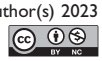
Article

adoption & fostering

Adoption & Fostering
2023, Vol. 47(3) 326–346



DOI: 10.1177/03085759231199775
journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf
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We can connect: Imagining the future of digital practice with and by care-experienced children and young people

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Abstract

A participatory study with care-experienced children and young people identified longstanding problems in social work with children and recommended service improvements. The authors reflected on a digital resource co-created by this study and speculated on future digital adaptations

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that might address some of the service development needs that children and young people identified. This was inspired by Haraway's (1985) call to imagine *cyborgification* in order to break from dominant thinking while being cautious of how power operates in human-machine conjunctures. The imagined digital adaptations focus on connecting to people and places, leisure, education, accommodation, journey planning through care and systems accountability. Imagining *cyborgification* highlighted how digital adaptations are embedded in, and not a substitute for, trusting relationships. Adaptations must be co-developed by intergenerational groups of children and professionals. Bourdieu's (1985, 1986) notions of *habitus*, *field* and *capitals* could guide theoretically informed feasibility testing, drawing attention to distributions of resources. Key questions relate to: When can digital adaptations challenge the dominant habits and politics of social care, strengthen deep relationships and secure social, cultural and economic capital in the hands of young experts and their adult allies, so that systems can redress inequalities and promote accountability?

Plain language summary

Children and young people helped create a research study and an animation. They found that there are long-term problems in the care system and ways of improving things. The animation made recommendations on what needs to change to improve children's connections to other people and places, their education, accommodation, journey planning through care and how the whole system works.

As there is now such a strong connection between people and digital technology, it is important to think through how digital tools might help to resolve long-term problems, or how they might make things worse. We watched the animation and thought about digital approaches that are already being used or that could be adapted to help achieve the changes children want. We also considered the risks. We discussed these ideas with the young participants.

In conclusion, digital solutions need to:

1. be co-created with children, young people and adults living and working with them;
2. help people to think and behave differently, rather than being digital ways of continuing to do the same negative things;
3. strengthen trusting human relationships, rather than replacing these;
4. increase the information, connections and power of children, young people and adults working for them;
5. help change the way in which the care system works and decrease inequalities.

Keywords

Children in care, digital social work, *cyborgification*, participation, trust networks

Introduction

Children and young people with care experience often suffer poor outcomes in education and in terms of their physical and mental health and wider social wellbeing (Department for Education [DfE], 2020). In response to these poor outcomes, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) (2021) developed guidelines for working with looked

after children and young people in England, with insights from the participatory research project, *Creating Our Lives* (Larkins et al., 2021). The study worked in partnership with care-experienced children and young people and highlighted, for example, the importance of:

- smooth transitions into placements;
- improved contact;
- stronger connections to important people in their lives;
- access to leisure opportunities through which to build relationships with carers;
- access to support and information within and about education;
- clearer influence over options for leaving care accommodation;
- influence in decision-making about all aspects of their lives.

Internationally, looked after children have rights to the best possible care and appropriate education but, as shown in *Creating Our Lives* and elsewhere, these are not being consistently respected (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 2021a). At a European level, the barriers to achieving these goals are longstanding and relate, *inter alia*, to funding choices, strategies of risk management, (de)regulation and dominant narratives that frame what social work in Europe is and should be (Kessl et al., 2020). The recent United Nations (UN) day of discussion on alternative care highlighted that there is need to redress long-term failings and to identify mechanisms for removing and circumnavigating barriers, including ensuring support for children's collective participation in holding systems to account (UNCRC, 2021a).

As part of a toolkit of responses to try to redress some of the ongoing challenges, and perhaps speeded up by the recent pandemic, digital adaptations are occurring from the UK (Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2022) to Nepal (UNCRC, 2021a) and beyond. In *Creating Our Lives*, some participants described the benefits of an app that they used to communicate about their daily lives with their social worker, and young researchers helped to cocreate a digital animation output from the study (www.ucanmakechange2.org/creating-our-lives-2/), which has been used to train social workers. Speculating on the further digital adaptations that may arise in social work with children could prepare us to understand how to evaluate their feasibility, rather than simply observing 'the politics of solutionist' approaches to technology, which can lead to uncritical implementation (Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2022: 427) driven by commercial or emergency response concerns. This article therefore reflects on the children's concerns raised in *Creating Our Lives*, imagines digital adaptations in response to these and identifies evaluative questions and theoretical approaches that might usefully guide feasibility testing of these and other future digital adaptations in children's social work.

