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Breaks in the chain: Using theories of social practice to interrogate professionals' experiences of administering Pupil Premium Plus to support looked after children

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Abstract

In England, Pupil Premium Plus is additional funding to help address the educational attainment gap experienced by looked after children. This paper explores the experiences of virtual school heads and designated teachers ($n = 140$) as they access Pupil Premium Plus-related information, guidance and training to support their practice; navigate the complexities of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) process; and measure the impact of Pupil Premium Plus-funded interventions. We explain professionals' experiences using insights from social practice theories, and argue that the process of supporting the educational outcomes of looked after children via Pupil Premium Plus is made up of context- and audience-dependent 'social practices'. When the social practices are aligned, virtual school heads and designated teachers may be effectively able to support looked after children, whereas barriers may emerge when social practices become disjointed. We conclude this paper by arguing that for Pupil Premium Plus to support educational outcomes of looked after children effectively, professionals need to reflect on their own cultures and practices.

Introduction

Looked after children

Within the UK, looked after children (common terms used the UK include 'children looked after', 'children in care', 'care-experienced children', and 'children cared for'; see the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), 2019), are children and young people up to 18 years of age who are cared for by a local authority for one day or more (see Children Act, 1989). Clear evidence from the UK and internationally shows that looked after children may be at risk of severe educational disadvantage (e.g. Berridge et al., 2020; Ofsted, 2012; Ofsted, 2014; O'Higgins et al., 2015; O'Higgins et al., 2017; Sebba et al., 2015). This educational disadvantage may result in an attainment gap which continues throughout a looked after child's education (Berridge et al., 2020). For instance, the Department for Education (2020b) described how looked after children have comparatively reduced educational outcomes when they progress from the end of Key Stage 1 (5-7 years of age) to the end of Key Stage 2 (7-11 years of age). Further, looked after children at Key Stage 2 are much less likely than their non-looked after peers to achieve expected standards in mathematics, reading and writing. Moreover, when reaching Key Stage 4 (14-16 years of age), looked after children are much less likely to achieve well in GCSE English and mathematics courses than their counterparts.

The limited outcomes for this cohort have been put down to the poor start in life and disrupted social settings, which many such children experience. For instance, there are many reasons why children may become cared for by their local authority, but the majority become looked after due to factors relating to neglect or abuse (Department for Education, 2020a). Other children may become looked after due to experiencing a history of familial dysfunction or distress, or having no parent to care for them (Department for Education, 2020a).

Pupil Premium and Pupil Premium Plus

Pupil Premium is funding designed to redress the inequalities that exist in educational outcomes affecting disadvantaged pupils when compared to their counterparts (Ofsted, 2014). Pupil Premium is a yearly grant awarded to each child within primary and secondary school education in England who are currently in receipt, or who have been in receipt in the last six years, of free school meals, and is paid directly to the school (Department for Education, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). At the time of the writing of this paper, primary schools are awarded £1345 for each pupil in receipt of Pupil Premium, and secondary schools are awarded £955 (Department for Education, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021).

To compensate for factors that are likely to contribute to the attainment gap experienced by looked after children, each looked after child in either primary or secondary education is entitled to a specific type of Pupil Premium, known as Pupil Premium Plus (also termed PP+ and PPP), which is a yearly grant of up to £2345, again at the time of the writing of this paper (Department for Education, 2021). This is paid by central government to the local authority responsible for the care of the child. Within the local authority, the virtual school, overseen by the virtual school head, administers the Pupil Premium Plus grant (Berridge et al., 2009; Ofsted, 2014). The virtual school does not exist as a physical entity but rather, comprises key stakeholders who are directed to work towards achieving the best possible educational outcome for the looked after children on roll with the local authority's virtual school (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). The virtual school and virtual school head role currently exist within England, rather than the UK as a whole (Jackson, 2015), though virtual school heads do exist within Scotland (CELCIS, 2021). Two statutory roles in England that are salient in the administration of Pupil Premium Plus in achieving this goal are the aforementioned virtual

school head and the designated teacher. The designated teacher is a qualified teacher or head teacher responsible for supporting the education of all looked after children who are based within their particular school (Children and Young Persons Act, 2008). This member of staff is responsible for the child within the real educational setting, which might be geographically located outside of the local authority's jurisdiction (Department for Education, 2018b, 2018c). One of the undertakings of the designated teacher is to coordinate between the relevant virtual school head and other key stakeholders involved in the care of the school's looked after children (Department for Education, 2018c).

