

# Inclusion of looked after children in education

**Claire Leslie and Azra Mohammed**

## **Abstract**

This paper will describe a piece of research carried out in a Scottish local education authority on the inclusion of looked after children. Key themes pertinent to this vulnerable group were identified through data gathered from looked after children; foster carers; education and social work professionals. Key questions will be addressed, such as what inclusion means; what barriers to inclusion can exist; and what factors promote the inclusion of looked after children in schools. This paper concludes with the important messages that we can learn from in order to promote the inclusion of every looked after child and young person in education.

## **Keywords**

Inclusion, education, looked after children

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## **Introduction**

### **The education of looked after children**

Research was carried out in Scotland to examine the issue of looked after children (Borland, Pearson, Hill, Tisdall & Bloomfield, 1998). This reviewed current research, policy and practice and highlighted how being looked after was an 'educational hazard' (Borland et al., 1998, p. 23). Many reasons were put forward as to why looked after children struggled with their education. These ranged from a low priority placed on their education, disruption due to moves in care placements, lack of partnership between social work and education, and the diversity and range of each child's situation and needs (Borland et al., 1998).

Looked after children have higher rates of exclusion and poorer attendance records in comparison to their peers (Brodie, 2003). The overall exclusion rate for looked after children in 2010/11 was 326 per 1,000 looked after pupils, compared with 40 exclusions per 1,000 pupils for all school children (Scottish Government, 2012a). This statistic equates to a looked after child being twelve times more likely to be excluded than other pupils. Research has suggested that schools may unfairly associate looked after children

with disruptive behaviour and fail to respond to their needs, which, in turn, results in exclusion (Blyth and Milner, 1996). After missing an extended period of education, children find it difficult to return to the classroom as they have fallen behind in their school work which leads to disengagement and then truancy (Osler, Street, Lall & Vincent, 2002). It is a cycle that can perpetuate the issue of non-attendance in schools.

Even with all this research evidencing the negative impact of being looked after on educational attainment, it does not necessarily mean that every looked after child will experience these detrimental patterns. What the research and statistics are suggesting is that being looked after can mean that a child or young person is at greater risk of encountering these issues.

### **Educational policy context**

Improving outcomes for children and families is at the heart of the current Scottish Government policy agenda and is being driven forward in authorities through the implementation of 'Getting It Right'. It is a major change programme at both a national and local level. It influences everyone who works with children, young people and their families, and requires changes in culture, systems and practice in universal and targeted services.

The principles of 'Getting It Right' are embedded within a holistic, child-centred, inclusive and collaborative way of working. For the education services, it means building on the good practice already in place and developing this to accommodate the new tools and processes that 'Getting It Right' brings with it to promote multi-agency working and effective planning for all children and young people, and their families. The 'well-being indicators' which have been created to help assess and review a child's development are a crucial part of the 'Getting It Right' materials. These indicators help the child, parents and professionals to assess the child's world. The indicators are safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included, more commonly referred to by the acronym of SHANARRI.

Getting It Right is mentioned within the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 which is a revision of the original Act of 2004. Under the new 2009 Act, all looked after children are now presumed to have an additional support need unless the education authority determines that they do not require additional support to enable them to benefit from education. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 will encompass Getting It Right For Every Child to improve the way that services work together to support children and young people, which undoubtedly includes the looked after population.

### **The future outcomes for looked after children**

There are concerns about the poor outcomes in terms of education and employment for adults with a looked after background (Connelly et al., 2008). Looked after young people are disproportionately represented in the 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) population which the Scottish Government is tackling through the More Choices More Chances strategy (Scottish Executive, 2006). Statistics from the Scottish Government

show that only 4 - 5% of the looked after population move on to university compared to around 40% of the general population (Scottish Government, 2014). This does not include pupils who move on to further education or employment, and due to the small sample size the figures do fluctuate from year to year, but they indicate that looked after children are less likely to maintain initial positive destinations from school than their peers.

In the attainment of qualifications, the looked after population leave school with far fewer educational qualifications than their peers. Within the looked after population it is children who are looked after at home who consistently leave with the fewest qualifications (Scottish Government, 2012a).

It is not just about academic achievement. Schools can provide the opportunity for children and young people to develop their social skills and skills for life. If looked after children do not attend school, or experience multiple school placements, then they do not have the same opportunities to develop these core skills. Poor basic skills have been shown to have an impact on physical and mental health issues (Bynner & Parsons, 1997). There is also a statistically significant relationship between repeated offending and poor basic skills (Parsons, 2002).

### **Setting the scene: Looked After Children in Scotland**

Many looked after children experience exclusion and failure in other areas of their lives, making it difficult to achieve in school. However, there are some looked after children who do experience educational success. The Count Us In report (HMle, 2008) highlighted that these children tend to value education and have an awareness of the impact of education on later life. The educational experience of looked after children is, of course, influenced by many different factors, including access to, engagement in, and motivation for education. Other factors include family support, care issues, socioeconomic status, housing and previous educational experiences.

