Complex 'everyday' lives meets multiple networks: the social and educational lives of young children in foster care and their foster carers

Veena Meetoo[1], Claire Cameron, Alison Clark and Sonia Jackson

Abstract

The everyday lives of young fostered children are rarely studied. Using an ethnographic approach including interviews, walks, observation and photo-map making, this paper reports on the findings from a unique pilot study of the social and educational lives of young foster children (aged 0- 4) in an inner London borough, UK. The paper will present the following findings: 1) what foster carers do: everyday lives and education; 2) foster carers' meanings and perspectives on early education; and 3) foster carers as 'everyday experts' in meeting complex needs. Our findings demonstrate how foster carers fulfil multifaceted roles as they navigate complex everyday life with their young foster children. We discuss the ways in which foster carers may provide a 'stimulating' environment, but also the barriers and difficulties they encounter.

Keywords: young children, foster care, foster carers, education, everyday life, ethnography

[1] Corresponding author: Veena Meetoo, veena.meetoo@ucl.ac.uk Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, London UK

The research literature on young fostered children is sparse. Where it does exist, it is focused on problems, such as aggressive behaviour or lack of attachment, and not on what foster carers can do to promote children's development and enjoyment of life (Biehal et al. 2010; Wildeman and Waldfogel 2014). Alongside this is persistent evidence of the educational under-achievement of children in care and its long term impact on life chances, wellbeing and life-course outcomes (Cameron et al., 2015; Connelly & Furnivall, 2013; Jackson, 2001, 2007; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Jackson & Höjer, 2013). Moreover, the vast majority of the literature on education and children in care is focussed on older children, and young children in foster care have been overlooked in both policy and research (Jackson and Hollingworth 2017).

Given that the early weeks and months of life are a time of rapid learning and brain development (Gray 2010; Jackson and Hollingworth 2017), we suggest that there is an urgent need to understand more about the educational lives of young children in foster care. Jackson and Hollingworth (2017) posit that we *"cannot afford therefore to treat babies and toddlers as passive objects for whom it is sufficient to provide basic physical care. This is especially true for children in foster care, who will usually have had a poor start in life" (p360).* Foster care, whether short or long term, has the potential to contribute to children's educational and social development and longer term outcomes, particularly in the early years. The research on which this paper draws was a first step towards addressing the lack of knowledge about young fostered children's educational and social lives with a view to building practice capacity in foster care.

Early childhood education and young children in foster care
The upbringing of young children is highly sensitive to educational processes due to their developmental stage. Across the world, societies are investing in early childhood education and care systems to complement parental upbringing and optimize children's development

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(Miller et al. 2017). In England, early childhood education and care (ECEC) can take a number of forms including nursery schools and classes, full or part time day care in nurseries, sessional preschools and home-based care with registered childminders. All ECEC providers must offer the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. There are also children's centres, which are very largely targeted on programmes to support parents to encourage early learning (Jackson and Forbes 2015). High quality ECEC makes a difference to children's outcomes throughout their time at school and beyond and there are conspicuous 'catch-up' gains for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sylva et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009; OECD 2017). Children who are looked after in foster care are among the most disadvantaged in England. This group consists of about 13,000 children aged 0-4 years (DfE 2017a), many of whom have developmental delay and a range of social, psychological and behavioural needs (Vasilevva and Petermann 2016; Flynn et al. 2018; Ward et al. 2006), which may influence their later educational participation and attainment in school. Therefore, the provision of ECEC is crucial for young fostered children's development (Lipscomb and Pears, 2011; Mathers et al., 2016; Meloy and Phillips, 2012), but preliminary studies suggest that children of preschool age in foster care do not attend ECEC at the same rate as other children (Mathers et al. 2016).

Government guidance stipulates that fostering services have the role to promote a 'stimulating environment' in fostering households to support the development of children's 'emotional, intellectual, social, creative and physical skills' (Standard 7.1, DfE 2011). Foster carers, then, have a broadly educational role in the everyday life of and interactions with young fostered children as well as facilitating access to more formal ECEC provision. Despite this important developmental role, we know very little about how foster carers go about educating their young fostered children, nor what kind of social lives the children have. Foster care in England is usually a temporary living situation until a permanent solution is found, either through adoption or return to birth families. Only a quarter of looked after children are fostered for a year or more (Narey and Owers 2018). However, it now takes an

average one year and 11 months from entry to care to adoption, so young children may spend many months in foster care (DfE 2018).