The statutory guidance in England (Department for Education, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) for local authorities, virtual school heads, as well as the designated teachers working alongside other professionals regarding how they should support looked after children, allows for a high degree of interpretation. Pupil Premium Plus should be spent on educational activities that support the diverse needs of individual looked after children, though virtual school heads are able to use the funding to spend on interventions that support multiple looked after children within their local authority (Department for Education, 2018b). But, NAVSH (2019, p. 41) acknowledged that the documentation 'provides little detail on the use of [Pupil Premium Plus]'. Virtual school heads' support given to looked after children through administering Pupil Premium Plus could at first glance appear to be largely down to their discretion (Department for Education, 2018b), particularly given the vast range of interventions and initiatives funded through the grant (e.g. Drew & Banerjee, 2019; Jackson, 2015; Read et al., 2020; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Examples include educational support, such as one-to-one teaching or educational psychology services; experiences of social pedagogy, such as that offered through trips to theatres, museums, art galleries, and participation in other creative arts experiences; and transition support that involves tailored assistance to move into

university or gain work experience. Some of the research in this field has described how Pupil Premium Plus is used to support activities which indirectly support looked after children, such as the training packages and information opportunities provided for stakeholders, including designated teachers, other school staff and social workers by virtual schools.

Challenges in the administration of Pupil Premium Plus

A virtual school head is tasked with establishing the procedures in their specific virtual school by which the Pupil Premium Plus grant is administered. This complex set of procedures entails consulting with key stakeholders involved in supporting all the looked after children in the virtual school, such as educational and social care professionals, and parents/carers, as well as taking into account the wishes of the individual child (Department for Education, 2018b). A range of bespoke administrative structures and records are deployed when each virtual school head is managing how the child's Pupil Premium Plus grant is to be spent and by whom, as well as accounting for the expenditure and evidencing the effectiveness of the chosen interventions (Department for Education, 2015).

Central to this administration is the drawing up and the subsequent implementation of each looked after child's Personal Education Plan (PEP) (Department for Education, 2018b). The PEP form is a statutory document that records the educational needs of each individual looked after child, and creates a record of the child's educational attainment, progress, and goals. The PEP form must be reviewed by professionals involved with the educational outcomes of the individual child at least twice per year. It is the responsibility of virtual school heads to ensure that each looked after child receives a completed PEP and review (NAVSH, 2019). The content requested in each local authority's PEP is largely discretionary,

but statutory guidance specifies that '[t]he quality of the PEP is the joint responsibility of the local authority that looks after the child and the school. Social workers, carers, [virtual school head]s, designated teachers and, as appropriate, other relevant professionals will need to work closely together' (Department for Education, 2018b, p. 14). One consequence of this is that designated teachers, regardless of whether they work within a virtual school head's local authority, are required to complete the relevant PEP for each child and adhere to its bespoke contents, as the quote below from one of our designated teacher participants describes. Through deploying and tracking the PEP form (paper-based as well as online formats), the virtual school head is able to demonstrate that Pupil Premium Plus funding allocated in their local authority is being used to further educational outcomes.

The dominant role of the virtual school head in deciding many aspects of the processes surrounding the Pupil Premium Plus for looked after children is paramount. Potentially this arrangement could deliver a tailored responsive approach to the needs of children who are situated in specific local contexts, in terms of addressing their individual educational priorities and building on their prior achievements. This system can work well, drawing together the professionals and looked after children for whom the local authorities have responsibility. However, when Pupil Premium Plus is administered according to the discretionary powers of virtual school heads, and when different local authorities impose their own administrations on the processes and procedures, there is space for inconsistencies, frustrations and failures to emerge. One designated teacher who participated in our research summed up the situation succinctly as follows:

> If there was one system for [looked after children] in all authorities, it would make
> management of the funding and the system so much easier for [looked after

children's] teachers. I have [looked after children] from three different authorities and each one has a different PEP, different views and rules on how the [Pupil Premium Plus] funding can be spent and different ways of carrying out meetings. It is disjointed and time consuming to manage. It also is difficult to explain to parents, carers and children why one [looked after child] can have [Pupil Premium Plus] money spent on music lessons and another [looked after child] can only have their money spent on 'educational attainment' and this is purely due to the authority which looks after them. (Designated teacher 45)

In this paper, we focus on the experiences of virtual school heads and designated teachers as they navigate the practices of administering Pupil Premium Plus. Some extant studies reveal a mixed picture in terms of challenges experienced with systems and organisational processes. As yet however, these freedoms and their subsequent impacts on the care of looked after children have received limited research attention. Rivers (2018), describing her work as a virtual school head, noted the importance of effective organisation and governance arrangements between key stakeholders. Similarly, commenting on the role of the virtual school head, Jackson (2015) described how some could experience a sense of isolation, and so networking with other virtual school heads was necessary. Sebba and Berridge (2019) found that whilst many virtual school head advocated effective collaboration, at times severe challenges could be encountered in achieving this preferred way of working. In particular, geographical distance between team members and cultural differences between professionals (e.g. education versus social care workers) were notable barriers to cooperation. Driscoll (2013) in researching the transition process at Key Stage 4 reported the sense of frustration expressed by virtual school heads and designated teachers with regard to the lack of effective communication between teams responsible for supporting looked after children.

The lived experience of virtual school heads and designated teachers within the extant scholarship demonstrates the challenges, and potentially deep sense of frustration, they may encounter as they administer Pupil Premium Plus. These experiences motivate us to investigate further in order to understand the phenomena we are encountering. That is, we adopt a social practice approach and set out to identify and interrogate the barriers or 'breaks in the chain' that are potentially interrupting the support provided for this vulnerable cohort of children.

Applying theories of social practice to explore possible breaks in the chain regarding the administration of Pupil Premium Plus

In this paper, we explore professionals' experiences, namely, those of virtual school heads and designated teachers, of navigating the complexities of administering Pupil Premium Plus for looked after children using theories of social practice (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). A 'practice' within practice theory refers to 'a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other' (Reckwitz, 2002; p. 249). Reckwitz (2002) argued that social practices are shaped by factors such as: the body and mind of the individual actor; the learned knowledge and emotional connection that is assigned to a particular practice; the material items that are necessary to complete a particular practice; and a structured routine or order over the practice. The individual actor must have an understanding of why a practice should be completed and a tacit sense regarding when it has been accomplished skilfully, as normatively judged by fellow practitioners. In effect, practitioners train both their bodies and minds to engage with objects and discourses, and in so doing, they make decisions and respond to challenges that craft practice on a day-to-day basis.

While recognising the importance of the individual actor, practice theories are focused more on how practices become established in the social world (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices are not singular events, but are instead highly interconnected phenomena (Schatzki et al., 2001). Social practice theory allows us to understand how particular practices work or fit together with each other (Blue & Spurling, 2017). In order for practices to effectively fit, such as those pertaining to the care of looked after children, there needs to be a synergy between the actor or actors, the materials and knowledges they bring to the situation (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). Where there are different practitioner groups involved, the qualities of the 'connective tissue within complexes of practices' (Blue & Spurling 2017, p. 6) are of key importance in shaping how they fit together.

Proponents of social practice theory contend that practices are enacted in ways that people are not necessarily aware of. Our rationale for applying social practice theory to our analysis was to make visible the practices that professionals responsible for supporting looked after children engage in. By doing so, we begin to see and understand *why* these practices are being produced the way they are (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). Taking such a stance also allows the connections between the social practices that different groups engage in to be unpicked, to ascertain where breaks in the chain might emerge and be reshaped by these actors (Tarleton & Turney, 2020). This allows professionals to appreciate where they could potentially change or develop their interconnecting practices, so that looked after children can be supported in ways that are more aligned to their individual needs (e.g. Craske, 2018).

