

Security-first thinking and educational practices for young children in foster care in Sweden and England:

A think piece

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Abstract

While the education of looked after children has attracted considerable policy attention in Europe and North America, and globally the early education of preschool aged children is the subject of substantial investment, the early education of young children in foster care is neglected in both research and policy. This paper is a cross-national think piece to stimulate research and debate about young children in foster care. We present findings from two studies, one in England and one in Sweden, exploring foster carers' views and practices with young children. We argue that there is a perceived tension, in foster care policy and practice, between education and emotional wellbeing such that young children's attachment relationships and sense of security is privileged over their engagement in educational practices. Attachment relationships are a necessary but insufficient condition for optimal development of fostered children.

Key words

Young children, foster care, education, emotional security, attachment

1. 1 Introduction

There is now ample evidence of the long-term adverse implications, for children who have been looked after by the state, of poor educational attainment and outcomes. It affects a wide range of life chances up to age 30 and beyond (Forsman et al. 2016; Cameron et al. 2018). Indeed, Brännström et al.

(2017) concluded that, in Sweden, poor educational attainment was the most powerful predictor of negative social, economic, and health outcomes of former children in care when they reach adulthood. Educational disadvantage among children in care starts early; analysis of administrative data in England shows that when they start school at age five, about 85 percent are behind their peers on standard tests (Melkman 2018). Children have a right to an education, including early (i.e., pre-compulsory school age) education, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), but we do not know to what extent young children in family based out of home care, referred to here as foster care, attend or how they benefit (Mathers et al. 2016). We will use data from two qualitative studies, one in Sweden and one in England, that suggest a privileging of discourses from attachment theory, what we call ‘security-first thinking’, in the views of foster carers, that puts education into a secondary place. However, at the same time, we show how foster carers are nevertheless carrying out educational activities in everyday fostering life. We argue that these two features – a secondary place for early education, and foster carers’ implicit rather than explicit incorporation of education into everyday life – may reinforce the invisibility of early childhood education for children in foster care.

First, we position young fostered children’s education within the general early childhood education and care (ECEC) literature, and particularly the impacts on young children of attending ECEC. Next, we assess, so far as it is known, the developmental status of children under compulsory school age, who live in foster care and how they might benefit from early childhood education on the one hand and supporting their social development including attachment relationships on the other. Then we briefly describe the two studies. We focus on findings in relation to foster carers’ orientations to emotional security derived from an understanding of attachment theory, and early learning and education inside and outside the foster home. Then we consider their actual, reported and observed educational practices. We argue that while foster carers rarely identify themselves as responsible for education, they are often in fact combining attention to emotional wellbeing with educational engagement. As we will suggest in the concluding section, we think that a larger scale and international study of the beliefs and knowledge of the

fostering workforce is merited given the importance of early learning and early childhood education in the longer term development of children.

We write as an international collaboration, representing Sweden, the UK (England), and Canada (Ontario) with extensive experience in foster care research. The studies reported here were not designed to be comparable, nor to address ‘security first’ thinking – we have come to this position as a result of international collaborative debate.

2. 1 Early childhood education and social disadvantage

Societies across the globe are investing in early childhood education and care for a period of preschool education from the age of three, and, increasingly, from the end of parental leave provisions. For example, in Sweden, where compulsory school starts at age 6, all children have a right to an ECEC place from age one, and attendance has become normative: 88% of two year olds and 94% of five year olds participate in early childhood centres (which are integrated, all day ‘preschools’) (Schreyer and Oberhuemer 2017). Attendance rates differ little by parental background due to substantial public subsidy of places (see Table 1 below). Sweden spends more than twice that of the UK on ECEC provision (see Table 2 below). In England¹, there is entitlement to a funded, part-time, part-year place for three and four-year-old children where parents are working, and for two year olds living in disadvantaged circumstances, including fostered children. Parents of children who fall outside the publicly funded provision pay unsubsidized rates; fewer children from lower income households attend ECEC (see Table 1 below).

% 2016	Participation rates of children aged under 3 in ECEC				Participation rates of children aged 3 to mandatory school age in ECEC			
	Overall	1 st *	2 nd	3 rd	Overall	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
Sweden	51	42.6	59	50.2	96.7	94.4	97.7	98
United Kingdom	28.5	17.7	25.3	41.9	73.4	59.5	79	82.7

¹ England is one of four jurisdictions of the UK and has the largest population. Policy for early childhood education is a devolved responsibility.

EU28	33	22.8	35	40.1	86.3	79.9	88.2	90.7
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* 1st = lowest income tertile; 3rd = highest income tertile. Equivalised disposable income tertiles = the ‘total income of a household, after tax and other deductions, that is available for spending or saving, divided by the number of household members converted into equalised adults’ (Flisi and Blasko, 2019, p9).

