress in learning and support strategies

All of the children in this study engaged in discussion about various aspects of their learning and their responses fell into two categories. They all discussed aspects of learning that they enjoyed, and were also able to discuss, to different degrees, where their strengths and areas for development might be. In addition, a few children mentioned specific support strategies that they found helpful.

When asked about what they were good at in school, all of the children mentioned either mathematics or aspects of English language. Some talked in general terms and others mentioned specific aspects of the curriculum or skills that they were developing. In most instances, the curricula strength and areas for development identified by the children were the same as those identified by the staff and carers. In the case of John, the focus was on improvements in handwriting. However, in some instances, as mentioned in Chapter 4, there appeared to be discrepancies between what was recorded in written records and what children identified as strengths during discussion. In Kenneth’s school report aspects of the expressive arts, including drama, art and dance, were areas in which he was considered to be making most progress; yet he did not mention them. Leanne identified that she was good at reading but did not mention her achievements in art. As noted in her case study, Cheryl was non-committal when asked about what she enjoyed in school and did not mention the musical achievements that were recorded in her personal profile. Although pupil profiling has the potential to support such reflection the discrepancies noted above gave me the impression that this was not the case with all seven children. Guidance (Education Scotland, 2012) suggests that the profile should be written by the young person in partnership with the school. However, the language used in the profiles examined seemed formulaic, and to imply an
adult source. An even more significant point was that the profiles appeared to be used in a summative rather than formative way. This was of concern because the profiling process is intended to:

‘promote very positively the way learners understand their own learning, progress and achievement.’ (Education Scotland, 2012)

This is in line with Winkler’s (2014) suggestion that resilience is linked to an individual’s ability to reflect on and make sense of experiences rather than be overwhelmed by them. I felt that as most of the children were able to engage in discussion about aspects of their learning their developing skills might have been used more effectively in the profiling process for this cohort of children.

When talking about specific support strategies that they found helpful, both Charlene and Wayne appeared to appreciate being able to leave a challenging task and return to it later. Wayne described how he was allowed to take a break and return to a task after playing on the computer for a while and Charlene shared that if a task was really hard the teacher would let her leave it and go back later. Her account, captured in her profile, of the success achieved in aspects of numeracy because of such persistence suggests that it may be an appropriate strategy to support the development of aspects of resilience. However, strengthening a child’s resilience in relation to completing tasks in this way requires considerable flexibility in classroom management and organisation.

5.4 Conclusion

Large scale data sets such as those gathered and analysed by the Scottish Government (2017) provide patterns and trends related to the lives of looked after children, notably that the attainment of looked after school leavers continues to be poorer than that of young people who are not in care. In this chapter, the intention was to explore what lies
behind this data by considering how seven looked after children experienced learning. Through the use of observations, interviews and examination of reports and records the findings discussed in this chapter draw on practice in supporting looked after children in two primary schools in central Scotland. I believe that within the findings presented in this chapter there are clear implications for practice which I discuss in Chapter 6.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to identify practices and approaches that might be used to support looked after children to engage in learning. It was considered to be a relevant area for study as it is important to ensure that looked after children are engaged in education not only for welfare reasons but also for social and economic reasons. Jackson & Simon (2006) note the correlation between education and outcomes such as physical and mental health and the attendant long-term savings to public funds. This study represents an exploration of a specific stage of educational provision for looked after children. Whilst previous research has focused on the end product of qualifications and destinations this study illuminated the experiences of looked after children whilst they were still at primary school. A significant feature of this study was that it set out to understand the views and experiences of seven looked after children of primary school age by focusing on their unique experiences of being supported to engage in learning activities. The rationale informing this focus was underpinned by Article 12 of UNCRC (UNCRC 1989) which promotes the rights of all children to have opinions and for their opinions to be heard. This study illustrates ways in which some practitioners drew on their professional skills and knowledge and personal resources in identifying the needs of individual looked after children. How this was achieved and the implications for practice are discussed below.

6.1 Practices and approaches that might be used to support looked after children to engage in learning.

Analysis of data suggested that a two-step process was helpful in engaging looked after children in their learning. As discussed in Chapter 5 the first step in this process
which I termed ‘taking soundings’ related to assessing the child’s readiness to engage in
learning either independently or with others. The second stage involved the use of
various bridging strategies such as providing ‘breathing space’ or ‘time out’ designed to
support children to develop skills and confidence to engage with others and to develop
resilience in persisting with tasks. Analysis of data would suggest that their success was
dependent on the understanding, empathy and patience of the practitioners involved.
Data gathered from observations and interviews highlighted that practitioners tended to
focus on the affective aspects of their pedagogy in order to work collaboratively with
children rather than simply undertaking a technical role in delivering the curriculum.