Using social practice theory as a lens to explore how local authorities' virtual school heads, and designated teachers enact their responsibilities for looked after children presents a novel

contribution to current literature. Each local authority and virtual school head may be afforded privileges to create particular social practices, and shape the associated materials and meanings that are attached to these practices. For instance, virtual school heads will likely participate in numerous social practices throughout their day, such as creating guidelines regarding rules specifying what Pupil Premium Plus can be used for within their particular jurisdictions, or liaising with different stakeholders responsible for supporting looked after children (NAVSH, 2019). Effective administration of Pupil Premium Plus will likely only emerge when the various practices that are implicated in their decisions are aligned, such as designated teachers knowing the specific procedures each local authority takes to supporting looked after children in their care. However, as we have demonstrated, administrative practices associated with Pupil Premium Plus, such as those described by the above designated teacher 45, may not work effectively in day-to-day practice (e.g. Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

Overview of research

The purpose of this paper was to elucidate, using theories of social practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012), how the processes of administering Pupil Premium Plus are shaped by interconnected social practices. We seek to understand how particular actions are performed by key actors (i.e. virtual school heads and designated teachers) when they are fulfilling their statutory duty, namely, promoting the educational outcomes of looked after children. To do this, we draw on a larger study that was conducted in 2019-2020 regarding the effective use of Pupil Premium Plus to support the educational outcomes of looked after children (Read et al., 2020). The project sought to gather the experiences from stakeholder professionals who were involved in supporting educational outcomes of looked after children, which included virtual school heads, designated teachers, and other key stakeholders such as social workers.

Methods

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the experiences of just the virtual school heads (*n* = 61) and designated teachers (*n* = 79), and explore the social practices that they engaged in. These 140 participants completed an online survey, where they were asked a series of questions relating to the content areas such as: (i) where they sought information, guidance and training to support their practice in promoting the educational outcomes of looked after children; (ii) how they used Pupil Premium Plus, and what factors influenced usage (e.g. PEP forms and relative cost of interventions); and (iii) how they evidenced the impact of Pupil Premium Plus-funded interventions.

Additional data was collected from select participants who were willing to discuss their survey responses in more detail, either through 'paired dialogue' sessions, or one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews with the lead author. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on factors such as ensuring a diversity of: role (e.g. virtual school heads and designated teachers), role experience (i.e. length of service), and local authority region. For the paired dialogue sessions, two stakeholder professionals with the same role and similar levels of experience, but from different local authority regions, discussed their experiences of supporting the educational outcomes of looked after children. In total, three paired dialogues were completed: two consisted of virtual school head pairings, and the third was a pairing between one primary and one secondary school designated teacher. Each pairing was provided with a topic guide to help their discussion, though their conversations were facilitated by the lead author where appropriate. Five one-to-one telephone interviews were completed with individual professionals who had not participated in one of the convened paired dialogue sessions. These telephone interviews took place due to

complexities in organising a paired dialogue, such as challenges in finding a suitable stakeholder match, or finding a mutually convenient time for the session. Four telephone interviews were with virtual school heads, and one was held with a secondary school designated teacher. Example topics covered during the paired dialogue sessions and telephone interviews built on the topics and questions that were asked in the online survey, and included: participants' understanding of Pupil Premium Plus, and how they used the funding; how they evidenced impact of Pupil Premium Plus-funded interventions; and whether they had any recommendations for changing or improving the funding. Each of the paired dialogue sessions and telephone interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were audio-recorded and anonymously transcribed. Ethical approval for this project was granted via the School of Education Research Ethics Committee, Bath Spa University.

Analysis

For our analysis, we were interested in exploring the interconnections and complexities of social practices, as described by the virtual school heads and designated teachers responsible for supporting looked after children. Following the analytical framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), we reviewed the qualitative data for evidence of practice elements, such as actors and materials (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012), and subsequently, this extracted content was then assigned a code. When assigning codes, we used 'process coding' (Saldaña, 2015), which involves focusing on particular actions of interest, for instance, completing a PEP form. Through iterative reading of the qualitative data, larger themes and subthemes connecting individual process codes were constructed. These themes and codes were revised as necessary as part of our ongoing collaborative analysis and discussion.