Table 1: Percentages of children aged under 3, and from 3 to mandatory school age, attending ECEC in Sweden, UK, and the EU overall, by household income1.

% GDP	Early childhood education	Family benefits
Sweden	1.92	3.537
United Kingdom	0.50	3.474
OECD	1.1	1.974

Sources: OECD (2020a), Education spending; OECD (2020b), Family benefits public spending; Akbari & McCuaig (2014).

Table 2: Public spend on early childhood education and family benefits in Sweden, UK (2015), and OECD countries (2014), as a percentage of GDP

The benefits of early childhood education, where it is of high quality, are clear. It supports the acquisition of cognitive, language and social skills (OECD 2017) and, in the longer term, two years or more of high quality ECEC enhances academic performance at age 15, reduces rates of obesity at age 11 and enables parents’ (in practice, mothers’) income to increase, supporting family resources (OECD 2017). For children from disadvantaged families, the gains are particularly clear (Mathers & Ereky-Stevens 2018; Murano et al. 2020). In 2017, an inter-disciplinary group of social scientists released a Consensus Statement on the current state of knowledge about early childhood education (The Brookings Institution 2017). They found compelling evidence of the greater benefits for economically disadvantaged children of attending centres with well-implemented, evidence based curricula, particularly in preparing them for school, and for those who attend over those who do not.

Maximum benefits are associated with high quality ECEC: ‘warm and positive relationships, a safe and healthy environment and opportunities to learn, helps children’ (Mathers & Ereky-Stevens 2018, p507), and poor quality ECEC may have no or even a negative impact. Mathers and Ereky-Stevens (2018)

concluded that all disadvantaged children, from the age of two, should have access to ECEC to support their all-round development. But this is not yet happening in many countries. In England, the take-up of government funded hours in ECEC for two year olds is lower among children whose families claim free school meals (a proxy for disadvantage) and/or from some minority ethnic groups (Teager and McBride 2018). There is a high degree of consensus, now, on the benefits of high quality centre based early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged children's development, and the effects last until age seven (Sylva et al. 2004) and eleven (Sylva et al. 2008), and in the case of High/Scope, until age 40 (Schweinhart 2007).

3.1 ECEC and fostered children

Little data is available to assess whether the benefits of centre based early childhood education are available to children in foster care. Although about 18 percent (in England, 2019), and 16 percent (in Sweden, 2018) of children in state care are under compulsory school age, evidence on their access to early education is sparse. Attendance rates are not officially collated although Mathers et al. (2016) estimate that, in England, take-up of places is less frequent than among all children in the age cohort. Anecdotal evidence from the Swedish municipalities suggests that children under compulsory school age do attend ECEC when they are settled in foster care.

If young fostered children are not attending ECEC (and even when they are it may be very part-time), they are reliant on the foster home environment for their educational stimulation and socialization opportunities. This is critical as what happens in the home environment is a more important predictor of children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income (Sylva et al. 2015). The home learning environment refers to the interactions and resources available to support children's development. It is particularly influential on the development of language skills, including vocabulary and reading (National Literacy Trust 2018). The benefits of a good home learning environment, where owning and reading books, maths activities and conversations about these subjects take place, last until at least age 12 (Lehrl et al. 2019; Sammons et al. 2015; Krier et al. 2018).

The need for much-enhanced early educational and other opportunities among young children in foster care is clear from recent data on the developmental status of a sample of 520 fostered children in Ontario, Canada, aged 12-47 months (mean = 29 months; Flynn et al. forthcoming). On a standardized measure of motor, social, and cognitive development, the Motor and Social Development (MSD) scale, the 520 children had a mean score of 88.7 (SD = 15.7) and a median of 89. Their median score placed them at only the 23rd percentile for their age group, a score 0.75 SDs below the median score of 100 (i.e., the 50th percentile) of young children of the same age in the general population. This negative gap represented a large effect size. In sum, evidence at present suggests that fostered children are not attending high quality early education centres at a rate commensurate with their peers, and, moreover, their developmental status is such that they would be seen as likely to benefit from such additional stimulation were they not in care. To reiterate, this is not an argument about institutional versus family care; this is about ensuring that the developmental needs of highly disadvantaged children in foster care are recognised and met, whether in the educational activities of foster carers, or in high quality group settings. In the Flynn et al. (forthcoming) study above, foster carers' promotion of literacy in their day-to-day interactions with young foster children was a positive and statistically significant predictor of higher scores by the children on the MSD scale.

