'We are the same as everyone else just with a different and unique backstory': identity, belonging and Othering within education for young people are 'looked after'.

Abstract

This paper develops understandings of how being publicly identified and consequently labelled as 'looked after' can have damaging consequences for young people, particularly in how they are perceived by their peers in the context of schooling. Based on qualitative research in northern England utilising participatory approaches with young people and interviews with support staff, we explore barriers that inhibit young people's sense of belonging. We highlight how the very processes and practices set up to support the young people can often have unintended consequences by routinely positioning them as Other, before considering the implications for education and schooling in particular.

Keywords: Young people; looked after; education; Othering; belonging

Background

Research conducted in the UK over the last 25 years has highlighted that children and young people in the 'looked after' system face significant educational disadvantage in comparison with their non-looked after peers (Jackson, 2010; Sebba et al., 2015). This includes, but is not limited to, higher rates of exclusions from school, lower levels of achievements in standardised tests and poorer progression rates onto further and higher education (Ofsted, 2012). Such evidence is not limited to the English context. Research globally has illustrated similarly concerning patterns and it therefore remain a significant policy concern internationally (Trout et al., 2008; Dill et al., 2012; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Jackson and Höjer, 2013; O'Higgins et al., 2015).

Whilst explanations seeking to understand these relative under-achievements have been broadly sympathetic, Berridge (2017) notes they are often under-theorised and inclined to offer partial accounts. For instance, Sebba et al. (2015) have pointed out that being looked after itself is often not the reason for low outcomes, as in fact becoming 'looked after' can have a positive impact on the educational outcomes of young people who would otherwise be left 'in need'. Moreover, studies by Brady and Gilligan (2019) and Hanrahan et al. (2019) have highlighted that non-traditional and non-linear educational trajectories and transitions for young people and 'care-experienced' adults are rarely considered meaning 'educational successes' can be underestimated. Nevertheless, a range of educational interventions have sought to address the relative achievement gap and have

often been enabled through the allocation of additional resources such as the Pupil Premium fund in England (DfE, 2018a). However, many of these interventions have been critiqued as having tentative impacts on closing achievement gaps between young people and their non-looked after peers, as well as lacking a robust evidence base (Evans et al., 2017). The substantive focus of many of these interventions has been tailored learning or support mechanisms including, but is not limited to, tutoring/mentoring (around literacy for instance), resilience building, extra-curricular activities to enhance social/emotional functioning and/or attachment support (DfE, 2018b; Evans et al., 2017). Such interventions have largely set out to tackle issues located within the young people themselves and to 'transform' them as the key route to addressing educational disadvantage (Guishard-Pine et al., 2007). Less forthcoming have been explanations and interventions that seek to problematise school processes and practices themselves, including how they potentially exacerbate educational disadvantage through their positioning of young people who are looked after as 'outside' of the normative student construction (Youdell, 2006). Research by Mannay et al. (2017) sought to do just this, by examining how processes and practices put in place to support the young people can have unintended consequences by further distancing them from ideas of the normative and idealised student. Specifically, this work examined how the 'looked after' label directly impacts upon both the young people's learner identities and their educational achievements, situating them as the 'supported subject' (Mannay et al., 2017). In this paper, we build upon this work but rather than focusing upon the impacts upon educational achievements or learner identities, we focus upon the psycho-social impacts of labelling, its effect on young people's emotional wellbeing and on their sense of belonging. Specifically, we examine how its resulting stigma impacts upon young people and how in turn, they attempt to manage this. We consider how this is seemingly exacerbated by school processes aimed at supporting them, distancing the young people both *from* and *by* their non-looked after peers, heightening their actual and perceived sense of 'Otherness' in the context of their schooling.