Using our lens of social practice theory, our ongoing analysis and discussion encouraged us to focus on three broad themes of interconnected social practices that were described by participants. These were: providing and accessing information and training; navigating and coordinating the PEP process; and evidencing the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus. In describing each of these themes from a social practice perspective, we explain how social practices can interact in synergy, but they can also misalign, which in turn reveals where breaks in the chain can emerge for virtual school heads and designated teachers as they navigate their job roles.

Findings

Providing and accessing information and training

Social practices involved in providing and/or accessing information and training to aid professionals in supporting looked after children were varied, and consequently, were not experienced in similar ways by participants. For instance, the Department for Education (2018b) describes how virtual school heads have a statutory responsibility to provide information, guidance and training, not just for themselves, but all stakeholder individuals who support the looked after children they are responsible for. Several virtual school heads highlighted their awareness of this statutory responsibility, with one describing in their online survey data how they provided '[t]raining for the Virtual School staff, designated teachers, social workers, school Governors and Foster Carers' (virtual school head 28). However, how, and the extent to which, this information, guidance and training was enacted in practice for the virtual school heads and designated teachers supporting looked after children, was mixed. While our data evidenced that professionals accessed myriad sources of information and training (Read et al., 2020), the process of searching for this information and training, and deciphering what was relevant to their professional practice, was found to be complex. There

were examples from participants that described how they felt adequately supported, whereas others reported receiving limited or even no information, guidance or training to help them in their role. Designated teacher 33 described in their online survey data how '[t]his has been my first year in role, so I have had advice in lots of areas including [Pupil Premium Plus], additional funding, attachment training, completing [electronic PEP]s etc[.]', whereas virtual school head 52 stated in their online survey data that they 'have not found any bespoke training for my team'.

This mixed picture in terms of accessing information was evidenced through virtual school heads and designated teachers having to spend time searching for what they needed, which may have led to professionals having to take time away from supporting looked after children under their care. For instance, particular challenges emerged when professionals had to make decisions about individual educational interventions without fully understanding whether these were likely to be effective, and so wanted to learn from the experiences of other professionals. The following designated teacher spoke of the benefits in their online survey data of

> [s]haring good practice - letting [designated teacher]s know what interventions are out there and which have positive evidence to show that they are effective. I spend a long time looking into resources for our [looked after children], this time would be better served in putting the interventions into place. (designated teacher 57)

Alternatively, some participants valued potentially standardising the process of information and training, so that there was greater continuity between local authorities. Virtual school head paired dialogue 1 participants spoke of the following:

Virtual school head 1: I guess from speaking to colleagues across the (region) most of us are engaged in some kind of attachment and trauma aware type training, we would use different partners, different providers, we'd have different setups and I guess we'd measure it in different ways as well, wouldn't we?

Virtual school head 2: Yeah, completely. There's no standardised way.

One professional from the online survey indicated that they would like to access '[a] national training plan that outlines the needs of [looked after children] and Pre-[looked after children] to ensure schools are inclusive and acquire additional training and resources to meet the needs of individual children. This would help standardise advice…' (virtual school head 48)

Navigating and coordinating the Personal Education Plan process

Participants spoke at length regarding their experiences of navigating the demands of administering Pupil Premium Plus. The three main administrative tasks discussed by participants included: the organisation of multiagency team meetings to discuss individual looked after children's needs as required for the PEP; effective completion of the PEP form for the child; and making use of the PEP to allocate Pupil Premium Plus funding. However, these administrative processes raised many social practices that influenced the ease with which professionals were able to support their looked after children. One such example was the practice of getting key stakeholders 'around the table' for the PEP review. Indeed, virtual school head 6 described in their online survey data the importance of each looked after child's needs being 'identified and recorded at the PEP', and that '[a]ll relevant stakeholders should contribute to identification of needs of individual and decide on the most appropriate and effective use of funding for that individual child'. In those situations where the process was managed effectively, virtual school heads and designated teachers acknowledged how

this could positively shape the educational experiences of looked after children. For instance, virtual school head 23 described from their online survey the importance of collaborative working, with an

> example of a [Year 11] student who has been on the brink of permanent exclusion several times but effective regular communication, flexible approach and agreed interventions has enabled her to remain at school with support from [the virtual school]. Everyone giving the [young person] the same message of support and persevering when [the young person is] presenting very challenging situations.

