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Perspectives of Young People in Care About their School-to-Work Transition

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Abstract

Achieving in education and employment has long-term effects on quality of life. With below-average levels of educational attainment, many young people in care are ill-equipped for the transition from school to further education and work. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study that explored the school to work transition experiences of young people currently or previously in care, and their ideas about future employment. A range of personal and contextual factors that influence study and work goals were identified. Young people spoke about the importance of personal confidence and determination, supportive relationships, someone to believe in them and encourage them, opportunities to pursue their goals, avenues to gain information about how to get desired jobs, positive school experiences, and the need for stability in their lives. The study suggests widening the agenda for case planning, transition from care and after-care support, to include career planning and vocational assistance.

Keywords: Care Planning; Child Protection; Out-of-Home Care; Work

Young people in the care of the state, and those who have left the care system, need considerable support as they negotiate early life transitions. They must deal with the emotional and sometimes physical consequences of maltreatment, as well as the losses and disruptions associated with being in care (Cashmore, Paxman & Townsend, 2007; Stein, 1994). These disruptions can include multiple placements in out-of-home care, changes of foster carers and caseworkers, a lack of consistent adult support and guidance, disrupted relationships with family members including siblings, and school changes. Such experiences all have the potential to adversely affect the emerging adult. Developmentally, the school-to-work transition is embedded in other transitions to independence. Gradually gaining more control over finances, living arrangements, daily activities, relationships and social networks are all intertwined. But at the age of 17 or 18 years, when many young people are leaving school and starting work or further study with the help of their parents, children in care generally negotiate these changes when the formal supports of the care system such as a caseworker, financial assistance, and a foster home, are ceasing (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Stein, 2006).

Achieving in education and employment has a long-term effect on quality of life. Employment is important not only to financial security (and therefore housing stability), it also improves self-confidence and social connectedness. Unemployment or insecure employment is associated with

low self-esteem and mental health problems for young people, whereas better education leads to better overall health status and higher labour force participation (VicHealth 2008). Therefore, it is important to provide the necessary supports to assist young people to develop work-related goals and interests. Unfortunately, there is little research on these aspects of case planning for young people in care. This paper presents findings from a study of the views of young people in care and recent care leavers about their work futures.

Education and Work Outcomes for Young People in Care

Educational participation and attainment are now recognised as pivotal to improving life chances and outcomes for children in care (Berridge, 2007). While some care leavers cope well, many in this population are ill-equipped to compete in the workforce. They are often early school leavers with low levels of educational achievement, which has ramifications for future employment and its associated benefits (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Courtney 2008). Poor educational attainment among young people in care has been linked to a constellation of factors including the structural influences of social class, ethnicity and gender, deprived pre-care backgrounds including family breakdown, high rates of school exclusions and truancy, frequent placement moves with consequent school disruptions, lack of co-ordination between educational and child protection personnel, lack of attention to educational needs by professionals, and low expectations held by foster carers, caseworkers and teachers (Berridge, 2007; Francis, 2000; Goddard, 2000; Jackson 2006; Stein, 1994). Children themselves, as a result of their experiences, may have low aspirations to achieve academically and occupationally (Farruggia, Greeleerger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006; Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006).

Negative long-term outcomes reported for care leavers include high rates of unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, persistent mental illness or substance use problems, and poor social adjustment (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). A small number of studies have reported on employment outcomes for care leavers, although few have examined how young people in care are prepared for workforce participation as distinct from their educational experiences. Broad (1999) found that 51 per cent of UK care leavers in a sample of almost 3000 young people were unemployed, with 11 per cent in full-time work, 4 per cent in part-time work, and 27 per cent in training or higher education (remainder unknown). Even though the sample was obtained via leaving care support projects, there had been little improvement in employment outcomes since an earlier study in 1993, although more success had been achieved in housing status. An Australian longitudinal study found that 4-5 years after leaving care, from a sample of 41 young people, 27 per cent were working full-time, 24 per cent were working part-time, and 22 per cent were unemployed (Cashmore et al., 2007). This study points to the importance of completing year 12 at school to both employment outcomes and overall positive well being post-care.