To engage in predicting the future, as encouraged by the call for this special edition, this article follows Haraway's (1985: 121) invitation to use the notion of a cyborg as an imaginative resource that may help us dare to engage with the boundary of fact and fiction, to seek 'potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work'. A cyborg is 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality [lived social relations] as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway, 1985: 117). That all human life, including social work, is in some way influenced and infused by machines and hybrid material–digital relations has become increasingly evident (e.g., Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2021). The dissolving of online/offline boundaries and the melding of humans and mobile phones can create a digital space, held in a child's hand, experienced as simultaneously more private and more public than words

expressed out loud (Aghtaie et al., 2018). Technologies of communication are becoming smaller and more privatised, and Haraway cautions that this can remove dissent from public arenas or conscript bodies into the circuit of high-tech bourgeois production or digital industries. A *cyborg world* risks being about the imposition of monitoring and control but may offer opportunities to embrace partial or hybridised identities, harnessing the power of contradictory standpoints and resistance (Haraway, 1985). Just as Haraway saw promise as well as danger within these hybrid machine–human conjunctures, teenagers and adults now, *cyborgified* by the intensity of their relationships with mobile technologies, are exposed to opportunities as well as risks (Thompson and Cupples, 2008). There is need for an informed and open discussion to enable social workers to develop a knowledge base which might enable them to understand the risks and better support children and young people's empowerment when using digital media (Simpson, 2016; UNCRC, 2021b), when co-developing digital adaptations and when using the data that emerges from this.

Background

To date, only a small body of research has explored the use of digital adaptations with care-experienced children and young people. This includes studies on contact with birth families (Macdonald et al., 2017), the use of digital technology to enable children to contribute to review meetings (Fursland, 2014), digital approaches to life story work (La Rose and Detlor, 2021), memory work (Gray et al., 2019), foster carer recruitment (Stringfellow, Keegan and Rowley, 2019), parenting resources for adopters (Fox and Archard, 2017), visits by social workers (Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2021), video introductions to placements (Banks et al., 2020) and the research presented in the other contributions in this special edition. These innovations highlight that the 'digital materialities' of hybrid digital social work are already occurring and demonstrate how, at times, these can be an effective practice that enables 'digital intimacies' (Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2022: 427).

Understandings of the risks and benefits of digital adaptations vary. At the level of children's experience and professional practice, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a shift in practice occurred to include more engagement with digital adaptations (Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2021). As a result, some social workers have relaxed the focus on risk and more readily appreciate the benefits of digital communication (Copson et al., 2022). Sage and Jackson's (2021) systematic review of young people's perspectives on digital technology in foster care acknowledges the risks of exploitation, distraction and bullying, and the potential benefits of opportunities for access to information, connection, social capital, normalcy, recreation, empowerment, identity formation and relationship-building. Willoughby's (2019) systematic review highlights the risks of bullying, abuse, negative social relationships and invasions of privacy. Less prominent among the concerns recently documented are those long raised by Turkle (1996; 2021) who notes: 'When the world comes to us in simulation, we lose a sense of what lies beneath and we learn not to care' (2021: 334). The impact on relationships is not conclusive. Sen (2016) observes that relationships may be eroded rather than deepened as digital communication may just become a poor replacement for physical proximity, involving superficial connection rather than transmission of meaning. Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2021) and Copson and colleagues (2022) identify that the distance afforded by digital communication can offer less emotionally intense encounters with professionals and carers, which are appreciated, although Copson and

colleagues (2022) also see these acting as a barrier to relationships based on co-presence and touch.

At the level of systems, the opportunities and the risks of control and prejudice noted by Haraway four decades ago, remain visible. Contemporary children's social care is framed by managerialism, a push towards privatisation and a lack of sensitivity to diversity (Kessl et al., 2020). Across Europe, children's case records are being held electronically with the effect of turning professional attention away from the social and towards datafication (Thane, 2019). While big data can drive positive change, there is a risk that when things go wrong in the 'moral crumple zones' of human–machine interfaces (Elish, 2019: 1), individual social work staff might be made to carry the blame for failing systems. Digital adaptations in the bureaucratised risk- and cost-averse systems may exacerbate the emotional roughness which characterises many children and young people's encounters with them.

The possible risks and opportunities of *cyborgification* also relate to the potential for shifts in the distribution of power (Haraway, 1985). Within social care, a shift is needed towards those in disadvantaged social positions, including children. Systematic reviews (Kennan, Brady and Forkan, 2018; Toros, 2021) show that despite the well-established right for children's views to be considered, the extent to which children influence the decisions that affect them depends on a range of factors. These include the presence of advocates, the formality of the setting, the skills and commitments of professionals and their relation to the principles of participation (Kennan, Brady and Forkan, 2018). Children and young people tend to be positioned as passive recipients of services, with parents or professionals asked to speak and decide on their behalf. Exclusion from decision-making is underpinned by adult presumptions of child incapacity/incompetence and protectionism (Toros, 2021). To investigate what digital adaptations might promote children's influence within social work processes, alongside the framework of 'digital intimacies' and 'digital materialities' provided by Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2021), further sociological concepts may be useful.

To understand how influence works, Steiner's (2021) discussion of power within digital social work is a useful starting point. In the digital era, technology is deployed in relatively stable fields of power where those who have resources dominate those who do not (Steiner, 2021). Technology on its own may reinforce the power dynamics that limit children's influence, rather than challenging them. To guard against this, Steiner (2021) suggests using Bourdieu's (1985) conceptions of *field* and *habitus* to unlock an understanding of where technology has the potential to enable flow and flux in power relations. Steiner (2021: 3362) suggests that new techno-social networks may 'transform habitus formations and change the positions of subjects and technologies in social fields'. In discussing our imagined digital adaptations, we therefore drew on Bourdieu's (1985; 1986) conceptions of *field*, *habitus* and *capitals* to explore how influence could be distributed to ensure that digital adaptations facilitate greater parity of participation and responsive relationships. By the term *field*, Bourdieu is referring to a social space in which there is a shared *habitus*, that is, understandings of the 'rules of the game' and habitual ways of being. Within any field there are also valued resources, which he terms *capitals,* that can be mobilised to express power and influence. These may be *social capitals*, such as networks and connections, *cultural capitals*, such as knowledge, and *economic capital*, such as finance and the exchange value placed on other resources (Bourdieu, 1986).