Findings from this study, including personal accounts shared during interviews,
provide specific examples of how carers were helped to support their children. Current
legislation and guidance (Education Scotland, 2017 and Scottish Government, 2006)
emphasise the value of involving parents and carers in supporting children in their
learning. However, there are times when some parents and carers require assistance to
be equipped to do this. One of the most interesting issues that emerged from my
findings was that in some instances schools may need to consider how they can support
carers to develop social networks within the school community as a precursor to being
able to support looked after children to become involved in learning with others. In
analysing the support mechanisms described by carers in this study key features that
underpinned the different strategies were the collaborative working and trust that was
built between school staff and carers. This has implications not just for those such as
teachers who may liaise most closely with parents and carers but for all staff who may be
involved with the families in different ways.
6.2 How looked after children are regarded by teachers.

In this study, a relatively small number (10) of practitioners were interviewed and observed interacting with looked after children. Therefore, whilst findings related to their perception of looked after children may not be generalisable across a larger population they do offer some interesting points which may be worthy of further consideration.

It was evident from interviews and observations that most practitioners expected the looked after children in the study to behave in what would be considered an acceptable manner in class. They also had expectations that the children work at the Curriculum for Excellence level appropriate for their age. This group of staff did recognise however, that they may need to provide additional support or at times make exceptions to help children achieve appropriate goals. By making these exceptions, such as spending time ‘taking soundings’ or giving children ‘time out’, the practitioners appeared to be demonstrating their belief that by responding in a flexible way they could support children to participate in learning activities. However, whilst the overall picture was positive there were indications that the expectations of some practitioners may have been influenced by negative perceptions of looked after children. The findings suggest that in some instances there is still a need for a cultural shift in how looked after children are viewed and how they can be involved in their learning. This was illustrated most notably by the looked after manager in Beta Primary School who expressed surprise that a looked after child required minimal support. This was perhaps not an unexpected response as research indicates that the majority of looked after children do experience difficulties. In addition, legislation which guides the work of looked after managers deems that looked after children should be considered to have additional support needs unless proven otherwise. This has the potential for practitioners to develop preconceived ideas about the level of support that looked after children may require. This is of
importance as it is self-evident that children in care will have a broad range of skills and capabilities and therefore cannot be prejudged. To affect this shift there is perhaps a need for practitioners to explore in more depth the intention of legislation and implications for their practice in supporting individual looked after children.

An indication of how teachers regarded looked after children was obtained by analysing profiles and reports written by school staff. A concerning contradiction that was identified was the difference in tone between reports written for parents and carers and those written for formal meetings such as Children’s Panels. It may be the case that the more formal reports were less positive as school staff wanted to emphasise the scale of the difficulties experienced by individual children in order to ensure the allocation of appropriate resources. Alternatively, it may be that the reports were written by different members of staff who had varying degrees of knowledge about individual children. Whatever the reason this inconsistency was of concern.

6.3 What can looked after children tell us about their learning?

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that children are experts on their own lives (Lansdown, 2005). As looked after children are considered in legislation to require additional support professionals might feel that as they are accountable they must provide the support themselves. This may result in what Woodhead (1990, p. 63) described as an imbalance of power with the looked after children being perceived as helpless. However, almost all of the looked after children interviewed were able to talk confidently about how they were supported in their learning. Not only were they able to discuss their own strengths and areas for development but in some instances, they were able to describe the ways in which they preferred to learn. They were also able to consider the type of support they found valuable from both school staff and their peers.
These findings highlight the importance of practitioners taking account of children’s views and being creative about whom they involve in providing this support.

In discussing their progress and achievements the looked after children often referred to entries in their personal profile. In some instances, there was a mismatch between what was recorded in the profile and features that the children focused on in discussion. An important implication is that profiles and teacher/pupil dialogue need to be used in a more precise way within the profiling process.

In some instances, children were able to comment on the wider aspects of education. For example, in raising the issue of support for transition Bethany provided a valuable insight into the challenges that this may present for a looked after child and the type of support that may be helpful. What was most compelling about this was the way in which she reflected on her experience and evaluated aspects of support that had been put in place for her. This emphasised, for me, the importance of undertaking research which enables looked after children to talk about issues that are of concern to them. This is important because not only is listening to children a matter of human rights but also because research (Veeran, 2004) indicates that interventions will be more successful if they are planned in conjunction with those they are designed to help. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 2, such involvement may contribute to the development of agency in looked after children by strengthening their perception of themselves as individuals who can influence existing structures.

