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Care experienced students' transitions to university: learning identities, prior educational experiences and socio-cultural contexts

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ABSTRACT

Care experienced students are one of the most under-represented groups in higher education (HE) in the UK. Research in this field has sought to understand why some care experienced young people successfully transition to higher education and achieve good outcomes in it, despite experiencing considerable adversities and inequalities. To date, there has been scant detailed attention to the role of students' wider social contexts in their transitions to university. Drawing on the voices of 14 care experienced students and graduates from UK universities, the paper highlights the role of their learning identities and social and cultural capitals and resources in their transitions to HE. The data provides an opportunity to critique individualising accounts of successful transitions to HE which have foregrounded notions of resilience or self-determination, by highlighting the role of wider social circumstances in care experienced students' higher education decisions and transitions.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a burgeoning interest in care experienced students' transitions to higher education (HE) (Jackson and Ajayi 2007) and their experiences of it (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014; Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2017; Ellis and Johnston 2022). Research in this field has made significant progress in illuminating both the factors that determine participation in HE amongst care experienced young people (Jackson, Ajayi, and Quigley 2005; Harrison 2020), the multifaceted challenges they face in higher education (Jackson, Ajayi, and Quigley 2005; Jackson and Ajayi 2007; Ellis and Johnston 2022), and the positive outcomes of those who make it to university and progress through it (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014, 2017). Care experienced students are amongst the most under-represented group of students in higher education in the UK and internationally (Harrison 2020), with roughly 6% of care leavers progressing to HE compared to 43% of the wider population

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(Department for Education 2017). Care experienced graduates are also less likely to achieve first or upper-second class degrees than non-care experienced graduates (Harrison, Baker, and Stevenson 2022). Thus, the recent focus on those who successfully transition to university is a valuable and welcome addition to research in this field.

As researchers have sought to understand care experienced students' successful transitions to and outcomes in HE, they have highlighted the numerous factors which help to explain why some care experienced young people are successful in transitioning to HE and making progress in it (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014; Harrison 2020). These factors include good prior educational attainment, supportive and encouraging adults (Driscoll 2013), stable and supportive school and care placements and good financial support (Jackson and Cameron 2012). In addition, the concepts of resilience and determination have become widely used to explain why some young people with experience of care do progress to HE (Driscoll 2013) and succeed whilst there, despite experiencing considerable adversities and hardships (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014; Pinkney and Walker 2020; Ellis and Johnston 2022). Researchers applying the concept of resilience have argued that resilience is not an intrinsic characteristic, but rather, is enabled by environmental factors such as having supportive and caring adults (Driscoll 2013; Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2017; Pinkney and Walker 2020). These studies have helped to counter individualising narratives embedded in policy and public discourses of resilience by highlighting the role of social environmental factors such as supportive relationships with key adults in young people's transitions to university and their experiences of it.

Notwithstanding the important insights provided by such research, there has been a distinct paucity of attention to the role of wider social contexts in care experienced young people's transitions to university and their experiences of it. Indeed, research in this field has been critiqued for lacking detailed theoretical discussion around care experienced young people's experiences and outcomes in education, particularly which utilise theoretical constructs drawn from disciplines outside of social work (Brodie 2009; Berridge 2007; Berridge 2012). This paper attempts to fill that lacuna by drawing on concepts from the sociology of education to examine care experienced young people's transitions to HE. This paper offers an original contribution to this important area of research by illuminating the role of wider social contexts in care experienced young people's decisions to embark on higher education and transitions to it. The paper reveals that decisions about participation in HE are located on the intersection of structure and agency and involve fortuitous or chance encounters which provide access to social and cultural capitals. New insights are offered regarding the role of social capital in accessing higher education for care experienced young people.