A range of factors, if not adequately addressed through appropriate care planning, can contribute to poor employment outcomes. For example, Dixon (2007) found that the in-care experiences of engaging in risk behaviours such as substance abuse and offending, placement changes, school disruptions (especially suspensions and exclusions), and age at leaving care all influenced engagement in employment, education and training after leaving care. Dworsky (2005) found low levels of self sufficiency (measured with reference to employment, earnings and public assistance receipt) for former foster youth. Most were not able to live independently as adults, and needed more assistance with independent living skills. Dworsky suggested that discharge from care at 18 years was not in the best interests of some youth. Lenz-Rashid (2006) examined the impact of an employment training program for homeless youth and found mental health issues had the most significant effect on ability to secure employment, and former foster care youth had more mental health problems than homeless youth without a foster care history. Given the effect of these issues

on young persons' lives, it is not surprising that there have been calls since the 1990s for career advice to be included in care planning (Stein, 1994).

There is a growing research, policy and practice focus on the transition from care. Normative patterns of transition have changed, with young people taking longer to move to adulthood or independence (Wade & Dixon, 2006). Associated with this trend is a demand for services and resources for care leavers (beyond the age of 18 years) to assist with post-secondary education, housing and independent living (Dworsky, 2005; Pecora, et al., 2006; Stein, 1994). Following developments in the UK and the USA, some jurisdictions in Australia have legislated to facilitate access to the resources of the care system for young people over 18 years (Cashmore & Mendes 2008). Transition and after-care services have been established, mainly concentrating on stable accommodation and practical living skills. There is less focus to date on other important aspects of well-being such as further education and work, mental health, community participation and relationships.

Career Development

Career development of adolescents – the process of exploring oneself and the world of work and making decisions about work and career directions – is complex, and requires more than attending to educational attainment. According to personal agency theories (Bandura, 2001; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000) the three central variables for personal and career development are self-efficacy beliefs (the confidence one has to succeed at specific tasks), outcome expectations (the anticipated consequences of performing particular behaviours), and goals (which reflect one's purpose). When applied specifically to career development, these three mechanisms influence a person's interests and drive their intentions, plans or aspirations to engage in a particular career direction (Lent et al., 2000). Personal agency theories emphasise the importance of contextual factors in influencing efficacy, positive expectations of the future, and aspirations. For example, financial and educational limitations, peer influences and lack of family support may inhibit the pursuit of one's primary life interests or preferred career goals (Lent et al., 2000).

The recognition of the importance of context is consistent with sociological research showing how changes in the labour market and the economy in the last three decades have reshaped young people's decision-making about work. Notions of personal identity and resources are influential in shaping work goals and how young people manage the fluidity of the labour market (White & Wyn, 2004). This confirms that both structural and individual factors are vital to understanding pathways to positive life and career outcomes. While adolescent career development research to date has focussed on youth in general, it is argued that personal agency and sociological approaches have particular applicability to understanding the career development trajectories of youth in care.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of the school to work transition from the perspectives of young people who are in care or who have been in care, and the factors that influence their thinking about future study and work, including perceived barriers and supports. This research was preliminary to a larger mixed methods study currently underway on the school to work transition. Given the lack of previous research in this area, its purpose was to explore the concepts and ideas used by young people in care to plan and take action in relation to their education and future work. It does not assume that the experience of being in care has caused the formation of these views for the participants. Their ideas about study and work may have been similar had they not been in care. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how they make sense of their experiences, and what they attribute to being in care.

Method

Procedure

In-depth interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 14 young people (care leavers and in-care youth). They were recruited with assistance from the statutory agency responsible for child protection in Queensland and from Create, an organisation run for and by young people in care. Staff from these agencies made personal contact with young people who met the inclusion criteria for the study (over 15 years, in long-term care or left care during the past 2 years). If the young person expressed interest in being interviewed, contact information was provided to the researchers. Interviews took place during 2006. Ethics approval was obtained for the research, and the statutory department consented to the participation of the young people in care, in addition to them consenting on their own behalf. Participation was confidential and voluntary and young people had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. A small financial gift was provided to each young person as a thank-you for taking part in the project.