But what are the other protective factors that facilitate successful educational placements? And how can what we learn about these be used in our practice when thinking about the educational needs of looked after children?

### **The local context**

In the 2009-10 academic session, X Council had a rate of exclusion of looked after children which was statistically significantly worse than the Scottish average, despite having a lower than average number of looked after children (272 looked after children in 2010) (Scottish Government, 2012a).

### **Rationale**

Although there has been progress in relation to monitoring the number of exclusions, an analysis of the reasons and factors associated with exclusions of looked after children had not been explored. The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) undertook to identify existing educational supports, the factors that have contributed to the experiences of success, and the barriers that have contributed to a lack of success in education.

## Methodology

### *Research questions*

- What are the protective factors that facilitate successful educational placements for looked after children?
- What current processes are helpful in ensuring the inclusion of looked after children? What processes are not helpful?
- What are the views of foster carers, looked after children, education and social work professionals on the inclusion of looked after children?

A mixed methods approach was taken to capture information in a variety of ways. However, the research questions asked followed a similar theme so that any contradictions and commonalities could be pulled out. Seeking the views of school staff, carers, children and young people, social work and education colleagues allowed for the triangulation of data, where each strand of data strengthens the next strand, making results more reliable and valid.

### *Research design*

A flexible design strategy was employed for this study (Robson, 2002). The research followed a 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987) to analyse the results from the interviews, focus groups and questionnaire returns. Qualitative designed interviews and questionnaires and grounded theory methods fit particularly well as they are both 'open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted' (Charmaz, 2006, p.28).

Grounded theory approaches bring a systematic rigour to exploratory, qualitative research, which helps to increase the validity of the findings (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory originates from a positivist stance but the method used within this research study has emerged from a constructivist view, allowing it to be a more systematic and reflexive approach. This approach does not suggest that it will deliver objective, certifiable, truthful or even replicable results, but it will provide authenticity and transparency of inference from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

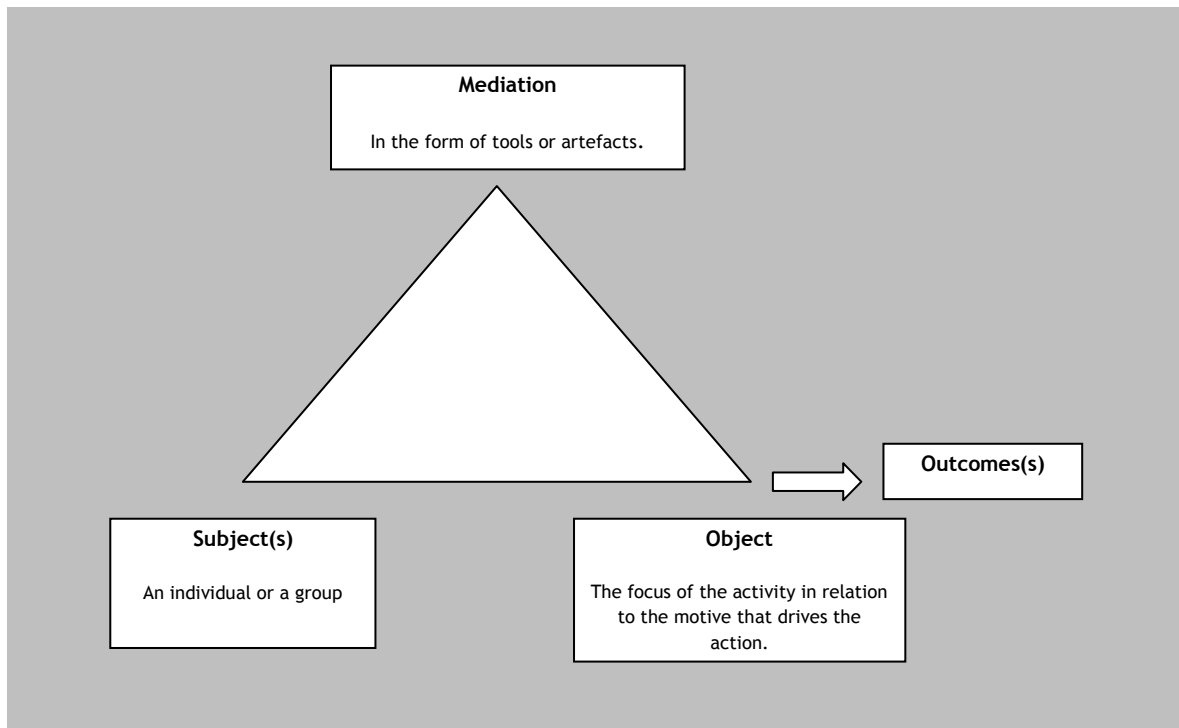
The recruitment of foster carers, looked after children, and professionals illustrates purposive sampling which sits within the framework of grounded theory approaches (Robson, 2002). These populations were uniquely identified so that additional information could be acquired to help produce conceptual categories. In other words, they were specifically chosen to assist in the study and research of the inclusion of looked after children in X Council.