A compelling message about agency emerged from the findings of this study when a number of children moved the conversation from focusing on the support they received to describing how they helped others. As discussed in Chapter 5 this has significance for the ways in which looked after children are viewed and supported in school. If the focus
is predominantly on their vulnerability and need for care and protection then looked after children may have limited opportunities to develop agency by helping others and contributing to the school community. Carr (2004) suggests that the development of agency helps individuals to cope with challenges in life and Rainio (2007) posits that it is a prerequisite for engagement in meaningful learning. Findings in my study underline that in order to support the development of agency it is essential to give due consideration to the guiding principle of participation as detailed in Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNCRC, 1989). As children are able to construct their own meanings and understanding of their experiences it is important to recognise this agency and their right to participate in decisions about them. Butler-Sloss (1988, p. 245) emphasised this point in her adjudication of the Inquiry into child abuse in Cleveland: ‘The child is a person and not an object of concern’.

Rainio & Hilppö (2017, p. 83) discussed the challenges that educators and carers face in supporting children to develop agency. They note agency should be viewed both as: ‘emergent capacity of the developing person and as a characteristic of interpersonal interaction.’ Thus, the challenge for teachers and other professionals may be in recognising this emergent capacity in looked after children who may be viewed predominantly as requiring care and protection. These findings are of significance because they support suggestions made in Chapter 2 (p. 22) of this study that insufficient emphasis is placed on supporting looked after children to become effective contributors and responsible citizens which are two of the four capacities which underpin Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004b).
6.4 Relevance for professional practice

The findings described in Chapter 4 are relevant to both practitioners and policy makers. The study offered examples of ways in which teachers identified readiness for participation and then adapt their pedagogy to provide appropriate learning experiences. A key to the success of such strategies appeared to be the willingness to be flexible and patient. It is recognised that some practitioners may not be comfortable in adopting strategies such as providing a breathing space. Teachers indicated that in order to use these strategies they needed to feel supported by senior members of staff. This illustrated the importance of all members of the school community understanding the strategies being used to support looked after children and their roles in achieving this.

A fundamental understanding to emerge from this study was a need for policies and training which forefronts the importance of inter-personal relationships in providing a sense of connectedness and engaging looked after children in education. It cannot be presumed that teachers come to the classroom prepared emotionally and socially to deal with the challenges that many looked after children present. Therefore, there is a need to consider this in legislation and with frameworks designed to provide support. The most effective way of doing this is not to introduce yet more initiatives or structured programmes but by supporting teachers to recognise the importance of their affective skills in identifying and meeting the social, emotional and educational needs of looked after children. Professionals may need to be supported to develop these skills over time. The type of interaction involved in taking soundings will be for many teachers a more complex form of interaction than they would usually engage in. Therefore, there will be a benefit in devoting staff development resources to exploring socio-cultural aspects of support for looked after children. Poulou (2014) touches on the importance of staff development to support professionals in developing effective communication strategies
to develop a positive environment in the classroom. This is of particular importance for looked after children, who, as noted in the literature review, may be vulnerable and find it difficult to develop positive and trusting relationships.

The use of profiling to support looked after children to reflect on and make sense of their experiences emerged as a potentially useful support strategy. The children interviewed could talk about strengths and areas for development in their learning. In many discussions, they talked enthusiastically about their achievements and reflected on the ways in which they had been able to contribute to the wider work of the school. Here a significant factor in the effectiveness of profiling may be the engagement of an adult in dialogue with the looked after child to support this critical reflection. This suggestion is supported by Valentine (2009, p. 347) who suggested that children demonstrate their agency through competence, strategy and awareness that their agency entitles them to greater participation in more rights. The importance of critical reflection on young people’s perception of themselves as agents is noted by Bandura (2008). Thus, as noted earlier in this chapter there is a need to consider how practitioners can further develop the use of profiling to support looked after children.

The study has raised important questions about the nature of support for parents and carers. The findings indicated that there is a need not only to involve parents and carers in their child’s learning but also to consider how they can be involved in the wider school community. As illustrated in Chapter 5 parents and carers, particularly those who live outside of the school catchment area, need to be supported to develop social networks to access resources required to help their children engage with others. The findings have the potential to further develop the dialogue on parental involvement to include
consideration of creative ways of addressing socio-cultural issues such as the
development of wider support networks.

