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Support in the workplace: how relationships with bosses and co-workers may benefit care leavers and young people in care.

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Abstract:

It is widely recognised that young people in care and care leavers may find challenges in accessing necessary social support. Their potential support network may be adversely affected by the issues behind their being originally admitted to care, and by later experiences during their time in care and after they leave care. In this article, we explore how relationships in the workplace may be an important source of support for some care experienced young people. Such support may assist their progress in the workplace and more widely. Drawing on a study of 22 young adults who left care in Catalonia and Ireland, this article reports on participants' experience of a range of support from bosses and co-workers. Support received included being shown trust, being given recognition, and being mentored. Participants also reported that employers and co-workers were very helpful, not only in terms of work issues, but also by providing emotional and personal support, and in many cases, by offering young people the opportunity to create meaningful and stable friendships beyond work. This paper highlights how the workplace may be a potential (and largely unrecognised) source of social support for care experienced young people.

Key words: workplace, relationships, social support, social networks, natural mentoring, care experienced young people

INTRODUCTION

Young people who leave care may face many challenges in different areas including education, employment, housing, income, health and mental health issues in their transition into adulthood. (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2018; Muir & Hand, 2018; Paulsen, Höjer & Melke, 2018; Sala, Villalba, Jarriot & Rodriguez, 2009).

Importantly, young people in care and care leavers may also be at higher risk of social isolation due to disruptions in their social networks (Perry, 2006). These disruptions may potentially arise both from their placement experiences while in care, and from earlier adversities that gave rise to their placement in care. The legacy of any such disruptions in their networks may continue to be a live issue when the young person leaves care.

Care experience may be linked to weakened social networks as found in a study by Sala-Roca, Villalba, Jarriot, and Arnau-Sabatés (2012) which reported on the experience of a sample of 22 care leavers in Catalonia. The study found they had very few friends when they left their residential centers and weak social networks because most of them did not have the support of their birth families. In a few cases, these care leavers could only rely on their previous carers from residential homes to whom they turned for specific advice, support and information. Four of the participants mentioned that they did not have anyone to rely on. This example underlines how at least some care leavers may lack a sufficiently strong or supportive social network or a person of reference to go to for help (Jones, 2014).

Weakened social networks may mean that young care experienced people have fewer supports when facing challenges in their lives. Care leaving policies internationally frequently require young people to leave care at the age of 18 and the research evidence suggests that this may often happen without certainty of support from services or their birth family (Gilligan, 2018). Many may lack a strong birth family network or have family relationships that fluctuate, with periods of instability or disengagement (Biehal & Wade, 1996). In reality, family relationships may still be complicated for this group at this life stage.

Where family support is less available and formal support scarce, care leavers may need to find new supportive connections in their wider (informal) social network (Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 1999). Yet, for young care leavers, it may not be easy to make these new connections, especially beyond the world of the care setting. Thus, the issue of where young people leaving care are to find support becomes a critical issue for practice and research. In this paper, we engage with this challenge by highlighting the topic through the lens of care leaver relationships within the workplace with bosses and colleagues. We also seek to explore how these work-based relationships may be a possible source of support and provide benefits within and beyond the workplace.

Social networks, supportive relationships and friendships may all be important resources for social inclusion (Korkiamäki & Kallio, 2018), for vulnerable populations and particularly for care leavers aging out of care (Collins, Spencer & Ward, 2010; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Perry, 2006). Relationships with significant non-familial adults (carers, mentors, teachers, etc.) are seen generally as promotive factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) and have been identified as beneficial for care leavers' mental and emotional health (Rahamim & Mendes, 2016). Moreover, those young care leavers with tangible support from a meaningful long-term adult relationship (through friendship, mentoring, etc.) seem to do better than those without (Ahmann, 2017; Gypen et al., 2017). Furthermore, Melkman & Benbenishty (2018) found that practical, emotional and informational support from social support networks also predicts economic wellbeing for

care leavers and a greater adjustment to post –secondary education. It has also been found, however, that young care leavers may lack sufficient emotional support as they make the transition from care (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017).