Following analysis of the data set, it was deemed necessary to represent it as a theoretical model in order to identify the contextual and sociocultural features of the environment within which the information was gathered. The researchers opted to use 'activity theory' for this as a way of approaching qualitative data (see Leadbetter, 2005, 2008).

The application of activity theory in educational psychology practice is fairly new and innovative, having been used to explore systems but not necessarily in the area of education.

Jane Leadbetter has written extensively on activity theory as a model that is concerned with individual action within wider systems of activity. For those working within complex human systems, activity theory can be used to understand human behaviour within these systems and the wider sociocultural context (Leadbetter, 2005).

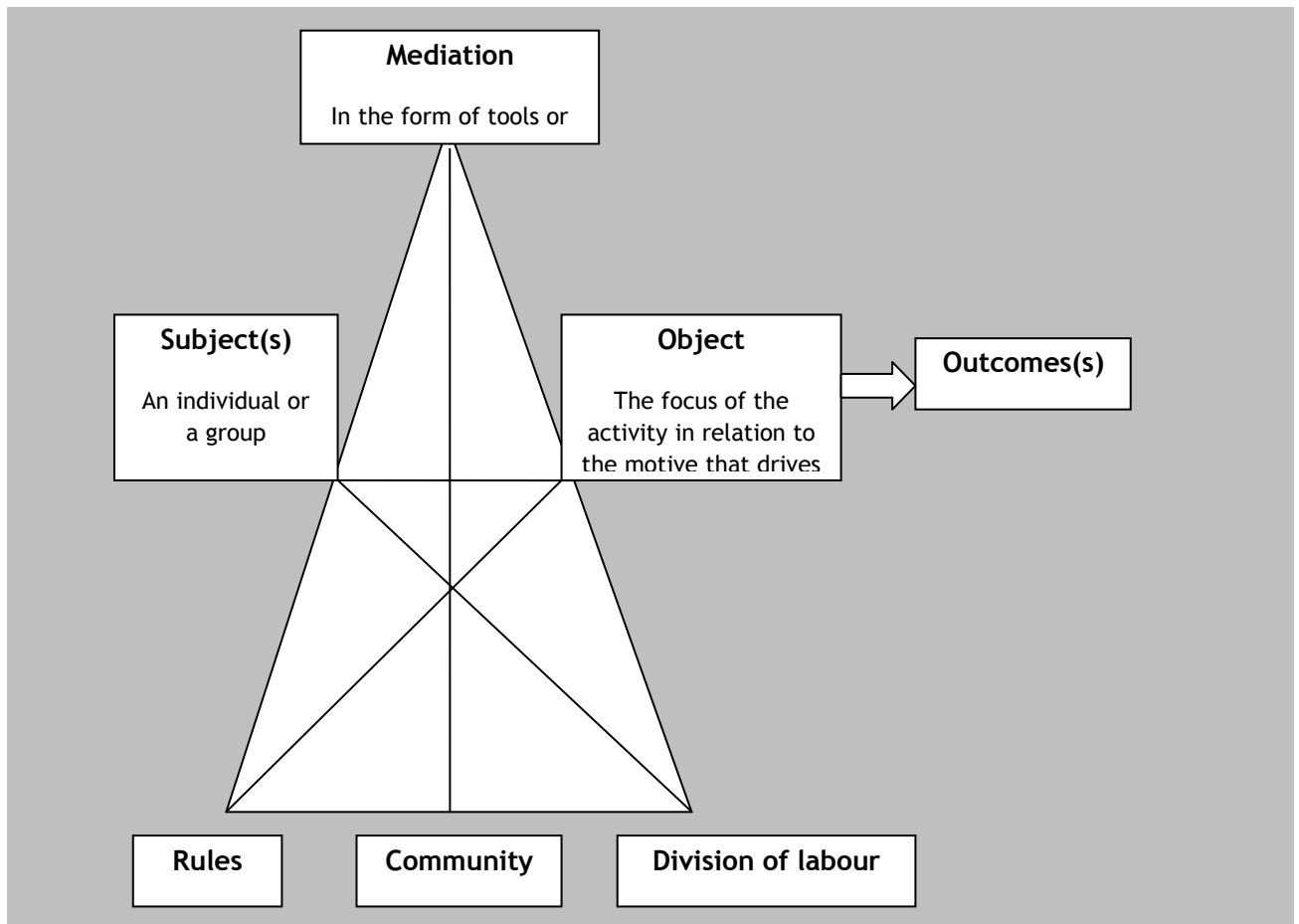
This early model of an activity theory demonstrates the interactionist nature of human activity:



*Figure 1. First Generation activity theory model (Daniels, 2001 in Leadbetter, 2008)*

The **subject** can be an individual or a group. The **object** is the focus of the activity i.e. what is trying to be worked upon through the activity. The top of the triangle represents the **mediation** that happens between the subject and the object in order to achieve the outcome. Further development of this model by Yrjo Engeström (1999) led to the addition of contextual factors and historical perspectives being considered, and their interaction with the subject, mediation and object represented with connecting lines.

As an example, a class teacher (subject) may be working with a child to improve their phonic decoding (the object) in order that they have improved reading ability and confidence (outcome). The class teacher may use a computer-based phonics programme and regular homework to support this goal (meditational tools).



**Figure 2: Second-generation activity theory model (Engeström, 1987)**

Engeström's expanded second generation model included a wider 'macro-level' analysis emphasising the combined and common factors that exist. He introduced the idea of there being rules (that support or constrain the work), community (who else is involved) and division of labour (how the work is shared out). These are said to influence and govern an activity system (Leadbetter, 2005).

Leadbetter (2005) argued that through its emphasis on mediated action and the importance placed on the cultural and historical factors, activity theory can be successfully used as a theoretical framework for different aspects of educational psychology practice.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The research study followed the guidance and requirements of the British Psychological Society code of human research ethics (2011), the Health and Care Professions Council standards of conduct, performance and ethics (2008), and X Council Educational Psychology Service research and evaluation procedures (2010).

## Results

This section details the main results from the data gathered. The analysis information gathered from the Designated Senior Manager (DSM) questionnaires and the foster carers' focus groups is summarised through an activity theory.

### Participants

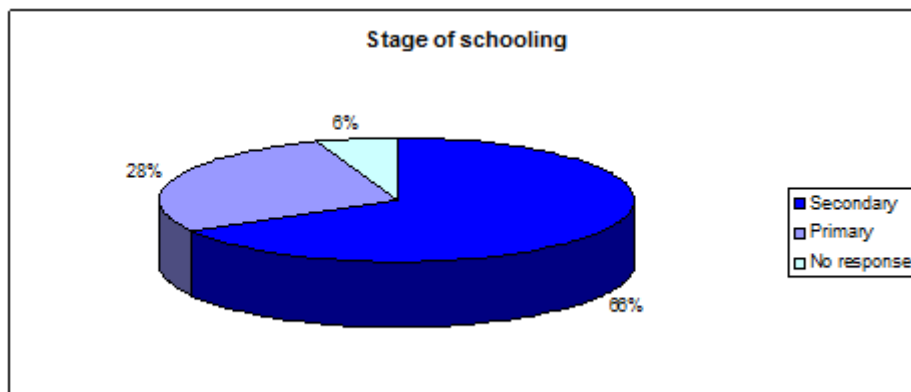
A letter was sent to foster carers in the authority and key education personnel that included a link to a questionnaire for looked after children to complete on-line. From this open recruitment of children and young people for the study a total of 18 questionnaires were completed.

Contact details for 24 foster carers were provided by social work as possible candidates for taking part in the focus groups. Three focus groups were held and a total of six foster carers took part, equating to a 25% participant rate.

An invitation was extended to every DSM in the schools within the authority to take part in an on-line questionnaire. From the 61 DSMs, 27 completed the questionnaire, equating to a 44% return rate.

