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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
laura.arnau@uab.cat

Robbie Gilligan^{b, c, d}
robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie

^aFacultat de Ciències de l'Educació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, 08193 –Barcelona-, Spain

^bSchool of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

^cOptentia Research Programme, North West University, South Africa

^dSFI-The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark

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.

Keywords: Entry to work; Adult care leavers; Work trajectory; Carers; Work experience capital; Agency

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 leavers²: future employment outcomes (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2011; Hook & Courtney, 2011). In a related finding for young people with 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.

2.3 Procedures (data collection and analysis)

All of the interviews were conducted in person and took approximately one hour and a half. They were tape-recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained prior to the start of the interview. The study design had the approval of the Research Ethics Approval Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Data collection and methods used were the same in both countries.

A random sample of interview transcripts was reviewed in order to begin the process of generating an agreed and consistent set of codes. When researchers found consistency in coding, the remaining interviews were coded. Data were analyzed using a descriptive analysis matrix based on the codes.

3. Results

The findings presented in this paper are structured around three main questions: (1) What was the work situation of the participants at the time of interview and how did they feel about work currently? (2) How did they get their first jobs in the labour market? (3) What experiences have influenced the participants' entry into, and progress in, the full-time world of work? Before addressing these questions, some relevant characteristics of the participants are outlined.

The Irish sample comprised five women and five men. In their final care placement, eight had been fostered with non-relatives. Two had experience of both residential care and family placement (one with relatives and the other with non-relatives). Five had been with the same foster family throughout their time in care, whereas three had lived with more than one foster family.

The Catalan sample comprised five women and seven men. All of these interviewees had lived in residential care across eight different residential centres under the care of social educators. Five had lived in the same residential centre throughout their time in care, while two other had lived in more than one centre, and a further five had experience of both residential care and family placement (four with relatives and one with non-relatives).

In terms of educational attainment, all Irish participants had completed at least secondary education (up to age 18) and had earned their Leaving Certificate (national state examination). While one had not progressed beyond their Leaving Certificate, four others had also undergone professional training (beauty therapist, tourist management, etc.), and a further five had managed to get to university-with two of them holding Masters degrees at the time of interview.

In Catalonia, six had been early school leavers leaving school at 16 without the Spanish School Leaving Certificate (Graduado en Educación Secundaria Obligatoria, ESO), although three of these later got involved in occupational courses after they left school and two of them had got involved in transition to work programmes while in school. Three had left school at 16 with the Spanish School Leaving Certificate (ESO), and one of these got involved in professional training (nursery work with children). A further three managed to get to university, and one of these had earned two university degrees.

What was the work situation of the participants at time of interview and how did they feel about work currently?

Twenty of the twenty two study participants were working at the time of interview, while the remaining two were not. These two had extensive work experience and had actually worked during the twelve months prior to interview. Roughly half of the employed participants on both sides (five people in Ireland and seven people in Catalonia) had held their current job for two years or more. Four participants from Ireland and four participants from Catalonia had been working at their current job for one year or less (see Table 1).

Table 1 Type of current job, length of time in current job, first job experience and age at first job.

Case	Type of current work	Length of time in the current job	First job	Age at first job
Case 1	Assistant manager in a shop (role as a supervisor)	8 years	Packing shelves in a shop	< 16
Case 2	Health and social care worker	Less than 1 year	Working in a fast food take away outlet	16
Case 3	Operator in a call centre	Less than 1 year	Assistant in a hotel	16
Case 4	Financial assistant	7 years	Manual accountancy in a company	18
Case 5	Manager in a medical laboratory (role as a supervisor)	6 years	Assistant in a video shop	18