Social network members could thus be valuable to young care leavers in assisting with their transition from care especially where the young person cannot readily call on the support of birth family members. Relationships with significant non-related adults may provide an opportunity for young people to build resilience and learn skills necessary for adulthood and independent living (Zimmerman, 2013). They may also help raise the young person's expectations for their future progress (Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011).

Work is important for social inclusion and integration and could, in principle, also offer a potential environment where care leavers might meet new people, form additional supportive relationships and add to or build their own wider support network. Where friendships emerge in the workplace they may involve, not only relationships with broadly same aged peers – fellow workers, but also inter-generational connections which Korkiamäki & Kallio (2018) remind us are also valued by many young people in their sets of friendships. Employers, managers or co-workers could be long-term sources of support emerging organically from the workplace and helping care leavers to extend naturally their social capital thus potentially increasing the presence of social supports and connections in their network of relationships.

Such trusting relationships within the workplace could be valuable for care leavers, especially where that relationship also involves cultivating the young person's talents and interests (Gilligan, 1999), through an informal mentoring relationship. Thompson, Greeson & Brunsink, (2016), in their systematic review on natural mentoring programs for youths, suggested that natural mentoring, understood as occurring naturally mentoring relationships within youth's social networks, are associated with better psychosocial, behavioural and academic outcomes. So, all adults that are involved in the young people network including bosses, co-workers, etc. could be considered as potential natural mentors. According to these authors, time and consistency are also important elements for increasing the quality of the natural mentoring relationships, qualities which a workplace environment may facilitate.

This component of the wider study being reported in this article examines the role that bosses and co-workers played as supporters and natural mentors in the young people's progress in the workplace and more widely.

2. METHODS

This paper draws on data from a wider qualitative study of the work progress of care experienced young people conducted with a sample of 22 care leavers from Ireland (10 cases) and Catalonia (12 cases) who had successful experiences in the world of work.

The reason why, both territories, Ireland and Catalonia, were used as the sites of this study, is to check whether, despite the differences in the welfare system and care leaving policies in the two sites, we find similar results. In Catalonia and Ireland, youths are discharged from foster care at the age of 18 and they may be able to access services until 21 (or sometimes 23 in Ireland and 24 in Catalonia) if they are engaged in full time education or training. In Ireland, although the state provides services till 21, children and young people in care are placed in foster families (92.5%) so they may sometimes stay on informally beyond the care leaving age. However, In Catalonia, 40% of youths in care are placed in residential homes and don't have family support, so most of them access

transitional services and go into the placement category of “living independently”, although 33% of them return to their biological families (Sala et al., 2009).

Therefore, including youths from different backgrounds (Ireland and Catalonia) that have been growing up in different forms of care and with slightly different leaving care policies adds variation in the sample (beyond core criteria) and is a strength for the study. If we find the same things across a diverse sample, this strengthens the value of the findings

In this sense, the two-country design has been seen as an opportunity to add variation to the sample and strengthen the value of results that are convergent (or divergent) across two quite different backgrounds and sociocultural settings.

Sample

Participants were recruited using maximum-variation sampling of care leavers (gender, type of placement, education / work history, etc.) in order to find consistencies emerging across the different cases in two quite different contexts (Ireland and Catalonia). All the young adults interviewed met the three basic criteria set for the study: having extensive care experience (more than two years in care), being in their mid-late twenties, and having substantial work experience since they left care (minimum two years active in the labour market).

Interview

An in-depth semi structured interview was conducted. Open-ended questions were used to explore the factors and influences that had helped their entry into, and progress within, the world of work. The young adults were interviewed about different aspects related to their current work situation and their overall work experience, and also what they thought had helped them be successful in their entry into and later progress to more established positions in the labour market. They were also asked about and what relevant supports (emotional, tangible, practical, etc.) - both formal and informal- they had found. Other particular issues such as relations with work colleagues and employers that emerged from the interviews were also explored. In the context of this paper, we will analyze more in depth this last topic in order to get to know better how relationships with bosses and co-workers may benefit care leavers and young people in care.

It is important to note that interviews were conducted using a flexible approach often surfacing topics out of sequence and adding more questions depending on the responses from the young adults.