4. 1 Attachment theory and its dominance in social work and fostering

What might explain this curious absence of policy and evidence about the early education of young fostered children? One reason may relate to the care/education split in administrative and professional thinking (Cameron et al. 2015). Social work, as the responsible professional framework for foster care, is focused on the 'care' of and for children, and has come to be dominated by attachment theory (White et al. 2020). With its focus on 'natural' emotional bonds between infant and mother, interactive responsiveness, and evolving sense of security, at an early stage of life, which in turn shapes human development, attachment theory offers an attractive and coherent set of ideas about the importance

of (mother) care and relationships (White et al. 2020). Some 60 years after John Bowlby's influential statement that 'what is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his (sic) mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment' (Bowlby 1951, p11), it is fair to say that no other theory has anything like the claim on foster care that attachment theory does (Smith et al. 2017). In part, the attention to relationships between carer and child is incontestable: all children (and adults) benefit from responsive and attentive relationships with the people around them.

Attachment theory derived thinking about fostering relationships is embedded in guidance for foster carers in England and Sweden. In England, while foster care standards for fostering services do not specify attachment (or any other) theory to inform practice, they make reference to the 'central importance' (Department for Education, 2011, p3) of 'sound' (ibid. p12), and 'positive relationships' (ibid. p14) between child and foster family members. The emphasis on attachment theory to define relational work was reinforced by official guidance about 'identification, assessment and treatment of attachment difficulties' (NICE 2015). The widely used Skills to Foster training pack for foster carers makes multiple mentions of attachment and in week one of seven sessions 'the secure base model is introduced to show how foster carers can facilitate security' (The Fostering Network und.). In Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare has created extensive and well informed guidance for foster carer education. The content in this course-material is based on four theoretical perspectives integrated into the text: i) ecological developmental theory; ii) theories on risk- and protection; iii) attachment theory; and iv) psychology of learning. Throughout there is an emphasis on attachment theory, and the importance of creating a secure base. This material is widely used by foster care services in Sweden (Socialstyrelsen 2017).

Beyond policy, fostering research frequently draws on attachment theory (e.g., Golding 2003, Gribble 2016, Oliveira and Fearon 2019; Lang et al. 2016) as the basis for interventions (Baginsky et al. 2017). Schofield and Beek's (2005) 'secure base' model for working with children in care emphasizes

caregiver dimensions of availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and family membership, all of which are aimed at strengthening relationships. We underline here that attachment theory and its attention to close, warm relationships has been invaluable in shifting attention towards a child centred approach in child protection systems and emphasizing the importance of placement stability for children's emotional development (Boddy 2013); our suggestion is that the take-up of attachment theory has become dominant to the point of exclusion of attention to other areas of children's development. For example, in the widely used PRIDE model of pre-service training, there is no mention of learning and education. An evaluation of PRIDE in Ontario (Nash and Flynn 2016) found that future 'resource parents' made very large knowledge gains, suggesting that its failure to sensitize trainees to the major importance of learning and education in the young child's present and future life represents a costly missed opportunity.

4.2 Security-first thinking

Another way we might detect a primacy accorded to attachment theory is in the professional discourse around 'security' and emotional wellbeing for children. In attachment theory, 'secure' attachment is the young child's sense that an adult will reliably respond to them, be helpful and sensitive to their needs (Ainsworth et al. 1978). In English policy on children in state care, children should experience 'a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity [...] a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond' (Department for Education 2010, p12). The secure base model is aimed at operationalising this developmental need for security in relationships. We might call this 'security first' thinking, where the security being referred to is emotional wellbeing derived from reliable and responsive foster care. By adopting security first thinking, the articulation of children's emotional wellbeing and primary relationships is positioned ahead of their participation in educational and learning forums. This can be seen in the absence of data about prevalence, or experience, of, ECE participation, and a focus, in foster care education, on attachment theory and practices (Smith et al. 2017).

However, Swedish longitudinal studies have found that educational performance at school is ‘a powerful mediating mechanism on the path from childhood to adult life’, particularly for children who have lived in foster care (Forsman et al. 2016, p68). Forsman et al. (2016)’s study of 7,500 Swedish foster children using national registry data found that poor school performance has a causal impact on the psychosocial outcomes in young adulthood of economic hardship, illicit drug use, and mental health difficulties. Poor performance in school at age 15-16 had large, negative effects on the young people’s psychosocial outcomes and life-course at age 30-35. Moreover, this detrimental impact was net of observed as well as unobserved confounds. For foster children, education appeared to be able to strongly reduce the negative impact of traditional risk factors such as parental psychopathology on long-term psychosocial outcomes in adulthood.

These findings suggest that security first thinking, while a necessary condition for optimal development, is not sufficient; it may be neglecting longer term adverse consequences if it does not also actively encourage educational practices with young children.

