

## **Supporting Care Leavers Through University: A Personal Perspective from Collette Isabel Bentley (Care Leaver Student)**

As I stood waiting for the flash of the photographer's camera dressed to the hilt in my graduation gown, clutching my First Class degree certificate, who would have guessed that as a child I had been branded "educationally subnormal" and been so badly abused as a child that aged just 13, I was expelled from school and attempted suicide. For the photographer, my university lecturers and my friends this was just another student going through the motions of yet another rite of passage in front of their demonstrably proud Dad, emotional Mum, and Great Auntie goodness knows who! I looked no different to my friends: smart, confident, intelligent with proud parents as on-lookers. Yet as far as I was concerned, this was a miracle after all – I had had the state parenting me.

I started university in the days prior to the inception of the Quality Mark – which meant that I had NO support neither during my A' levels when I was applying to university, or during my first year of university. I almost laughed when a year into my degree, I was chosen to participate in research conducted by the Frank Buttle Trust's "By Degrees" project and was asked who paid my tuition fees for me? Who? I answered. Me! Who do you think?

I funded my A' levels, enrolled at university, wrote my own personal statement, took out my own student loan, paid for my tuition fees and successfully lived off Tesco Value Cornflakes for a month when my money ran out at the end of term! In fact, I had never even had a conversation with my social worker about attending university. I was, on the surface, indistinguishable from every other student apart from the fact that most of their parents paid their tuition fees whereas I had no-one to pay mine.

Let's just put this into context for a moment – a child from a normal background has parents supporting them through every step of their education, paying for private tuition, checking their personal statement, buying them shopping when money is tight, paying for tuition fees, calming them down on the end of the phone when they miss the deadline for that all important deadline. Yet – kids in care, who in fact need more support as they haven't had it early on in life – are told to go it alone.

That is why only 1% of children in care go to university. It's logical isn't it? Get a job, earn some money – OR go to university, get into debt – it's a calculated choice.

One would hope and assume that coming care could provide a pathway to educational success – but this will never happen until there are radical changes in attitudes and assumptions about what children in care have a right to expect from the state as a surrogate parent?

Surrogate parent? If the state really were being a true parent then the Quality Mark and the Frank Buttle Trust would be redundant. Why is it that external agencies have to be called in to put into place mechanisms of support in schools and universities for children in care. Why aren't they already there? This simple answer is: no-one expects that children in care will go to university, so no-one thinks about the needs to put into place mechanisms of support.

Every single one of the issues that Gerry has raised today is extremely important if one is to raise the aspirations and achievements of those children in care. But fundamentally, it is my firm belief that unless there are drastic changes in attitudes and assumptions about what children in care have a right to expect from the state as a surrogate parent – then no more than 1% of children in care will be going to university in 10 years time.

**'Education, Education, Education...!'** Why is it that everyone else is raving about education, yet our overburdened social services system has other priorities? Priorities?! What then are these other priorities if education is not one of them? A child comes into care and social services spring into action; pumping their efforts into their physical and emotional needs, filling in the gaps in the child's patchwork life. Sonia Jackson, from the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the University of London notes that back in the 1980s education did not even appear in the index of most childcare textbooks or among social workers' lists of priorities in planning for children in care. Why is this? Why is it that only 8% of children in care achieve five A\*-C grades at GCSE, and only 1% of us go on to university? Is it honestly that we don't have a brain cell between us?

It's brilliant isn't it? Children in care struggle in early life, battle against family problems and then are greeted in the foster care system by a complete and utter lack of expectation. Talk about a dual disability. We have no stable family, have experienced emotional, physical, sexual abuse – and now... well let's rob us of our chance in education. Brilliant – thank you very much!!

"Describe yourself?" one psychologist asked me aged 8, the reply: "I'm clever and I like school." So how was it that by the age of 13, I was permanently excluded from school and left with a deep sense of failure?

