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**Institutional habitus and educational  
outcomes of Looked After Children: Lessons  
for teachers**

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**Abstract**

Educational outcomes of Looked After Children in England are lower compared to their non-Looked After peers, contributing to the reproduction of social inequality. The dominant research and policy discourse locates responsibility for this within the care system, including the attitudes and behaviour of staff. The Bourdieusian concepts of capital, field and institutional habitus provide a relevant theoretical framework for deepening understanding of mechanisms behind social reproduction. This paper explores the extent to which educational outcomes might be better understood using these theoretical lenses. Simultaneously, the study reflects upon the concept of a homogeneous institutional habitus. Twenty-eight education and social care professionals and two young people who had been in care took part in interviews. The findings indicate that a complex set of factors help explain educational outcomes of Looked After Children. The data also suggest that the concept of a uniform institutional habitus fails to fully reflect the reality of the social relations within the research sites. Instead, it is more accurate to speak of institutional nexus, characterised by a combination of consensus and contrast between the imperatives of the organisation and the disposition of individuals. Lessons for teachers of the findings are discussed.

**Keywords**

Looked After Children; Education; Bourdieu; Institutional Habitus; Capital; Social Inequality.

**Background to the research**

Looked After Children (LAC) in England are those children under the Children Act 1989 (c.41) for whom the state has taken over responsibility for their care from the child's birth parent/s. For these children, school test and exam results over time have remained significantly lower compared to their peers not in care (Jackson, 1994). In 2014 the percentage of LAC gaining at least five GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examination results at A\* to C grade at the end of the secondary phase of schooling (aged sixteen) was 31 percent compared with 75 percent of all children (DfE, 2014). There has been a significant body of research searching for possible causes of the persistent gap in outcomes, and therefore also for possible solutions (Berridge, 2007).

There are two main positions in the literature, more fully discussed in the next section. The dominant discourse focuses on placing responsibility for this gap on a 'failing' care system, predicated on the assumption that those taking over responsibility for LAC should be able to compensate for any early disadvantage these children have experienced, and detailing the areas that social workers, teachers, carers and others might improve upon in order to achieve the goal of better test and examination outcomes (Jackson, 1987; Jackson, 1994; Martin and Jackson, 2002).

An alternative discourse avoids linking the care system causally to outcomes, arguing instead that it may be unreasonable to expect the care system to compensate fully for the long-term impact of

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early abuse and disadvantage which many LAC experience. Proponents of this perspective such as Berridge (2007) and Stein (2006) argue that these factors may have a deeper influence upon the educational trajectory of LAC than factors within the care system.

The research reported upon in this paper sees the educational outcomes of LAC as a problem of the social reproduction of inequality: if these children continue to have low achievement, their life chances are impaired. Bourdieu has developed a comprehensive and sophisticated framework for understanding how social inequalities might be sustained over generations, through his work on the acquisition of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), the development of individual habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), on how habitus operates in relation to the field of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), and on how these three inter-connect and inter-relate. More recently the neo-Bourdieuian notion of institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2001) provides further insight into mechanisms supporting social reproduction. The research therefore employed his ideas to frame the study.

This research study focuses on cultural capital, which according to Bourdieu (1986) has different components. Embodied cultural capital refers to internalised characteristics as customs, manners, knowledge of how to behave within dominant cultural spheres, and a culturally esteemed accent or vocabulary which can bring advantage to individuals. Institutionalised cultural capital includes educational qualifications which are recognised by those who legitimate them as being valuable for advancement.

One of the most fundamental points Bourdieu makes is that capital cannot exist except in relation to a field, defined as 'a space ...in which social agents and institutions... confront one another in strategies aimed at preserving or transforming [their] balance of forces' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:76). In any field, there is competition for capital, and furthermore, an individual's position and involvement in a field is largely determined by the amount and type of capital they possess: capital acts as a rich resource which can either advantage an individual, if what is held is considered legitimate by those in positions of dominance and power, or disadvantage an individual if it is not. Since all forms of capital are distributed and acquired in an unequal manner, and because they tend to interact with the various fields in a self-perpetuating way that is advantageous to those already holding substantial and relevant capital, this helps to explain the reproduction of social inequality.