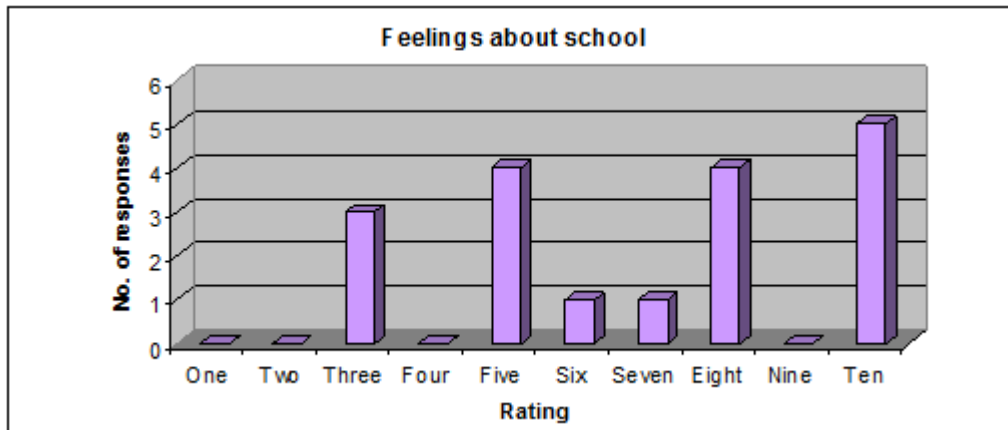
### Looked After Children

*Graph 1 - Responses by stage of schooling*



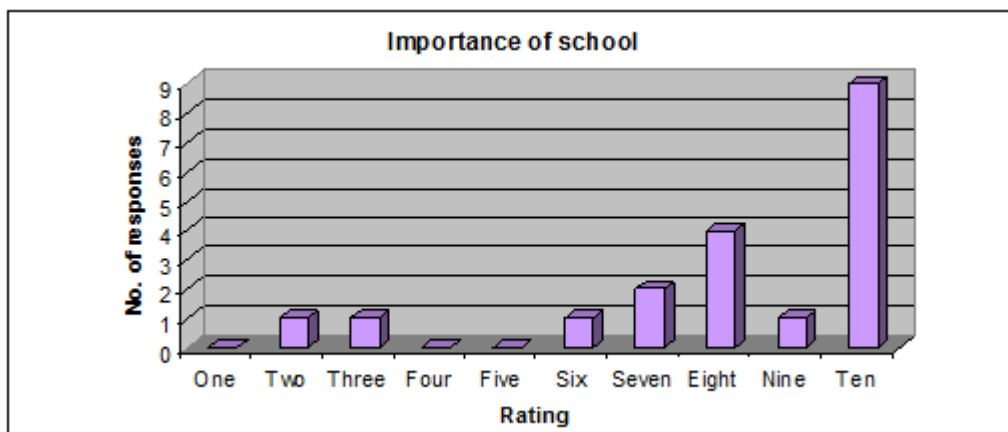
To establish how looked after children felt about school and how much they valued their education, two rating scale questions were used. The questions used a 10 point scale with the lowest number being '1', which represented a very negative response, and '10' representing a very positive response.

**Graph 2 - Looked after children's feelings about school**



Graph 2 details the results for the question of how looked after children feel about school (mean = 6.9).

**Graph 3 - Importance of school**



As graph 3 illustrates, 50% of looked after children who responded felt that school was very important for them by scoring a 10 (mean = 8.1).

When asked about whom they see as helping them in school, the majority of children mentioned teachers. Outwith school, 50% mentioned their foster carers as offering the greatest support in relation to their education.

**Table 1 - Looked after children's feelings about school**

| How do you feel you are treated at school? | No. of responses |
|--|------------------|
| “OK”                                       | 4                |
| “Like every other pupil”                   | 2                |
| “Good”                                     | 2                |