We now turn to findings from two preliminary studies, one in Sweden and one in England, on education in the lives of young children in foster care. We can see that, in both cases, foster carers are at least to some extent carrying out educational practices to support children’s learning while simultaneously supporting security first thinking. The two studies were complementary but not identical; both aimed to discover more about day to day foster care for young children. These parallel but independent studies (Meeto et al. 2020; Höjer and Nordenfors 2020), were carried out by teams with a long standing collaborative record, and who arrived at common conclusions about the role of education in the lives of foster carers through joint workshops and dialogue over several years. As a result we are seeking to compare Sweden and England for the similarities rather than differences in outlook.

5.1 The two studies – methods and data sources

Study one was carried out in the Gothenburg area of Sweden. Its main aim was to find out about the participation of preschool aged children living in foster care in early childhood education and the

perceptions of foster carers about such participation. Seventeen foster carers in 11 foster homes participated in the study, recruited through city social services teams and through contacts with foster care units in local municipalities. The children were between 3 weeks and 5.5 years of age at the time of placement, were younger than seven at the time of fieldwork, and had either general developmental delays, or specific health or neuropsychiatric diagnoses. For two of the children, a custody transfer had been carried out². Although permanency planning is not a recognised part of out-of-home care in Sweden, all foster carers stated in the interviews that it was understood that the children were placed in care with the prospect of permanency. Nine study participants (all female) had current or past professional experience with children, mostly as preschool teachers; the remainder (five male and three female) had varied occupations from veterinary surgeon to administration, sales and plumber. Those with teaching experience are likely to have had a special interest in educational issues.

Study two was located in inner city London, England. This was an ethnographic study exploring foster carers' views about, and their daily practices in relation to, the education and social lives of preschool aged children. Foster care in England is more likely to be short term than in Sweden, since it is often a prelude to, for young children, adoption, or return to birth family. Data sources in this study were five foster carers in one borough, caring for six children aged between six months and three years. Four of the six children had developmental delays in relation to speech and physical development, and the other two were infants, one of whom was born prematurely. Three of the carers had Jamaican heritage, one was Eritrean and had migrated via Italy, and one was White British. All full-time foster carers, prior professional experience included administration, school cook, and working with young children in ECE settings, one of whom was trained to do so. Four of the five had older, biological, children living in the household.

In the study in England, each household had three research visits, and the data collection methods included interview, field notes, observation, map making and photo elicitation. For the latter, the foster

² When a child has been placed in foster care for three years, the local social welfare committee shall consider whether the custody of the child should be transferred to the foster parents, regardless of the circumstances of the birth parents, in order to secure stability and a sense of family belonging.

carers were asked to take photographs of their everyday lives between research visits one and two, and visit three was used to create photo maps with the images the foster carers had selected. These methods were chosen to capture taken for granted aspects of everyday life that might have been omitted from reporting in interviews. The study aimed to find out the following: 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; and perceptions of the benefit of early childhood education.

To create data for the current study, the Swedish and English teams each selected interview material relevant to care, security, safety, attachment, play, learning and education from the transcripts, and in the case of the study in England, from maps and fieldnotes. These were organised into jointly agreed themes through discursive deliberation back and forth between the teams and with our collaborator in Canada.

6.1 Findings from two complementary studies in Sweden and England

We present thematically organised material first in terms of what foster carers revealed about their orientation to their role, specifically in relation to attachment theory, emotional security and education; and secondly in terms of their actual educational practices. Since the two studies did not ask precisely the same questions nor use the same methods, we are not looking for direct country comparisons. Rather, as two innovative studies in the same general terrain we present striking similarities in outlook, which, we believe, conveys a predominant belief in emotional security and an under-emphasis of the value of early education. As we indicate, we believe these findings should preface a wider scale investigation of the knowledge and capabilities of foster carers and their potential to offer high quality early education to young children.

6.2 Attachment and security in the discourse

6.2.1 Information to foster carers

Swedish foster carers were asked about the content of their pre-service and ongoing training. None of those interviewed could recall a focus on young children or their learning. One said: *‘No, we have not really received any education that addresses the needs of small children...’*³ (SEFC8); and others concurred: *‘I can’t remember that we’ve talked about education at all’*. (SEFCM4)... *‘No, school, no, it’s more focus on the family’* (SE FCF4). Ongoing training was about *‘mental health ... unaccompanied children ... parents who have addiction problems’* (SEFC2).

However, almost all of the foster carers reported that emotional security was a major theme of training: *‘I remember that it was very much this that you have to get a child to function in a new family, how to deal with that’* (SEFC2M) ... *‘It was very much this emotional bit, ...but I can’t remember in any way that we talked about the learning of small children but I remember that we talked about attachment’* (SEFCF2). These accounts parallel the absence of attention to the importance of learning in the life of the young child in care in the PRIDE programme for training foster, adoptive, and kinship parents in Ontario noted above.