6.5 Strengths and limitations of the study

This study illustrates practice in two schools in one local authority area. While there
are clear geographical parameters to this study in that it was undertaken in one local
authority area in Scotland I would suggest that aspects of the findings may be applicable
to all practitioners working with looked after children.

One of the strengths of this study is that it represents a comprehensive examination
of the experiences of seven looked after children in the context of their primary school
classrooms. The value of a small-scale study, which uses interviews and analyses the
experiences of seven looked after children in detail, is that it identifies some of the
everyday practical issues of supporting them that may not have been captured in other
studies.

The value of using open-ended questions in this study was that participants were able
to talk about aspects of support that were of particular significance to them. This meant
that some very specific but potentially significant issues such as the importance of looked
after children being given opportunities to help others were raised.

In this study, I have attempted to capture the ‘voices’ of seven looked after children
and those who support them in primary school. Whilst most of the children were happy
to talk at length about their experiences there is a need to acknowledge that not all
looked after children are willing or able to share their views with us.

Ideally it would have been beneficial to interview the parents or carers of all twelve
looked after children but understandably because of the sensitive nature of the subject
there were some who declined to be involved. In the same way, the data would have been enhanced further with observations of all ten looked after children who participated in interviews. However, in one instance the teacher suggested that my presence might disrupt the dynamics within a specific teaching group. Although experienced in observing children in similar situations, in this case it was important, of course, that I was guided by the practitioners who knew these children.

6.6 Future areas to explore

As I have stated, Legislation (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) suggests that all looked after children should be considered to have additional needs. In turn, education authorities issue guidance for schools on procedures for overseeing and recording the educational progress of looked after children. One role of looked after children managers is to ensure that personal plans are in place for each child. However, there is limited formal guidance for those working most closely with looked after children on how to identify and meet their learning needs. The findings of this study highlight that the guidance and support may vary from school to school even within the same authority. I consider that there is the potential to explore further the articulation between legislation and guidance and support provided to practitioners who work most closely with looked after children.

An extension of this study may be to involve looked after children of primary school age in identifying how they can be provided with meaningful opportunities to develop agency by supporting others and contributing to the work of the school. This would be a relevant area to explore because it was something that children in this study appeared to suggest was of importance to them. A study of this type would provide an insight into the opportunities that looked after children have to develop all four capacities as successful
learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors which underpin Curriculum for Excellence Scottish Executive, 2004b).

Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein (2006, p. 211) considered that there was a need for research that investigated: ‘how teachers establish and maintain positive, caring relationships with students, foster autonomy and self-regulation, and build community.’ I consider that my study has explored these issues and illustrated the extent to which this was achieved for a small cohort of looked after children and the barriers to engagement experienced by others. Further research should be undertaken to explore specific aspects of the relationship building process, including perhaps an exploration of what might constitute the concept of taking soundings. To develop this work further it may be helpful to explore with a wider range of practitioners the notion of taking soundings with looked after children.

In order to develop a more detailed understanding of how looked after children are regarded by teachers there is a need to examine aspects of the processes used to record and report children’s progress. Due to the scope of this study it was not possible to examine in detail the reasons behind the discrepancies between the reports to parents and carers and those written for the Children’s Panel. Further research should be undertaken to explore the reasons for the differences in tone of the two forms of report.

6.7 Finally

This research confirms previous findings, for example, (Cameron et al., 2015) that suggest that if looked after children are to benefit from education in school then they need to be equipped socially to work with their peers and to be able to reflect on situations and learning. By considering the views of children my study has addressed criticism of the existing literature made by Winter (2006) which highlighted limited
participation of looked after children in research regarding their education. It contributes additional evidence that underlines the importance of giving looked after children a valuable place in the school community by proving opportunities for them to contribute as well as receive support.

This study has challenged my thinking in relation to support mechanisms for looked after children. As an HMI, I expected every school to have additional support plans in place for all looked after children and would often scrutinise these in order to evidence impact of achievement. If I were still in that role today I would want to engage in more detailed discussions with practitioners about the steps taken to help looked after children to build positive relationships with their peers and practitioners in school.