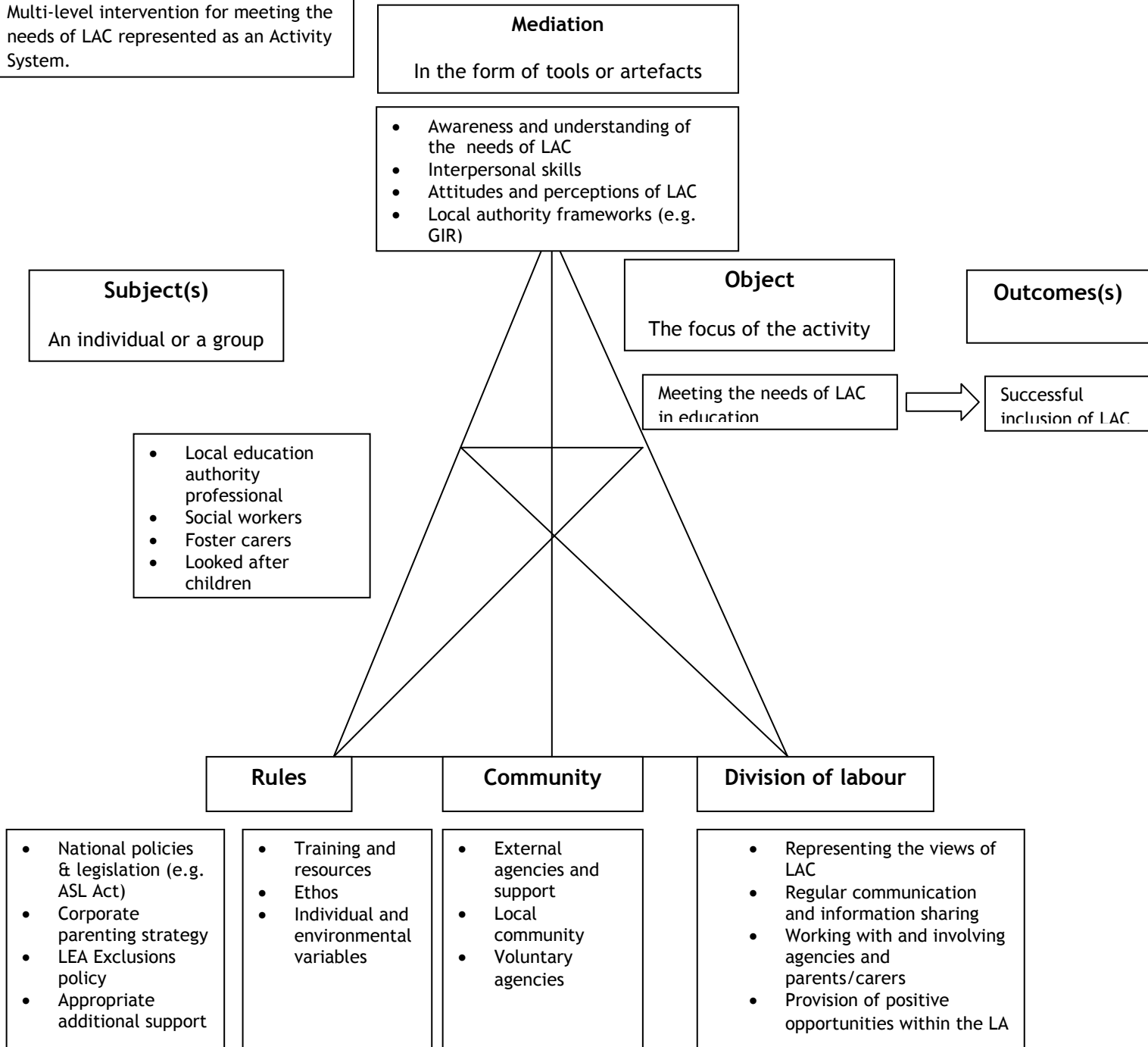
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|                                 |          |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| <b>“Fine”</b>                   | <b>2</b> |
| <b>“Can’t wait to leave”</b>    | <b>1</b> |
| <b>“Very well”</b>              | <b>1</b> |
| <b>“Very important”</b>         | <b>1</b> |
| <b>“Sometimes good”</b>         | <b>1</b> |
| <b>“Very good”</b>              | <b>1</b> |
| <b>“I like how I’m treated”</b> | <b>1</b> |
| <b>“Have been bullied”</b>      | <b>1</b> |
| <b>No response</b>              | <b>1</b> |

### *Activity Theory*

The following results relate to the information gathered through the individual interviews with the identified professionals (Social Work Service Manager and Principal Teacher of Behaviour Support), the three focus groups with foster carers and the qualitative data received through the DSM questionnaires.

**Diagram 1**  
Multi-level intervention for meeting the needs of LAC represented as an Activity System.



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## Discussion

### The Participants

Diagram 1 shows that there are many different agencies and stakeholders involved in trying to promote the inclusion of looked after children. Each agency will have specific objectives and outcomes that they are aiming for. For meaningful joint working to exist, there needs to be a common focus as the agreed object. Differences in the tools used within different agency contexts could lead to contradictions or tensions when trying to achieve the objective, for example in the language used. Terms like ‘need’, ‘assessment’ and ‘inclusion’ can be interpreted in different ways (Leadbetter, 2005). Frameworks like Getting It Right can help in building a shared, common language based on multi-agency/integrated assessments.

### What is used to mediate the outcome?

#### *Having an awareness and understanding of the needs of looked after children*

This was a key theme that emerged from the transcripts of interviews with carers and the survey of DSMs. Some of the comments about what factors promote the inclusion of looked after children included: ‘understanding and allowing for the additional needs of looked after children’; ‘school staff to understand the child’s needs’; ‘awareness and understanding from staff’; and ‘flexibility’. This may present a contradiction between the belief that looked after children should not be treated any different to other children and the idea that schools should be flexible for these children and allow for any pressures and difficulties present in the child’s life. On one hand, looked after children should be afforded the same rights and opportunities as every other child, but should schools be applying the same rules and boundaries to them in light of their additional support needs? If allowances are made for looked after children, does this mean they are being treated differently? How is this explained to the rest of the class? How does this interact with the culture and community? Brewin and Statham (2011) also uncovered this theme in their research. All the adult participants in their research made reference to the importance of not singling out children due to their looked after status. This so-called “normalising” of experiences is highlighted in a range of literature in relation to the education of looked after children (e.g. Martin & Jackson, 2002). Ward (2006) made the case for treating looked after children ‘normally’, stating that ‘by subjecting children to usual expectations devoid of special allowances, their sense of being different would not be emphasised’. On the flip side, some young people may struggle to feel ‘normal’ until their individual circumstances have been understood and acknowledged. Brewin and Statham (2011) concluded that although the participants in their study believed that children should not be made to feel different, it was still important to address the individual needs in a discreet manner.