Education was the only thing I had going for me as a child, yet Social Services were prepared to let it be subjugated to the demands of my birth parents, pleas of foster carers and the drawbacks of the

system. A succession of foster placement changes, intermittent periods back with abusive parents and a string of social workers meant that by the time I did my GCSEs, I had changed school 9 times. My patchwork life was mirrored in my patchwork education.

I remember moving into a new foster placement aged eleven and asking when I could go back to school. The answer was:

*'Oh dear, you don't want to be worrying about school right now; we've got lots more important things to sort out first'*

When I was finally enrolled in yet another school there were only five weeks of the school year left. That year - my last year of primary school - I moved between two sets of foster parents, a residential children's home and the abusive home of my birth parents - four changes of home and school. The advent of secondary school was no better: I asked to take the entrance exam for a local private school (HYMERS)- Social Services refused to fund it - or even allow me to try out for a scholarship! Why are we not placing children in care in top performing schools to give them THE best chance? Why are we not funding private school where brains are starring you in the face? Instead, my foster parent at the time enthusiastically enrolled me in a comprehensive school, seldom asked me about school life, showed little interest in my progress and never attended a parents' evening. Yes! NEVER attended a parents' evening!

In fact upon asking for help with homework one evening I was told not to bother learning French since she had never bothered and it hadn't done her any harm in life! The irony is that I went on to gain a first class degree in French and Spanish!! Her intentions were good and she did want the best for me, but as far as she and the system were concerned: I was successful: I was 'ATTENDING school - which was more than could be said for most kids in care!!. Social services could tick their boxes at reviews, the foster parent felt like she was contributing to my stability and all was hunky dory!! What did it matter whether I got a C or an A in French GCSE.

Therein lies the fundamental problem. I lived not only with a lack of aspiration and encouragement but also a missing expectation of excellence! Success in the care-system is measured by 'attending' school - maybe leaving with a handful of NVQs without being pregnant or on drugs - because after all, 'these kids have had a hard life.' What sort of expectation is that for future generations? Yes, we are in care, yes, we have had it hard but don't we deserve a decent education as much as we deserve a decent family? The system is cheating a whole generation of young people. Why do we push all our other children to achieve what they are capable of and yet deem that it is OK for a child in care to gain a 'C' when they are capable for an 'A'? Why are we not placing children in care with potential with foster carers who have experience of university, or a higher level of education to raise

aspiration? Or pairing foster students up with older buddies who have been through university after care?

Going to university for normal children is rapidly becoming a normative experience, yet for children in care it remains seemingly unattainable. The system has the responsibility to ensure that being in care makes a positive difference to life chances – not weakens them! That means doing more for children in care than a parent would ordinarily do – going the extra mile, making up for lost time, lost chances.

Why does the system not offer private tuition for those students who have missed periods of school? Why does the system not offer its children the opportunity to attend private school where potential is glaring them in the face? Why are foster carers not forced to attend parents evenings? Given a separate budget for academic books, revision guides, tutors, petrol allowance to drive children to a “good” school despite it being further away. The system claims to become a “surrogate parent” for children in care – well... what sort of parent allows their child to underachieve and become mediocre?

Last year, I graduated from the University of Birmingham with a First Class degree in BA Modern Languages (Hispanic Studies). I’m one of the 1% of children in care who went to university and I am here for one reason and one reason alone: having been adopted aged 17, my parents expected the best of me! Had I continued in the normal foster care system, I would not ever have stepped through the doors of a university let alone worn a mortar board or become a graduate? That, would have been tantamount to theft – the system would have robbed me of education, my chances, my future.

I stand here today and praise the efforts of the Frank Buttle Trust, and the Quality Mark for it will undeniably affect the experience of university for that 1% of care leavers who make it to university – BUT unless the state starts acting like a surrogate parent to us children in care – 99% of us will continue to be lost in the system – robbed not only of our families and our childhoods, but our education as well!

*This speech was written by Collette Isabel Bentley and given at the Care Matters: Transforming Lives – Improving Outcomes Conference, incorporating the 8<sup>th</sup> International Looking After Children Conference, 7-9 July 2008, Keble College Oxford UK.*