Learning identities and socio-cultural contexts in young people's transitions to higher education

Like all young people, care experienced young people's decisions to embark on university are informed by their wider social, cultural and educational contexts. These social contexts frame the range of options available to young people in terms of education, training or employment upon leaving compulsory education. One of the most important factors determining participation in HE is prior academic qualifications (Crawford 2014; Crawford and Greaves 2015). Given that care experienced young people are amongst the lowest performing groups of young people in terms of educational outcomes in the UK and internationally

(Sebba et al. 2015), and GCSE performance is one of the strongest predictors of HE participation (Crawford and Greaves 2015), this is an important explanation for their lower rates of HE participation.

Transitions to HE are not only informed by objective measures of attainment but are also informed by young people's views, feelings and orientations towards learning. Key here are young people's learning identities which emerge from prior experiences of education and academic attainment (Rees et al. 1997; Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 2013) and incorporate the personal, social, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning (Weil 1986, in Rees et al. 1997). Since learning identities encompass young people's views on the process of learning (Rees et al. 1997) and their affective and emotional responses to it (Rees et al. 1997), they can inform their views on the accessibility of HE and their decisions about participation in it (Evans 2021). According to Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective meaning that the extent to which an option like higher education is conceived as accessible to a young person depends on both their academic attainment and their views, feelings and orientations towards it. These dimensions define young people's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), which encompass their objectively available education, training and work options, as well as their subjective assessments of them.

The sociology of education has shed light on the subjective dimension of educational opportunities through highlighting the ways in which young people's decisions about higher education are routinely inflected by classed based experiences and identities (Ball et al. 2002). Classed-based socialisation practices within the family play a crucial role in cultivating dispositions towards higher education and orientating young people's thoughts and feelings towards it (Ball et al. 2002; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Ingram et al. 2023). These dispositions make up the habitus and emerge through early socialisation experiences in the family, opportunities and constraints (Bourdieu 1990; Reay 2004). As the embodiment of social structures, the habitus structures perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions (Reay 2004) including those pertaining to higher education. It is through exposure to experiences, opportunities or constraints during childhood that transitions to HE become part of a 'normal biography' for some young people (Du Bois-Reymond 1998); rendered 'linear, anticipated and predictable' (Ball et al. 2002, p57), whilst for others, it sits firmly outside their subjective opportunities. Whilst early experiences may orientate young people's views towards opportunities such as higher education, young people are nevertheless able to make decisions according to preferences and towards personal goals. Even if their social contexts give rise to deeply limited options, young people nonetheless have personal preferences and make agentic decisions according to them.

The extent to which care experienced young people anticipate and make transitions to HE will also depend on the nature and character of their social capital. Social capital can operate as a powerful mechanism in decisions and transitions to HE (Brooks 2008). Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the 'actual or potential resources' associated with durable networks of relationships which exist between people who are mutually acquainting. The resource dimension of social capital is important; where networks and connections exist between socially and culturally heterogenous individuals this can provide access to knowledge, information and opportunities which might not otherwise be accessed (Putnam 2000; Granovetter 1973). Whilst this kind of 'bridging' social capital (Putnam 2000) may lack the social and emotional closeness of bonding capital which exists between socially homogenous individuals (Putnam 2000), it can be particularly powerful for care experienced young

people who might lack access to social capital through familial connections due to fractured relationships with parents or relatives.

Crucial to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is the notion that capitals can be converted or transformed from one to another and in this sense have exchange value (Archer et al. 2023). Exchange value capitals are those which operate in particular fields and have symbolic value in that they can be leveraged to access other forms of capital which bring fortuitous and advantageous opportunities and outcomes (Archer et al. 2023). Social capital can open up opportunities for accruing cultural capital (such as higher education) which in turn can be converted to economic capital through the graduate premium (Britton et al. 2016). If this is the process through which middle-class advantage is maintained and reproduced, this raises questions about the extent to which care experienced young people can access such privileging capitals and resources in the absence of family networks or cultural capital gained through intergenerational familial transmission.