### *Interpersonal skills*

It is well known that the interactions between teachers and children are mediated by the interpersonal skills of the teacher, and this can help build a positive, nurturing relationship. Woolley and Bowen (2007) reported that students who had a network of supportive adults in their lives, such as teachers, reported higher levels of psychological and behavioural engagement with their education. Several respondents from the DSM group referred to interpersonal skills and relationship building as a key factor in promoting the inclusion of looked after children.

### *Policies*

Participants showed a good awareness of local and national policies and made comment on the challenges and issues that these policies can place on them, namely limitations and restriction of policies on meeting the needs of looked after children and working with others to meet these needs.

It is a common challenge faced by professionals in developing the skills required to work collaboratively with others through interagency working. Varying levels of communication between professionals, resources, understanding roles and responsibilities, and professional and agency culture can present difficulties for interagency working (Atkinson, Wilkin, Stott, Doherty & Kinder, 2002). Moreover, Milbourne, Macrae and Maguire (2003) argued that policy approaches set by governments may act as a constraint to the models of collaboration needed to support professionals working on the ground, impacting on effective collaboration. There are a number of policies and procedural guidelines that are in place to help meet the needs of all children, including looked after children. The different 'rules' set out in these documents could act as a pressure to schools, who are already trying to adapt to a changing curriculum, legislation and job roles.

### *Appropriate additional support and ethos*

One particular aspect that emerged from the data was that of having the appropriate additional support required to meet the needs of looked after children, such as time, least intrusive intervention, and individual support. The latter was felt to be one of the strongest supports for meeting the needs of looked after children. It is out with the remit of this research to look at provision and individual supports, but there was clearly a feeling that a lack of additional support when required could be a barrier to learning, and inclusion.

Analysis of the data collected highlighted the importance of the existing ethos in a school. Comments from DSMs in primary and secondary schools highlighted that the ethos is a factor that promotes inclusion of all children, including looked after children. Comments from respondents suggested some features of an inclusive school ethos, for example, that the ethos is 'a shared one across all members of a school'; 'looked after children are treated the same as other children'.

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### *Individual variables*

Closely linked to ethos are the individual and environmental variables that exist within an educational setting. For example, whether the school has had any looked after children previously and the experiences of the child. There is evidence that pre-care experiences can affect emotional well-being, behaviour and the ability to form and maintain relationships (Peake, 2006; Rutter, 1999). Happer, McCreadie and Aldgate (2006) found that the way young people moving on from care thought about their past experiences mediated the positive outcomes they achieved.

Individual child factors were also mentioned as influencing the successful inclusion of looked after children e.g. the behaviour of the child; social skills and self-esteem. Although the influence of personality and individual characteristics in the development of children is complex, there is evidence that characteristics can be changed by the interactions had with others at different stages in life (Engfer, Walper & Rutter, 1994).

### *Environmental variables*

Another potentially constraining environmental variable is the length of the care placement, the uncertainty over this, and the possibility of yet more transitions for a child or young person. It could be difficult for those working with looked after children to feel that their work is going to have any long-term impact if the child undergoes another transition only months later. The transition to secondary from primary school can affect academic performance and sense of well-being and health of all children (Zeedyk et al. 2003). For looked after children, any transition, including that to secondary school, is more likely to be challenging. One of the reasons for this is that they are less likely to have developed secure attachments, which increases the risk of problems at times of stress or change (Dent & Cameron, 2003). It has been documented that pre-care experiences, the process of going into care and being in care are all likely to impact on educational participation (Berridge, 2008). This leads to lower academic attainment (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) and children with lower attainments are more likely to have difficulties making systemic transitions (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). It has been established that looked after children are twice as likely to experience bullying (Daly & Gilligan, 2005), and bullying has been found to be a key inhibitor to successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008).

### *Community*

The role of the community contributing to the positive inclusion of looked after children came through in the analysis of the data as being an important factor. Having 'positive opportunities within the community' was identified through a combination including; 'attending school and having friends in the local area', 'extra-curricular opportunities' and 'participate and be included in activities/play'. Several foster carers mentioned about the importance of looked after children being part of their community and feeling included by being allowed to attend the school in their local area.

### ***Support from external agencies and voluntary organisations***

Included as part of the 'community' are the agencies and voluntary organisations that provide support to looked after children, their carers and family. Foster carers mentioned how valuable they found the peer support they received from other foster carers. Peer support is a great, inexpensive resource as it allows participants to receive support from others who they share a common factor with (Naylor and Cowie, 1999; Solomon, 2004).