6. 2. 2 The basis for learning is a sense of security

In the Swedish study, foster carers talked about the importance of offering the child an environment where they can feel safe. A feeling of security is an overarching theme. In the context of learning and pedagogical methods, several of the foster carers talk about learning activities as if they must be preceded by a sense of security: *‘If you do not feel safe, you cannot learn’* (SEFC4) and *‘the basis for all learning is that you feel safe’* (SEFC2). Others revealed their views about the sequential relationship between learning and security:

‘... If you do not have basic security then learning will not come. So then you can’t, then you can’t take it (learning) because then you are in “escape mode” all the time in some way, that you have not landed. /...

³ All quotations from the Swedish study are authors’ own translations.

/ And that is where the learning can come later when you have found some peace and quiet and you know that you can settle down a bit, I think. ’ (SEFC8)

‘Young children, 0 – 6, need to stay at home with the foster carers for some time, before they start pre-school. In this way, the foster carers can be informed of the child’s developmental level, and the needs of the child’ (SEFCFG 3)

6.2.3 What is good foster care?

According to foster carers in the Swedish study, good foster care is having time and being present *‘especially at the beginning of a placement’ (SEFC4)*. As one carer put it, *‘I think you need to be at home a lot with them in the beginning so they can find their own routines, getting to know where their things are and that they feel that they want to be at home’*. (SEFC5). Another agreed that presence was important: *‘That you are present. ... we don’t think that the most important thing is that you do fun things but, ... that they can trust that you are there when they call for you’ (SE FC10)*. Establishing reliability and predictability through everyday routines was said to be an important ingredient in good foster care and as a road to the feelings of safety and security. As one carer said: *‘I think is important that there are routines. I think that is included in care and upbringing. That the children know what applies ... ’Now we do this, now we go and lay down, now we go up, showers ... ’ (SEFC1)*

Study foster carers in England used the language of love and emotional bonds, in a similar way to the Swedish foster carers, when asked about ‘good’ foster care. One said: *‘Looking after them like one of my own, love, patience, kindness, providing them with safety, making them feel wanted, and keeping them clean’ (ENFC1)*. Another said *‘I love them and give them the best care ... you have to reassure them, I don’t care how young they are. They feel that warmth and that love’ (ENFC1)*. A third reported that in her family *‘we had a very good bond, we all of us formed a bond with this little boy ... [when he left] all we thought about was him ... he was always at the forefront, how is he, how is he getting on’ (ENFC4)*. A fourth, who had previously worked in ECE, said *‘you have to have a real genuine love and a passion that*

you want to help ... and provide a good home environment' (ENFC5). She thought that conveying a feeling of security was important: *'showing them that they can feel secure and feel warm and that they know this is a place [for them]: a hundred percent you are there for them'* (ENFC5).

Good foster care was seen as emerging from long experience of caring for children in families: *'it's something I just do naturally, because I've been an auntie since I was 12'* (ENFC4). ENFC3 said she *'look[s] after them like my own...I just do what I have to do to the best interests of the baby. ... basically making sure they are clean and dressed well and they're fed. They don't want for anything'*. ENFC2 concurred that *'you have to look after them like your family'*.

The temporal break as fostering comes to an end and young children are adopted or returned to parents was assessed in terms of emotional impact and loss. Foster carers described the impact of fostered children leaving them in terms of being *'sad ...it broke my heart'* (ENFC3), and *'having to be emotionally in the right place'* (ENFC1). The idea, practice and loss of being attached to children they looked after was arguably a powerful part of being a foster carer and originated in their identity as mothers and carers. Only one participant drew on their previous professional experience; this was a carer who had worked in early childhood education prior to becoming a foster carer.

6.3 Actual educational practices

We now turn to the data on actual educational practices. We saw in the above that the descriptive language used by foster carers about their role was centred on providing emotional security in line with attachment theory and that providing learning opportunities was often sequentially related to emotional security. In this section, we discuss what the foster carers were doing to support their fostered children.

6.3.1 Reading

All of the foster carers in the Swedish study greatly valued reading to the children; they also perceived that the children like being read to. One foster carer said: *'Reading is a basic thing really, yes. Get vocabulary and things like that so it is easier to learn other things.* (SEFH5). Reading to children has several purposes. Reading bedtime stories was described as a way to help the child relax and prepare for sleep. But reading aloud can also be a way to give the child attention and create a relationship: *'When you read to someone you really show that "I care, I want to be with you, I do it for you ...'* (SEFH10). It could, in addition, help children develop their communicative language and *'gain an understanding of how the world works'* (SEFH10).

Among study participants in England reading to young children was not universally considered appropriate. While one said *'reading to her, all that is very important ... from the baby stage ... I did with my son, so all my foster babies I done the same'* (ENFC3), another declared that *'it's too early to read a book ... I prefer for them to see me singing, playing with them ... its better reading for them when they are nine months at least'* (ENFC2).