However, what was evident from participants' responses was that this desire for joined-up thinking and working did not necessarily materialise in practice. As mentioned above, local authorities and virtual school heads are afforded discretion over how they support their looked after children, for instance, how they design their PEP form (Department for Education, 2018c; NAVSH, 2019). Complexities were often encountered in navigating the process of completing these, such as the different technologies and PEP forms used between different local authorities, as was emphasised by the designated teacher's experience described in our introduction. Our research found that it was common for virtual school heads to administer funding for a particular intervention on receipt of an effectively completed PEP. However, some virtual school heads reported encountering friction regarding the perceived lack of quality of the completed PEP forms they often received for individual looked after children, as indicated by virtual school head telephone interview 2:

> You can see that generally in the quality of the PEPs that are in place. PEP quality doesn't always equate to the support on offer, but you see it because the language used by the school or the way they talk about the children, if the child has got a concern, they see it as we've got to solve this. They bond with the child and they care

for the child, whereas in the school […that] really doesn't get it, the difference to those children. […] The support for the children is not as good. There's so little in the PEP. They don't know how they've spent the Pupil Premium Plus. They're not looking at creative ways of spending it.

Other concerns related to difficulties in coordinating meetings with professionals, such as due to staff turnover, or participants feeling that they had to navigate conflicting motivations or interests of different stakeholders at meetings. For instance, designated teacher 6 described in their online survey how '[i]t is always so very difficult to get professionals other than school to commit to meetings or take some responsibility for helping to gather a comprehensive assessment/ picture of an individual[']s needs'. As a consequence of this tension, some participants were concerned that the voices of looked after children held little weight in the decision making process, or that funding would not be used in the most appropriate way. For instance, the following virtual school head described in their online survey data a previous disagreement with an individual school over how they wanted to pool all available Pupil Premium Plus funding in ways that did not necessarily support the experience of looked after children:

> [The] School wanted to pool all their [Pupil Premium] funding (including [Pupil Premium] for free meals) to fund a range of resources which did not necessarily meet the needs of the child. They refused to use the funding for 1:1 tuition. I did not send the school the [Pupil Premium Plus] and used it for 1:1 tuition for the child who had expressed that he desperately needed it. (virtual school head 32)

Evidencing the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus

Many professionals spoke of the challenges they faced in measuring and demonstrating effectiveness. One virtual school head (46) described in their online survey data how '[t]here is still a lack of clear evidence over the effectiveness of Pupil Premium spend and adva[n]cing pupil's learning.' For instance, participants spoke of the focus of government policy in terms of evidencing educational attainment, such as through established measures of educational progression. However, at the same time, these participants acknowledged that greater emphasis was needed on 'softer' outcomes not necessarily directly related to educational outcomes, such as self-confidence and self-esteem. In virtual school head paired dialogue 2, one participant described how, in order to evidence educational attainment, looked after children first need to be at a place where they are 'ready to learn' (NAVSH, 2019, p. 51):

> I understand that the within the statutory guidance it's to support academic outcomes but […] you're not going to get academic outcomes unless the child is ready to learn and you're not going to get that unless you put the therapeutic support in basically.

This was echoed during the designated teacher paired dialogue, with one participant describing the importance of investing staff time and resources into establishing the well-being of looked after children: 'just having that person there to speak to them (looked after children), to say, "Are you alright?" To just talk about things, to let them get back in the classroom […] sometimes there's got to be some soft indicators.'