Interview times varied, but most lasted around one hour. The topics covered in the interviews included: what school was like; work experiences at school or post-school; what they have been doing if they have left school; who or what has influenced their goals about future study or work; their ideal or dream job; how confident they were about achieving their goals; any barriers to achieving their study or work goals; who they have spoken to for career advice; any health issues; thoughts about what might help other young people who are in care to move from school to further study and work.

Participants

There were 9 male and 5 female participants, whose ages ranged from 14 to 20 years. Three young people were no longer in care at the time of their interviews, with the maximum period out of care being 2 years. The length of time in care differed: some entered care as infants, others were older, but all of them stayed in care until their late adolescence. For a brief description of the participants, see Table 1.

Table 1: Description of participants¹

Four participants had a career goal, a plan for getting their desired job, and were optimistic about future work.

- AO – 17 years, stable school, stable relative placement, plans to finish year 12 and join army, has undertaken work experience via school
- BP – 17 years, stable school, stable placement, plans to finish year 12 and go to TAFE to study graphic design, has a part-time job and has undertaken work experience in the graphic design field
- CQ - 16 years, stable school but unstable placement, currently undertaking a traineeship as grounds keeper while at school, enjoys it, will stay to finish year 12 and then plans to get a full-time job
- DR – 20 years, stable schooling, obtained year 12 and TAFE certificate, currently has a job and feels confident about future work options

Four participants could identify a career goal but were not clear about how to achieve it, and were vague or uncertain about future work

- ES – 17 years, stable placement, has cerebral palsy, enjoys school and wants to go to TAFE or university to study music but is not sure whether he will be able to access the support needed for daily care, life is unclear after he leaves care

¹ Initials have been changed to preserve confidentiality

- FT – 15 years, stable placement, left school before finishing year 9, currently at TAFE and has part-time job, would like a trade qualification but has no plan for obtaining this, thinks he will get a full-time unskilled job when he finishes TAFE at end of year
- GU - 14 years, excluded from previous school, currently undertaking year 9 via distance education, unstable placement, has some job ideas (chef or computers) but does not know what qualifications are required, would like a part-time job
- HV- 18 years, stable placement for last two years of care, did not enjoy school and left without finishing year 12, currently unemployed, wants to complete year 12 at TAFE but not enrolled, aspires to work with horses but mentions lots of other possible jobs

Six participants had no clear work aspirations and low expectations about future work, prefaced work goals with ‘probably’ or ‘maybe’, lacked direction

- IW- 17 years, lives independently, left school after year 10, currently unemployed, wants to find a job and work until end of year and then go to TAFE to study youth work
- JX - 15 years, previously in foster care but currently lives with parents, multiple school suspensions, does not currently attend school or have a job, would like to be a carpenter but says he is not good enough at school so he expects he will have an unskilled job, everyone just tells him to finish school
- KY- 17 years, unstable placements, currently in foster care, excluded from school, tried TAFE many times, has had several jobs, currently at TAFE but intends to drop out and get a job, ideal job is truck driver or work in a clothes shop, but would do any job
- LZ - 15 years, multiple school suspensions, does not currently attend school or have a job, plans to go to TAFE to finish year 10, would like to do an apprenticeship but will see what comes up, future work is unclear
- MA - 19 years, currently unemployed and pregnant, has had part-time jobs previously, wants to complete year 11 and 12 at TAFE but no clear plan
- NB - 16 years, stable placement last three years, resents being in care and feels unsupported, multiple school suspensions, probably will finish year 10 at TAFE, would like a job to have money but says he has no motivation