Case 6	Beauty therapist	Less than 1 year	Taking care of horses in an equestrian centre	< 16
Case 7	Airline ground staff	3 years	T-shirt costumer service	17
Case 8	Nurse	2.5 years	Assistant in a shoe shop	< 16
Case 9	Not working— doing voluntary work— —seeking a job	-	Working in a kitchen of a restaurant	18
Case 10	Psychiatric nurse	Less than 1 year	Washing dishes in a restaurant	< 16
Case 11	Primary teacher	9 years	Serving in a restaurant buffet	18
Case 12	Policeman	2 years	Building maintenance	16
Case 13	Chef	4 years	Working in a supermarket	16
Case 14	Supermarket worker	13 years	Working at the same supermarket	16
Case 15	Care assistant	Less than 1 year	Waitress in a bar	17
Case 16	Owner of a bar	Less than 1 year	Waitress in a bar	16
Case 17	Shop assistant	Less than 1 year	Sales assistant in a clothing store	17
Case 18	Soldier	6 years	Working in a supermarket	16
Case 19	Manager of a community centre (role as a supervisor)	1 year	Leisure animator	19
Case 20	Waitress	5 years	Selling fruit in a supermarket	16
Case 21	Not working—seeking a job	-	Sales assistant in a shoe shop	17
Case 22	Head of maintenance in an hotel (role as a supervisor)	5 years	Building maintenance at the same hotel	16

The majority of the participants were working in the service sector. Four of the participants were supervising other staff in their current jobs (see [Table 1](#)).

In general, participants seemed broadly to be happy in their current jobs. Reasons included enjoying the work, satisfaction with the recognition-/extra responsibility/promotion they felt they had earned, and an appreciation of the benefits of work for their life more widely:

“I am absolutely delighted with what I’ve done, em, I mean I’m finding work hard at times, do you know. [Health and social care] work is a hard job to do... I mean it’s stressful, it’s emotional but I think, I am delighted because I’ve achieved something. Em, and it has opened up so many doors for myself and for my child, as well.” (Case 2, Ireland).

“Currently, I am working in a Primary School, I have been there for 9 years ... and I like this job very much, a lot ... and above all, it enables me to combine my professional life with my private life ... I’m very happy.” (Case 11, Catalonia).

How did participants get their first jobs in the labour market?

Across the two countries, the majority of the sample entered the world of paid work before age 18, and while still in care and at school. They did so mainly through part-time work (weekends or summer jobs) (see [Table 1](#)). The majority of these jobs were in the catering sector (cafe, fast food, takeaway outlets etc.) and retail sector (supermarket, convenience store, shoe shop, florist etc.):

“I’d say about 13 I was in washing dishes in a restaurant but like it’s in the countryside.” (Case 10, Ireland).

“I started working at eighteen...in the mornings I went to school and then in the afternoon I went to work to a restaurant a buffet..., and that fact enable me to combine studies and work...however I had in my mind the idea of keeping study because that fact could give me a better life...”(Case 11, Catalonia).

Sometimes, these openings had led on to more established ‘positions’:

“I’ve been in the organisation now, for going on six years. Six years in October, kind of fell into the occupation, kind of haphazardly, started off there as a temp. And decided to stay for a couple of extra months, they decided to keep me for a couple of extra months...” (Case 5, Ireland).

Participants recalled the reasons they sought their first work opportunity. Their motives included earning money for their own benefit or to assist with wider need in their biological family, gaining some independence and, for some, to begin to broaden their identity beyond being a ‘young person in care’.

“But I suppose, going into care at thirteen, I wanted to be independent. You know, I didn’t want my foster parents to be handing out for me left, right and centre. That I wanted to have kind of my own income like, so, when I started the, the job in the garage, that kind of paid for my petrol money to go back and forth, em, to college. I worked in the garage just at weekends and say my lunch money.” (Case 6, Ireland).

“... I was quite an adamant young lady and if I made a decision that I wanted to do something I was kind of doing it anyway, so I had agreed with the social workers that I would work ... well I needed money to make Mam better, to fix everything that was going on, so that was ...” (Case 1, Ireland).

Many participants reported—the important role their carers had played in encouraging and supporting their entry into work. Many interviewees got their first work through carers’ connections. In other cases, participants had shown considerable initiative and perseverance in seeking jobs for themselves.

“My first job, I worked illegally. I was fourteen ... I worked in a shoe shop ... was just, I was actually just out of care and I went to live with my sister, she got guardianship of me because my Mam passed away and I decided I wanted a job, I felt very independent and I worked in the shoe shop for, oh God, I think I got away with it for eight months.” (Case 8, Ireland).

“I was sending my cv every day for two weeks, without stopping ... every day, every day, every day, each day 20–50 cv, and look after two weeks I got a job.” (Case 17, Catalonia).

What experiences have influenced the participants’ entry into, and progress in, the full-time world of work?