The process of research and imagination

In 2019–20, academics from the University of Central Lancashire worked with a group of eight care-experienced young people aged 12–17 to develop *Creating Our Lives*, a participatory study designed to inform the NICE guidelines for working with looked after children and young people in England (for full methodology, see Larkins et al., 2021). Young researchers, recruited from two children in care councils, met for 10 hours, guiding data collection approaches (and analysis) by exploring study themes set by NICE. Resultant research tools included:

- theme card visual prompts;
- visual arts and music-based activities to connect to wellbeing;
- individual interviews using the tools above as prompts;
- group discussions centred around a long undulating line, which represented the progression of a movie script and the ups and downs of life.

Ethical approval for the study was given by the University of Central Lancashire and by the Association of Directors of Children's Services. Children invited to participate in the study, and their carers, were provided with information via social workers, advocates and independent visitors. They approached children and young people with a diversity of demographic profiles, whom they considered would not be put at risk by being asked to reflect on their care journeys. Participants indicated their wish to participate, then their carers/social workers signed consent forms. Participants signed their own consent forms after they were given opportunities to ask the researchers questions. The children and young people were offered alternative activities alongside each of the research activities, so that they could change their minds about participating at any moment and opt into alternative pursuits (including indoor football, drawing, chatting with friends and workers or returning home). Groupwork and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Visual responses were photographed; young people retained the originals if they wished.

The study recruited participants from three local authorities across England. When the Covid-19 pandemic started, due to restrictions limiting fieldwork, we also mined existing data sets from matched local authorities to enable the inclusion of broader perspectives (e.g., those of young parents). In total, the study included interview data from 47 care-experienced children and young people aged six to 17 (10 from the Southeast, 17 from the Midlands, 20 from the Northwest). Of these, eight were Black, three South Asian, two Dual Heritage and 34 were White; 17 had pronounced mental health or wellbeing concerns; 10 reported special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) diagnoses and four had emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD); three were in special schools and three were home tutored; two identified as LGBTQI; six were placed out of county; 14 were at risk of exploitation; 11 had a history of going missing; and 11 were young parents. The experiences captured here were intersecting, meaning that any one participant might have multiple characteristics.

This study applied inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A framework approach was used to integrate data from different sources and to ensure that analysis was driven by participants' perspectives (Srivastava and Thomson, 2009). This involved indexing data against key questions and existing and emerging themes. The initial indexing of data was in relation to key questions identified by the NICE Committee Two further recurrent themes emerged (decision-making and leisure

activities). Data were indexed to these themes and charted in NVivo software and in Microsoft Word and Excel. Through charting we identified concepts (outcomes, feelings, features of relationships, people, places, resources, actions, processes and barriers). The concepts were presented to the young researchers through a series of questions which they used to explore anonymised transcripts, photographs and themed data summaries. Through this process, the young researchers developed codes in relation to each concept (e.g., features of relationships included codes such as 'respect' and 'warmth').

This draft framework was discussed with the NICE Committee members who suggested a few additional codes. Academics then used this framework to code extracts of the data set, only adding additional codes where no relevant cocreated one could be found. The full coding framework was checked with participants, to ensure that it represented all the issues that they had raised, and then applied to the full data set. The adult researchers also conducted reflective discussions to identify how our personal and professional backgrounds affected the methodology and data generated (Kiili, Moilanen and Larkins, 2023). We reported our own analysis in a separate section of the published report.

Subsequently, young researchers met online to discuss the summaries of the report contents with the support of a PowerPoint presentation. They asked questions about the report and were given additional content verbally. They then selected all quotes and words for inclusion in an animation and gave guidance on colours using handprints that they sent in on paper. This content became a design brief. Their selected graphic artist created an animation using the words they had chosen and illustrating the quotes they had selected. Voice actors who had been working with young people involved in the same children in care councils recorded the audio. A soundtrack was created by the first author (CL), mixed from the music the participants had identified with the word 'wellbeing'. The animation was shared back to the children in care councils and has started to be used to train professionals.

Through this process of cocreating and conducting research, children and young people engaged in the emotional labour of researchers and research participants. Children reflected on deeply sensitive issues, and their frustrations about poor practice and broken promises were palpable. The original young researchers moved on to other projects. Based on discussions with children in care council facilitators, the authors did not approach new children and young people to engage directly in digital imaginings, therefore, but rather, in a series of individual and shared online and hybrid discussions, the authors themselves viewed the animation. We (academics, who have direct personal experience of social care, are foster carers or have been social workers, advocates or teachers) used the cocreated animation as a visual prompt to imagine and share ideas in intuitive, non-linear discussions (Froggett, Manley and Roy, 2015). We recorded our discussions of potential digital adaptations, identified how these linked to the themes in the co-created analysis framework and returned to a further round of collective imagining. Each author then developed one idea following this structure:

- identify what the young people had voiced in the animation and underpinning study;
- conceive an imagined related digital adaptation;
- conduct a review of connected literature and current digital adaptations;
- reflect on the ways of being (*habitus*), relational dynamics (of the *field*) and resources (*capitals*) that might be involved.