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was conducted on the data that focussed on participants’ perceptions of what helped or hindered them in their transition to work. Some of the factors that helped some young people actually hindered others; for example, school was viewed both as a positive experience that encouraged higher work aspirations and as a negative that hindered the development of work goals. The initial coding scheme for each transcript was based on nine areas covered in the interview protocol: aspirations, expectations, influences, barriers, supports, current issues, environmental issues, school and work. Two researchers independently analysed the data to provide a reliability check. Facilitators and constraints were then categorised as either personal or social factors. The *personal* factors were self efficacy, expectations and aspirations. Self efficacy includes the confidence to make decisions in areas such as goal selection, occupational information, problem solving, planning and self-appraisal. Expectations are what you really expect to achieve, beliefs about your capacity to achieve your ideal job and your determination and effort to achieve your goals. Aspirations are what you want to do, your ideal job, and plans that lead to you ideal job. The *social* factors were those related to placement, school, work experience, and relationships with family, carers, caseworkers and teachers.

Results

Personal Factors

All participants indicated a desire to get a job and saw completing a certain level of education or training as a way to achieve this goal and increase future career options. Consequently, many young people aspired to obtain certain qualifications such as completing year 10 or year 12, undertaking further studies (usually at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college), or gaining a traineeship or apprenticeship that would improve their chances of obtaining the job of their choice. Several spoke about needing qualifications in order to get a “decent”, “proper” or “good” job. Most young people were able to name a “dream” or “ideal” job, but were less clear about how to achieve their goal. Others were not sure about the type of work they would be interested in: “I haven’t found what I’m really good at yet” (KY). Participant CQ said he did not really care what job he did after leaving school as he was looking forward to working for “just experience and that is it”.

Financial remuneration was the primary motivation to gain employment for certain young people: “Just getting a good job, having money. That’s what work’s for, making money” (LZ). For other participants “money is just part of the job” (MA). As BP explained, “It’s just the passion I have ... it just draws me in to do more. I wouldn’t do it for the money, personally”. The experience of being in care influenced the choice of career for IW: “I just yeah, always wanted to help other people, other kids in care and stuff, because I know what it’s like”. Others selected possible jobs by thinking about their likes and dislikes. For example, FT ruled out an office job because it would be boring: “If I had to sit in an office I would probably get a bit twitchy”. Participant JX, through his experience with woodwork at school, indicated that he might be interested in carpentry “cause I like hammering nails and stuff”.

Some of the young people expressed confidence that they would succeed in reaching their career goals and a few had already experienced being in paid work of their choice. Many did not see any obstacles in their path to success besides having the “determination” or “the courage” to finish school or other work related courses. This theme of personal strengths was evident even for participants with limited goals. It was seen as critical for young people in care to have confidence in their abilities to reach their career goals and determination to overcome any barriers. For example, MA said she had worked hard to remove the words, “I can’t” from her vocabulary as she believed such negative statements had prevented her from achieving her goals in the past; and HV thought she had gained confidence in her abilities through the adversity of not being able to rely on the statutory child protection department for assistance in the past: “Yeah well, I’ve lasted this long without getting the help, like a lot of help from the Department. So I think I’m more than capable of finding my own way”. Conversely, others attributed their low expectations to personal deficits, like JX who thought he would “probably get a shitty job like trolley pushing or something” because of his limited education. Although he was considering trying a TAFE course, he expressed doubt about his readiness. Similarly, NB was interested in obtaining work or returning to study, but he was not confident he would be able to overcome his lack of motivation. Either way, participants felt they individually were responsible to muster the requisite confidence or motivation: they did not expect nor rely upon encouragement, help or support from others.

Social Factors

School and work

The importance of stable schooling was voiced most strongly by those young people who believed that changes of schools had been detrimental for them. Participant MA, who changed high school for Year 11, described this move as being “the biggest mistake” as the difficulty she experienced settling in contributed to her dropping out of school. Changing schools was also stressful because of the need to form new relationships with peers and teachers. Five of the participants had been suspended or excluded from school, some more than once. Participant JX had attended seven

different schools (and had been suspended from many) and was adamant that he would not attend another mainstream school, because “I don’t like seeing other people, new people”. Participant HV considered her early departure from school as a negative in that she did not have any high school certificates and she believed this would limit her work and study options in the future. Participant GU suggested young people could be financially rewarded to continue with their studies: “you know you should be encouraged with money ... like you get like \$5 a day for school”.