Before we move on to explore further research in this area, we first want to discuss language as an important starting point for our work. The terminology used to describe young people 'in care' or who are 'looked after' by the state (as having a 'corporate parent') differs across the world including, but not limited to, in state/public care, foster care and out-of-home care. In the English context, 'looked after children', commonly abbreviated with the acronym 'LAC' (DfE, 2017) has been the term used in policy discourse and professional contexts, and is defined in law under the Children Act 1989 (DoH, 1989). Whilst there have been some terminological shifts towards 'children looked after' (CLA) at least partly in recognition that 'LAC' in particular is problematic given its deficit homophone 'lack' (TACT, 2019), we are still troubled by terminology that labels the young people. We are also mindful that even innocent-sounding acronyms may exacerbate the labelling and othering process (Connelly, 2017). As we have set out our intention to focus on the educational experiences of young people who are 'looked after'

here, we simply refer to them as 'young people' from this point forward. Where we refer to other groups of young people, for instance, non-looked after peers, we will make this distinction clear. This is more than an issue of semantics. The regular discursive positioning of these young people as outside of normative constructions of both youth and an idealised learner is deeply problematic (Youdell, 2006). Our concern in this paper then is to highlight the challenges faced by the young people. We focus on the often well-meaning processes and practices intended to support them, examining how these can disrupt and/or deny young people the right to just 'be' (a young person) and their sense of belonging within their schooling. We focus on this sense of Otherness repeatedly highlighted by the young people in our qualitative research that utilised participatory methods, alongside interviews with support staff working closely with them.

Identity, belonging and the 'Other'

The need to belong, or in other words, to feel valued, respected, accepted and included, especially within and amongst supportive relationships, is a central concern for all humans (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Mahar et al., 2012). Yuval-Davis (2006: 202) adds that, '[c]onstructions of belonging… reflect emotional investments and desire for attachments'. Establishing a sense of belonging is often manifested within the dynamic and complex process of identity construction. As Epstein (1993: 18) makes clear, 'it is by drawing boundaries and placing others outside those boundaries that we establish our identities', and thus where we feel we belong. Identity is complex not least because it 'hinges on an apparently paradoxical combination of sameness and difference' (Lawler, 2008: 2) and identity and belonging are as much about what is excluded as included, and therefore implicit in identity formation (Hall, 1997). However, constructions of 'Other' also operate as an exclusionary process through which some cultures, groups and identities are normalised at the expense of others that are positioned as abnormal, inferior and pathological (Jaworski & Coupland, 2005) and more likely to experience marginalisation, and to be reduced to a set of negative characteristics and stereotypes (Johnson et al., 2004).

In an educational context, young people who are labelled 'looked after' find themselves 'relegated to subject positions' (Jensen, 2011: p65), positioned as Other and as 'outside' of notions of the normative, idealised student construction (Youdell, 2006). As Mannay et al. (2017) argue, they are first labelled as 'the failing subject position' and then the 'supported subject position'. A key part of this Otherness is that feeling of not belonging. A sense of belonging for young people who have experienced removal from their families can often be complex and traumatic (Wilson and Milne, 2013; Briggs, 2015). The human need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), is further complicated for young people labelled 'looked after' as this infers a stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963). This stigmatised identity can come to shape the young people's sense of self, self-worth and self-esteem, operating as a powerful form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and internalised oppression, as highlighted by the work of Rogers (2017) and

Dansey et al. (2019). Jensen (2011) however argues that those who are Othered may attempt to display resistance to these types of 'symbolic degradation' (p65) by drawing upon McClaren's (1994) notion of 'oppositional agency' (Jensen, 2011: p66). Resistance here can be enacted by either *capitalisation* (the act of drawing out/reclaiming capital from the situation) or through *refusal*, that involves a 'disidentification' from the positioning of Otherness. This disidentification involves making clear 'claims [for] normality' (Jensen, 2011: p72). In order to do this, those who are Othered often need to engage in careful forms of *strategic identity management* (Schmitz and Taylor, 2018) that then need to be 'performed' (Butler, 2004). Driscoll (2011) notes that many young people labelled as 'looked after', carefully manage who they disclose their looked after status to. However, as Dansey et al. (2019) argue, secrecy of this kind can have negative impacts for the young people, not least an internalisation of themselves as 'damaged' (p36). The weight of such secrecy can also undermine young people's opportunity for forming meaningful relationships with their peers which are central for enhancing a sense of belonging (Dansey et al., 2019; Rogers, 2017). Whilst this secrecy can be damaging, it is important that young people are able to exercise ('oppositional') agency in determining whether their 'looked after' status is disclosed, especially as once this information is disclosed, it cannot be retracted.