However, according to Bourdieu (1990) there is a further fundamental process at play here too: that of individual habitus, forged through early experience. Individuals internalise their social situation in a powerful internal edifice which in turn structures how they are disposed to the social world. Habitus as created by class position reinforces cultural advantage or disadvantage depending on one's original social position. Moreover, schools, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue, are not neutral but loaded in favour of the advantaged. The middle-class child, on entering school 'encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). Working-class children, on the other hand, arrive at school with a habitus forged from less formal and dominant ideas or dispositions, and thus feel out of place as there is a mis-match between their habitus and the culture, language, values and practices of the school.

This notion of habitus has in more recent years been applied to institutions, predicated on the idea that organisations, like individuals, internalise the social world and form powerful dispositions which are shared by those working within the organisation. Institutional habitus has been defined as 'the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (Reay et al., 2001:127). The notion of institutions having a unified institutional habitus has been challenged more recently (Atkinson, 2011). The research described in this paper, which

took place in England, uses this Bourdieusian lens to explore further the role of staff supporting LAC within their organisational context.

### **Context for the research**

A key issue which emerges from the dominant research that followed is the attitudes of key workers supporting LAC (social workers, teachers, carers) who, it is argued, fail to fully appreciate the importance of education or provide sufficient support with education or who hold low expectations of LAC (Coulling, 2000; Francis, 2000; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Fletcher-Campbell and Archer, 2003; Harker et al., 2003; Mallon, 2005). There are some powerful messages here, but small sample sizes of both professionals and LAC involved in some studies may not be representative of a more general population of LAC, professionals and carers.

Other factors within the care system that seem to correlate with poor educational outcomes for LAC include changes of care placement and / or school placement and spending long periods out of school (Jackson, 1989; Fletcher –Campbell and Archer, 2003; O’Sullivan and Westerman, 2007; Thomson, 2007); a lack of resources to support homework and develop interests and hobbies (Martin and Jackson, 2002); and placement type, with those in residential care often faring worse than those in foster care, possibly exacerbated by a lack of advocacy in the former (McClung and Gayle, 2010). In England, every LAC should have a Personal Education Plan, designed to address their specific short and long-term educational needs, and detailing, for instance, who should help with homework or attend parents’ evenings. Even where these exist, research shows that these can be too rigid and can lack resources for practical help to be put into place (Hayden, 2005). The role of the school has also come under scrutiny in relation to LAC: there is evidence that they are more likely to experience bullying (Rao and Simkiss, 2007; McClung and Gayle, 2010), and that teachers fail to manage behavioural problems effectively (Francis, 2000).

The alternative view in the literature questions the whole basis of much of the preceding research. Berridge (2007) provides a thorough critique, describing it as simplistic and arguing that social problems are deeply complex and structural in origin: seeking apparently straightforward causes within the care system for the lower attainment of LAC misses this complexity.

Hare and Bullock (2006) argue that most research appears to ignore the heterogeneous nature of LAC as a group, such that any research sample might contain children with very different backgrounds and needs, thus making any findings only relevant to a small percentage of the sample. They also question the use of retrospective samples to gather data, concluding that this tends to over-emphasise the causal link between educational outcomes of LAC and the care system in which they find themselves.

There is also a body of work arguing that the typically disadvantaged backgrounds that many LAC experience prior to entering care can have a long-term impact (Forrester, 2008; Sinclair, 2010; Coman and Devaney, 2011) and that where this is compounded by abuse and neglect, this can have long-term consequences for LAC’s subsequent learning (Phillips, 2007; Greig et al., 2008; Peake, 2011; Scott, 2011; Harkess-Murphy et al., 2013).

The Bourdieusian approach taken in the research reported upon in this paper allows for a novel approach to the dichotomy found within this literature. The research had two aims: first, to explore the extent whether the reasons for the educational outcomes of LAC might be better understood using the lens of institutional habitus; second, to explore whether the concept of a unified institutional habitus is sufficiently robust or subtle to explain the complex social phenomena at play.