However, FT, who left high school at the end of year 9, perceived his early departure from school as positive because it hastened his entrance into the paid workforce: “TAFE has helped me get a job. So, I have already got a job now... which is good”. Similarly, IW was “definite” that she had made the right choice “because there was no use ... going to school and sitting there, not concentrating, worrying about something and just failing absolutely everything when I could be, you know, working and making money”. Others thought that they might be ready for their studies when they were older. For example, KY intended to quit studies and work for a while to “get my head sorted out ... then I might be mature enough like, when I get everything sorted out I’ll go and get year 11 and 12.”

Some young people spoke of contact with Guidance Officers at their schools as having been helpful in relation to career advice as well as practical help with employment or job applications. When asked about what schools could do to help young people in care, several participants talked about the role of schools in organising activities aimed at informing students about career choices, including information to help students decide whether to remain at school. For example, BP said “my school has an open day where all the TAFEs and everything come in ... that helps heaps ... they tell you about what they do at their college and what facilities they have and everything like that ... they have little stalls that you can go talk to them personally”, and according to IW: “Well, in grade 10 they like sat us all down and said you know you can leave at the end of the year ... and told us what our options were and what we could do. And yeah we had people come in and ... show you good sides and bad sides of the things ... that was good, that helped me decide whether or not I wanted to stay on “til year 12”. However, other participants had difficulty in naming where they could go for information or advice about their work goals, and plans tended to be vague.

All participants were asked about their Education Support Plan (a requirement for all young people in care in Queensland state schools since 2004). Most had to be prompted before they could recollect what such a plan was, and others were not sure whether or not they had one. Two participants saw the benefits of the Education Support Plan: “It helped me set my life in priority. Like how I am going to get there” (AO). Participant BP explained that although he had “a good plan” he did not “stick to it” because he preferred to be independent and take responsibility for reaching his career goals. But he did think that having goals and the supports in place to reach these was critical for young people in care: “They need to have a goal of what they want in life. That is basically the main thing you need and then you just need to keep them on the track”.

Several young people did not find the process of developing an Education Support Plan useful. Participant KY said he did not attend a meeting arranged to discuss his plan because he was “not interested at all” because he had already decided to leave school and considered that such planning was “a bit late”. Participant LZ said: “I am sick of the little action plan things on paper ... they don’t work. Trust me, none of them work. People just still do ... what they want to do ... I am sick of seeing form after form after form after form ... it is unnecessary. People with parents don’t have to have form after form”. This expresses both the frustration and feelings of being different that many participants felt were part of being in care.

Young people who had undertaken work experience organised through their school spoke about the benefits gained from their participation. For AO, it provided valuable insights about work: “It gets us out there and shows us what it is like”. Another participant was delighted that a school work experience placement had resulted in a paid part-time position, “They offered me a job the first day I worked there which was awesome. So I took that and did that for about six months”.

Two young people commented on the benefits of undertaking traineeships. A year 11 student, CQ, was completing a two-year traineeship as a groundskeeper at his high school, which he said was “pretty cool” and “good pay”. He was optimistic that this would help him to obtain work when he left school at the end of year 12. Participant DR spoke with pride about having completed a traineeship and being able to refer to herself as a certified youth worker.

For some young people it has been helpful having other educational avenues besides mainstream school available to them. Participant FT left school after finishing year 9 because he wanted to learn more practical skills to help him join the workforce sooner. He enrolled in a Workplace Access course at TAFE, which led to him obtaining a paid part-time job: “I like it better than school ... because I wasn’t really doing good at school”. Other participants agreed that school did not provide a direct enough route into work. According to IW: “I realised that school wasn’t really going to get me into what I wanted to do”.