When taken as a whole, these findings have implications that speak to the nature of support for looked after children in primary schools. Data reported here suggest that an important precursor to developing support strategies is the development of positive relationships with looked after children and their families. Significantly, the strategies discussed in this study highlight the importance of social interaction rather than focusing on protocols as detailed in guidance which has been developed nationally (Scottish Government, 2008b). If used to inform staff development the findings of this study have the potential to move the discourse on looked after children from focusing predominantly on needs and vulnerability to recognising potential and supporting success.
References


Barnardo’s (2015) Overseen but often overlooked Children and young people ‘looked after at home’ in Scotland, Edinburgh, Barnardo’s Scotland.


HMIE (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education) (2008) *Improving the Odds Improving Life Chances*, Livingston, HMIE.


Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Prompts

Children’s Interviews

If the child brings some work to show me ask them to tell me about their work.

Can you tell me about what you like doing in school?

Who helps you to do well in school?

Possible subsidiary questions:

Why do you like working like that?

Who else might help you to do well?

Staff Interviews

Can you tell me about how you support _________ in their learning?

Possible subsidiary questions:

What has been the main impact of this support?

Is anyone else involved in providing support?

Carer Interviews

Can you tell me about how _________ is supported in school?

Possible subsidiary questions:

What difference has this support made to _________?

How are you supported to help _________ with their learning?
Appendix 2 Information Sheet

**Project Title:**

How might primary schools support children?

**Researcher:**

Jacqueline J. Horsburgh

Education Scotland
W1 Spur Saughton House
Edinburgh
EH11 3XD
0131 244 8123

**Purpose of research:**

The purpose of the research is to look at the ways in which primary schools support children to learn and achieve.

**What and who will be involved?**

I intend to talk to a range of children about the ways in which the school helps them to learn and achieve. The children will be between seven and eleven years old. I shall talk to them about things that they enjoy in school and who helps them to do well in school. I will also talk to members of school staff and parents and carers about the ways in which the school supports children to do well. Everyone taking part will be asked if discussion can be recorded so that I can make notes later.

The discussions, which will last about 20 minutes will be recorded and later written down. All comments will be treated as confidential and names of those taking part will not be used in my final written report. Those taking part can choose to stop taking part at any point during the study. As well as obtaining permission from parents or carers of children taking part I will ensure
that at the start of each session individual children are happy to take part at that time. If a child does not want to take part then they will not be involved in the study even if their parent or carer has agreed that they can participate. Meetings with children will take place in a quiet area during the school day and there will be another adult such as a classroom assistant or member of the management team present. Discussions with parents or carers will take place at a convenient time, for example, when they have dropped children off at school or before they are collecting them at the end of the school day. Meetings with staff will be arranged either during their continuous professional development time or at the end of the school day.

A few months after the interviews I intend to observe a selection of children during the school day to look at the different ways in which they are supported to do well. I will use the information from these observations as the basis of a second discussion with this group of children.

The information that is collected will be kept securely and anyone who takes part in the study will be able to ask to see the information that they have given or if they want to have it destroyed.

I shall arrange to discuss the main findings of the study with all those who take part and give them information about where they can read the full report.
Appendix 3: Participation agreement form

Centre for Research and Educational Technology, The Open University

Project title: How might primary schools effectively support children?

Agreement to Participate

I, __________________________ (print name)

agree to take part in this research project.

I have had the purposes of the research project explained to me. I have been informed that I may refuse to participate at any point by simply saying so. I have been assured that my confidentiality will be protected and I will be guaranteed anonymity as specified in the information sheet.

I agree that the information that I provide can be used for educational or research purposes, including publication.

I understand that if I have any concerns or difficulties I can contact:

    Jacqueline Horsburgh at:

    W 1 Spur
    Saughton House
    Broomhouse Drive
    Edinburgh

    Jacqueline.horsburgh@educationscotland.gsi.gov.uk

    If I want to talk to someone else about this project, I can contact [Name of main supervisor]

    at: The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

    I assign the copyright for my contribution to the Faculty for use in education, research and publication.

Signed: Participant’s signature    Date:

Signed: Researcher’s signature    Date
Appendix 4: Contact Summary Sheet

Contact type:

Site:

Date of contact:

Today’s date:

Main issues or themes that struck me as important:

Summary of information obtained

Other salient, illuminating or interesting points:

Emerging areas or themes to follow up as a result of this contact:
14-1-13 Interview - Mrs D Y - CT

Focused on how she greets John, mood when he comes in, supports him to join an activity with others.

Knowledgeable about needs - adapt learning accordingly (e.g. individual / group, with / without support).

Linked closely with PSA.

Regular contact with carer.

I feel her side looks more positive as important - collaborate.

High level of support from carer.

How much support does carer need?

Interesting that she felt she was treating him the same as others. I would she be...