Despite the importance of wider socio-cultural contexts, prior educational experiences and learning identities in young people's decisions about HE (Ball et al. 2002; Reay et al. 2001; Evans 2021), there has been scant detailed attention to the role these play in care experienced young people's decisions and transitions to HE. Attention to these contexts is important given that care experienced young people routinely experience disruptions to their primary and secondary schooling (Sebba et al. 2015; Harrison 2020), which can have adverse effects on their educational attainments and their learning identities prior to embarking on university. What's more, care experienced young people often occupy ambiguous social positions due to their placement in care and interactions with adults whose social and economic circumstances may differ from their birth families. Their birth families will also occupy nuanced social locations, and whilst relationships with them may be fractured or strained for many young people in care, they will nevertheless frame their formative experiences of education and hence indirectly inform their decisions about HE.

In what follows, I consider the ways in which care experienced students and graduates' learning identities, prior educational experiences, and their wider socio-cultural contexts informed their decisions and transitions to HE. Applying a sociological lens to the data analysis revealed that transitions to HE cannot adequately be explained by recourse to individualising concepts that are inherent in the notion of resilience. Instead, I illuminate the social, cultural and educational 'situatedness' of care experienced young people's decisions and transitions to HE. The research on which this paper is based offered a unique opportunity to examine the role of these wider social contexts in care experienced students' transitions to university, which has not previously been elucidated.

The study

The paper discusses data generated as part of a study funded by the Society for Research into Higher Education which aimed to examine care experienced students' experiences of higher education and their transitions from university to post-graduate life. Whilst the aims of the wider project were to identify the factors which support students' transitions into post-graduate life, given that more than half of the participants in this study were current university students, this paper focuses on the factors which support care experienced young people's transitions to HE. In total, eight students and six graduates took part in the study and all were care experienced. Amongst the students, two were studying for degrees at

universities in England and five in Wales. One had, at the time she was interviewed, dropped out of university but was planning on returning to 2nd year in September 2023. Amongst the graduates, all had achieved either a 1st or a 2:1 in their degrees. Of the graduates, three were doing post-graduate study, two were in full-time employment and one was employed whilst undertaking an internship. The graduates were located in England and Wales and one was, at the time of the interview, doing an internship outside of the UK. The participants were recruited through contacts made with university staff located in student support services, widening participation teams and 'care leaver' contacts in HEIs. They were also recruited through charities that work with care experienced young people or foster carers. For a small number of participants, contact had been made with students and graduates through a snowballing approach where participants put the researcher in touch with friends or contacts of people who were care experienced students and graduates.

Eleven of the interviews were conducted online *via* Zoom and three were face-to-face. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and all lasted between 45 min and an hour. Following Bayfield (2023) and Ellis and Johnston (2022), I use the term 'care experienced' rather than the narrower term 'care leaver' because it includes those who have been looked after by the local authority at some point during their childhood, those who have 'aged out' of care at the age of 18, as well as those who have received care from social services or social service involvement during their youth but may have remained in the family home. This contrasts to the less inclusive term 'care leaver' which is legally defined in England and Wales as a person who has spent 13 wk or more in Local Authority care spanning their 16th birthday. Ethical approval was granted by the University ethics board (approval number removed for anonymity) and followed BERA¹ guidelines for conducting ethical research.

The data was analysed thematically, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) six step process which includes coding the data, searching for themes and reviewing and defining themes. Concepts drawn from the sociology of education, including social and cultural resources and capitals and learner identities framed the data analysis. This approach generated several key themes and sub-themes, including those defined by participants' references to prior experiences of learning and schooling, and their feelings about education in general and higher education in particular. These references culminated in a theme defined by the concept of learning identities which was used to examine participants' relationship to education and their decisions about transitioning to HE. A further significant theme was defined by participants' references to the role of social and cultural capitals in their decisions and transitions to HE (Ball et al. 2002; Reay et al. 2001; Archer and Leathwood 2005). In identifying this theme, a pertinent sub-theme emerged, defined by references to luck and serendipity (Archer et al. 2023; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). The analysis explored the extent to which luck and serendipity operates as vehicles for accessing cultural and social capitals in the absence of familial transmission of them.