Alongside a stimulating environment, foster carers should provide a nurturing, sensitive and stable environment to help children in local authority care overcome early adversity and promote attachment security (Mathers et al., 2016, Lang et al., 2016). Foster carers may have a positive influence over children's educational attainment (Mathers et al., 2016; Pears et al., 2010). However, carers in general appear to be less involved than they might be in their children's education (Mathers et al., 2016), possibly due to frequent placement transitions, lack of awareness about the provision of early education and limited information about accessing to special services (Pears et al., 2010). In practice foster carers help young children access educational activities through taking them to sessional activities such as playgroup, going to parks and providing them with toys and stimulation at home. The 'stimulating environment' for young children underpins what we refer to as the 'educational and social lives' of young children in foster care. We refer to the whole environment: following research evidence from ECEC on high quality services (e.g., Mathers et al. 2017), we are interested in how the physical, social and emotional environment combine to facilitate children's development. The stimulating environment includes resources such as basic welfare requirements (e.g. health, safety and appropriate supervision). It also includes experiences, such as caring and nurturing relationships, and reflects how the social and pedagogical are linked together, for instance, how early learning is embedded in relationships with adults and peers, and the quality of social interactions and support for learning (Mathers et al 2016). We outline how the stimulating environment was measured below (see 'Outline of the study and methods' section).

Ethnography, foster care and the 'everyday'

Researching foster care means investigating the family and work lives of carers whose professionality is ambivalent. Foster carers work with, and look after, children whose birth

families cannot, for a variety of reasons, care for or bring up their children. Accustomed to being assessed and monitored, and also responsible for the intimate details of care and education, foster carers' expertise and practice straddles the informal and the formal (Nutt 2006), presenting challenges for researching their practice. Researchers of everyday life note the invisibility of the 'habitual' (Phoenix et al 2017), and researching the habitual in family homes, typically a private space where the normative or routine is largely unarticulated (Phoenix et al. 2017), is particularly difficult. Data collection methods such as interviews risk omitting what might be taken for granted details. Moreover, observations are difficult to negotiate in the private, informal and domestic setting of family homes, particularly those, like foster care households, that are subject to more overt surveillance by official agencies. Foster carers are offering their home and their care as an exemplar of 'ordinary' family life to children whose lives to date have been extraordinary (Berrick and Skivenes 2012). 'Ordinariness' tends to be invisible and taken for granted, while foster carers are required to document both the routine and the exceptional in children's lives in part for the purposes of scrutiny by courts (DfE 2011).

Ethnography, as a study of interactions, behaviours and perceptions (Reeves et al. 2008), is a promising approach to studying everyday life in foster care but has been little attempted, especially where the focus is younger age groups of children (Wildeman and Waldfogel, 2014; Cunningham and Diversi 2013; Schelbe and Geiger 2017). Ethnography requires a researcher to be 'embedded' with their participants, or in a given site for a sustained period of time (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). It involves the researcher 'burrowing into the social relationships of a specific local social world and revealing at least some of its internal dynamics and layers of meaning' (Riain 2009: 289).

Multiple methods for data collection are typically used in ethnographic studies such as participant observation, focus groups, and written and visual materials. Ethnographies are 'flexible' and provide the researcher with the space for adaptability in the context in which

the study's participants are located (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Bassey 1999) and require sensitivity to the relationship between researcher and participants. Ethnographies typically involve the researcher observing 'real life' situations, writing extensive fieldnotes, following a group and taking part in what is going on in that setting, which generates 'thick description' (see Reeves et al. 2008).

For this study, we adopted an ethnographic approach to understand how the habitual, routine, 'everyday' carries significant importance, potentially showing us how ideologies of care, parenting and education are embedded in everyday practices. We set out to explore how the everyday in routines and habits help us identify the facilitators, barriers and limitations to providing good early education in a foster care environment. Our study draws on a growing body of scholarly work exploring the practice of 'everyday' life in families (Phoenix et al 2017). Scott (2009) suggests that because everyday life is often seen as trivial, it can be easily forgotten and omitted in research, but is important as it comprises the ways in which people typically act, think, and feel on a daily basis. In family practices, everyday life encompasses the mundane, routine, habitual, or 'normal' things we do (Morgan 2013). However, the process of understanding the everyday can be methodologically challenging. Interviews alone cannot sufficiently capture the everyday. Hitchings (2011) suggests that ethnographic and particularly observational approaches are often seen as better suited to studying the everyday, and that interviews can be useful in studying everyday lives and practices *alongside* other methods (in Phoenix et al 2017).