Accordingly, the research questions were:

1. What national or local policy frameworks do those who support LAC utilise to underpin their work? What are their dispositions towards these and how do they enact them?
2. What are the dominant assumptions and conceptualisations of LAC among those who support them, and how are these enacted?
3. How is educational achievement understood by those supporting LAC? How is this enacted? How are individual and institutional levels of practice related?
4. How are the relationships between different agencies or services that support LAC characterised?

### Methodology and Methods

This qualitative research was based on a Critical Theory paradigm which is concerned with investigating and exposing power inequalities (Humphrey, 2011). Two Local Authorities in England were chosen as loci for the research. The first, labelled Municipal, serves a city and its immediate district with a population of over 500 000 people. It is a metropolitan authority, covering a relatively small, densely populated geographical area. The number of LAC is in excess of 500. The GCSE outcomes had shown improvement over the three years preceding the research. The second Local Authority, named Provincial, serves a larger geographical area, has no major conurbation, but does include smaller populous towns, and overall the population is similar to Municipal. There are fewer than 500 LAC within the authority. The GCSE outcomes had remained stable over the preceding three years.

Across both authorities, interviews were undertaken as follows:

**Table 1.** Summary of Interviews.

Type of interview	Municipal	Provincial
Group	5 social workers who directly support LAC 3 foster carers No young people participated	6 social workers who directly support LAC 4 residential carers 2 young people who had been in care
Individual	1 Deputy Director, Children's Services 1 Virtual School Headteacher 2 Designated Teachers (1 Primary; 1 High) 1 Central LAC team staff	1 Deputy Director, Children's Services 1 Virtual School Headteacher 2 Designated Teachers (1 Special; 1 High) 1 Central LAC team staff

The interviews were semi-structured, centred on a schedule constructed from the research questions. The intention was that the interviews mirrored a conversation. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Key local authority documents regarding educational support for LAC were studied in order to gain organisational context.

For analysis, the research questions were used to frame themes which were conceptualised and written using open language, so as to avoid too narrow an interpretation of the data. Code numbers

were attached to each theme, with letters representing sub-themes. The data were then hand-coded on the transcripts.

All research should be bound by clear ethical principles, which as Orb et al. (2000) remind us are: autonomy, beneficence and justice. Autonomy recognises that participants have rights to information about the study, and to give or withhold informed consent. Beneficence is the principle of "doing good for others and preventing harm" (Orb et al., 2000:95) which includes maintaining anonymity of participants. Justice refers to the need to prevent exploitation of participants. Full and open sharing of information by researchers as to the purpose of the research, and the methods to be used, is central to adherence to this principle.

In accordance with the principles outlined above, permission to carry out the project was granted via formal university ethics procedures. The Director or Deputy Director acted as the gatekeeper for each local authority. Subsequent negotiations regarding access to participants took place with other managers, and through this process, participants volunteered themselves for the study. In the case of the group interview with the young people (aged in their twenties) in Provincial, a Youth Worker facilitated the setting up of the interview, having asked them if they were willing to take part. Participants were informed they did not have to take part in the interview, or could end the interview at any time if they wished, with no negative consequences at all. Participants were also reminded that during the interview, there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, and that the study was genuinely interested in their responses to the questions. This was particularly pertinent to the young people who took part, and particular care was taken to reassure them. Furthermore, the use of an insider researcher with a shared professional background working with LAC to conduct the interviews helped probe responses to elicit rich data, and assisted in liberating participants to produce honest responses within a safe environment (Mercer, 2007). The local authorities and participants within them have been anonymised, and pseudonyms have been used.

### **Findings**

The findings should be viewed within the context of their credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). These were aided in this research by the triangulation of data, achieved through the use of individual and group interviews, the involvement of participants from different agencies and career positions within the local authority, and the document analysis. Further credence was added by the 'insider' nature of the research (Mercer, 2007) mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the use of a post-interview reflective log, discussed with highly experienced researchers, helped ensure that the interview data collected was reported accurately. Although the findings relate to the 'particular environments and individuals' (Shenton, 2004:69) in this study, broader conclusions can be arrived at with caution, given the relatively small sample size in this study.