In what follows, I begin by foregrounding the role of learning identities in participants' transitions to university, before considering the role of capitals and resources in these transitions.

Transitions to university: learning identities, prior educational experiences and attainment

The role played by prior educational experiences and attainments in young people's decisions about higher education is substantial (Crawford 2014; Crawford and Greaves 2015;

Evans 2021). The care experienced students and graduates who took part in this research were no different in that respect and it was clear that for some of the participants, their positive experiences of education had played an important role in their decisions regarding HE. Rebecca, Sophie, Robin and Elin, had a strong sense of themselves as learners and therefore regarded HE as a possible destination following post-compulsory schooling. There was a cyclical element to their expectations and aspirations for HE in that their educational achievements at school and their burgeoning positive learner identities had helped foster their aspirations for HE and in turn encouraged their academic achievements at school. This was particularly apparent for Elin whose positive academic identity at school led her to view elite HE as firmly within the boundaries of her opportunity structures (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997):

Yeah, well because I recognised that I was good academically and I also did enjoy learning about my subjects and studying so I would say that I wanted to go [to university]. I didn't really want to go to university in the UK unless it was [elite university]. My back-up was Kings College London. Not many universities do [chosen course] so that summer school was a significant factor in me applying to this course (Elin, student).

Similarly, Keira's emerging positive learner identity at school, stemming from her academic achievements, stimulated her positive engagement in education which eventually led her to apply for university:

...by the time year 10 came and I sat those year 10 exams, I got a B in one of them, and I think I got a C or a D in another one. I think that was the first time that I got good grades. ... Once I got those grades back, people started looking at me differently. 15 year old me had light bulbs going off in my head going, "Actually I can get positive attention". I started being this extremely high achieving student. (Keira, currently dropped out of university)

Clearly, Keira regarded HE as a possible option following completion of her post-16 education because her early educational achievements and positive learner identities had meant that higher education was located within her 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997).

The determination to succeed in education and embark on university in the first place had, for some, emerged from a place of adversity. By their own accounts, their experiences at home were so terrible or 'toxic' in Elin's words, that school and education had become a welcome escape and distraction from such environments. Elin described how she threw herself into her schoolwork as a way of coping with the challenges that were going on in her personal life. Similarly, Sophie emphasised how she saw education as an escape from her situation:

I saw education or school as an escape. Rather than causing havoc, fights, that I know a lot of people have done, or escaping school, I would go there to get away from my mum or get away from my family and then the praise that I would get from teachers. I didn't get like love from my mum so it felt like love from teachers, so I knew that if I did well in school teachers would praise me and then I would feel happy and I think it just stuck with me (Sophie, student).

The emotional and intellectual dimensions of learning identities are prominent here (Sennett and Cobb 1972); for Sophie, her early academic achievement in school had fostered her positive emotional responses to education, which was further enhanced by the praise and support she'd received from teachers. Sophie's experiences evoke Mannay et al. (2017)

contention that significant adults such as teachers and foster carers can play a crucial role in care experienced young people's educational outcomes through providing encouragement, belief and support. Indeed, the support and encouragement Sophie had received from her school teachers was pivotal in fostering her academic achievements and subsequent transition to university. Moreover, for Sophie and others, their experiences of significant adversities and challenges during their time 'in-care' led them to aspire for a different life to the one they'd experienced. In this context, HE was regarded not only as the route to a better life, but for some, the only feasible option given the extremely limited alternatives for accommodation upon leaving care. These young people needed to embark on HE as a matter of urgency, partly to secure accommodation, as Robin explained:

In all honesty, I felt like university was the only option and that was one reason why I went to university in the first place was because I felt as though I didn't have anywhere to like live. So getting away and doing my own thing was the only way I was able to grow and able to be who I wanted to be. That was the reasoning for why I went to university. (Robin, graduate).