What we therefore want to do in this paper is to consider some of these issues further. We want to highlight how being labelled as 'looked after' and in receipt of often well-meaning support processes can inhibit the young people's sense of belonging in schools, particularly amongst their peers. We highlight examples of processes and practices that exacerbate feelings of Otherness and how they attempt to strategically manage their 'stigmatised identities' before considering the implications for education in more detail at the end of this paper.

The study

This paper draws on findings from a rolling programme of research developed in collaboration between university researchers, a Virtual School[1] and a Children in Care Council[2] from an English local authority that began in 2017. The research is underpinned by a strong commitment to effecting positive change and foregrounding young people's participation, with young people involved from the outset and at all subsequent stages in developing the direction of the project (Lundy, 2007; Gormally & Coburn, 2014; Mannay

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[1] Virtual Schools are the English local authority mechanism that support the education of young people who are 'looked after'. They are overseen by a Virtual School Head (VSH) who advocates for young people's education as parents would. VSHs manage the pupil premium grant allocated for raising attainment as set out in each young person's statutory personal education plan (PEP) that forms part of the larger Looked After Child (LAC) Review process (DfE, 2018a).

[2] Children in Care Councils are the mechanism for capturing and engaging with the voices of young people that all local authorities in England are required to have as set out by the 2007 White Paper, *Care Matters: Time for Change* England.

et al., 2019). In this paper, we draw upon the voices of young people generated through three different mechanisms: firstly, two group interviews utilising participatory methods with a total of 11 young people from the Children in Care Council (CiCC); secondly, qualitative surveys completed by 24 young people who are 'looked after' from the wider local authority; and finally, discussions with 12 young people from the CiCC during six workshops where they co-produced an animated film. All young people were 'looked after' at the time of the research, mostly living in foster placements, but with some in residential care homes and their time in care ranged from just 10 weeks up to 15 and a half years). All the young people were aged 11-18 (though mostly aged 11-16), attended predominantly mainstream schools, though with some attending alternative education settings or further education. We also draw upon semi-structured, group interviews with a total of seven adults engaged with supporting the young people (including Education Welfare Officers, virtual school staff, and staff employed to advocate for the rights of the young people). As the research's primary focus was always on the young people's lived experiences, these acted as supporting interviews whereby adults were presented with the activities the young people were completing (see below) and directly reflected upon on what they felt the young people would be sharing with us.

The anonymous qualitative survey was both the idea of and co-designed by the young people in the CiCC. Paper copies were sent out by the Virtual School to maintain confidentiality to young people aged 11 or over who were currently 'looked after'. Surveys consisted of open-ended questions, unfinished sentences and visual exercises, with approximately 90 sent out and 24 completed surveys returned (12 males and 12 females). Invites to participate in the group interviews were sent to all of those young people who are invited to attend the CiCC (approximately 70) and the 11 who took part (nine males and two females) were those who responded and volunteered to do so. Open-ended questions, alongside participatory methods were used, including drawing/visual response to questions, completing unfinished sentences and diamond ranking exercises where nine statements are 'ranked' from 'most' to 'least' important into a diamond shape with the most important statement heading the diamond (see Messiou, 2014). All discussions around these activities were audio-recorded and transcribed.