Seven key findings can be identified as follows:

Firstly, staff working directly with LAC interpreted formal policy differently, according to their own dispositions towards them. They did not slavishly enact policy but rather were selective in what they focused upon. The following quotation is representative of the views of frontline participants:

'That's what governments do, isn't it, they set standards and ... we do things on a much more individualised basis, whereas, that's ...just standardised isn't it, and children aren't standardised, they are unique, and we have to recognise that'

(Martin, Social Worker).

Across both research sites, a number of different policy documents were referred to, and within each authority, staff disagreed on which were the most important for them. Education workers, as might be expected, focused more on educational aspects of legislation and on target setting, and senior managers were more pre-occupied with meeting the demands of external policy imperatives compared with frontline staff.

Secondly, staff developed deep relationships with children, and showed a deep commitment to them, and in addressing their holistic needs. Within this context, the socio-emotional needs of children were seen as equally important as their educational needs. This was true of workers across all agencies, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘She’s so lovely...and she was in the library laying on a cushion reading with her glasses on, and I thought “Yeah, we had to take you out of your home and we were the ones that saw the bruising”, and we went through the whole thing...when you’re involved in the whole process and then you see that...all you would ever want is that that carries on’

(Dawn, Designated Teacher, Primary School).

Thirdly, this disposition of staff towards a holistic view of LAC led to them making judgements about which needs to prioritise, and often the pressing emotional needs of the child took precedence. This is illustrated by the experience of Claire (Young Person) who described how she was moved from her home town in an effort, she believes, to separate her from negative influences and so maintain her emotional stability. Staff were acutely aware of the need to address the ongoing impact of pre-care trauma, as exemplified by one participant:

‘If there’s that emotional baggage and that trauma then that has to be dealt with’

(Chris, Virtual School Headteacher).

For staff, the focus was on what they believed to be in the interests of each child, such that:

‘the driver is about just ensuring that we do the best for each child’

(Dawn, Designated Teacher, Primary School).

This disposition led staff to recognise and celebrate relatively minor achievements of children at events at which children received certificates. This was a strong feature across both sites and supported by all staff from all levels of seniority. The achievements recognised ranged from improved school attendance to achieving excellent test marks. The focus was on supporting and encouraging LAC by boosting their confidence and sense of self-worth, as part of meeting the needs of the ‘whole’ child. There was an interest in progress made, or ‘the distance travelled for the individual’ (Pauline, Central LAC Team) rather than in narrow test outcomes alone.

This did not mean, however, that recognition of the ‘real world’ importance of education for young people was absent. A fourth key finding was that staff held a broad interpretation of educational success. As one participant put it:

‘If you can’t read, and you can’t write, you can’t get a job’

(Sally, Deputy Director).

Educational success was interpreted in different ways by different staff based on what they assessed as the child’s needs. Jaz (Social Worker) epitomised this when she described how, for one young person with whom she works who ‘wants to do medicine, it is important to have the five GCSEs’, but

the attainment of five good GCSEs, is, as she put it 'not the be all and end all of everything' for every child. There was a prevalent feeling among staff that young people who were not able to achieve formal outcomes were delegitimised by the focus on test outcomes, and that their progress should be recognised. This was particularly important for children with special educational needs, as Rita (Designated Teacher, Special School) was keen to emphasise.

The broader context of the work was also significant. A fifth key finding was that the physical geography of the local authority impacted upon the children's learning where they had to travel long distances to and from a foster home and school:

'The kids are tired after an hour and half taxi journey'

(Bob, Designated Teacher, High School).

The visceral impact of these journeys was powerfully illustrated by Holly (Young Person) who described how at the age of fifteen, she was placed some fifty-five miles from her home town and was expected to travel 'by buses three hours each way' to school. She went on to describe the experience as 'really, really difficult' and 'quite scary in the winter, it was late nights going back when it was dark and having to change buses'. Unsurprisingly, Holly struggled to prioritise her learning, and this only changed when she moved back to her home town, where, as she put it, she 'was able to manage education better, because I was not having to do that journey as well'.