Though Robin's decision to embark on HE was informed by both her positive learning identity and academic attainment, she was nevertheless engaged in 'deliberate decision-making' whereby she was making the decision to go to university in the contexts of few available alternatives (Ball et al. 2002). Similarly, for Rebecca, going to university involved accepting one option, rather than choosing between many (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997):

Things were so bad at home that I just loved school so I did really well at school when I was younger....Yeah, I guess, knowing that your only way out was education, only way out of the system is education because at 18 you're put on income support, you're put on housing benefit and it's just that cycle isn't it (Rebecca, graduate)

Both Robin's and Rebecca's decisions to embark on HE emerged at the intersection of structure and agency; at once, both young women were agentic in choosing to embark on HE because going to university would enable them to continue formal education which they enjoyed. But structural constraints also operated in their decisions; Robin and Rebecca were not choosing between a 'suite of options' (Ingram et al. 2023, p 161) in the way that many privileged young people do. Instead, they were making choices within a limited range of options, the boundaries of which were constructed socially and educationally (Ball et al. 2002; Ingram et al. 2023). As Robin describes above, university was regarded as the 'only option' as she didn't have anywhere else to live.

Whilst positive learning identities, good academic achievement and enjoyment of learning coupled with praise and support from teachers, helps explain some of these participants' decisions to embark on HE, not all the students and graduates in this study had performed well at school or had particularly positive experiences of it. Some reported negative experiences of schooling which were often related to disruptions in their schooling due to placement moves or their own social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. For these participants, other factors, including wider social and cultural capitals played a prominent role in their transitions to HE and success whilst there.

Transitions to university: social and cultural capitals and resources

Young people's decisions about higher education are not only informed by their learning identities (Evans 2021) and their educational attainments (Crawford and Greaves 2015),

but by their wider social and cultural circumstances. These circumstances frame the range of opportunities available to young people as well as their subjective interpretations of them (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Evans 2021). A small number of participants in this study had foster parents who had been to university or had foster carers' who had children with university experience, thus providing indirect access to cultural knowledge and experience of HE on which they could draw (Ball et al. 2002). Caitlyn, who had several relatives with university experience, had access to socially dominant forms of capitals and resources (Archer et al. 2023), including knowledge of HE. She described how her aunty and uncle, who were only a few years older than her, were influential in her decision to go to university. She was also encouraged by her grandmother:

They [extended family] just expected that that was what I would do anyway [go to university]. It wasn't like I got any extra help or anything. At that point, it just seemed like the thing to do in my family. I wasn't from one of these families where I was the first one to go to university. It wasn't a big thing. It was just something that we all did (Caitlyn, graduate).

Caitlyn's account is evocative of Ball et al. (2002) contention that family habitus plays an important role in young people's decisions regarding HE. HE was rendered objectively possible by her prior academic attainment and subjectively accessible by her wider social and cultural contexts, including familial expectations and experiences. Her grandmother's encouragement of university participation was also important in constituting HE as part of a 'normal biography' (Du Bois-Reymond 1998) for Caitlyn.

For most of the students and graduates who took part in this research, however, neither their foster parents, nor anybody in their immediate biological families had been to university. They did not have the kinds of 'educational inheritances' (Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 2013) which many middle-class young people acquire through familial experiences of HE that orientate them towards it. In the absence of familial social or cultural capitals, access to dominant forms of capitals and resources had, for some, been achieved through fortuitous or serendipitous encounters or interactions with people who possessed such capitals. Whilst Elin's access to an elite university in the UK was primarily enabled by her high academic attainment, it was also supported by her 'lucky' acquirement of privileged forms of cultural and social capitals which ultimately supported her entry to a prestigious university. Elin was an extremely academically high achieving student and had done very well in her GCSEs and A-levels. During her time at secondary school she had been getting the bus each day to make the lengthy daily commute from her foster placement to her school which were located in separate local authorities. Whilst attending secondary school, a local private boarding school had approached her school to offer one of their pupils the opportunity of a scholarship for a place at the school. Upon hearing about Elin's dedication to her studies, as reflected in her making the long daily commute to and from school, she was awarded the scholarship.