They were asked about two issues: firstly, what they thought had helped them be successful in their entry into and later progress to more established positions in the labour market and secondly what relevant supports (emotional, tangible, practical, etc.) they had found. Previous papers from the study highlighted the supportive role of formal carers and other adults in the participants' journey to work (see Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017). In this paper, we examine further the sources of work – related support found by participants by turning the focus to the role that employers, bosses and co-workers played in this process.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted in person using a topic guide in order to explore the sources of work-related support found by participants. They took approximately one hour and a half and were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The focus of the interview was explained to the participants in advance and their written consent was sought prior to the start of the interviews. The interviews took place in neutral locations selected by the participants. The materials and procedures used to carry out the interviews were the same in both jurisdictions and they were transcribed in respondents' native languages.

The interviews were carried out by the two principal investigators, one of them fluent in both languages (Catalan and English). Researchers did the first half set of interviews together to ensure coherence, consistency and full compatibility of procedures and data.

The study design had the approval of the of the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

After each interview, the topic guide was revised as necessary to ensure that later interviews covered the most relevant themes. A conventional content analysis was conducted using coding categories derived directly from the text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In accord with Braun & Clarke (2006), after familiarisation with the data, a random sample of interviews was selected, read and independently coded by the two principal investigators in order to generate an agreed set of codes and categories. The rest of the interviews were then categorized and analysed.

The researchers have changed the names of the participants and places mentioned and have deliberately omitted certain personal characteristics to avoid any identifying information.

Finally, it is important to point out that a cross national design like the one used in this study requires careful preparation to ensure consistency in both study settings. In order to reduce bias the researchers applied some rigorous methodological procedures to ensure the reliability and the quality of data collected. As it was previously mentioned, in the context of this study both researchers have extensive experience with the welfare system in each territory that facilitates the execution of the study in a proper way; the topic guide of the interview and protocols were the same in both sites and these were translated in both languages and were adapted culturally and reviewed by both advisory groups in order to ensure the equivalence of the key concepts. Also, the interviews were conducted in the native language of participants by the principal investigators who, moreover, did half of the interviews together.

3. RESULTS

Twenty-two care leavers between 23 and 33 years of age (mostly mid-twenties), who had successful experiences in the world of work were interviewed (In the context of the study, success is considered to be mainly reflected in having regular jobs, job stability and promotion). Ten participants were from Ireland and 12 from Catalonia. The Irish sample comprised of five women and five men and the Catalan sample five women and seven men. Most of the Irish young adults had been fostered with non-relatives whereas most of the Catalan participants had been placed in residential centers under the care of social educators. The difference between the type of placement is a reflection of the child welfare system in each territory: in Catalonia, almost half of children and young

people are placed in residential care (group home or institution) whereas in Ireland the most common measure is foster care (both non-relatives and to a lesser degree relatives).

Across the two countries, the majority of the sample entered the world of paid work before the age of 18, mainly through part-time work and while still in care and at school. At the point of interview, the majority of the participants were working, mostly in the service sector, in many different jobs: social worker, shop assistant, policeman, manager in a medical laboratory, financial assistant, chef, nurse, soldier, primary teacher, etc. Four of the participants were supervising other staff. Almost half of the employed participants on both sides had held their current job for two years or more.

For the purposes of this paper, we report on the influence of relationships with two categories of actors in the workplace. Firstly, there are 'bosses' - people who are the actual employer (in small enterprises) or a manager who served as the boss of the participant day to day. Secondly, there are co-workers, the peers of the participants in their workplace. The (full or part-time) workplace in the study could be a commercial enterprise (of varying scale), a public service, or a civil society community or voluntary project.

Fourteen of the 22 young adults referred, in an explicit way, to having a good relationship with some employers and managers (current and previous) and also with some of their co-workers, and seven of them reported still being in contact with such work colleagues even where they had left the relevant workplace. None mentioned difficulties with colleagues although this was not a specific focus of questions nor the study since it was seeking to investigate what participants had found supportive in their progress.