As part of our ongoing commitment to collaborate with children from the two children in care councils involved in the original research (Larkins et al., 2021), we met with them to

discuss possible future development of the imaginings in this article. We provided paper prompts with brief words describing the possible digital adaptations and offered additional verbal explanations. This enabled non-verbal responses by children – they could choose which ones to discuss and to prioritise. We also described our intentions to seek funding to try to explore some of these ideas with them in the future. Funding applications to support feasibility studies in relation to their priorities have now been submitted. Their insights and priorities are introduced in the Discussion section of this article.

Evaluating further *cyborgification* of social work with children

As already noted, existing research and practice have identified some of the benefits of digital adaptations in terms of contact with birth families, contributions to review meetings, life story and memory work, recruitment of foster carers, building parenting capacity and visits by social workers. As outlined below, the imaginings we report are focused on other areas, namely: connections to and within placements, access to leisure, support within education, transitions to independence, journeys through care and accountable decisions. These are not ready-made digital adaptions. Rather our aim is to use them to provide insights into what might be on the horizon and the questions and theoretical perspectives that might usefully be included in future evaluations of digital adaptations within social work with children.

Virtual visits

The children and young people who participated in the study valued placement transitions that involved:

- gentle introductions supported by information and explanations;
- known workers accompanying them through transitions;
- welcoming staff or carers.

Research participants wanted to do things to get to know new carers and to maintain close relationships with a wide range of people and the places they had lived.

Although there is a shortage of placements (MacAlister, 2022), meaning children rarely experience extensive choice about where they live, there may be opportunities to mitigate the experience of having things 'done to' them (Benjamin, 2018: 21). The UNCRC's (2021b) guidance on children's rights in digital environments highlights that, where risks are well managed, digital technology in alternative care can provide a useful tool for developing relationships with prospective carers and maintaining ones with distant family. We imagined that further developments could involve:

- children creating videos about their interests and concerns;
- carer(s) responding in videos or live chats;
- carer(s) making videos including a tour of the home and immediate area, as well as an introduction to any other people and pets currently living in the placement.

Within placements, children and carers could show each other places they have lived or loved using tools such as Google Street View (Google LLC, 2015), thereby virtually walking through past lives, and stimulating memory and story-sharing.

If video representations of humans and places generate a 'feel' for someone or somewhere, virtual visits and video dialogues may enable children and carers to find common ground and shared interests before a face-to-face visit. Indeed, a pre-recorded video created by an individual social worker during the Covid-19 pandemic was successfully used to introduce a foster carer (Banks et al., 2020). A pre-recorded video might ensure that, even in an emergency, a child would still see their new home. Where a choice of placement is available, children might use this information as part of their decision-making process. In placements, carers and children might try creating a reciprocal sharing atmosphere and sense of intimacy by sharing sight of important places, which could help to facilitate the development of trusting relationships (Mitchell et al., 2010).

However, these *cyborgified* relationships to physically and temporally distant people and places may be disruptive. Some children speak more openly and confidently in a video call than in person (Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2021), but others may be intimidated. After the digital intimacy of meeting someone on a video, a face-to-face encounter may promote unease. Digital links to past people and places could disturb a child's ability to settle, or trigger negative emotions. The sensory environment of smell and touch, only gained through in-person encounters, could be missed. Children may be promised things in videos that carers or services fail to deliver. Professionals' capacity to assess and navigate these potential dynamics in collaboration with children and carers would therefore remain crucial: assessing what is safe, facilitating connections, answering questions, exploring thoughts and emotions that might have arisen, ensuring that carers do not overpromise and limiting unrealistic expectations.

Critical evaluation of future digital adaptations must therefore explore the *economic capital* (investment in placements) and quality of in-person relationships that would make any of these digital adaptations feasible and beneficial. It would be important to explore whether access to the *cultural capital* of video visits enables children's influence over placement choices and leads to greater long-term stability of placements. If this resource is of value, the *habitus* of social workers who manage to balance related risks while promoting children's access to influence might also be explored.

Activities hub

Children and young people reported (Larkins et al., 2021) that enjoying leisure activities with significant people in their lives helped to improve their sense of connectedness and promote their wellbeing. They enjoyed contact that involved fun activities in accessible venues and recommended that social work practice should include doing nice things that were chosen by the children and young people themselves. Some children and young people highlighted that they did not know about leisure opportunities.