Whilst Elin described her experiences as 'lucky' in that she was fortunate to win a scholarship to attend a private boarding school to study for her A-levels, her experiences could only partly be described as that. The interplay of structure and agency is prominent here; Elin's success in winning the scholarship was greatly dependent upon her agency including her high academic achievement and her determination and dedication to her studies and drive to apply to an elite university. But socially structured opportunities also characterised her experiences; upon attending the private boarding school, Elin gained access to dominant

social and cultural capitals in the form of intense tutoring and mentoring which ultimately led to her successful application and offer of a place at an elite university:

So the support that I had through that process [applying to university], that was down to the school [the private boarding school she attended], they found a mentor for me, someone who had done this [course] in the college that I was going to.... That person really really helped me. They built up to the entrance exam, and they did help me with my personal statement and they helped me with the entrance exam (Elin student).

Elin's account is evocative of Devine's (2004) contention that social capital plays a central role in educational decision making and is inextricably tied to cultural capital. The social and cultural capitals which Elin had access to at the private school had exchange-value (Bourdieu 1986; Archer et al. 2023) in that they were the mechanism through which she was able to apply to and gain entry to an elite university. Elin's experiences are an extra-ordinary example of the ways in which agency and structure entwine with luck to open up opportunities. For Elin, her lucky or fortuitous encounters rendered dominant forms of social and cultural capital accessible which in turn were leveraged for opportunities, in this case, elite higher education.

Like Elin, the interplay of structure and agency was prominent in Marie's account; Marie's agency was reflected in her enthusiasm towards going to university to pursue a teaching degree. But the structural dimension of her transition to university was also prominent. Marie described the mentoring she'd received from the teachers she'd worked with at a school where she was a teaching assistant prior to going to university. The social capital she had leveraged through her connections with these teachers had not only provided her with knowledge and experience of HE on which she could draw, but also a sense of belief and confidence to apply to university:

Yeah, they said, 'you're wasted as a TA [teaching assistant]' which is not a thing because TAs are invaluable, but they were saying, you're so young, you really should go and do a teaching degree. And some of them had done it later as well. So, then I was like, oh actually, that's... they would tell me, I love hearing stories of people going to university later. It makes me feel so much more normal, because I think I had such a complex about it and it's much more common than I thought it was.... So, I guess I was really lucky, because how else do you provide that as a service to people. It was almost like I was mentored basically, but by a whole school, because every person would... all of the teachers I worked with and stuff, would give me different knowledge and advice and stuff. It was very supportive. But it wasn't a one person mentor, it was like a whole team effort (Marie, student).

Marie's experience is a powerful illustration of Bourdieu's (1997) contention that capitals can be converted or transformed from one to another and therefore have exchange value (Archer et al. 2023). The social capital she accessed through her connections with teachers facilitated her application to university which may ultimately enable her to access teaching jobs and other financially rewarding opportunities. What's more, Marie also enjoyed a sense of stability and security from having stable accommodation and a job prior to embarking on university. Together, these material contexts and the social networks surrounding her, provided a physical, economic and psychological sense of security usually enjoyed by more socio-economically privileged young people (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010).

Whilst Ingram et al. (2023) argue that the notion of luck is often wielded by middle-class young people to 'obscure structures of privilege' (p155), the participants in this study did

not evoke luck to ‘explain away’ privilege in this way. Instead, they saw luck as fortuitous events or encounters that had facilitated their access to dominant capitals and resources which in turn opened up opportunities for them. Luck and privilege can therefore be seen as two sides of the same coin; the fortuitous encounters Elin and Marie had experienced had enabled them to access privileged opportunities they might not have otherwise had. This is captured powerfully in Marie’s explanation for her successful transition to university where she recognised that having a stable job and accommodation provided her with space to dream of higher education.