The participants were asked to reflect on influential experiences in their ‘work story’. The key area mentioned in both countries in terms of entry to work was relations with carers, and where relevant other members of carers’ families.

Key areas reported (also in both countries) as influencing progress and choices in work after initial entry included ongoing support from carers, relations with employers and work colleagues, care history and care experience, insights gained from work experience and moving beyond an identity of being or having been ‘in care’.

3.1 Role of carers (foster family carers and social educators)

Carers were reported to have assisted entry to, and progress in, work in a number of ways. Carers helped young people to find work, sometimes gave them lifts to and from work, and generally were encouraging the young person in subtle and obvious ways as the young people made their way in the world of work.

Many of the Irish participants reported that they got their first job through foster family connections:

“... I had got [first job] through my foster parents. They knew somebody that was working there and got me into part time work there.” (Case 2, Ireland).

Five of the twelve Catalan care leavers reported that they got their first job through contacts the social educator in their residential centre had:

“Peter [social educator] was able to help me because he knew the person who was working in the human resource department and he gave her my cv, together with another two boys.” (Case 14, Catalonia).

3.2 Relations with employers and work colleagues

Some of the participants had found positive relationships and continuous supportive connections at and through work. Employers and managers had a positive influence on many of them and in some cases participants stayed in touch with employers even when they no longer worked for them:

“Well ... We didn't get on very well, my boss and I, at work, I mean. Then, you see, he hired me again, we went for a coke together ... We are still in touch.” (Case 18, Catalonia).

“I never quit with the restaurant because by that stage it had been like three years and William [the employer] was part of my family, you know, I was part of their family, they were part of my family, we were our own little working family, so I would never, you know.” (Case 1, Ireland).

Participants reported that they had learned from their bosses and gained from being trusted and recognized in their work:

“He was a good man [talking about the employer], he helped me a lot in how to do things, always explaining the best way to do things: ‘you need to do it this way or that way’ ... So, I saw that they valued me a lot, respected me, and above all I saw that I did my job and I did it properly and for that reason they were happy.” (Case 22, Catalonia).

Some of the participants reported having friendships at work.

“I love all my colleagues to bits. They're like almost a second family in some ways. We're very, very close in there.” (Case 5, Ireland).

One participant got other jobs through a work contact that helped him to move on in his work career.

“Pedro [a work colleague] left the company and he set up his own business. After six months I decided to leave the company and start working for him ... I learned a lot with him ... He's like one of my parents We are still in touch.” (Case 15, Catalonia).

3.3 Care history and care experience

The majority of participants felt that the fact of being in care had not affected their chances of getting a job. However, some of them had been worried about other people knowing of their background, especially employers and did not explain the situation to avoid being judged, bullied or treated differently.

“I didn't say it to my colleagues ... because I didn't want them to say ‘Poor you’.-” (Case 13, Catalonia).

There were examples where telling work colleagues or employers about their care history had been a positive experience:

“In my case the fact of being in care helped me, they told me in the interview that I had an experience that others didn't have, that the large majority of people didn't have, and you value things that other people don't ... and people like you, we like.” (Case 12, Catalonia).

Experience of life in care had sometimes influenced work interests and career choices. Seven of the participants overall reported that their background in care and the people that had helped them when they were in care (social workers, social educators, etc.), had had an influence on their professional and work choices. All of these seven decided to work in social professions like social education, nursery care, social/care work, etc.:

“I'd say my interest in that area [nursery] probably came from being in care...” (Case 10, Ireland).

“... She was an amazing social worker. Always there for me, em, always took me outside of the house, you know to talk to me and she was there for a long time. Em, so I think that helped and I suppose, that's what I would love to be [working in helping services].” (Case 2, Ireland).

3.4 Insights gained from work experience

The formative value of their first work experiences was also highlighted by most participants. They reported, for example, that the first work experiences provided a context in which to improve their ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ work skills, or (looking back) their career prospects. Examples of ‘soft skills’ for work might include learning to meet employer expectations about time-keeping, appearance, the social skills of interacting positively with customers and work colleagues, dealing with conflict or having a positive work ethic. Examples of ‘hard’ skills for work (more tied to a specific job) might be knowing how to cook ‘fast’ food, serve tables, deal with complaints effectively, pack shelves, serve customers in a retail outlet, cash up at the end of business, use a cash register etc.