Within Provincial, the geography was particularly impactful. Staff described how time taken travelling to visit young people, who could be placed up to two hours' drive away, reduced time for other work. The impact upon communication with colleagues from other agencies was also affected by distance, and setting up meetings took much longer as staff struggled to find a convenient time to meet, given the time taken to travel to a mutual meeting point.

A sixth key finding was that different groups of staff had access to differing levels of resources. Social Care staff complained that restrictions on funding resulted in them having to 'think outside the box' (Tracy, Social Worker) and replace more costly activities with visits, for example, to the local park, which came with attendant difficulties such as 'the weather, and it's like raining' (Jaz, Social Worker) or the inappropriateness of expecting teenagers to go to the park. On the other hand, school-based staff were able to access funding from school budgets. Dawn (Designated Teacher) explained how an 'outstanding' school status brought with it the ability to control the school budget. Others described how school paid for activities such as extra tuition or international trips for LAC (Kate and Bob, Designated Teachers, High School) or to enable music or sensory therapy for children (Rita, Designated Teacher, Special School). Rita also relayed how she had led a fund-raising campaign to complete seventeen thousand pounds worth of improvements to a sensory room.

The final key finding was the significance of inherent barriers to multi-agency working. Staff from different agencies held different priorities for children, or had different views on how for example, the Pupil Premium funding should be spent. This is additional funding provided direct to schools in England for pupils who are deemed to be in need of extra assistance to boost their attainment. Issues of status and power also impinged upon these relationships, for example a school teacher telling a social worker that the school could not accept the social worker's assessment that the child had attachment difficulties which were affecting her behaviour in school, and insisted upon an independent assessment to 'prove' this. These tensions caused professionals to enact diverse interpretations of how best to meet the needs of children, and of one another's roles and responsibilities, and this led to complex relationships characterised by tension or challenge.



### Discussion

Seen through a Bourdieusian lens, the seven key findings reveal that staff held a focus on developing embodied cultural capital of children with whom they worked, helping the children to develop the attributes that the staff felt would help enhance the life chances of the children. This did not mean, however, that they ignored educational needs, and where staff felt that educational success was important for the child's trajectory, they very much supported this acquisition of institutional cultural capital in the form of test and exam results. However, cognisant of the fact that for many children, these formal outcomes remain unattainable, staff encouraged the acquisition of what might be called quasi-institutionalised cultural capital: the certificates relating to the relatively minor achievements of the young people but nevertheless which may be useful for them in the future. In this way, staff seemed to be aware of the need to try to help children gain capital which would help their prospects once they enter the fields of further education or employment markets.

A further implication of the focus on recognising minor achievements is that it could, paradoxically, reinforce low expectations of children. In supporting the development of embodied cultural capital and in meeting the child's socio-emotional needs, staff wanted very much to encourage and support any noted advancement. However, in doing so, they were in danger of inadvertently placing emphasis on achievements which, in the wider fields of education and employment, held very little value compared with the more legitimised achievements of school test and exam results.

The findings are therefore complex. Staff were not uninterested in education as much of the dominant research discourse suggests. Staff in this study did not fail to appreciate the importance of education or to support education in a simplistic manner, perhaps fuelled by low expectations of what the children could achieve, as indicated by the likes of research by Coulling (2000), Francis (2000) or Martin and Jackson (2002). Rather, staff recognised that, in accordance with the children's needs, they had a responsibility to meet both socio-emotional and educational needs, with the former taking precedence where the staff believed that to be necessary in order to help build embodied cultural capital as a springboard to then allow the child to settle and achieve within the educational field. The paradox here is that although staff appear to be highly committed to their work and child-centred, in doing what they believe is the 'right' thing (supporting socio-emotional needs and helping children acquire embodied and quasi-institutionalised cultural capital), they may simultaneously be doing the 'wrong' thing (not focusing on hard test and exam outcomes or the acquisition of institutionalised cultural capital).

