



What helps young care leavers to enter the world of work? Possible lessons learned from an exploratory study in Ireland and Catalonia



Laura Arnau-Sabatés ^{a,*}, Robbie Gilligan ^{b,c,d}

^a *Facultat de Ciències de l'Educació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, 08193 Barcelona, Spain*

^b *School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland*

^c *Optentia Research Programme, North West University, South Africa*

^d *SFI – The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2014

Received in revised form 29 January 2015

Accepted 27 March 2015

Available online 4 April 2015

Keywords:

Entry to work

Adult care leavers

Work trajectory

Carers

Work experience capital

Agency

ABSTRACT

Work is important for promoting social inclusion, especially for marginalized or economically vulnerable populations. There is also evidence that work is associated with stability and social integration for young people who have left care. There is, however, little detailed evidence on how young care-leavers access, and remain in, the world of work. This paper seeks to address this issue. It reports on preliminary findings from a cross-national qualitative study conducted in Ireland and Catalonia.

The study set out to explore factors influencing care-leavers' entry into, and progress within, the world of work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 young adults (10 from Ireland, 12 from Catalonia) aged between 23 and 33 years. The main criteria for inclusion were that study participants should have spent an extended period of time in care and have had substantial employment experience since leaving care. Preliminary analysis reveals different 'pathways' into the world of work for the young adults in the study, and a range of influences and circumstances related to these pathways. The implications of the findings for further research and for child welfare practice and policy and research are explored.

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1. Introduction

In many parts of the world, young people bear an unfair share of the burden of unemployment. Almost one in four young people aged 16 to 24 years are unemployed across Europe, a rate more than double the adult rate of unemployment. The rates of youth unemployment are even worse in the two settings for the study, with the rate for Catalonia running at 50.25% and for Ireland 30.2% (Eurostat, 2012). These rates reflect the particular difficulties faced by young people in accessing and progressing within the world of work, in a period of economic recession and under policies of austerity. It is also important to remember that these national/regional figures are likely to mask much higher rates among potentially more marginalized sub-groups of young people such as care leavers.

Work is an important step in young people's transition to economic and social 'independence'. Work-related status and experience seem to be an important means of social inclusion for care leavers as for other populations at risk of marginalization. For care leavers work and work-related training may have special symbolic value in supporting their transitions (Berridge, 2014).

Care leavers face a range of potential challenges as they make the transition from life in care. In addition to a high risk of unemployment, care leavers may face other threats to social inclusion flowing from their experience of life in care, and the adjustment to life after care. These may include excessive dependence (Anghel & Beckett, 2007), weakened networks of potential support (Perry, 2006), stressful and turbulent transitions from life in care to life after care (Anghel & Dima, 2008; Dima & Skehill, 2011), and a personal identity often dominated in a restrictive way by their care status and experience (Dima & Skehill, 2011; Gilligan, 2008). A care identity may often be reinforced by stigma and segregation linked to wider negative social perceptions about the nature of 'public care'.

In relation to work issues more specifically, there is considerable evidence that care leavers tend to be disadvantaged when trying to find employment (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007; Dixon, 2007; Dumaret, Donati, & Crost, 2011; Mendes, 2009; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). International evidence also suggests that care leavers may experience less employment and lower earnings compared to their peers not in care (Courtney et al., 2011; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006).

Various studies suggest the positive value of the first work experiences in care leavers' future employment outcomes (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2011; Hook & Courtney, 2011). In a related finding for young people with

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 93 581 2629; fax: +34 93 581 2629

E-mail addresses: laura.arnau@uab.cat (L. Arnau-Sabatés), robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie (R. Gilligan).

experience of disadvantage more generally, Tomaszewski and Cebulla (2014) highlight how early work experience and repeated changes in jobs may eventually lead on to employment in higher-level occupations. There is also evidence that early work experiences (prior to age 18) help to improve later employment outcomes of young people in care when they reach their mid to late twenties (Courtney et al., 2011; Stewart, Kumb, Barth, & Duncana, 2014).

For young people, finding work, is, in practice, related to two important concepts in the research literature about the lives of young people – *social capital* and *agency*. Finding opportunities depends, of course, on the wider economic context in a given place or region, but it also depends on the young person's connections (social capital) (Noble-Carr, Barker, McArthur, & Woodman, 2014). In his classic paper on job-seeking, Granovetter (1973) shows how even weak social connections may be powerful in helping people find work, connections that may be difficult for young people in care to build or sustain because of the thin networks that we have already noted are often linked to care status.