We therefore imagined how an accessible, single digital resource, detailing leisure activities in a given area, might be co-created with children and carers so that information might be communicated through online networks. There are several free parent-centric activity apps available for general use (Future Publishing, 2015; ClubHub 2021; Eventbrite, 2022). These are gate kept and shaped by adults and do not report whether an activity or venue will be sensitive to care-experienced children and young people's needs. We imagined an activities app that might include venues and activities identified in *Creating Our Lives*, such as parks, yoga, sports clubs, arts and crafts, libraries, museums, café, youth organisations and participation groups. Trustpilot (2022) style reviews, with a numerical scale and comments,

could be requested on the themes children and young people told us were important (Larkins et al., 2021):

- staff friendliness and sensitivity to looked after children and young people;
- application of trauma-informed approaches;
- suitability for contact meetings;
- cost and access, including transport.

Responding to other concerns about access to information raised in *Creating Our Lives*, reviews of schools' extracurricular activities could help children and young people make informed choices during transition from one school to another. In addition, information about access to and cost of activities could help young people prepare for independence, including applying for grants from the pupil premium fund (a UK Government initiative to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children in state-funded schools in England). Further, the app could include a 'favourites' option to enable users to curate a history of events they have enjoyed. This could help to redress the paucity of records of positive memories that the research participants highlighted in our study. The provision of the app in some care settings might also help to change the *habitus* of that setting, which has been seen as particularly important in children's homes where engaging in sport is not the norm (Quarmby, 2014).

Critical evaluation of any app of this nature might include looking into whether children and young people more readily explore activities and assert their wishes via a screen alongside someone, rather than in a face-to-face discussion, and by clicking rather than speaking. Particular benefits for young people who do not freely share their wishes directly, or who have histories of trauma which have taught them that this is dangerous or pointless, might be investigated. The potential of such an app to increase children's, young people's and carers' access to *social capital* through networks that share advice on venues, as well as the friendships that develop through the activities on offer, might also be explored. The question could be posed whether voicing their views in such a context helps children and young people express their preferences in other areas of life.

Classroom clicker

In our study, young people stressed the importance of relationships with teachers and other education workers. They valued school staff who were caring, fair, trustworthy and who considered nothing was too much to ask, as one participant described:

> . . . there's like the . . . Safeguarding Officer . . . but you've got pastoral supports in every year, so I just go to my pastoral support and they'll do whatever they need to do.

Some participants suggested schools should be more supportive and gave examples of bullying not being responded to. Some children and young people lacked permission to leave a class or to gain access to safe spaces and help when they were experiencing physical or emotional distress.

Electronic feedback response systems are often used in schools: to enable teachers to gauge student understanding through real-time responses to questions; to collect and track attendance and behavioural data; and to gather research data on children and young

people's views throughout the school day. Putting this sort of technology into the hands of looked after children, we imagined a *classroom clicker*, enabling them to contact their designated educationalist(s). This might:

- send a short statement or question when feeling concerned or overwhelmed;
- let teachers know that they are experiencing emotional distress and need to leave a classroom immediately;
- report bullying before it escalates;
- enable an adult to indicate staff availability and a designated safe space;
- ensure the class teacher receives a simple visual code indicating that a named young person has approval to leave or that there is bullying that needs addressing.

Although the aim of discreetly contacting any designated educationalist is to access the in-person trusted relationships and human support available to them within the school environment, which was important to children and young people in the study, the challenges related to this digital adaptation are multiple. In *Creating Our Lives*, children raised concerns about their control over whether to share their looked after status. To enable their choice, classroom clickers might be made available to all students or discreetly modelled to look like a pen. Capacity to implement this technology might also vary, as some schools are reported to have a stronger commitment to promoting looked after children's wellbeing. It might also require evolution in teachers' *habitus* (as the rules of the education game tend to put reporting in the hands of education professionals rather than pupils) and clarity about how any stored data are used, so that they experience the clicker as a means of safeguarding rather than as a tool to monitor their professional practice. *Cyborgification* of the reporting of concerns could increase teachers' perceptions of surveillance or dehumanise teacher–pupil relationships. However, in line with expectations that virtual headteachers advocate for and model strengths-based approaches and high aspirations for children with a social worker (DfE, 2022), *cyborgification* might offer a way of collecting learning from these reports to help co-create environments where care-experienced children and young people feel more settled and motivated, thereby offering them a better school experience.

Critical evaluation of any such gadget would therefore need to consider how it could be co-produced by teachers and pupils, how it might enable children and young people to self-record their experiences across the school year, how cross-school data is collected and becomes used as concrete cultural capital, as well as how well it enabled children to access a safe and trusted adult.

Accommodation digital trust networks

Research participants who were leaving care told us that information about accommodation options should be made available as they approach the point of transitioning from placements in foster care or children's homes towards independent living. In particular, young people wanted information and support to make decisions themselves about where they live. Some of them described the absence of choice that many care leavers experience, but one young person described how her social worker challenged this:

> My social worker said, 'I'm not letting you move out to the wrong place… I don't like the urgency'. My social worker lets me see the flats that she thinks are acceptable and then I choose.

This experience was in sharp contrast to the sense from many of the care leaver participants who thought that accommodation was recommended on the basis of availability and even hidden agendas, rather than young people's best interests. An app cannot in and of itself remedy the availability of quality accommodation for care leavers, which is shaped by market forces (Jones, 2018). We did, however, imagine a world in which a digital trust network might over time help people in the field of leaving care accommodation generate a different *habitus*, in the sense of 'regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu, 1990: 57). Digital trust networks are online rating and reviewing systems through which peers (customers or users) share their views (Levine, 2019). They depend on peer networks, consisting of lateral relations with other individuals in a similar status/power position. We imagined that it might be possible for an Airbnb-style review system, for use by care-experienced peers, to:

- enable shortlisting of initial accommodation by a young person;
- provide virtual tours;
- enable online chats with existing young tenants;
- permit booking in-person visits.