This complexity is also reflected in the differences in perceptions and perspectives between staff operating within different services, resulting in some tensions between them. Different professional identities were at play, jockeying for position within the decision-making process for each child. This reflects the nature of the institutional habitus at play in both local authorities, which in this research was not a uniform, homogenous entity. There was a complex mix of consensus (on the focus on the 'whole' child, and on securing the emotional stability of the child as a priority) and of contrast (individual staff interpretations of educational success and of which needs to address). In addition, the physical geography of the local authority and differential access to resources by staff impinged directly upon children's educational trajectories. Taken together, the findings support the alternative view in the research literature, which argues for the need to acknowledge the long-term impact of damaging pre-care experiences (Phillips, 2007; Peake, 2011; Scott, 2011) and emphasises the complexity of factors involved in explaining educational outcomes for LAC, as well as the importance of capturing progress made by LAC (Berridge, 2007) if the dominant narrative of 'failure' of the care system and 'blaming' of workers is to be questioned.

## **Conclusion**

The first aim of the research was to explore the extent to which educational outcomes of LAC might be better understood using the lens of institutional habitus. In this respect, the research contributes to a more subtle understanding of reasons behind the educational outcomes of LAC. When the continued lower outcomes of this group is seen a problem of the social reproduction of inequality, and when a Bourdieusian lens is used to examine the dispositions and actions of staff supporting these children, the dominant research narrative of the failure of the care system and blaming of staff can be challenged, and the complexity surrounding these educational outcomes begins to emerge.

In this research, staff worked hard to meet the individualised needs of children and to support them in the way they thought would best allow them to reach their potential, even if this did not lead to narrow educational success as measure in school test or exam scores. The inherent paradoxes here, where actions providing appropriate socio-emotional support might preclude a focus on narrow schooling, further illustrate the nuanced nature of social reproduction at play here. Staff do not ignore the importance of education through ignorance or willful neglect of schooling, but tend instead to emphasise and enact their own interpretation of what the child needs, which could, ironically, lead to the child not acquiring the institutional cultural capital in the form of exam qualifications which would arguably help the child break the cycle of disadvantage.

The second aim was to explore whether the concept of a homogenous institutional habitus is robust. Here, the research again found evidence of complexity, where in some respects there was uniformity (the focus on meeting socio-emotional needs, seeing education as important alongside other aspects of children's lives) and in others there was contrast and difference (different ideas about what educational success means, different interpretation of key policy initiatives). It may be better, therefore, to think of institutional nexus rather than institutional habitus. Here, nexus is used to represent a complex web of relationships whereby individuals are simultaneously bound together by shared truths in response to the external world, yet are also in conflict with one another and their employer's formal policies or guidelines as they enact their internalised dispositions within the nexus. Thus, what emerges is a knotty, byzantine web of interactions that reflects much more complexity than that suggested by the notion of a unified institutional habitus.

The implication of these findings is that where teachers have awareness of the wider unintended impact upon educational outcomes of a focus on socio-emotional support for children, of celebrating relatively minor achievements, of concentrating on progress made rather than final test outcomes, and of long journeys to and from school, they can use this knowledge to try to offer individualised support to LAC to augment their educational success. While teachers can and should support the 'whole child, they need also to use their expertise to maintain focus on educational targets.

Future research could study the paradoxes revealed in this study more closely. For instance, the tension between workers' focus on minor achievements and the subsequent impact upon formal educational outcomes, or between support for the accumulation of embodied cultural capital and institutionalised cultural capital could be explored in detail to further understand the precise mechanisms at play.

Other aspects of Bourdieu's framework, such as cultural capital, or the individual habitus of professionals and young people, and how these interact with the various fields which the social players inhabit, could also reveal rich and exciting data, adding to a deep understanding of Bourdieu's ideas in action. The specific role of the teacher within this could be researched more thoroughly to understand what particular skills and approaches they could employ within a multi-

agency network, to support the educational journey of LAC. If successfully navigated, this could lead to the acquisition of legitimised and widely recognised institutionalised cultural capital which can in turn result in improved life chances for LAC.

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