In addition to finding opportunities for work there is also the issue of willingness or readiness to take up such opportunities (exercising personal agency). A range of issues may constrain or support the exercise of agency in the face of opportunity (Aaltonen, 2013; Evans, 2007; Gilligan, 2009; Munford & Sanders, 2015). Relevant support over time may be a key such issue for care leavers (Munford & Sanders, 2014; Wade & Dixon, 2006).

1.1. Rationale for the study

This study focuses on a sample of adult care leavers from both Ireland and Catalonia who have substantial work experience and who at the time of interview were aged mainly in their mid and late twenties. The aim of the research is to illuminate the work trajectories of the young adult care leavers' *from their perspective* in both contexts. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the factors that the young adults now consider influenced (helped or hindered) their entry into, and progress within, the world of work.

The cross-national nature of the study in two countries with high unemployment rates but also with cultural and care system differences provides interesting opportunities. In this instance, the intention is not to compare results across the two countries, but to explore the degree of convergence in the findings, despite the differences in context. Such convergence would tend to underline the potential wider relevance of the findings.

The study seeks to address a number of apparent gaps in the literature on care leavers. While there have been a number of quantitative studies which report on some or other aspects of work outcomes for care leavers, studies with a focus on aspects of care leavers' overall work trajectories and *experience* are much rarer. There seem, further, to be even fewer studies which look at the work history experience of people formerly in care. It may be possible to find studies that describe labour market outcomes. It is much more difficult to find studies that look at the care leavers' experience of entry into and remaining in the world of work. Studies mainly focus on what has happened, whereas this study seeks to add some attention to the *how* and *why* of work progress as experienced by the participants.

There is a tendency for research on care leavers mostly to focus on the period age 18–21, on the early years after leaving care. Arguably, a later age window (early to mid–late twenties) gives a fuller sense of developments since leaving care, and may also allow some impression as to how things have unfolded after the initial stresses of the post-care transition. It is also the case, for understandable reasons, that many studies report on general issues or difficulties encountered or experienced. It is less common to find studies that single out care leavers with positive experiences and that seek to identify potential wider lessons from these experiences.

Jackson and Martin (1998) sought to tease out possible lessons from care leavers' positive experiences in the area of education, and this paper follows that example in relation to the area of work in the labour market. Given that the sample here has positive work experience, and that work experience is generally a challenging area for care leavers, there are useful things to be learned from accounts of care leavers with positive experiences. The study seeks to highlight potential key ingredients in stories of success in study participants' entry into and progress in the world of work.

This is a preliminary study intended not only to report findings, but also to test the relevance and future potential of the topic and the cross-country design: do the findings and the experience of conducting the study suggest that there is potential value in going further down the road taken by this study? Another relatively unusual aspect of this study is that it is 'biographically informed' at least in relation to the 'work story'. It seeks to elicit the main features of the 'work story' up to the point of interview. This 'look-back' gives a more textured understanding of experiences and influences as understood or recalled by the participants. It is hoped that the study can offer some preliminary evidence on sources and experiences of support or difficulty that young people in the sample have encountered on their journey into and through the world of work since they left care until the time of interview.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Sample

A total of 22 care leavers (10 from Ireland, 12 from Catalonia) were recruited on the basis of three criteria: extensive care experience; age at interview of mid-late twenties (in the achieved sample, all participants fell within the age range 23 to 33) and substantial employment experience since leaving care (a record of full time employment for all or most of the time since leaving care). Participants were recruited with the assistance of social workers, social educators and foster carers who first approached them on behalf of the researchers with a letter of invitation provided by the researchers. If they were willing to consider taking part in the study, potential participants then made contact with the researchers. Twenty two interviews were scheduled and conducted (10 in Ireland and 12 in Catalonia). In general, participants were willing to take part in the study, except three who were on holidays and four who did not make any initial contact with the interviewers. It should be acknowledged that while willingness to participate in the study may imply more stability or perceived success in post-care adjustment on the part of the young person, the focus of the study on learning from successful cases makes this possible bias less problematic than it might otherwise be.

Confidentiality was assured to participants throughout data collection and analysis. The researchers have disguised names of participants in cases and changed names of cities, shops, and places or deliberately omitted certain personal characteristics to avoid any identifying information.

2.2. Material

A semi-structured interview was used, based on a topic guide that was reviewed by two advisory groups for the project. These consisted of academics and practitioners in the field – one in each context (up to six members in each case) to ensure that all relevant areas were covered.

The young adults were interviewed about various aspects of their current work situation and their overall work experience, and also about factors and influences that they felt had helped or hindered their entry into, and progress within, the world of work. Other issues such as relations with work colleagues and employers were also explored.

Interviews were conducted in the first language of participants by the Principal Investigators.

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