From these activities and methods of data collection/production, the young people identified teachers as needing more training on the issues they faced. We therefore facilitated six workshops where the young people from the CiCC worked with a film-maker to develop and co-produce an animated film to be used in teacher education and school professional development/training. At each workshop, between eight and 12 young people (consisting of five females and seven males in total) were present. We therefore also draw upon our experiences and notes of the discussions in these workshops and the stories they shared in the film they created. The participatory approach adopted here draws upon our experience utilising similar methods elsewhere with younger children (Adderley et al., 2015). It builds upon our team's commitment to transformative research including youth work expertise whereby relationship

development, participation and co-production of knowledge are central (Gormally & Coburn, 2014). The utilisation of similar participatory techniques with young people who are looked after has been used by others to enable their voices to be heard as a means to both develop understandings of their experiences and needs (Hanrahan, 2019; Rogers, 2017; Hooper and Gunn, 2014; Wilson and Milne, 2013) and as an important means to 'inform, and potentially improve, public services in the fields of social care and education' (Mannay et al., 2019: 59).

Data generated was subject to an iterative thematic analysis, beginning with familiarisation, moving to coding and then on to generating themes, neither entirely inductive or deductive but moving between these exploring both 'semantic' (evident in transcripts/narratives themselves) and more 'latent' themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006),'…go[ing] beyond description, [to] make an argument' (p93). These 'findings' were shared with the Virtual School and the young people from the CiCC. The young people supported with further interpretation of findings before determining what action should result and hence the creation of the film and the workshops. This strength of relationship, the trust we have built, and the young people's involvement at all levels including what to do next and what actions to take, increases both the trustworthiness of the data and our interpretations (Gormally & Coburn, 2014). In working in this way, our research is attempting to move through Lundy's (2007) four chronological steps towards genuine participation, by first providing 'space' that is safe and inclusive for young people to express their view, secondly, offering facilitation to enable 'voice' to emerge, third ensuring that the young people have an 'audience' and are listened to before enabling this to have 'influence' and to be acted upon. However, we have taken care throughout to make clear that this study employed participatory methods, techniques and approaches and attempted to be as participatory as possible without claiming is a participatory project given inevitable issues around power, ownership and consent as raised by Hughes and Cooper (2017). The research followed BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) and ethical clearance obtained from our home institution, with appropriate permissions and consents from the Virtual School and the CiCC. We recognise informed consent as an ongoing process and therefore whilst all young people signed up voluntarily to participate, they were reminded that they were free to withdraw/not attend at any point and free not to speak/disclose as appropriate . Our sample is made up of young people who volunteered to take part (as it should be) and who are therefore 'engaging' (at least in part) with the CiCC and thus education/social care services. We therefore recognise our sample is, inevitably, self-selecting and we make no claims to talk for all young people. Nevertheless, in highlighting the challenges facing the young people who did take part, our aim is to take forward understandings in this important but still relatively under-researched area.

Being Other

In direct correlation with other work (e.g., Rogers, 2017), the young people in this research repeatedly highlighted their identification as 'different' to their non-looked after peers in the context of their schooling. This could be positive, for instance, the allocation of additional resources in particular were almost universally seen as positive for the contribution they were able to offer the young people to support their education. However, there was also a clear sense that the young people felt they were treated differently by the school and teachers through their positioning as what Mannay et al. (2017) refer to as firstly the 'failing' subject and then the 'supported subject position'. For instance, whilst some referred to feeling invisible to their teachers, others felt their 'looked after' label meant teachers had low expectations of them:

> I think a lot of teachers see us as not important because they think even if they do help us, we're still going to fail, we're still going to, you know, not succeed (Male, 16).

Several young people felt strongly that they received more punitive treatment than their non-looked after peers. Here one young person recalls an incident from his primary school:

> ...since I like started being in care that they were treating me different. And then in the end there was an incident where someone pushed me and stuff so I sort of like pushed them back. I got excluded, he missed a break time or whatever. I was locked up in a room, a very small room with no windows, for six hours a day every day for five days. (Male, 16).