I think I was really lucky to have a stable job for a long time, and I think probably because I was stable, I had a stable living space and a stable job and perhaps both of those things being secure allowed me to dream I think, because it’s really common for care leavers to move around a lot and be between hostels, and then be back with parents, and then that doesn’t work out and they move out again and have lots of instability. (Marie, student).

Other participants also reported serendipitous experiences which enabled them to gain access to social networks and resources which facilitated their transition to HE. Sophie described how her boyfriend’s stepmother was a social worker and had provided important support in applying to university:

My boyfriend’s step-mum is a social worker so she would actually go through a lot of it with me [the university application] and my boyfriends’ family are the ones who helped me, also pushed me to go to [named] university because I was like, freaking out about it so they were encouraging me to go there... (Sophie, student)

Here, Sophie’s access to ‘significant adults’ (Archer et al. 2023) with knowledge and experience of HE played an important role in her application to and ultimately gaining a place at university. Like most of the participants in this study, Sophie was the first in her family to go to university and in the absence of familial knowledge and experience of HE she mobilised dominant forms of capitals through her wider social networks. It was not so much the lucky experience per se that had brought advantageous outcomes for Sophie, but rather, the social capital that was leveraged to access HE, that the lucky encounter had given rise to.

Discussion

The concept of resilience has become widely used in research with care experienced students as a tool for understanding their entry to and achievements in higher education (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014, 2017; Ellis and Johnston 2022). Indeed, the students and graduates who took part in this research had shown extraordinary levels of self-determination and perseverance to overcome extreme hardships, adversities and challenges in getting to university and successfully completing their studies. Echoing dominant meritocratic accounts of educational success, participants tended to emphasise their own determination and drive to succeed in education as explanations for why they’d successfully transitioned to university, and amongst the graduates, completed their degrees. However, looking beyond these narratives of self-proclaimed resilience and self-determination which surrounded their educational achievements, we can see that these participants’ wider social contexts, including their prior experiences of education, learning identities, and the social and cultural capitals and resources they were able to mobilise, were crucial to their transitions to university.

These care experienced students and graduates' decisions about and transitions to HE were forged at the intersection of agency, structure and chance. At once, their decisions to embark on HE reflected their agency; their drive, determination and enjoyment of academic learning and a desire to live a different life to the one they'd experienced so far. Simultaneously, socially structured patterns of academic attainment and early experiences of education had framed the range of options available to them, as well as their subjective interpretations of their opportunities (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Rees et al. 1997; Evans 2021). For these young people, HE was viewed as a possible destination following post-16 education because both their academic attainment and their burgeoning positive learning identities had located it firmly within their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Their positive learning identities had been informed by their early educational experiences, academic attainments and positive support from teachers. These had framed the way they regarded HE, including particular (elite) institutions, and themselves in relation to it.

Their decisions and transitions to HE were also informed by their access to social and cultural capitals. Some of the young people in this study accessed dominant forms of capital through lucky or chance encounters. The capitals and resources they gained access to had exchange value (Archer et al. 2023); they were leveraged to access a deeply privileging opportunity in the form of HE. Some had attended schools or had foster placements where supportive teachers or foster carers encouraged their educational achievements and application to university. Others had links with adults with knowledge and experience of HE, and one was able to draw upon the economic buffer of her foster parents to provide a sense of security whilst at university. These resources were crucial in supporting their transitions to HE and enabling them to complete their studies.