Might *cyborgification* here shift the dispositions of providers and social workers towards enabling choice?

Unfortunately, digital trust networks are open to misuse. On Airbnb, for example, there is evidence of bias against potential renters who have names which suggest they are of a minoritised ethnicity (Tene and Polonetsky, 2018). This is problematic as digital trust networks rely on self-regulation to provide legitimacy and encourage their use. One solution might be to create a shared professional–young person platform with transparent moderation. Young people could be introduced to the system in an age-appropriate manner earlier in their care pathway when, as some participants discussed in our study, they are starting to ask questions about the future. This might also enable experiential learning for staff and young people about safe engagement (see Twinkl, 2022).

The feasibility of any such digital trust network adaption might therefore be evaluated by considering the extent to which change is possible in the *field* of leaving care accommodation. Redistribution of *social* and *cultural* capital could be explored to identify what might enable young people to have the combined role of empowered consumer and inspector, rather than being positioned as objects of market relations between profit-making accommodation providers (Jones, 2018). Shifts in the *habitus* of workers in the field might be assessed to identify any dispositions towards developing risk competency, rather than risk aversion and protectiveness towards corporate reputations (Parton, 2014).

Journey planner

In *Creating Our Lives*, few children felt that they could consistently voice their concerns or participate effectively in the decision-making related to their lives. Children reported that social workers often lacked the relationships with young people to enable these conversations, due to staff turnover, heavy caseloads and only being able to support when something significant is happening.

To redress such challenges, a plethora of gaming and visualisation tools have been developed over decades to help gather young people's ideas. These include the *Decision Making Green Toolbox* (Thomas et al., 1999), *Three Houses* (Weld, 2008) and *My Life on Track*

(Children in Wales, 2020). Digital developments include Triangle's (2022a; 2022b) *My Star* and *Shooting Star* versions of their *Outcome Star* tool. The *Mind of My Own* range of apps (Mind of My Own, 2023), used in alternative care and youth justice, allow children and young people to note down their thoughts, feelings and ideas in real time and send them electronically to the adults in their lives.

We imagined further *cyborgification* in the form of gaming future planning to bring learning from earlier analogue tools into future digital products, as the advantage of gamification has been seen in other domains of children's lives (Caponetto, Earp and Ott, 2014). Drawing on a tool which the sixth author (IK) is now co-developing in an analogue form, we imagined how children or young people might sit with a trusted adult to:

- picture themselves on a journey, moving towards a destination, which is aspirational, forward-looking and, most importantly, defined by the young person;
- outline where they were at the previous conversation/review;
- discuss where they are currently and how that feels, where they want to be in the short- to medium-term and what support they will need in their planned journey to get there.

For digitally adapting this relationship-based analogue tool, we imagined that conversations might be recorded and logged graphically and digitally for sharing with the child's wider care network. As resources are identified and secured to support young people in their chosen journeys, these could then be visually represented in the digital tool. In periodic repeat discussions, children might play with the gamified visualisation of how far they have come using the journey planner alongside the other resources they have accessed and continue with or revise their plan for the next period.

The reliance of this tool on discussions with a trusted adult (or perhaps a trained peer) bring the risk that they 'lead' the conversation and influence the choices of the child. Journeys may be thwarted by the lack of sustained social networks, recently identified as a widespread phenomenon (MacAlister, 2022), and the lack of resources in social care. Therefore, evaluation of this digital adaptation might include the extent to which the adaptation and accompanying training could enable trusted adults to develop the reflex (or *habitus*) to prompt reflection, rather than proffer advice, and to advocate with and for children to secure the real-life support and resources needed. Relationships to other valued resources (*capitals*) that enable children's influence over their lives might also be explored.

The Accountability App

As summarised by the animation (https://youtu.be/Vl_oSSeyWKA), children and young people asked for professionals who:

- do the job right;
- understand us as individuals;
- help us make decisions.

They wanted more responsive social workers, combined with coordinated action: 'Instead of different social workers and no-one communicating. We need people to be actually sorting things out.' Existing practices of individual record-keeping within children's services

are patchy and, at times, experienced as disempowering both in the UK (Hoyle et al., 2019) and other parts of Europe (Hoikkala and Pösö, 2020). This has led to recommendations of strengthening rights-based documentation by clearly recording children's views alongside subsequent decisions in ways that are accessible to children (but which do not expose them to risk, for example, where their views contrast with the opinions of their parents or carers). Electronic record-keeping is thought to offer potential as a rights-respecting tool for recording and tracking decisions, as long as professionals take a reflective approach to the ethics of their practice (Hoyle et al., 2019). But current case-documentation systems focused on quantification and managerialisation, rather than the empowerment of service users, demonstrate the need to co-design systems that are more than digital-control mechanisms (Steiner, 2021).