We draw on interviews, observation, shadowing, and photo data during multiple visits, as influenced by two methodological traditions. The first is Alison Clark's (2005) 'Mosaic approach' in ECEC settings, which she describes as the *"bringing together of different pieces or perspectives in order to create an image of children's worlds, both individual and collective"* (p31). This approach combines established methods such as observation and interviewing with innovative participatory tools. In her studies, children used cameras to

document what they thought was important in their ECEC spaces and took the researcher on a tour of the setting. In addition, they were asked to make maps using their photographs and drawings. Each tool forms one piece of the 'mosaic' (Clark and Statham, 2005). Secondly, we draw on Phoenix et al.'s (2017) study of everyday family practices and the environment in the UK and India. These two studies had different foci but had in common a concern to capture embedded and /or invisible practices from the participants' viewpoint. They both recognised the value of multiple data sources and methods (interviews, maps, observations, fieldnotes, photo-elicitation). Below, we set out how we adapted these two methods for the purposes of our study of young fostered children's educational and social lives before discussing our findings.

Outline of the study and methods

The study piloted an ethnographic methodology with foster carers to understand their 'everyday' lives with foster children of pre-school age. More specific aims around education were to explore:

- What foster carers believe is 'good' care and a good upbringing for children they look after;

- What foster carers can do to provide a stimulating environment for very young children, and what gets in the way;

- The benefit from educational provisions available to them such as free places in nurseries.

The researchers worked with a fostering team in one London borough to facilitate the recruitment of the participants with whom prior contact had been established. During a regular foster carers network meeting where the research team delivered a presentation about the project, the head of fostering introduced carers looking after pre-school age children to the researchers.   Ethical clearance was obtained from the UCL Institute of Education's ethics committee. Conducting research with looked after children and gaining

parental consent can be complex, depending on the status of the child. Of the six children in our sample, we required consent from two sets of birth parents as the local authority had shared parental responsibility for the child with the birth parents. This led to significant delays in beginning fieldwork with the foster carers and underlines the difficulties of researching young children in foster care.

Whilst we draw on the Mosaic approach, we adapt it in that the main participant is the carer, in a similar way to Clark's adaptation of the approach to engage with early childhood practitioners' perspectives (Clark, 2011). Our initial intention was to address children's views directly, especially those age 3-4 years, but this proved not to be viable given that most of the children had developmental delays. We draw on Phoenix et al.'s (2017) work by similarly using multiple visits with participants, photos of 'everyday life', and photo elicitation discussions alongside the construction of photo maps (further details below). The fieldwork design comprised three visits from the researcher, and made use of the methods outlined in Table 1:

Table 1: Summary of ethnographic methods

	Method	**Comments**
Visit 1 **(half day)**	Interviews	A semi-structured interview conducted in the home with the foster carer
	Observation and shadowing; fieldnotes	Qualitative observation accounts of child and foster carer at home and/ or outside (e.g. park, playgroup). Foster carers requested to take photographs of everyday life over next two weeks.
Visit 2 **(1 hour)**	Photography	Upload foster carers' photographs to secure digital platform, and selection for printing
	Observation and shadowing; fieldnotes	Qualitative observation accounts of child and foster carer at home and/or outside (e.g. park, playgroup)
Visit 3 **1-2 hours)**	Photo map making;	2D representations of everyday life of foster carers with young children using photos and foster carers' own written labels
	Observation; fieldnotes	Qualitative observation accounts of child and foster at home

In total, five foster carers were recruited, all of them female. The carers were experienced in fostering, each having looked after children aged 0-4 years for between 7-10 years. Indicative of the ethnic diversity in the borough in which the study was conducted, three of the carers were from African Caribbean backgrounds, one was African and one White British:

Table 2: Participants' details

	Details of foster children
Foster carer 1	13 months old, developmental delays (speech, physical)
Foster carer 2	7 months old, born 2 months premature
Foster carer 3	6 months old, no known special developmental or physical health needs
Foster carer 4	3 year old, physical health problems, developmental delays (speech, physical)
Foster carer 5	Twins, 2 years old, developmental delays (speech)

Alongside interview, fieldnotes and observation, map making and photo elicitation were used to capture the more taken for granted aspects of everyday life that might have been omitted from reporting in interviews. Foster carers were asked to take photos of everyday activities over a two week period. Examples of such everyday activities included feeding, stairclimbing, and habitual practices that go alongside this such as encouraging independence through eating and play. While observation was essential to the ethnographic approach alongside the interviews and informal chats as a means to explore what people say, and what they do in practice, the photos were a means to see everyday life through the eyes of the foster carer, by what photos they chose to take and which they went on to select. By organizing and labelling the photo maps, we aimed to provide carers with space to co-construct their stories of everyday life with their young foster children and capture the accompanying simultaneous verbal narrative. The photo map making was an attempt at creating the opportunity to construct a narrative together, for the participant to 'think what they think' about their 'world right now'.