6.3.2 A part of daily activities

Being part of daily activities in the family was described by all study foster carers in Sweden as an important basis for learning. It was seen as a way of "socializing" into society (SEFH2). One foster carer described everyday life as fundamental to growing up in a family:

... trying to encourage ... or plant flowers. Unload the dishwasher. So this everyday ... a little more responsibility, some new things, a little, yes. And we've done it with all our kids and we don't do it any differently with him (SEFC8).

Involving children in everyday life, such as showing her or him how to go about preparing a meal, how to do carpentry on the new porch, and so on, was described as essential to learning. One foster carer (SEFH6) described how their foster daughter spends a lot of time with them and that when they, for example, walk to the preschool, they talk about things they see, such as the construction process when

they pass a building site every day. Foster carers saw naming what one does and what things are called as a way to bring learning into everyday life.

Among study participants in England, daily life was often an organizational challenge, to fit in housework, shopping, facilitating children's contact with birth families, which might be several times a week, meetings with professionals, their own families' needs and so on. For some foster carers, difficulties emerged in managing competing demands on the children's time. One was caring for a three year old who *'should have been in nursery but wasn't ... for them [birth parents] contact would be more important than the child going to an education setting'* (ENFC4).

Nevertheless, study foster carers described shaping opportunities for their children to learn at home. One talked about *'teaching the alphabet, counting and the animals ... I taught her to ride a little scooter ... if they're taught from a young age, there's not a problem'* (ENFC3). Another had a view of learning linked to ages and stages and children copying adults: *'when they are three years old they can sing after you, they copy from you'* (ENFC2). A third attributed her creativity at home to her cultural identity. She said *'as a Jamaican, our play is what we make it of natural things. We create our own play. ... things like when they finish their bubble bath I just cut holes in there and put it in the bath and they play with it, they use it as a funnel ... they find it fascinating'* (ENFC5).

Figure 1 illustrates two foster carer's photomaps, designed as a way to demonstrate foster carers' views of everyday life with and for their children. Images selected were of objects found around the



home, such as a sterilizer, cot, and record book, but also shopping in local

supermarkets, bedrooms, contact centres, playparks, toys, and, in the case of one carer, days out with her family.

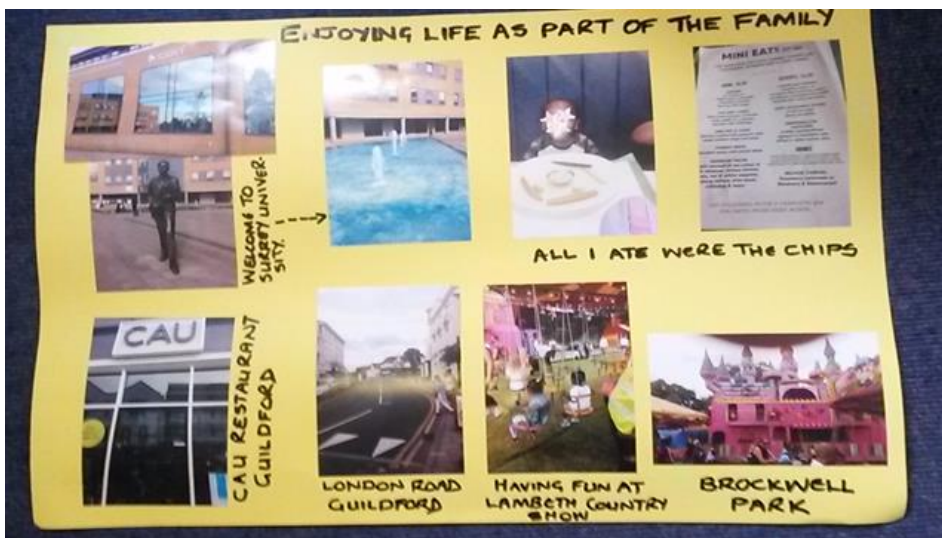


Figure 1: Example photomaps of everyday life, study in England

Various obstacles to fostered children enjoying everyday life were mentioned. For example, study participants doubted the cleanliness of public facilities in the light of the susceptibility of young fostered children to infection. In one example, a study participant said *'I didn't want him to go up there [children's centre] and be catching all these other things ... I don't have a [sandpit] but I would make sure it was clean if children were playing in it. ... Even at nursery, I know they clean everything but that is only every*

so often. You just have to pray' (ENFC4). Another mentioned that the local swimming pool was not suitable: *'It's not good to take him ... he has a hole in his heart, I think it might do something to him'* (ENFC2). She questioned whether the water was clean. Study participants in England were acutely aware that they have a special responsibility to keep their fostered children safe, and free from infection, and that this group were particularly vulnerable, especially if they had delayed development of any kind, which applied to most of the children in the study.