These care experienced students and graduates were in many ways exceptional; they not only constituted a minority group in terms of their participation in HE (Harrison 2020), but they were also able to mobilise dominant social, cultural and economic resources and capitals to support their transitions to, retention in and transitions from HE, in a way that many care experienced young people are not able to. Nevertheless, the findings of this study have potential to shed light on the experiences of care experienced students beyond this study. They illuminate the powerful interplay of structure, agency and luck in young people's transitions to university, reminding us that transitions to HE cannot be understood as an individualised process but are located in wider social contexts that are routinely characterised by systematic barriers to HE for care experienced young people. For some of these participants, lucky and chance encounters provided access to privileged forms of social and cultural capitals in the absence of familial sources of social or cultural capitals. At once, this raises questions about the role of luck in disrupting wider patterns of social inequalities and supporting social mobility amongst care experienced students (Archer et al. 2023) who are less likely to have access to dominant capitals (Berridge 2012). The longitudinal element of the project hopes to explore the longer-term experiences and outcomes of these students and graduates as a way of examining the extent to which HE, and subsequent post-graduation employment or education opportunities gained by these participants, provides a mechanism for the disruption or reproduction of social inequalities.

Yet the findings also illuminate the fragility with which some people can access socially privileged capitals. This encourages us to explore the potential role of schools, teachers, social workers and fosters cares in providing more equitable and consistent access to privileged forms of capitals that care experienced young people might not typically access.

Promoting young people's connections with people who have knowledge and experience of HE or other key forms of support is vital if we are to bring about more socially even rates of participation in HE amongst under-represented groups of students. If teachers and social workers can act as vehicles for accessing privileged forms of capital for care experienced young people, their experiences might mimic those of more privileged young people whose access to knowledge and information regarding HE is a matter of social class privilege (Ball et al. 2002; Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 2013). In the context of HE, this paper highlights the potentially important role of providing opportunities for students to develop their social capital whilst at university in order to access opportunities upon graduation. Given the pressure that universities are currently under to ensure the employability of their graduates, investing in opportunities for students to develop social networks which might be resourceful upon graduation would be valuable for students, graduates and universities alike. Indeed, these considerations are to be explored through a developed network of university professionals, widening participation practitioners and academics located in universities, schools, charities and other organisations across Wales, following the completion of the research.

To conclude, whilst we should recognise the significant hurdles these young people have overcome, it is crucial to avoid the methodological individualism inherent in the concept of resilience which is routinely used to explain the educational successes of care experienced young people. By its very nature, the concept can only explain the success of individuals by recourse to individualistic traits or attributes, such as motivation, determination and drive, albeit traits that are mediated or moderated by wider social contexts such as the presence of social networks or supportive relationships (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014: 2017). As we have seen here, attention to the wider social and educational circumstances of care experienced young people is crucial in understanding why some succeed in making it to university. When we fail to acknowledge these circumstances by emphasising the inner 'resilience' of the individual, the responsibility is shifted away from structural and systematic inequalities and placed firmly on the individual to overcome these (Ellis and Johnston 2022). This may place blame on and further stigmatise and marginalise those who have not transitioned to university or succeeded whilst there.

It is crucial, therefore, that we don't take these students and graduates' experiences as typical of all care-experienced students and instead maintain a focus on the structures of disadvantage and inequality, including poverty and social exclusion, that work to exclude the majority of care experienced young people from HE in the first place. When resilience and determination is regarded as the key explanation for successful transitions to and outcomes in HE, we risk extolling the personal characteristics and attributes of the individual whilst casting opaque the structural and personal challenges that young people have faced in getting to university. This potentially absolves responsibility of universities and social services of the need to address the consequences of structural inequalities for care-experienced students (Ellis and Johnston 2022). It is imperative therefore that more socially sensitive and sociologically informed accounts of care experienced students' transitions to HE and experiences of it are acknowledged in policy and public discourses surrounding participation in HE amongst under-represented groups. The account provided here hopes to have contributed to this by highlighting the wider contexts in which young people's decisions and transitions to HE are made and shed light on why some young people make it to university against the odds.

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