The methodological tools and frameworks for recording data were constructed with early childhood education in mind. The interview questions and fieldwork recording sheet were devised to cover specific features identified in Mathers and colleague's (2012; 2016) work on high quality childminding, which was selected as a similar domestic and work environment. Given that the tools to which Mathers et al. refer are specific to formal ECEC settings, not all are applicable to foster carers providing for children in their homes. However, some of the measures of good childminding were very much part of everyday life with foster carers, and as such, we drew on the following features of the scales:

1) Space and furnishings (e.g. play and learning, child-related display, gross motor equipment);

2) Personal care routines (e.g. meals/snacks, naps/rest);

3) Language-reasoning (e.g. books and pictures, encouraging children to communicate, using language to develop reasoning skills; informal use of language);

4) Activities (e.g. fine motor activities, art, music/movement, nature/science, numbers, use of TV, video, and/or computers);

5) Interaction (e.g. discipline, carer-child interactions, interactions with other children) (cited in Mathers et al. 2012).

In addition, the Head of Fostering at the local authority was interviewed to gain their perspective on policy and practice, and a focus group with six foster carers who had not been involved in the ethnography was held for the purposes of further reflection on the initial findings. However, this paper focuses on the data generated from the ethnographic methods with the five foster carers. We discuss three main areas of findings that reflect what we saw as the everyday educational and social lives of young children in foster care. These findings capture both how the 'stimulating environment' was provided by carers and others involved in the children's lives, but also the barriers and difficulties encountered by foster carers in providing a stimulating environment.

Findings

What foster carers do: 'everyday' lives and education

Providing basic 'care' needs of food, hygiene and affection were a strong if not the dominant feature of all foster carers' narratives, which was encapsulated by the following carer's response:

> *…you have to have a real, genuine love and a passion that you want to help these kids, and also provide a good home...home environment for them, that they can feel secure and feel warm and that they know this is a place that...there's trust here. I can be myself here. I'm not going to get hurt…And also for them to feel you are there for them…You know, those kind of things…* (Foster carer 5, Interview).

When carers were asked what it means to provide good foster care, typical responses included *"Looking after them like one of my own, love, patience, kindness, providing them with safety, making them feel wanted, and keeping them clean".* One photo map reflected these typical interview responses, depicting the home as functional, well equipped, safe and hygienic:

Photo map 1: 'Inside my carer's home', foster carer 1

Some photomaps such as the above reflected what are arguably the most predictable and anticipated aspects of everyday life of foster carers and their children, given that carers are expected to provide a home that is 'warm, adequately furnished and decorated, is maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene and is in good order throughout' (Standard 10.2, DfE 2011). However, others captured the unexpected. For instance, many of foster carer 2's photos were of shopping, which spurred her to group these together and thematise the map as 'Shopping Everyday'.

Photo map 2: 'Shopping everyday', foster carer 2

Shopping was not an everyday activity that the carer spoke about during interviews and informal chats, but through the maps it became apparent how integral it was to her week, thus highlighting the relevance of the photo method in capturing 'the everyday'. The articulation of such everyday activities open up a further line of analysis in terms of contextualizing the carers as socially and economically located individuals. In this case, the carer, a single mother, lived in a flat above shops with her two older children (both over 16 years of age), and did not own a car. It became evident how this carer spent much of her time travelling on foot and bus to shops to buy various items for her family. Her shopping journeys reflected her migrant background, going to specialist shops to buy specific food items to cater for family preferences, and also the dietary needs of the foster child by purchasing specialist baby milk. Other carers who were married or living with a partner spoke of the help they had with everyday activities such as shopping, and as such appeared to have more time and support to take up a range of activities, such as accessing swimming pools and a variety of playgroups further from home. These findings suggest the need to

consider and contextualise who foster carers are in terms of their backgrounds and home lives, to further understanding of what might facilitate or create barriers to a 'stimulating environment' for young children in foster care. Most importantly, they signal that everyday routines and environments in foster homes should be considered by the wider fostering team when planning for meeting the needs of the child, and how foster carers can be better supported to provide a 'stimulating environment' (Standard 7.1, DfE 2011).

Other routine everyday activities that we found to be present in foster carers' homes and conducive to the 'stimulating environment' included feeding, interaction such as singing, talking and physical affection, and domestic family life consisting of interactions with the extended family, friends and special events. Being present in foster carers' homes, the researcher observed everyday practices including feeding, changing, playing, singing, and talking to the child. Feeding during mealtimes were also moments in which affection was commonly conveyed. Cuddling, joking and open questions were observable amongst all carers, and affectionate behaviour during mealtimes was common, particularly with the very young children (foster carers 1, 2 and 3).