The challenge of placing greater emphasis on the 'softer' measures of child success was that evidence of improvement could be difficult to demonstrate, as the following virtual school head's online survey response exemplifies:

> It remains difficult to correlate outcomes with spend but soft data has to be legitimate. We may not always see the grade uplift that we hope for but a good tutor can keep a student engaged enough for them to actually sit an exam. Using [Pupil Premium Plus] to fund projects for targeted groups of children, inside and outside school may not have a measurable outcome this year or even next, but can have a lasting effect on the wellbeing or career choices of a child. (virtual school head 49)

As the above virtual school head describes, evidence of the effectiveness of interventions funded through Pupil Premium Plus may not necessarily be observed in the short term. There were concerns raised by participants that focusing on short term outcomes, may miss the longer term development and improvement of looked after children, which in turn, could show a more positive picture regarding the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus. For instance, some professionals were able to evidence that rates of fixed-term exclusions for their cohort of looked after children had reduced through the introduction of Pupil Premium Plus funding. Virtual school head telephone interview 2 described how:

> Over the last couple of years, our exclusions have gone down term on term. Like for like, for autumn term to autumn term. Three years in a row we had a dip, well, a reduction in the number of exclusions. The same with comparing the spring terms and with summer. We're starting to see things like that where we've followed it up, we've gone out, we've talked to the schools.

Discussion: Addressing the breaks in the chain

The aim of this research was to apply insights of social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012) to the experiences of professionals who administer Pupil Premium Plus to help support the educational attainment of looked after children. Our findings demonstrate that virtual school heads and designated teachers are navigating multiple complex situations involving various geographically dispersed stakeholders, as well as different administrative systems and expectations as they fulfil their roles in responding to the children's potentially complex and changeable needs. Participants expressed concern that at times, the administration of Pupil Premium Plus did not progress as seamlessly as they would like, due to issues such as: limited access to training and support; PEP forms being completed to a poor standard; difficulties in coordinating the different stakeholders involved in supporting individual looked after children; and not knowing what interventions were effective nor how to evidence effectiveness.

By taking a social practice stance towards unpacking the phenomenon of the administration of Pupil Premium Plus, the practices that professionals engage in become visible, and in turn, this sheds light on how these practices can act as enablers and barriers to working with looked after children. Regarding information and training, professionals are relied upon to craft where and how they access these. They often use their own initiative in finding resources that they consider valuable in their specific contexts. This is particularly true for the virtual school head when fulfilling part of their statutory responsibilities (Department for Education, 2018b). To ensure information and training is gained, the actor needs to engage in searching for fresh information and training (materials) in order to improve the level of knowledge they bring to the role (Reckwitz, 2002; Reckwitz, 2017; Shove et al., 2012). The

experience of accessing information and training can be a very positive one, providing that there is synergy between the individual actor, the knowledge and competence the actor brings, and the materials they access. But, as was evident in our findings, breaks in the chain may emerge in this process if professionals do not know who to contact, or where to obtain information and training relevant to their day-to-day practice.

Further breaks in the chain may emerge in relation to the PEP process, for instance, regarding how professionals navigate the differing social practices between local authorities. Social practice theorists argue that different professional groups are likely to experience social practices differently, due to variations in factors such as the actor, their learned knowledge, their meanings they place on a particular practice, and the material resources they have to complete the practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). The example of designated teacher 45 investing time and energy in having to become proficient in three different local authority processes (competence) and versions of PEP forms (materials) exemplifies how challenges can emerge which other stakeholders may not necessarily experience. In the same vein, virtual school heads reported navigating social practices specific to their role, for instance, how they may have to challenge stakeholders when they receive PEP forms that have been completed to a substandard quality (i.e. not up to the requirements that they have prescribed across their particular jurisdiction) (Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

Finally, when evidencing the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus, what was evident from the findings was that virtual school heads and designated teachers experienced challenges in demonstrating whether, and to what extent, educational outcomes of looked after children have improved as a result of the funding. Indeed, Evans et al. (2017) reviewed interventions designed to support the educational outcomes of looked after children, and argued that

effectiveness of interventions should be treated with caution due to the variable rigour of reported studies. Gorard et al. (2021) further described the ongoing challenge of establishing how to measure any potential link between educational attainment and Pupil Premium funding. Sebba and Berridge (2019) highlighted how this ambiguity regarding effective interventions means that it is also challenging to determine the extent to which the virtual school head role is an important factor in improving the educational outcomes of looked after children.