“I learned from work how to deal with customers, to deal with certain people, it's very important, very important. Not only at work but in life, it's very important. To be able to see a person and know if they are alright or not. How to organise yourself ...” (Case 15, Catalonia).

“[About what they learned at work] ... having the experience in the supermarket, using the tills ... and using your phone and everything for calling for problems and all that, so that was. It's more experience than, what you have, like, like. I think that you don't really need to go to, well it helps, go to college.” (Case 4, Ireland).

For some participants across the two countries, work experiences were reported as a source of motivation to find a better job through studies:

“Well ... working at the supermarket it was ... em ... working in a large team, learning how to make decisions, relating with people that weren't colleagues but adults, people that were almost 30 years old, then ... in the construction industry ... the experience made me realise that I didn't want to work anymore in that sector. I intend to study and work where I want ...” (Case 13, Catalonia).

“... working in fast food wasn't going to do that for me. It was going to give me a job but it wasn't going to give me any savings or any future ... Em ... I did want better for her life [daughter's life] than what my past history, and I think obviously I did have a huge interest in helping work. I wanted to do what people were doing with me all my life ... It was just and half way through it I kind of said to myself, Jesus, am I actually able for this. I finished IFI, I graduated and I was delighted.” (Case 2, Ireland).

3.5 Moving beyond an identity of being or having been ‘in care’

One participant reflected on how work provided opportunities to transform their identity or sense of self. It helped them to escape an identity too confined to the experience of life in care.

“Work gave me independence or my own autonomy like to think that like oh right I can... I've a job like and I'm a responsible young adult and not just a little boy that's in foster care like, do you know. And I think having work gives you the opportunity to shine and be your own person and I think people in work gave me an opportunity to be like that. I'm not saying now that I was ever made, felt like I was an outsider on the inside, I was a very, I was always very welcome to my foster family from day one like. But you still always have that little bit over your head that you are in care like, so.” (Case 10, Ireland).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings reported in this paper shed light on the experiences of a sample of young adults who had been in care for extended periods and have become well established in the labour market since leaving care.

Drawing on data derived from qualitative interviews with these young adults, a number of key points emerge. There is no single or simple pattern of linear progression from school-to-work.

There was a variety of pathways and gateways to becoming established in full time work after leaving care. Perhaps the most striking finding is that the roots of their progress in the world of work typically began long before the young adult had left care.

While there is a strong debate in the literature as to whether part-time work impedes educational progress for school students (Mortimer, Harley, & Aronson, 1999), the findings here seem to support those of Courtney et al. (2001), Courtney et al. (2011) and Stewart et al. (2014) which found that part-time work experience proved to be an asset for care leavers in terms of future employment prospects. In a similar vein, Tomaszewski and Cebulla (2014) reported that different early work experience helped young people from disadvantaged areas to achieve employment in higher-level occupations.

From the age of 16 and sometimes even younger, most of our participants across the two countries had accumulated a range of work experience, which according to their accounts seemed to produce a number of benefits. Early experience in the world of work seemed to lay a foundation of what might be termed 'work experience capital'. This new concept could be defined as a mix of 'soft' and 'hard' work skills which were valuable for the young person's employability and sense of confidence.

From the accounts of our participants, it is clear that education was an important 'enabler' in progression in the world of work, but that the informal learning afforded by part-time work experience was also a valuable complement to the fruits of formal learning for the young adults in our sample. So, work and early work experiences had a powerful influence on the participants

in their progress to more established positions in the labour market, but also had ripple effects in other arenas such as education and the development of social networks. In the same vein, [Mortimer et al. \(1999\)](#) found that early work experience complements rather than draws away from educational progress. In this sense, it seems that first work experiences may be a source of resilience for vulnerable youth such as care leavers, since work may provide opportunities to acquire social capital and other potentially resilience-enhancing experiences ([Gilligan, 2008](#)).

A second recurring message from their accounts is the importance of the practical and moral support of carers and others adults. In countless ways, carers and other 'informal carers' had helped the young adults to find work and to cope with the demands of balancing work, study and other parts of their life, points also evident in the work of [Greeson and Bowen \(2008\)](#) and [Lemon, Hines, and Merdinger \(2005\)](#).