Displays of warmth when feeding young children consisted of jokes and talking to the child in a soft and playful tone (foster carer 1). Given that the 13-month old had physical developmental delays and could not hold a spoon (a movement that would usually be seen as typical for a child of this age), the carer's patient approach was crucial. Her commitment to ensuring that the child had been fed was carried out using physical affection and verbal encouragement. The researcher observed that when the child stopped eating, she picked her up and put her on her lap, and whilst being cradled, the child continued to eat:

> *Being on her foster carer's lap appeared to make baby happier – she was smiling,*
> *making lots of eye contact with her carer and vice versa, and baby also was turning*
> *to me and looking. She appeared to really enjoy being physically close to the foster*

carer, and being talked to and joked with whilst being fed. She was touching the

carer's leg whilst being fed on her lap…They appeared to have a good bond, and

being physically close to the foster carer had a noticeable effect on the level of return

interaction from baby (fieldnotes, visit 1, foster carer 1)

Similarly, feeding time with foster carer 2 was characterized by praise and encouragement (e.g. 'bravo', 'excellent', 'good boy'). The display of affection also appeared to be important in motivating the child to eat. She provided cuddles, 'kissing noises' and talked directly to him. Singing was also a means to engage with the child whilst feeding. Her persistence through affection appeared to be important to counter his resistance to eating (fieldnotes, foster carer 2, visits 1 and 2).   Such moments provide a window onto the important role foster carers play in responding to specific feeding needs for children who may experience such mundane activities as difficult. The carers' displays of affection and warm emotional climate contributed to the 'stimulating environment' that supports the development of the children's skills, particularly the emotional, social, and physical (Standard 7.1, DfE 2011).

A further feature of the all the carers' everyday lives was providing a stimulating environment through interaction with other children in the extended foster family. Some carers looked after their nieces, grandchildren and their birth children who were of a similar age which provided valuable stimulation and interaction (foster carers 1, 3, and 4). Such interactions were particularly important for children who struggled in formal ECEC settings due to developmental delay (discussed further below 'Foster carers as "everyday experts" in meeting complex needs'):

Foster carer's niece being on the mat also made a difference to the baby – niece

interacted with baby by passing her toys, and baby reached out and was touching

these a lot more with her than with us adults. Her presence seems like an important

addition to the household! She was stimulating her – baby wanted to touch the same

toys as niece and definitely more responsive to the child (Fieldnotes, visit 1, Foster carer 1)

Similarly, foster carer 4 spoke about the importance of including the child as part of the family, by taking him to special events such as the graduation of her daughter, and other wider family gatherings. By taking him to a university and seeing his foster sister graduate, she commented on the potential significance of such memories for his own educational aspirations. Being part of the fabric of everyday family life appeared to provide the children with stimulation through interactive social skills, intellectual development, as well as emotional bonding through fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Foster carers' meanings and perspectives on early education

During interviews, carers talked about education as something delivered by other professionals. For instance, all five carers talked extensively about taking their foster child to formal educational pre-school settings, such as playgroups, toddlers groups, nurseries and sing along sessions at local libraries. These activities formed an integral part of their week and were recognised by the carers as important, arguably an expected finding given the now normative discourses about the value of early years education (DfE 2017b). Taking the child to the park and walking around the local area were also regular activities. Education in everyday life appeared as: 1) Structured/formal education sessions outside the home (e.g. playgroup, park, libraries); 2) Educational equipment in the home (e.g. books, toys - usually plastic and boldly coloured, digital technologies to play educational games such as learning the alphabet); and 3) Play based learning (e.g. bubbles, messy play).

Many photo maps reflected the place of formal educational settings and outside play spaces, but they also captured what foster carers view to be educational in the home. The maps and spending time in foster carers' homes showed equipment, and where it was located (e.g.

playmat in the lounge, books in the bedroom, types of toys and suitability for the child's developmental age).

Photo map 3: 'My World Right Now' Map, foster carer 4

Strikingly, foster carer 4 presents a snapshot of the home *for* the child. Her selection of photos of books in the child's bedroom, toys that he enjoys playing with, and his 'bright and colourful' room all emphasise educational stimulation and activities for his development.