The results section is structured in two parts. In the first part (3.1.), there is a description of the role that employers played as supporters and natural mentors (patterns of contact, support experienced, impact on participants' stability, resilience, etc.). In the second part (3.2.), the focus is on how connections to employers/managers and co-workers brought opportunities to make friendships beyond care and helped the young adults in enlarging their support network.

3.1. How were workplace relationships experienced as supportive?

There were two types of support from workplace colleagues identified in the responses of participants. Firstly, there was support offered to the participants in the performance of their work roles. In this case, the employers/managers were central. This form of support is described in the first two parts of the following sections (3.1.1. and 3.1.2.). The second type of support involved both managers and co-workers and related to friendships both inside the workplace, and in social life outside work. Sometimes, such friendships with managers and colleagues also endured even after the participant had ceased working in the particular workplace. This second form of support illustrates how the workplace may be a source of relationships which help to extend and strengthen social networks for the young people involved. This type of support is explored further in the third part of the following sections (3.1.3.) and in the next section (3.2.).

3.1.1. Personal Support by Managers / Employers in relation to Work roles - Showing Trust and Giving Recognition

Many participants reported that their employers / managers had shown trust in them and had given them recognition, something they greatly valued

"I'm very happy at my job, they value my work. One year they chose me as the best employee of the month. Another time, the owner congratulated me because I fixed the sound of some music devices, and he told me that they were really happy to have me in the Company (...) I see that they value me a lot, they respect me, they trust me, and moreover I also see that I'm doing my job and I do it well, it's because of that they are happy." (Cat_case 22)

*"Like actually there's a magazine [in my workplace (airline)] (...) I got on the front cover of that in February so that was a good (...) So everybody in the airline, like managers and all were kind of going ah you're your man off the front cover (...) **Again your man rang me, the manager of the xxx station, he said (...) I was asked to find someone that's, you know, hard working, committed to the job and kind of shows an interest and he said he thought of me (because of the article).**"* (lr_case 7)

In some other cases, employers provided the participants with opportunities for more responsibility in the workplace again offering precious experiences of recognition, and of having confidence and trust placed in them:

*"He [the boss] said he wanted to have a word with me. I thought I had done something wrong but he asked me: **"do you think you'd be able to run the store?"** And I was in shock, not able to reply at that moment, and in the end I said yes!. He trusted me. I'm really lucky because I have known some really good people in my life, and my boss has been one of them."* (Cat_case 16)

*"When I started working there it was purely administration it was, it's still I suppose, in administration. But I'm in charge now of the division where the administration occurs. Em, I was there at a very kind of, em, I suppose, eh, a fortunate time in some way, in the, the organisation's development (...) **And they [bosses] said basically, if you're here next year and you've kind of met the targets, we'll make you manager. So, I said sure I'll give it a lash and see. And now yeah, I manage a team of six, em, exceptionally busy, em, but I love it. I, I do genuinely love what I do. Like, I suppose, it really comes down to the fact that, what I'm dealing with is not just pieces of paper.**"* (lr_case 5)

In another example, an employer had offered a participant a second chance (despite their having had earlier difficulties in their relationship) and hired him again and, even after the participant had left that workplace, they were still in contact:

"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." (Cat_case 8).

3.1.2. Personal Support by Managers / Employers in relation to Work roles - Mentoring and encouraging participants in developing work-related skills

The participants described how employers / managers had encouraged and supported them on a personal level in various ways - paying attention to their career prospects, providing work supervision, cultivating specific-task skills, teaching them certain soft skills.

Shaping career aspirations

Employers were reported as being very supportive in influencing young people's aspirations and giving positive messages and encouragement for them to go further in the world of work.