Whilst some discussed receiving more punitive treatment than their peers, others felt that teachers were more lenient with them to the extent that one explained, 'I can get away with murder' (male, 15). However, this differential treatment often had its own negative consequences, particularly in identifying them as Other to their peers:

> ...if I haven't got my homework in, my teacher will let me off like say, 'Oh, well you've probably been doing something, oh so you've been in care', and stuff, so ... and then like a lot of my friends have been getting annoyed with me simply from it... (Male, 16).

The young people also talked of feeling that teachers and peers often perceived that they had become 'looked after' because there was 'something wrong' with either them, their families or both, as this young person illustrates:

> ...a lot of the time people have jumped to the conclusion that you're in care because your parents were not very nice people, like druggies or alcoholics and they thought it's your fault and they think that you're just going to turn out like them... (Male, 15)

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What was particularly troubling was that bullying around this was seen as the norm, as 'par for the course' and something the young people just had to live with. The interviews with support staff highlighted that the young people frequently faced hurtful comments and taunts around rejection by their families: 'People use it like against them, don't they?... They'll like say things like, "Your mum didn't want you"'. This young person highlights such a case:

> There was a girl called [names girl] in my primary school and she was a bully to me. And she picked on me for being in care and she said the reason you're in care is because your mum doesn't love you. And not lying I was going to hit her but I knew I'd get in more trouble. (Female, 11)

These issues were particularly exacerbated for the young people when their 'looked after' status was made visible to their peers through things that were outside of their control. Here this young person talks of his experiences:

> I went to school in a small village and everyone knew me and knew my parents and when I turned up to school in a taxi... they knew immediately I was in care and... the amount of people that turned on me... it was heart-breaking and it was the worst moment of my life ... for a long while everyone would know me as the kid who gets a taxi, the kid who's in care. (Male, 16).

We will shortly return to the particularly problematic role that such processes can have in accentuating the visibility of the young people's 'looked after' status that mark them out as Other.

Resisting the Other: 'We are the same'

The young people repeatedly told us that they wanted to be seen by both peers and teachers as 'the same' as 'normal' students, a phrase they used frequently, for instance:

> If I could tell my teachers one thing about what it's like to be a 'looked after young person' in school it would be ... don't ignore us, we are the same as everyone else just with a different and unique backstory (Female, age 12).

The importance of wanting to feel 'the same' as other students, to just 'be' a 'normal' young person cannot be over-stated echoing the work of others (see Rogers, 2017). The interviews with the adult support workers also highlighted this as one Virtual School staff member explained what they felt would improve the young people's educational experiences the most: 'it would be for that normality, I think, they'd strive for that, just to blend in and not stand out'. The young people's emphasis on *sameness* rather than *difference* demonstrates their need to belong to the wider social group. Their attempts to

emphasise their normality may be seen as a form of oppositional resistance (McClaren, 1994). As demonstrated, the stigmatised 'looked after' label often involves hurtful encounters with peers, therefore it is unsurprising that young people may seek to distance themselves from or even 'refuse' this label (Jensen, 2011). Thus many of the young people we spoke to actively engaged in forms of 'strategic identity management' that Schmitz and Tyler (2018) outlined. As highlighted in other studies (see Driscoll, 2011; Dansey et al., 2019), the main way the young people we spoke to attempted to do this was to strictly control who knew about their 'looked after' status. However, this was not always straight forward as one Virtual School staff member explained:

> …some young people who come into care perhaps when they're younger tend to tell people and then it's very hard to take that back, isn't it, when you get older, because everybody in your school knows you're looked after then. And you kind of think, well, I didn't really know how it was going to affect me when I was seven and I told everybody, and now I'm 11 and I don't really want people to know because I don't want that to define me.