Out-of-home care

Some young people reported that placement breakdowns or other difficulties associated with being in care made it hard to focus and concentrate on school work and led to having poor grades or dropping out. Participant IW, despite experiencing stable schooling, related that she was unable to keep up with her school work due to changes such as moving house and living by herself: “I was going to get an OP (Overall Position for university entrance) and everything but I decided not to because there was too much stuff in my life going on, yeah, I couldn’t concentrate on school and everything else”. According to NB, who had been placed in “24 different foster families” since being taken into care, he was feeling “confused” and “screwed around” by the lack of stability in his life. He said: “I am sitting here at 16 ... 13 years later ... I am a drug freak, I am stoned every day. I depend on drugs and that is all because the Department has ruined me. Now I can’t be saying that it is all their fault because it is probably not. But if they had realised, you know”. He believed that his instability of schools and placements had undermined his education and his ability to be motivated to achieve qualifications that would help him to obtain a “proper job”. Others also linked behaviour problems at school to their problems at home and placements. For example, LZ said he was “kicked out” of school in year 8 “because of hassles at home. I was real ratty at school”, and DR said she had changed schools “because I was still running away from you know, difficulties, because that’s what comes from being in care”.

Relationships

Many young people spoke about the high turnover of child protection staff and the lack of consistency of worker styles and practices: “They always change CSOs (Child Safety Officers) all the time. So it’s like you have one good CSO and then next time you’ve got a bad one” (GU). Participant NB felt overwhelmed by the number of different workers and his experience of feeling anonymous and insignificant: “I have got so many different people that come in here and see me that I don’t know their name ... When you are in the Department, every face looks the same. None of them have a name. You know... You feel exactly the same as them because you are just a number too. And even though you would like to think that someone cares, people don’t”. Other participants felt disempowered by decisions they disagreed with, such as not being allowed to attend their preferred school, being made to live in another geographical area, or being removed from home which disrupted their schooling.

Other participants spoke positively of caseworkers who were interested in them, were encouraging, and provided information about community resources such as youth groups, tutoring and counselling services. They were seen as committed to making a difference: “she had that passion to change young people’s lives. Like it wasn’t just a job for her” (DR). Not everyone regarded lack of contact with their caseworker as negative. In these instances young people

perceived they were doing well and therefore did not need support: “because I keep myself out of trouble ... they don’t need to come out and see me” (LZ).

Yet most young people mentioned the positive impact of having supportive people in their lives who give them encouragement as well as practical assistance to achieve their educational and work goals. Some young people indicated that for assistance with career decisions they would talk to teachers, parents or carers, caseworkers (statutory and non-statutory), community visitors, employment agency staff, or rely on their own devices such as research on the internet. For others, the informal supports provided by friends or family have been critical. Participant AO: “there are a lot of teachers that are supportive more than family members ... help you with really tough times and that”. One participant had ongoing contact with her father who she found supportive. Other young people commented about the importance of foster families: “I know [my foster parents] would drive me down to where I need to go [for work] ... like I know I’ve got their support...and that’s what I need, just someone to support to help me” (KY); “I think the most thing that motivated me in going to school is my foster family...because they like went to work every day and their kids went to school so I had someone to follow” (HV). For some participants their school friends were “just there for support as friends” whereas another mentioned the role his friends played in encouraging him to stay at school.

Discussion

This was an exploratory study with a small sample, so the results may not generalise to the wider population of young people in care. The study confirmed the diversity of experiences, work aspirations, expectations and work readiness of young people in care and care leavers. Amongst this small group there were attitudes ranging from apathy and concern about the future, to optimism and a clear sense of direction to attain work goals. Like other young people, they have career aspirations that need to be nurtured and worked with. In revealing the stories of young people in care who have clear work goals and plans, the findings disrupt the pessimistic attitudes about young people in care that can lead to low expectations. It shows that even young people with quite unstable living circumstances are thinking positively about their future work pathways, and that they need help with this.