Some of the employers encouraged young people to take up career development opportunities

"I did a week or two and I actually enjoyed it. And I met people and that lady [first boss] was kind of saying I'd a flair for floristry. Em, and throughout the two years then I went and got my Interflora exams through that job." (lr_ case 2)

In other cases, employers helped them to work towards their aspirations in the workplace. For example, the participant in case 4 realised that she was not happy after doing routine tasks for over five years and the manager encouraged her to take exams to get a better job position more in line with her career ambitions:

"I was actually in the first department, I was in that for five and a half years. And that was doing the basics, pushing trolleys round files and all that. And I was getting bored and obviously, my manager was like going, Patricia you did a course in this, would you not go for the job that's in payroll. It's just covering maternity leave and I said, ah I will yeah, I better yeah. Didn't think I'd get it like, but I got it and that was grand, so. They told me I had to do a, obviously, me exams, sit exams, even to show that I'm in the middle of doing it, so. But there was a, then after that they moved me to the, the expenses [department] because obviously your one came back from maternity leave, so. It, it's grand, like yeah, I'm, I'm, settled enough like it's, a good company, it has a good reputation, kind of thing." (lr_case 4)

Coaching certain skills and giving encouragement

Employers / managers were sometimes reported as being a kind of role model that supervised their work and helped them to gain both "soft" skills (such as being more patient, showing more initiative, etc.) and "hard" skills to increase their employability capital. In the first example below (Case 12), the relationship between the participant and their boss had also grown into a friendship.

*"I was working with him last year in the company, but he decided to start up his own company and it went really well. **After 6 months, he asked me to work with him in his new company and he taught me everything I know, everything about this profession. I was working with him for 6 years. He was like my father, my father at work you know...and we still have a good friendship (...)** He was very good at dealing with people (...) and professionally he was very good, very good. **He was always telling me what was good and bad and he knew how to deal with my lack of patience and my ways since I was very young.**" (Cat_case 12)*

*"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 [at work]: '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." (Cat_case 22).*

In some cases, employers helped young people to improve their soft skills (work-ethic, etc.) and gave them encouragement by telling them that they were more capable than they thought and that they had the potential to achieve something more than what they were currently doing.

"I have memories of old bosses saying like you're your own worst enemy and kind of stuff like that. And like if you put half as much energy into what you're doing or if you put more effort into what you're doing you'll go a lot further with it and stuff like that. And you have brains to burn and all that. And that came from like managerial people and stuff. And it wasn't, like it wasn't that I wasn't doing, not taking part in work and stuff like that but I think to show initiative that if I, when I started doing something or I lent a hand doing something else, I got a lot of encouragement from people to maybe try. So that's how you progress from washing pots in the back to washing dishes at the front and helping plate up food, like desserts and stuff like that." (lr_case 10)

There were also instances where co-workers emerged as informal mentors or role models, giving advice or emotional support to the young person:

"Patricia, my colleague from work, is like a sister to me, in the moments that I had thoughts about quitting the job or staying on, she was there to support me (...) She is very responsible and for me she is a someone to look up to, she is very well organized." (Cat_case 19)

In case 10, the support at work was found through co-workers that were of the same age, offering a kind of peer-support:

[Talking about having Friends at work] "Yeah, yeah and no, like I suppose, like say in the restaurant where I worked, the people would be my own age and stuff like that so you would have made friends and stuff like that and kind of [had] peer support." (lr_case 10)

3.1.3. Personal Support in Wider Life Beyond the Workplace from Managers and Co-workers

As already noted in relation to Case 12 above, bosses sometimes not only had a good working and personal relationship with the young people but also offered them more general emotional support and advice over time.

In some cases, this support benefited the young person in their work roles, and also in their wider life. In this example, this support was so valued by the young person that they kept in contact with their previous employer long after leaving the particular work place:

“When I was working in the carpentry company, my boss taught me many things and not only from a work point of view but about life in general. He was aware of all my problems and circumstances and always treated me strict but fair. He treated me like a son at work, and after so many years we are still in contact.” (Cat_case 18)

In one case, a former boss helped the young person find a new job opportunity:

“I was there for about two years and I, I kind of struggled em. I, I had some odd jobs and things in bars and something like that. But it wasn’t easy, I had some eh, jobs in sales and things like that. I actually, em, the, I only, I came back to Ireland so I could, ‘cos someone told me about this job. It was actually my former boss, in fairness. Em, told me about the, the em, the job in Galway and, and so, so and I have quite a good relationship with, with my... ‘cos I mean, eh, eh, I was there eh, between the age of nine and fifteen.” (Ir_case 3)