Other staff members also discussed the difficulties for young people in attempting to keep their status private, especially when they were treated differently from their non-looked after peers:

> There's always things, isn't there, that the child's taken out of class for to do with being looked after or not involved in due to being looked after, so I think it's – it's unavoidable but I think it obviously – for a child that wasn't keen on everybody knowing, I think it would be quite difficult to keep it private if you wanted to. (Support Worker)

Despite these difficulties, some young people were able to maintain privacy, as one Virtual School representative explained:

> Some young people do keep themselves very, very private. I mean, I know a young man who went to a celebration event that we had at [X] and he saw another young man who he knows, and they both had no idea each other was in care. And then he did an intervention group for social and emotional needs in school and there was a girl in his year group…they both didn't know until they did that intervention that they were both looked after. So, it is possible to keep that privacy, but I think it's very much how you start off… And these young people have come into care aged nine, around that sort of age, and they've always said to their carer in school, "Can I just call you Auntie?" "Can I just call you Mum, but only in school so nobody asks me any questions?" So, there's ways round it really, but it can be hard.

Here, we see the ways in which some young people attempt to manage their care status by referring to carers by familial names as a way to make claims to normality. Below, two

young people illustrate the strategies they employed when leaving classes to attend meetings to distance themselves from their 'looked after' label:

> All my friends knew that I'm in care, so they – all I said to them was, "I've got a meeting, I have to go," and they understood and so they didn't question me. But it's part of everyday life for me and my friends. But for people who don't understand… I didn't want anyone to know I was in care, so when I had my first sort of meetings it was really awkward, and I always used to say, "I've got a dentist's appointment," but then it used to be weird when I come back later in the day… (Male, 16)

> … I mean to be honest I used to tell them I was just like [truanting*] lessons, but then I got in trouble because the teacher thought I was [truanting*] lessons… (Male, 16) [*colloquial word used omitted to reduce risk of identification]

In the examples above, the young men engage in forms of strategic identity management (Schmitz and Tyler, 2018) that require them to 'perform' alternate identities perceived as more socially acceptable or normal (Butler, 2004). Being able to exercise agency in this way is potentially empowering for the young people. However, the complexity and difficultly of having to continually perform an identity or identities should not be underestimated and the weight of such secrecy, as we have seen, has been highlighted by Dansey et al. (2019) and Rogers (2017). What is particularly important here is that these young men are in many ways being forced into engaging in forms of strategic identity management *because* they are being taken out of class to attend a meeting connected to the processes set up to support them. The forced need to 'perform' different identities also creates further problems for the young people as we see above ('weird when I come back' and getting into trouble with the teacher). We now move on to look at some more examples of such processes that act as potential barriers for young people to simply 'be normal' including those that inhibit young people's ability to keep their looked after status to themselves.

Not belonging: School/support processes that highlight 'difference'

So far, we have highlighted some of the ways in which the young people feel they are seen as different and sense being treated differently. We want to focus here specifically on the mostly well-intentioned processes and procedures that are put in place to support the young people but which highlight their 'looked after' status making 'difference' more visible. We argue that this significantly reduces the young people's opportunities to simply 'be' a young person like their peers, instead exacerbating their sense of Otherness. What was notable was that instead of being able to feel 'normal', most aspects of the young people's lives were highly professionalised (Broadhurst et al., 2010). With highly formalised protocols and procedures in place that marked them out as Other, the young people were often positioned as *supervised subjects*. One young man talked passionately

(and repeatedly, during the film workshops) about his anger at not being able to sleep over at a friend's house without a significant paper trail which we were informed also required his friend's parents to submit for formal police checks. This created an institutionalised and overly-responsible (corporate) parenting approach that inhibited the young person's ability to engage in 'normal' friendships with his school peers. A number of other, overly professionalised encounters were raised. A support worker said: 'you can't just take a form home for a school trip and bring it [back] the next day because it just feels like every man and their dog's got to look at it and sign it'. Similarly, another added:

> If they go missing… they get reported and it's the kind that, it's a different process to a non-looked after young person, so it's quite serious… and they're like, 'Oh, I just, but I just [truanted] for the afternoon with my friends, I didn't do anything'

Following this, there may be home visits and police involvement which again marks them out as different to their peers. The support workers talked extensively about the barriers they perceived for the young people, non-stop meetings and bureaucratic processes young people were subjected to and how these further undermined young people's sense of normality with multiple professionals involved in their lives as this example from a support worker exemplifies:

> It's constant, there's something going on all the time… And it's like, "Leave me alone. You said I was normal and now I've got a solicitor and I've got a social worker!"