6.3.4 Specific methods to promote learning

Some of the foster carers in the Swedish study consciously used certain methods such as pictograms where the weekdays have different colours:

'stuff on calendar for him to learn and understand like days and weeks..., what happens these different days, so he gets a grip on time. ... How long is a week? Yes, we will go to the dentist and when will we do it? So, we have used it (the calendar) ever since he actually came and it works great... he thought it was great. ... Yes it also shows that different senses, different experiences are associated, and that even if you do not understand what a Tuesday is, you understand what a blue day is' (SEFH10). Another carer described *'set[ting] up the alphabet a little here and there... A, B, that is, like, when you are and getting dressed, yes there was the alphabet, what was that letter? It is A like in a monkey ("apa" in Swedish), or that you ... yes, all the time ...'* (SEFH7).

6.3.5 Stimulation from other children

For some foster carers, older children are important in offering foster children a stimulating environment. One family in the study in Sweden had an older son who owned a construction company, and he often visited with *'his construction car'* (SEFH3) and puts stuff in the garage. There is always something going on and the foster child may be a part of this. Another family described their foster son as being *'very stimulated'* (SEFH4) by his big brothers.

Two study participants in England had other children in the household who offered stimulation and support to the fostered children. One looked after her granddaughter two days a week, and she and the foster child played together for extended periods. Fieldnotes recorded that in the park *'he seems to follow what FC's granddaughter does – wants scooter from her. He is not as fast as she is but can use it slowly. FC comments that he has just learned to do this'*. Later, the researcher observed that the *'two children play all the time together – they build towers with stacking cups, use a blanket and pretend to go to sleep'* (ENFC4). For a baby with serious developmental delays, a visiting niece offered stimulation. Fieldnotes recorded: *'FC'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'* (ENFC1).

6.3.6 Capturing the child's interest

In the Swedish study, several foster carers emphasized the importance of capturing the child's interest and building on their curiosity. In this example, the carer conveys a sense of creating a stimulating mutual learning environment:

Interviewer: *In what way would you describe that you offer a stimulating environment for ...?*

FH 8: *I think I'm trying to give him things he can enjoy. I'm curious about what he likes, I'm curious about what he can do.*

For these foster carers, it appears that their discourse about everyday life with the children is infused with educational concepts and methods, seen both as an important for learning and also as a means of socializing and strengthening relationships.

6.3.7 Views about education

In England, study participants all said that education was important or '*paramount*' (ENFC4) but this was not necessarily related to early education. One discussed education in terms of the time and attention children in care got in schools, particularly if they were '*our own Black children... they feel that because they are in care, no one cares about them*' and the impermanence of foster care leads to them, or schools, thinking '*what's the use in getting settled*' (ENFC1). This carer thought that younger children in foster care, '*should get priority in nursery*' so that they don't feel they have '*missed out*'. Even '*twice a week ... would help them education wise*' (ENFC1). Similarly, another carer said the first '*four years are the most important ones, foundation years. ... the children's centres, libraries, leisure centres are necessary for them... it's about equipping them with everyday ... I'm well into education*' (ENFC4). A third took her child to playgroup three mornings a week, unless '*other things crop up*', where her foster daughter '*loves the singing ... I get her hands to clap ... I didn't think she'd understand [but] she knew what I was saying*' (ENFC3). This foster carer integrated educational activities into her daily life on the basis that '*the more you put into them when they're little, by the time they start going to school, they're already ... even if not halfway, a quarter there*' (ENFC3).

The three year old twins were about to start nursery, which their foster carer saw as offering a chance to explore the wider world. She said '*I was always going to send them, whether it was for one day or two, whether I had to pay for it or not*'. But previous to this point in time '*there was no need for them to go*' (ENFC5). This carer saw nursery before the age of three as an option if she, the foster carer, was not coping. She said '*it's not that I couldn't handle it ... it's about them, it's not about me*'. Overall, while participants valued education, they largely saw it as happening later (in compulsory school), or in organized settings such as playgroups or children's centres. Less often, they recognized their own role in promoting learning at home. One referred to the value of play in organised settings: '*a lot of it comes through play. And other children as well...from each other, learning together; put them in a group*' (ENFC4).

Study participants emphasized routines to help children learn, such as putting a child to bed to learn about nap times (ENFC1), having weekday routines that reflect ‘*what you’re going to want for that child*’ (e.g., potty training) (ENFC4), and copying the adults around them (ENFC2). Two carers explicitly referred to taking the lead on learning activities such as reading and counting (ENFC3) and extending the possibilities of digital toys by making associated sounds, using everyday objects to create play materials (e.g., playdoh, pasta) about which questions about texture and colour arise (ENFC5). Observations of what the carers did at home suggested little presence of play-based learning, through, for example, messy play, with the exception of one who was a trained ECEC practitioner.