The final recurring message was the impressive level of 'agency' or initiative so often evident in the accounts of the participants. They had sought out or availed themselves of opportunities. They had persuaded employers to take them on, sometime disguising their true age so as to circumvent employment law limits. They had succeeded in meeting expectations of interviewers or employers who were deciding to fill positions, or give more responsibilities. The overall workplace experience seems to have been positive allowing the young person to gain confidence, earn precious recognition and trust, and break free of the master identity of 'young person in care'.

These broad findings seem to carry a number of implications. They show that in this sample at least positive work experience appears to arise from – and contribute to – the young person's *social capital*, a quality that may be scarcer for young people in, or leaving, the care system. Social capital is widely debated concept, but for our purposes here, its relevance relates to the value of social connections through which reciprocal obligations of support may flow. Such support may be very precious for young people whose care profile, and the underlying reasons for admission to care, may leave them thin on potential sources of support. It is also possible to discern in many of the accounts how the young people had resisted any notion of dependence. Such dependence may be a real risk facing young people growing up in care who may grow quite accustomed to the all embracing support and structure of life in care. Making the transition to a stage where the young person is expected to stand on their own two feet is no easy matter. The 'work stories' of these young people are laced with hints or examples of how they stood on their own two feet in the world of work, gaining valuable opportunities for rehearsal and experience for countering the risk of dependence in their wider life. Their interest in and commitment to acquiring work experience and opportunities reflected and cultivated *self-efficacy* ([Bandura, 1993](#)), an important quality which, in this context, helps young people to counter inappropriate levels of dependence. Positive work experience (and early entry to work) also seemed in these examples to be associated with a *smoother transition* from life in care to life beyond care. Smoother transitions may be very important given the turbulent experiences often associated with leaving care. The findings also lend further weight to the view that young people with positive work experience while in care and afterwards may develop a fuller and more positive sense of *identity* that is not so tied up with the care experience alone ([Gilligan, 2008](#)). Immersion in a 'care identity' poses risks for segregation and stigma which may impair a young person's confidence and willingness to venture into new experiences.

The business of equipping young people with the resources and skills to manage in life after leaving care is a long term process. The accounts of the young people suggest that they had often been, in effect, building what we would term here as relevant 'work experience capital' for the world of work long before age 18. This is not to imply that the young people saw this as a long term project from when they were young, but more that they had made choices and decisions (and received support) in relation to work opportunities that produced cumulative benefit over time. This 'work experience capital' was essentially a bank of know-how about how to succeed in the world of work, how to match the expectations of bosses, colleagues and

customers.

While lessons from this study in relation to the role of carers is the subject of a planned companion paper, it is worth noting here how important the tangible and often more subtle support of carers (and others) was for the progress of the young people. This suggests the need to include such messages in the training and support of carers. The final broad message is the significance of the 'agency' of the young people. Long before leaving care, these young people had been helping to sow the seeds of their own success, by their energy, enthusiasm, dedication and hard work. These positive 'work stories' underline that young people in care should not be seen only as passive victims and 'receptacles' for support. Yet while the young people display agency and its importance in these accounts, it also seems true that key adults such as carers offered very important forms of low key support which in the terms of [Munford and Sanders \(2015\)](#) enabled the young people to rehearse how to 'enact' their agency.

We suggest that the outcome of this very preliminary study vindicates two of its key features: firstly, the focus on work experience as an important potential dimension of the care leaving experience and secondly, the cross-country design. The findings justify the effort and strongly support the value of deeper investigation of the 'micro' factors and processes influencing positively (or negatively) progress into and through the world of work for young people in care and care leavers. The two country design provides opportunities to assess the constancy of even preliminary findings across different contexts. Our early experience with this approach has encouraged us to explore the possibility of adding further exemplar countries in a later stage of the study.

This paper makes an initial case for how work experience must be taken seriously in terms of its potential multiple values for young people in care. While clearly further study is required, it seems that a compelling case emerges from this study that work may be an essential element in a broad and specific strategy to support the development of young people in care. Work experience in the labour force seems potentially to offer some of the key supports and opportunities that the wider research evidence shows are important to the progression of young people in care. This paper underlines the value of paying attention – in practice and research – to the detailed experiences of young people in care in their early encounters with the world of work.

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