In the absence of clear information regarding how effectiveness is measured, virtual school heads and designated teachers are tasked with using their judgement to interpret statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2018b; 2018c) in the way they feel most appropriate to their context (Craske, 2018; Gorard et al., 2021). Previous reporting of looked after children outcomes (e.g. Department for Education, 2020b) focuses on conventional tangible measures of educational attainment, progress, absences, exclusions, and special educational needs and disability/disabilities. Some of our participants reported challenges in evidencing the improvements children had made if these observed improvements did not accord with these quantitative measures, or when the full extent of the improvement would not be known in the short term. A significant break in the chain was apparent here. That is, operational requirements for auditing the impacts of PEP deployment/funding through largely conventional measures did not always align with interventions that some professionals deemed appropriate from their practical knowledge, and that they wished to enact when striving to meet the complex needs of children.

Bringing each of our findings together, a tension may be observed in terms of virtual school heads and designated teachers administering Pupil Premium Plus in ways that support the

individual needs of looked after children, while at the same time, a standardisation of approach being valued. For instance, while individualised support for looked after children may be encouraged in policy (e.g. Department for Education, 2018b), the use of conventional measures of educational outcomes has implications for how tailored or individualised educational interventions can be. Discretion afforded to professionals in establishing measures of effectiveness can be useful when practices are aligned, such as when children's improvement can be easily measured. However, this discretion can also lead to considerable frustration when professionals have to find different meanings of children's success, and learn new methods of assessing success in order to demonstrate the educational improvement of their children. We wish to echo the argument of Gorard et al. (2021), who suggested an apparent disconnect between government policy requiring all Pupil Premium interventions to be evidence-informed, and the inability of virtual school heads and designated teachers to demonstrate this in practice. Indeed, Craske (2018, p. 23) suggested how professionals involved with the administration of Pupil Premium go through a process of 'odd acrobatics' as they attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of certain interventions. From a social practice perspective, we argue that a fundamental break in the chain may be realised in terms of the seeming incompatibility of data measures to evidence the nuanced and complex nature of looked after children's educational journeys (i.e. knowledge and meaning; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012).

Extending this social practice argument, what we are suggesting in our paper is that for virtual school heads and designated teachers, flexibility is a necessary part of the routine practices they encounter in their everyday work. The seamlessness of practices comes into question when the 'connective tissue' (Blue & Spurling, 2017) between different professionals' practices is weak or causes friction, such as when virtual school heads and

designated teachers are following different systems or agendas. Attempts to increase the apparent seamlessness of practices between professionals (e.g. through introducing a more standardised PEP approach across local authorities) could have the unintended consequence of removing the much needed flexibility for effectively supporting the individual needs of looked after children.

Concluding comments

Applying a social practice approach to the administration of Pupil Premium Plus allows professionals and scholars to see the complex workings of interconnected practices involved in supporting looked after children. Breaks in 'connective tissue' of interconnected practices may emerge when such practices do not fit together effectively, leading to professionals potentially encountering considerable barriers and frustration (Tarleton & Turney, 2020). What we have evidenced in our research (Read et al., 2020), is that professionals can and do craft novel and creative ways to help support the looked after children they are responsible for when the relevant social practices align. It requires the relevant actors having appropriate knowledge of systems, people and interventions; access to materials; and to recognise the value and importance of creative interventions and/or ways of working in order to be effective (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012).

In acknowledging the role of actor as an important factor in social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002), a limitation of our paper is that our arguments regarding the influences of social practices in shaping Pupil Premium Plus processes can only be attributed to the experiences of the participants involved in the research. This research did not gather data on the specific local authority that participants were employed by, in order to prevent potential identification of staff. This means we are unable to determine whether there are particular local authority or

staff social practices that shape administration of Pupil Premium Plus, nor why individuals chose to participate or not in this research (e.g. particularly challenging workloads or responsibilities of virtual school heads or designated teachers may have possibly prevented certain individuals from participating in this research). We also did not focus on the experiences of looked after children themselves, nor other key stakeholders, such as foster carers or guardians. Individual social practices may be experienced differently for other professionals, stakeholders, and looked after children in ways that are not described by the participants who shared their experiences with us for this research. Therefore, it is important that further research be conducted with a wider pool of individuals.

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