It is important to be cognisant of negative outcomes for care leavers without over-generalising the situation of all young people in care as either troubled or troublesome. In order to avoid a climate of low expectations, it would be helpful to view this population as adolescents making the same efforts as their peers to create a positive future for themselves. Career development theory helps in understanding the importance of contextual factors in influencing self-efficacy and career goals. Young people may limit their work aspirations because of factors such as low levels of educational attainment, lack of adult support and role models, disrupted relations with family, instability in their living situation and economic hardships. Such conditions can constitute barriers to individual life and career choices, and are especially relevant to the situation of youth in care. A perception that some things are beyond their reach influences their hopes for the future and can narrow their horizons. Support and encouragement from a variety of sources are essential to both personal and career development, and while some participants received such support from carers, caseworkers or school personnel, others felt being in care meant they had learned not to rely upon others, and that they were “on their own”. However, there is a downside to this sense of self-reliance if it makes care leavers wary about seeking emotional support or help from others, or to feel wholly responsible for their own successes or failures (Samuels & Price, 2008).

Young people in this study accepted the orthodox view that education helps you get a job or gives you more job choice, and were oriented towards improving their education even if they felt their circumstances had worked against them in their education efforts. School stability and

retention is very important, therefore strategies to prevent suspensions and exclusions for children in care are critical (Dixon 2007). Lower levels of achievement in the school and workplace for children in care cannot be attributed totally to the care system. The education system has a vital role to play in providing interventions that not only improve well-being and confidence while at school but also provide occupational-related skills that will be useful in the transition to work. Moreover, there are entrenched social inequalities and structural risk factors that are linked to under-achievement in education, and these broader causes of social disadvantage must be tackled if the overall position of young people in care is to improve (Berridge 2007).

The study adds another layer to the resurgent debate on transition from care, especially the interest in post-care support. What can be done to support career development and better employment outcomes? General measures to improve the quality of care, better transition planning, and more post-care support are called for (Stein, 2006). The agenda for transition from care planning and after-care support needs to be broadened to include career planning and vocational assistance. Interventions should be targeted at improving both psychological well-being and career-related confidence (Creed, Muller & Patton, 2003). Scholarships would assist young people in care to stay at school, learn trades and attend university. More vocationally-oriented curricula, work experience and non-traditional schooling would have suited many participants. There is plenty of room for constructive efforts to expand job programs and opportunities for this population, including specific career planning, job preparation and supported employment programs (Dixon, 2006).

Early school leaving is a broad policy concern in Australia, and federal and State governments fund a range of initiatives aimed at improving school retention and the post-school transition. Disadvantaged youth are identified as a focus for concern in these initiatives, but more specific attention is required to address the needs of the multiply-disadvantaged population of young people in care. Intensive, personalised and ongoing assistance is indicated for young people who exit care without qualifications, such as the Personal Advisor scheme in England (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). It should be noted that this study was conducted at a period of relatively high youth employment in Australia. If unemployment increases as expected in the worsening economic climate, disadvantaged young people will be in an even more precarious position.

With most of the policy attention in the care system focused on the availability and quality of out-of-home care placements, it is possible for issues related to further education and career development to be overshadowed. But succeeding in education and work are central to quality of life and not at all tangential to the real issues for young people in care. Certainly, an adequate supply of stable placements is an important priority, but this should not override attention to other aspects of life. Consideration must be given to all the transitions young people make during adolescence and emerging adulthood. From the standpoints of both ethics and evidence, it cannot be assumed that if a young person in care has a stable placement, then everything else will flow from there. While the stability of placements has been found to correlate with educational attainment, "felt security" in care is also significant (Cashmore et al., 2007, p.57). It is also recognised that some placement and school moves can be advantageous to children (O'Sullivan & Westerman, 2007).

Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives of young people in care on the school to work transition. A range of personal and social factors that influence career development were identified. For individual children in care, more intentional case planning and transition from care planning aimed at encouraging further education and establishing pathways to future work is warranted. Collaboration between education and child protection agencies is required to encourage young people in care to achieve during and following the completion of their school years. It is vital for

caseworkers, foster carers, teachers and others to encourage young people in care from an early age to develop work goals that match their skills and interests. What the young people in this study spoke about specifically was the importance of having optimism, personal confidence and determination; supportive relationships; someone to believe in them and encourage them; opportunities to pursue their goals; avenues to gain information about how to get desired jobs; positive school experiences (both academically and with peers); and stability in other aspects of life including placement.

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