We have already highlighted the challenges involved for young people in being pulled out of class for meetings and interventions and the strategies this forces them into enacting. Whilst some young people liked the opportunity to leave class, being taken out of class for meetings was frequently mentioned as amongst the worst things as it emphasised Otherness because '…a normal student in class wouldn't just be taken out of the class… (Female, 16). This echoes a key finding of Mannay et al., (2017) who recommended that meetings be held outside of school time to limit highlighting 'difference' and fear of stigma that could potentially damage young people's emotional health. However, building upon this, the support workers were able to give us further information on the challenges around this. One support worker explained how they had been in a meeting that very day with a young person that had lasted almost the entire day. Thus whilst all young people are offered the opportunity to attend these meetings to ensure their voice is represented, it is perhaps unsurprising that young people often choose not to attend:

> Some of the young people don't like other people to know they're looked after so they won't come to meetings and things because that draws attention, making them look different [Support Worker].

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Attending such meetings can present potential challenges for young people for instance in relation to frustrations at relationships with social workers/other professionals, a sense of lacking agency and becoming fraught in discussing stressful aspects of their lives (Diaz et al., 2018). Some young people talked specifically of attending these meetings but then missing learning opportunities including one young person (male, 13) who missed an in-class test that they were subsequently not allowed to re-sit. The support workers recognised the challenges of these school-time meetings, but as this support worker explains:

> ...there's not really any way round this, but if they need something, for example CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] come in to do some work with them for six weeks, they tend to come to school at the same time every week, so they might miss a whole half term of the same lesson because there's no way round it.

The support workers expressed frustration that many services were not flexible in the support offered to young people, as this support worker illustrates: 'Some services only work 9-5 and I think when you're working with young people you have to be a bit more flexible and unfortunately there's a lot of services that can't'. As we have seen, many young people felt compelled to strategically manage their identities resulting directly from having meetings/interventions held within school time or gave up their right to attend these meetings so as not to have to potentially reveal their looked after status. In this sense, support for young people seems structured to fit within conventional working hours rather than focused upon developing practices that might genuinely make a difference to the young people's already challenging lives. Moreover, meetings timed during the school day caused further problems when young people were then expected to catch-up on school work missed:

> If it's a young person who likes to keep school and home very separate, getting them to catch up with that work in their own time can then be quite difficult because they'll be like, "No, no, no. You took me out of school. I'm not doing that when I get home" (Support Worker).

Another important area that was highlighted as particularly problematic was insensitive handling of anything related to the young people's 'looked after' status. Several examples of such cases were highlighted, for instance this support worker gives one such example:

> A teacher might come in or a teaching assistant [and] say your social worker is outside and they'll be like, "Oh my God, I can't believe you just said that in front of everybody".

A particularly upsetting example we heard about in the workshops was from one a young person (Female, 15) who explained how a teacher had left open their emails projecting on the interactive whiteboard. Here, the whole class saw confidential information requesting that the young person be excused from class in order to attend her 'LAC review' and subsequently the whole class then proceeded to ridicule her. This incident happened some three or four years earlier but the young person was still impacted upon by this, feeling particularly troubled that the teacher had never even apologised. We also heard from a support worker of an incident that very day with a school receptionist. Despite the support worker having telephoned the school twice earlier that day to explain she would be collecting a young person, this situation still occurred:

> I've just picked a child up, making sure everybody knows that they're in care. Because I've just had a receptionist say to me, "You can't pick him up. I need to ring his mum first." And this child was quite upset because obviously he doesn't live with his mum, so making sure that everybody's aware and they're quite sensitive about that. Because they were going to ring Mum for consent…

The young people also highlighted that teachers would often pull them aside and ask them details about their home life in a way that they did not feel they asked their non-looked after peers. As this young person explains:

> Teachers tend to take you out of lessons to talk to you about how things are doing at home… Yeah, so I mean obviously a normal student in class wouldn't just be taken out of the class to see how home is doing (Female, 16)

The support staff echoed this view when reflecting upon what concerns young people had previously raised with them:

> A lot of the feedback was that they didn't want to talk about their personal life. I mean, one of the ones was that he doesn't mind asking if you're okay and all that, but it's the constantly, "Are you okay? How's home life?" And he doesn't want to bring his home life into school.

However, whilst the young people often talked about not wanting others to know about their looked after status, there was a real tension between wanting their status as looked after to be private, and only shared when necessary, but a desire to want to know which other children in their school were looked after. For instance, one young man stated that he would like to ask the school "If they actually know how many students are looked after in the school" (Male, 16). His reason for asking this was "Because then you don't feel singled out, like I had … well my best friend in school he was looked after as well so I obviously had someone but if I didn't have him then I would have felt different'. Here the desire to 'belong' and a sense of positive affirmation and shared experience where they may safely just be and not perform other identities. As one female (age 12) poignantly

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states 'I'm fine is the biggest lie we tell. It means you won't understand and you can't understand'.

Conclusions

Young people who are 'looked after' continue to face significant educational disadvantages. Much research in this area has focused on educational attainment including the relative attainment gap between young people and their non-looked peers and on interventions to close these gaps. Our aim in this paper was to highlight how being identified and consequently labelled as 'looked after' may negatively impact upon young people's sense of belonging in the context of their schooling. A limitation of our study is of course that it focuses on young people in one part of the country and predominantly with those young people who we might term as 'engaged' (at least in part) with the CiCC and it cannot claim to speak for all young people. However, we have demonstrated the ways in which school processes and practices, often set up to support the young people often serve to distance them both *from* and *by* their non-looked after peers and exacerbate their sense of Otherness. For instance, regularly being taken out of class for meetings, being subject to insensitive handling of their 'looked after' status and being subject to overly professionalised and highly bureaucratic corporate parenting practices inhibited young people's ability to just 'be' a young person. What is particularly striking however is that these factors, which can have significant psycho-social impacts upon the young people, are far from insurmountable. As far as we could see, meetings/interventions were mainly held during the school day to accommodate the normal working hours of professionals/support services. As such, it becomes possible to see that more flexible support services that listen to and work around young people's needs (rather than those of the professionals) might begin to alleviate some of the pressures on young people to strategically manage their 'looked after' identities. Likewise, we might suggest it should be possible to review corporate parenting processes and practices. An appropriate balance between the legislative responsibilities (including safeguarding) and enabling young people to engage in 'normal' peer-focused activities that enable them to build friendships, would potentially enhance their sense of belonging. Changing negative attitudes and developing appropriately sensitive approaches within schools are perhaps more difficult to change, but not impossible. Our research did not identify any clear evidence of good practice in this area, for instance in relation to what enhanced young people's sense of either belonging and/or normality. We would argue these areas are currently both under-researched and under-theorised with further research required. As Driscoll (2011: 27) notes:

> ...the importance of school in providing a normalising environment where children can detach themselves from their looked after status should not be underestimated, but maybe undermined by an over-emphasis on children's social care status within school.

A sense of belonging is important for all young people as a means to enhance emotional wellbeing. The significance of schools in this is especially pertinent for those young people who are already likely to have difficult and challenging lives. We therefore suggest that future research and/or interventions that explore the potential role of schools in developing practices that specifically aim to foster a sense of belonging would potentially be very helpful.

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