Foster carers were aware of the discourse of play based learning through their contact with nursery and playgroup settings. When asked how young children learn best, one carer explained:

> *I think a lot of it comes through play. And other children as well...from each other, learning together; put them in a group (Foster carer 4, interview)*

However, observations of what the carers did at home suggested little presence of play based learning, with the exception of foster carer 5 who was a trained nursery worker and intentionally used sand, home-made playdoh and everyday objects to support children's learning. Play based learning is widely regarded as beneficial for younger children's learning, and is commonly seen to constitute an integral part of early education (MacIntyre 2011; Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer 2009). But for some children, such as those with developmental delays, there maybe be barriers to engaging in play based learning such as playing with sand and other natural textures. For example, Foster carer 1 expressed her concern that playing with sand would pose a risk to the child who, because of her clenched fists, would get sand in her eyes.   We also found that in addition to the perceived risks associated with play based learning, perceptions of messy play sat in contrast to foster carers' narratives about the importance of hygiene, conflicting with presentations of their homes as organised, hygienic and tidy spaces to adhere to the official guidance. Our data suggests that a more nuanced understanding is required of how play based learning that is messy may not be afforded high priority in 'hygienic' spaces of foster homes, and where 'risks' to accidents must be effectively managed and minimised (Standard 4, DfE 2011).

Foster carers *as 'everyday experts' in meeting complex needs:* navigating professional relations and early education

Carrying out a caring role for very young children requires attending to basic needs, being attentive and responsive through providing care such as physical affection, feeding, nappy changing and bedtime routines, all embedded in an 'ethics of care' (Tronto 1993). Beyond such 'typical' parenting activities and tasks, we found that the carers in our study were looking after very young children who often had complex, multiple physical health and developmental needs. They were also at the core of what were sometimes complex legal situations and processes between the birth family and adoption, as well as being tasked with the integration of the foster child into foster family life.

Carers talked in interviews and informal chats about how complex and busy everyday life is for them and the children they look after. Common activities included taking children to visit a number of professionals and specialists for health or development issues. Taking children to contact with their birth parents anywhere between one and five times a week made heavy demands on their time. These activities ran alongside going to playgroup, libraries, parks and their other family responsibilities, such as cooking cleaning, shopping and looking after their own and other children such as grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Through the following diagram we map what caring for very young fostered children typically involved:
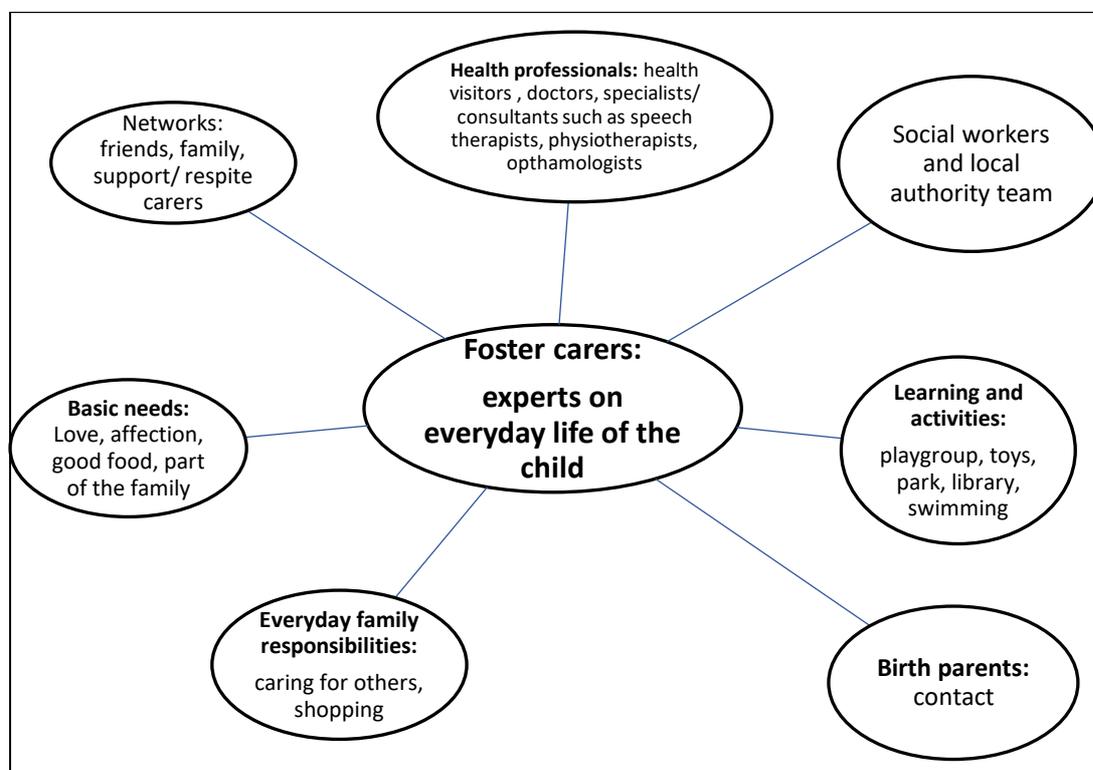

Figure 1: Foster carers and their young foster children: a web of relations

Navigating the web of relations, activities and needs was a common feature of discussion amongst all the carers in the study. The number of professionals involved in the young children's care went well beyond the local authority team. Physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, dieticians, health visitors, and ophthalmologists were amongst the

professionals cited by carers, with whom they engaged on behalf of their foster child. This led some to feel as though they were doing more than should be expected of foster carers. As carer 4 explained during an informal conversation, there is *"so much involved in looking after child with complex needs"*.