We therefore imagined *cyborgification* of the review and recording process in *The Accountability App* – an electronic system that might put information and the flagging of concerns in the hands of children and young people, alongside the current review recording which is professional centred. Through the app, children and young people would feed views into the reviewing system, as well as being able to:

- receive clear feedback about how each idea was considered or not, and why;
- have a comprehensive record of the actions and timescales that have been agreed;
- track whether actions have happened or not;
- escalate any concerns about actions not taken within agreed timeframes;
- feed changes in decisions and action back into the app, to keep track of concerns outside of reviews.

This proposed adaptation might include increasing children's access to information and speeding up informal complaints. A traffic light system, highlighting children's sense that actions are not being taken, might also trigger prompts to social workers to visit and understand concerns or to team leaders so that they can discuss any barriers to the planned actions (by social workers, schools, health professionals, carers, etc.).

A risk, however, is that social care professionals or teams may be exposed to individual blame. This would be likely to strain relationships, expose professionals or children to reprisals and potentially discourage implementation. To avoid the privatisation of dissent which Haraway (1985) foretold, in this *cyborgification* of the relationship between children and their review action plans data would have to be shared. Evaluation might therefore focus on whether metadata (from across the 'amber' and 'red' alerts) and qualitative responses from social work teams could be made into objectified *cultural capital* in the form of an accessible anonymous report, and whether this could be fed into intergenerational collaborations between children in care councils and strategic planning at a local authority level to trigger a service-level response, such as additional or redirected investment. The relational processes and *habitus* within the *field* of social work connected to such an app might also be investigated to understand whether children are able to semi-privately raise concerns and engage in co-producing solutions, as well as how the blaming or exploitation of individual workers might be avoided.

Discussion

Children and young people in care have reported that their current concerns are too often overlooked and their voices unheard (Larkins et al., 2021; UNCRC, 2021a). The causes of

this disregard include the historical and systemic tilting of institutional power relations towards adult-directed, state-sponsored and marketised care services and education (Jones, 2018), and we are under no illusions that these relations could be significantly redressed with an app or two. But, reflecting on the potential digital adaptations we have imagined, there may be circumstances in which risks could be navigated to enable some of the promise predicted by Haraway. As Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2022) note, it is important to recognise the materiality of all digital adaptations as all digital encounters are enmeshed in material relations, as well as emotions, such as anxiety and trust. The notion of *cyborgification* may be useful, therefore, in the sense that it describes hybrid material and digital conjunctures of children-professionals-communication-systems.

Potential for beneficial *cyborgification* may lie in the opportunities for children and young people to exercise power in their everyday and collective participation, by accessing and mobilising *social, cultural*, and *economic capitals* (Bourdieu, 1986). We have highlighted that this potential may be more likely in contexts where the *habitus* or dispositions of dominant actors in the field show the ability to move towards affording care-experienced children and young people the space and time for reflection, access to knowledge resources and influence over distributions of cultural and economic capitals. These hypotheses could usefully be deepened and tested in future research.

The importance of apps enabling resistance in challenging and unresponsive environments was emphasised when we discussed our imaginings with children in care. They noted the benefit of being able to flag up inaction through *The Accountability App* without having to first go through the gatekeeping of a social worker. They also noted that the classroom clicker enabled access to support other than the teacher. So, digital adaptations might also be evaluated by the extent to which they provide additional *social capitals* and enhance the potential to expand the parameters of action (Haywood, 1998) – in this case, towards an arena where, as digital natives, children and young people may have the embodied *cultural capital* which eases interaction with digital devices.

In terms of objectified *cultural capital*, knowledge created through digital systems (for example, alerts about inaction and consistent paucity of provision) has a different aesthetic to concerns raised through telephone calls to social workers or private conversations. Digitisation creates data which can be traced (Thane, 2019), which may help create information which is more valued and less easily discursively hegemonised and dismissed. This in turn, as Haraway predicts, may help blur an identity boundary, namely of child/young person as user and social worker/services as decision-maker. We imagine this might occur through intergenerational co-commissioning collaborations.

There is a risk that this blurring may result in placing greater responsibility on young people to manage their own care, rather than on corporate parenting. In contrast to personalisation approaches to social services and care, which empower the individual to exercise choice through allocation of their individual budget (Kessl et al., 2020, digital adaptations might be evaluated according to whether they help co-create further change or individualise responsibility. That is, the extent to which they enable an individual child and collectives of children to exercise influence by mobilising *social* and *cultural capital* to guide a collective service response, and whether this response acts for the benefit of individuals and groups of children in our care.

In relation to individual's *social capital*, and the networks of connections through which other capitals are mobilised, there are some caveats and paradoxes, and acknowledging them is important in the development and dissemination of technological innovations in

any relational sphere. In line with Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2022), throughout this discussion of potential *cyborgification*, we have highlighted the importance of acknowledging anxiety and securing in-person trusting relationships. Certainly, as the young researchers noted, virtual visits must be contained within safe relationships and risk assessed. We need to ask: What are the modes of expression and interaction at issue? How do we respond to Turkle's (1996; 2021) and Copson and colleagues' (2022) concerns that digital culture promotes a depthlessness in human relations, where the bias towards surface interactions, simulation and flow apparently forestalls the need to confront human 'trouble'? Does digitisation of the 'rules' of social relations effectively empty them of 'play', which in Winnicott's (1971) view is always a form of reality testing? Is it advisable that young people whose histories of instability, trauma and loss already challenge their sense of identity and belonging be encouraged to look for digital 'workarounds' rather than confront the emotional and multi-sensory complexity of the *in vivo* human encounter?