Foster carers also named voluntary organisations that have supported them and the children in their care. Voluntary organisations can make a significant difference to the course of a life of a looked after child (Happer, McCreddie & Aldgate, 2006) and can also provide inventive provision to local community services which contributes to social change (Osborne, 1998; Schwabenland, 2006).

### **Community and Mediation**

#### ***Attitudes and perceptions of looked after children***

Happer et al. (2006) found that participants in their research wished for attitudes that are more positive to exist towards looked after children. Similarly, the present research found that the attitude of others in schools and the community can have an impact on inclusion. Although training and resources are available to schools, the same cannot be said for communities.

#### ***Division of Labour***

The 'division of labour' was ascertained within the interview questions, for example, children were asked 'who helps you to feel included, and in what way?' School staff and carers were asked 'what helps you in your role as a designated manager/foster carer?' and 'what factors/processes facilitate the inclusion of looked after children?'

The 'division of labour' identified key activities that different people involved in making sure looked after children are included carry out, such as regular communication between everyone involved, the sharing of information and working alongside other agencies and parents or carers. These are vital requirements for effective multi-agency working.

In the past decade, multi-agency collaboration has increasingly been viewed as the most efficient way to deliver high quality and responsive services (Miller & Ahmad, 2000). With such a variety of services and agencies being required to work together for the needs of a child it has been shown that school is the pivotal institution (Bryan, Austin, Hailes, Parsons & Stow, 2006). This makes sense as a common factor for each child and young person is that they attend school. For that reason, schools can play the key role in co-ordinating and informing all relevant parties with new information. It is therefore vital that there is effective communication with schools to keep them informed of progress and developments (Bryan et al, 2006).

### *Representing the views of looked after children*

A distinct 'division of labour' that was identified was the need for those working with looked after children to be advocates for them and ensure that their views are represented. This is a role that is identified and supported with the Scottish Government's 'We Can and Must Do Better' report (2007) which clearly states the need for every local authority employee to act as a 'corporate parent' for any looked after children that they work with.

### **Reflection**

This research focussed on the factors that helped and supported the inclusion of looked after children, as far as could be reported by the key stakeholders we asked. It did not consider other factors such as attainment, types of additional support, specific circumstances that led to a child or young person becoming looked after or reasons for exclusion. Perhaps this could be considered a shortcoming of the work. Within the timescale and remit the researchers had, it was not possible to dissect all of the variables that can be involved in an exclusion. What the researchers attempted to do was to acknowledge these variables through the activity theory model by naming the community, rules and division of labour as important variables.

A final reflection must be directed to the process of data analysis. Grounded theory was used as it was deemed to be a good-fit to the aims and purpose of the research; both researchers were familiar with it, and it resulted in an open and transparent account of the data gathered. Mapping this on to an activity theory framework was more of a challenge. Neither researcher had used activity theory before, but believed that it could help to make the data more 'real' by planting it within a theoretical context. Whilst researchers and psychologists may be familiar with the terminology and theoretical perspectives referenced, other professionals could find it complex and inaccessible. For this reason, a clear dissemination strategy was devised with specific groups in mind: parents; children and young people; education professionals; the educational psychology service; and allied partners. A user-friendly summary was written for carers and parents, providing key information and action points.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has described the application of qualitative analysis and sociocultural theory to a real world challenge: including our most vulnerable children and young people in our schools. What the analysis makes clear is that it is a complex picture, where factors influence and act upon each other. Amidst this complexity, there is real need. We could spend time identifying and dissecting what goes wrong, or we could spend our time identifying what works and why, and be doing more of it.

Within a system, there are direct and indirect forces that help it to operate. Anyone who is directly or indirectly involved in a looked after child's life should be aware of how their own role and actions influences outcomes, for example those who deal with financing, transport, placements or schools dinners.

The present research identified what works in helping this vulnerable group to experience success and inclusion in schools. These can be summarised as follows:

- There is a continued need for staff in schools to have an awareness and understanding of how being looked after can affect children and young people.
- It is important to address the individual educational needs of looked after children in a discreet, sensitive manner within schools.
- Positive relationships are built with looked after children through the interpersonal skills and awareness of adults working with them. School staffs need to understand their role in helping looked after children succeed.
- Training and resources should be available for those working with looked after children to continue raising awareness and understanding in schools.
- Building resiliency into the early years of education can give those who do become looked after children the best chance of 'bouncing back'.
- Ensuring looked after children are part of the local community they reside in, giving careful consideration to placement at their local school.
- Ensure the principles and practice of Getting it Right are embedded to support effective multi-agency working and meet the needs of looked after children by using a shared framework and language, integrated and holistic planning processes, and clearly defined roles amongst professionals.
- The role of being an advocate for looked after children to be reinforced through a Corporate Parenting Strategy.

These are the factors that, when present, can make a positive contribution to the inclusion of looked after children in schools.

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