One obstacle to foster carers accessing ECEC for the young children they look after is the time involved in taking the children to see these various professionals, to contact centres to meet with birth parents, alongside home visits from social workers. This sometimes meant that attending educational settings was difficult. As one foster carer explained, at the beginning, contact can be several times a week:

> When they first have contact it can be five to seven days a week. Then it gradually gets a bit lesser and lesser and lesser as you go on. But obviously with the parents not turning up half the time, it quickly went from five days to like three days or two days and then one day and then none….. it's full on (Foster carer 3, interview).

Schofield and Simmonds' (2011) explore the debates and practice contexts of contact for infants subject to care proceedings. The authors note that whilst "the goal is to achieve good-quality contact that enables the infant to experience their parent as a familiar figure…this frequency should be at a level that does not interfere with the infant's need for consistent physical and emotional care in the foster home and to form a positive relationship with the foster carer" (p74). Our findings similarly demonstrate the adverse impact high levels of contact can have young foster children's access to ECEC.

Being the constant adult involved in the children's lives often meant that the carers were the ones who knew the child best and were at the forefront of identifying barriers to ECEC. Study observations revealed how the carers were not only attending to the basic needs of the child, but also observing and assessing their needs and adapting their caring practices to

suit the child. Often receiving the children when they are young babies and toddlers, the carers were at the forefront of observing development issues, and were sometimes the first to identify physical and speech delay. Four of the six children had some form of physical and/or language delay, which carers sometimes identified to be a barrier to taking up ECEC. During the walk to playgroup, foster carer 1 spoke of the pressure from the child's social worker to provide certain types of educational stimulation, which was highly encouraged to strengthen interaction with other children. However, the carer felt that this was inappropriate for the child's developmental stage in particular:

> …*Foster carer said that she happily takes her [to playgroup] twice a week, but has understood that because of slow development, she does not use the playgroup in the same way as other children. She cannot do messy play, or go in the sand pit as she rubs her eyes with clenched fists a lot. She also does not stay for snack time because she cannot eat as the others do (e.g. would choke on bananas – FC comments it will be on 'her neck' if she chokes. Her responsibility to make sure she is safe) (Fieldnotes, foster carer 1, visit 2)*

Similarly, foster carer 4 explained how ECEC settings could sometimes be challenging for the child she was looking after. He had poor development of his legs stemming from having contracted rickets due to malnourishment as a baby:

> …*he cannot keep up with other kids, running, communication. I've seen that where he's just sort of sat down and just played by himself because he can't keep up with the other children…So things like that slows him down, you know (Foster carer 4, interview).*

In addition to the child's physical delay, foster carer 4 also identified that he had speech delay, which required her to make careful choices of educational toys for use in the home. Whilst constructing the photo map 'My World Right Now', she explained:

> *… the items are important for him because they show what developmental stage he is at – he is definitely below 3 years – so the shapes and colours help him…"I picked these toys because looking at him, not even as a three year old, but someone who is younger, I am trying to build him and develop him from coming back and forward again.. like an 18 month old….". (Fieldnotes, foster carer 4, photo map making)*

Burger (2017) cautions, "adults must not over-stimulate children's development but provide care and education responsively to children's needs and abilities" (p756). Our data highlights how foster carers are well placed to understand the learning capacities of their particular child, but also indicates a requirement for carers to have basic knowledge of child development and learning of young children. At the time of data collection, specific sessions on this area were not a core part of the borough's training package for foster carers.

Foster carers have reported feeling undervalued and dismissed by social workers, managers and teachers, reflecting a failure to treat carers professionally, despite them knowing the child best (Narey and Owers 2018). The examples from our research demonstrate how foster carers should be seen as everyday experts in the needs of the child in the following ways: firstly, how the carer was a key figure in identifying the child's needs; secondly, that providing a 'stimulating environment' for young children with developmental delays needs to be integral to the care plan for fostered children (i.e. that a one-size fits all approach is not appropriate) and that foster carers should be part of the team to input into the plan (Narey and Owers 2018); and thirdly, that foster carers looking after children with complex needs are at the forefront of managing the risks involved in taking such children to ECEC settings that may pose hazards. In addition to 'choking' because of the child not having developed

swallowing skills (carer 1), another was concerned about taking her foster child swimming because of his heart condition and having to ask health professionals what can and cannot be done (foster carer 2). Foster carer 4 explained that, from her perspective, the hygiene levels in playgroups had gone down which she attributed to funding cuts and a downturn in quality. This made her apprehensive about taking her foster child to playgroups because he had weakened immunity.