7.1 Discussion

Our study data drew on two small scale studies with foster carers in two countries with differing approaches to early childhood education but similar approaches to family based foster care. The roles of the studied foster carers differed somewhat: in Sweden, study participants saw the children as with them for the whole of childhood, while in England, the placements were more temporary, between return to biological parents or new adoptive families. These differences of role may account for differences of perspective in, for example, concern about hygiene and infection, and the extreme busyness reported among study participants in England. Nevertheless, their views of foster carers about what makes a good foster carer were similar: both groups promoted the value of emotional security in a family setting. In neither case did carers see themselves as educators or their role as education of young children. One might argue that education is not part of foster carers remit and therefore one could not expect them to self-identify as educator. It is worth noting that in some jurisdictions broadly based ‘education’ is the overarching framework for care services while in others a more holistic ‘social pedagogy’ that combines education, care and upbringing is the dominant concept (Cameron et al. 2015). In many cases study foster carers were offering everyday educational experiences despite a primarily ‘care’ identity and perhaps if a role as educator were promoted, it might enhance young children’s access to educational activities and developmental stimulation in foster care. Study foster carers in England had more obstacles to doing this

than their peers in Sweden, as their daily life was logistically very challenging. Young fostered children are often in a liminal position of not living with parents who are going to bring them up over the long term. In Sweden, study participants believed, however, that their fostering would be long term despite a lack of legal permanency. In England, study foster carers were facilitating visiting arrangements with birth parents or adoptive parents which had to be fitted in to their schedule, alongside, frequently, medical or other appointments (Meetoo et al., 2020). Hectic schedules arguably took time away from focusing on everyday education and care and were not found in the Swedish study data.

The data suggests that, while young children in foster care are entitled to early education, this right is being obscured by 'security first' thinking. This thinking is also obscuring the informal educational activity carried out by foster carers that they do not necessarily recognize as such. We stress that this is preliminary data, but we show that foster carers often prioritised young children's need for emotional security before their need for learning and education. The general perception was that a feeling of security, and emotional closeness, is a prerequisite for children's ability to learn and develop their cognitive capacities. Security first thinking is in line with the views of child development contained in the materials used to train foster carers for their role.

For reasons of space we have not presented study data on social workers' and fostering services' views on the fostering role and early childhood education. However, initial data supports our argument that educational matters are not a priority for those directing foster care (Meetoo et al. 2020). Rather, social work is concerned about relationships and stability of placements, seen as important indicators for secure attachment, and early childhood education outside the foster home as representing requirements for children to create or manage additional attachment relationships rather than as offering stimulating play and social opportunities that are of equal merit and protective in the long term (Jackson and Hollingworth 2018).

8.1 Conclusion

The foregoing considerations have led us to formulate a two-fold working hypothesis, which will need testing in a relatively large-sample and longitudinal study. First, we hypothesize that security-first thinking derived from attachment theory has been influential but largely unacknowledged in planning for young children in foster care, distorting practitioners' conceptualisation of how young children in care develop and how their carers should be prepared. Second, we hypothesize that this bias towards security-first thinking has contributed to an under-appreciation of the protective and preventive role of education in young children's short-term and long-term academic success and emotional well-being.

We noted the dominance of attachment theory in social work and foster care, which reflects not only the long lasting administrative and professional split between care and education in child welfare services in many countries, but also the attractiveness of a theory that describes what is apparently 'natural' in family life. As attachment theory has been elaborated, it has usefully foregrounded relationships with children in care, but it has also essentialised them to the point where the state of wellbeing that is associated with warm continuous relationships overshadows children's opportunities to learn and participate in social life. This is not just a point about children's participatory rights. We know from longitudinal studies how crucial education is in mediating social disadvantage for those with a childhood in foster care; the impact lasts well into adult years (Forsman et al. 2016). We also know from studies of care-experienced young people how disrupted school-based education can be (Jackson and Cameron 2014). In addition, we know that foster carers are able to make a significant difference to young children's literacy abilities (Flynn et al. 2012). In the Swedish data presented in this paper, the foster carers largely ensured they incorporated learning into everyday activities with children, with the aim to improve their cognitive capacities; this may be related to professional backgrounds in education. Among study participants in England, conscious active educational practices were not so strongly articulated, but were present in some accounts, particularly where the foster carer had a background in early childhood

education. The relationship between professional background and foster carers' educational practices should be explored more comprehensively.

Rather than waiting to educate young children in care in school, we should pay much greater attention from the start to the home learning environment in foster care settings. Moreover, social workers and foster carers need to be better informed about the crucial protective role that education plays in children's development and about their own important contributions as educators themselves.

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