We pose these questions because they are pertinent to design – not just of an app, programme or device, but to the hybrid digital materialities of any creative adaptations. Critical evaluation of digital adaptations must explore whether they expand existent systems of communication and relationship-building, become part of professionals' kitbag (not a substitute for face-to-face work but a supplement) and support children's offline and online relationships with parents, friends, carers, teachers, social workers and managers. If any app simply becomes a mechanism designed to strip an interaction of complexity – like messaging to bypass the messiness of human communication – then it may become transiently popular, but it will ultimately fail to put valued *social* or *cultural capital* into the hands of children or professionals.

A further point of the innovations we have imagined, appreciated by the care-experienced young researchers, is to forewarn and forearm. The aim is twofold: to enable care-experienced young people to better manage for themselves situations in which they feel uniquely vulnerable and where, in the absence of voice, there is too often a deficit in recognition; and to support them and the professionals and carers around them to transcend the binary dynamics of 'doer' and 'done to' (Benjamin, 2017). Our imaginings highlight that this may demand transformations in professional–child relations and potentially the *habitus* of the overlapping *fields* (social care, leaving care, education and leisure) in which children live their lives. Co-production of adaptations with all the young people and adult stakeholders involved would be key. Important here is the co-development of children's, parents', carers' and other professionals' (e.g., social worker, foster carer, teacher, etc.) guides to and understanding of best practice (UNCRC, 2021b), so that the positive aspects of *cyborgification* envisioned by Haraway are promoted and more problematic aspects mitigated. For example, so that an otherwise unheard child or young person is creatively encouraged to express their views using an app and so that these views are explored and responded to within a trusted relationship or as part of a burgeoning one.

Co-design and feasibility-testing of any digital devices and applications are crucial. The *economic capital* that might enable creation of any of these tools remains firmly located in the hands of central government and senior managers. The risks of commercial and other forms of exploitation remain high, although the provisions in the UK's online safety bill (currently in its third reading in the Lords) may yield some progress. But one remedy may be to explore how any digital adaptation might put the necessary *economic* and *cultural capital* into the hands of intergenerational co-design groups, involving care-experienced children and young people and professionals as commissioners. With buy-in from senior positions

within government and local authorities, and opportunities to work collaboratively with looked after children and young people, partnerships with technical providers may also be developed. These might also develop inclusive training in digital working and guide maintenance and future app development. As many children in alternative care lack access to digital devices and connectivity (UNCRC, 2021b), *economic capital* would also need redistribution to redress digital exclusions. These initial investments are challenging in the current global post-pandemic economic climate, but the potential for efficiency savings to enable this investment might also be explored.

Conclusion

Some digital innovations may be of benefit to children in care, but they also bring risks of increasing surveillance, dehumanising relationships and (when *cyborgification* challenges the *habitus* of the overlapping fields of social care, accommodation provision and education) encountering resistance. We have therefore highlighted the need for co-production with care-experienced children and young people, carers and other professionals to identify the affordances of technology (connectivity, instantaneity, network activation, accountability and communicative compatibility) and to explore the feasibility of embedding these in ongoing, resourced and committed relational practice. But beyond this, as across Europe data from social encounters are being routinely amassed (Thane, 2019), our digital imaginings beg the question of how the concrete *cultural capital* generated, for example in children's social care records, might be used collectively by care-experienced children. Might they use this information to redirect the capitals which already exist within children's social care? Digital adaptations are unlikely to result in improved support for children in care, unless they can challenge the taken-for-grantedness of existing generational, professional and marketised relations. But, mobilising the collective data generated to drive service improvements through intergenerational co-commissioning groups might respond to the need to create more collective accountability to children within alternative care (Blackstock in UNCRC, 2021a).

To dare to explore the feasibility of any cautious steps forward in *cyborgification*, there is value in using Bourdieu's notion of *habitus, capitals* and *field*, and this framing may be relevant to wider fields of social care with adults, as well as with children. To Steiner's (2021) suggestion that digital adaptations might help shift the *habitus* of the social work field, we would add the need to evaluate whether any potential *cyborgifications*:

- enhance deep interpersonal relationships and s*ocial capital*, rather than pushing towards superficiality;
- redistribute the means of creating *cultural capital* in ways that can be used by children and professionals to enhance services, rather than being used as a tool of surveillance to hold individuals responsible for system failures;
- put *economic, social* and *cultural capital* into the hands of experts-by-experience in collaborations with supportive professionals to the extent that they can guide the development of accessible, accountable services;
- perpetuate or redress the existing disadvantage in distributions of resources within the *field*.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: CL is a guest editor of this special issue. The invited reviewers were unaware of this and CL was not told the identity of the reviewers. The other two editors liaised with reviewers and made all decisions.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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