A further barrier to taking up ECEC was due to issues surrounding understandings of attachment theory. The temporality of foster children's stay was seen by some carers to be in conflict with the process of settling them into nursery, which could also conflict with the attachment they as carers were forming with the child. One carer explained how her social worker had advised against attending nursery due to uncertainty surrounding the length of the placement and the child being adopted in the near future. Forming attachments to key workers in nursery for a short period of time was seen as potentially detrimental, and forming an attachment to the foster carer was prioritised. As the foster carer explained,

> …forming multiple attachments [is] not good when you are trying to form your
> own…contact also takes time – and it is more important for them to see parents
> rather than taking them to educational setting (Foster carer 4, notes from informal
> conversation)

Limitations and challenges of the project

We identify a number of limitations and challenges. Firstly, the research was conducted for a small pilot project. Funding was limited and the sample size of five carers reflects this restriction. However, due to the depth of the data collection it has been possible to generate a comprehensive picture of the social and educational lives of young children in foster care, which to our knowledge, has not been done before. Secondly, and typical to working with

foster carers more generally, participants had busy schedules which meant that arranging and carrying out multiple fieldwork visits was challenging. From start to finish, fieldwork with the five carers was completed over a six-month period, but the duration of the project was much longer as the project was first discussed with the local authority in November 2016 and funded in February 2017. Negotiations to set up fieldwork including the complex consent seeking process for the children to take part took three months. From the point of funding to the end of data collection, the project duration was nine months. Thirdly, given that the local authority was instrumental in selecting the participants, it is possible that the carers were 'hand selected' to reflect the borough's 'best' carers.

Conclusions and reflections

The demands on the everyday lives of young children in foster care are complex and multiple, from domestic routines, to contact with health and developmental professionals, to the requirements of the foster care system. This can make meeting their educational needs a challenge, with notable barriers in accessing and 'using' formal education settings. Hectic schedules punctuated by contact with birth parents, and meetings with professionals often acted as obstacles to the take up of ECEC. Given the importance of high quality early education for outcomes in later life (Mathers et al. 2016), for socially and educationally disadvantaged children such as those in foster care, the need for a sound educational beginning is paramount. Urgent attention needs to be paid to these barriers so that young children in foster care are able to access the best possible educational start in life. Our exploration of the 'everyday' through ethnography allows us to visualise care and education beyond formalised settings such as playgroups and nurseries. We highlight the important role that foster carers play in young foster children's education, a group who require greater levels of support and attention than children who are not in care (Mathers et al. 2016; Cameron et al. 2015).

Reflecting on our adaptation of Mathers' features of a 'stimulating environment', we found that carers were heavily invested in providing furnishings and equipment such as toys, and that carers provided positive interactions with themselves and other children. They also made significant contributions to the child, through personal care routines and interactions, stimulating their emotional, intellectual, social and physical skills. However, there was less engagement with some activities such as play based learning in the home. We also found that not all carers adopted educative practices such as reading to babies and very young children. Such findings highlight the complexities of positioning foster carers as educators and defining expectations of foster carers in light of the 'stimulating environment' fostering services are expected to provide.

Further, the relationship of foster carers to regulation and standards shapes their daily practice. They are socially, culturally and economically located, and their understandings of education and care derive from this positioning. Carers' meanings and experiences of education, and associated social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu and Passerson 1990; Lareau 2011) arguably shape the care and education for young children in foster care, but to our knowledge, are yet to be researched. Time spent by foster carers through caring responsibilities for the wider family, the support they receive from other family members in providing care and education for foster children touched on in our study, are also understudied. Further, the positioning of foster carers as a predominantly female, non-professionalised group of carers with accompanying lack of benefits such pensions, sick and annual leave (Narey and Owens 2018), has not, to our knowledge, been explored in light of the implications for the education of foster children.

Overall, our study demonstrates how foster carers are experts in the children's everyday lives in managing the routine and mundane as well as navigating the professional web of relations in meeting the often highly complex needs of the young children they look after.

We hope that insights generated from our research into the everyday lives of young fostered children and their carers will encourage fostering teams to support carers develop ways to harness educational opportunities in their everyday environments[2].

Acknowledgements

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[2] We have begun to address possible ways to build the educative self-concept of foster carers through a knowledge exchange programme (Cameron et al, in preparation).

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