3.2. Friendships beyond the workplace

Some of the participants found long lasting and stable connections and friendships 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:

“Philip [her boss] and I are great friends and he took me under his wing and he was very caring and he would, you know, give me good opportunities.” (Ir_case 1)

“I have a very good relationship with my boss, I think I showed also my commitment with work as I have been in the company for more than 6 years already, he knows that I do my job well and he trust me a lot (...) He is my boss, but I don’t feel he is a boss, is more my friend, we trust each other, and sometimes If he needs to let me know that something is not working fine, he does it.” (Cat_case 19)

Young people in their workplace were also able to access meaningful friendships with their work colleagues. This not only helped them to have a more positive experience in

the workplace, but also to establish new connections and expand organically their wider social network:

“Work is a big part of my life. Some people think of work as just you know, get the money in, pay the bills (...) I look at work as ...very important, it’s a challenge and it keeps you in with life, it keeps you fresh, it keeps you going you know. If you don’t have a job you’re just sitting at home doing nothing. I don’t want that. So, it keeps you motivated, keeps you looking around, keeps your options open you know, and you can see many aspects, you meet new people (...) I have friends at work. People from different countries, different languages you know, so you realise what life is about you know, you know. I’m not the only one that had a harder life, you know. Everyone has many challenges but you know, you kind of become a team and help each other out and stuff, yeah (...) Yeah we’d have function nights like Christmas nights and the odd summer party night out in town, you know, we’d go to that.” (Ir_case 7)

Where workplace friendships emerged, these might prove of great value

“Yeah, em, I, the garage I worked out in em, Portarlinton, the car sales. Like, I’ve made, there’s two girls there that are lifelong friends. You know they’re, they’ll be there I’d say forever.” (Ir_case 6)

In many cases, participants found different ways to connect with co-workers. They might go the cinema, or have coffee or go out for dinner together.

“I do, yea, I would have friends, like. I class them as my friends, some of them I would. I’d go out with them or I’d go to the cinema with them after, like. I met most of my friends that I am friends with now, in work, through work. And if it’s not this work, through a different workplace (...) I find I’m, ‘cos when you leave school everybody’s apart, they went different ways, so you kind of lose contact. Where in work they’re all around, do you know the way? But because I’m, been there for what, half the day kind of thing. You kind of have to get along with somebody so, you kind of make your business to be kind of friends with some of them now. I’m not saying all of them now (...) I know you make colleagues as well, I know the difference between colleagues and friends but. (Ir_case 4)

“I have friends inside and outside of work. I can go and have a coffee with them [work-colleagues], eating outside, they are also my friends.” (Cat_case 12)

In some cases, participants ended up sharing accommodation with co-workers, and in one case this led to an ongoing friendship even after the accommodation-sharing ended.

“I used to live with somebody in Sligo that I used to work with. And like that was too expensive. But I’m still friends with that person so. Like, I lived with her for what six, eight months so, yea.” (Ir_case 4)

“When I went to Cork for the first time and I worked in the Fringe like, for a month. And it was out of that, that I got, I got my first flat in Cork. So, like there was someone there [in the workplace] and they had a flat and I moved in with them.” (Ir_case 3)

It seems that many of the participants found the workplace to be a natural setting for them to develop new contacts, new connections and possibly new friendships, and sometimes this happened quite soon after starting the new job.

“When I started my first job I started to know all my friends (...) we are still in contact after so many years (...) from time to time we meet or they come to see me and they say: “Sara you knew how to do things in life, look at you now, you are running your own business.” (Cat_case 16)

Sometimes, co-workers from different types of work (paid work and voluntary work) are considered as part of their family or best friends who are always there for them:

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

“Today most of my best friends are colleagues that I have had at work.” (Cat_case 13)

“Yes. I was doing some voluntary work with kids as a free-time instructor before I started working, and in this group of instructors I met one of my best friends (...) he was always there (...) the day I left the residential center, when my mum passed away, he has been supporting me along the way (...) He helped me a lot.” (Cat_case 19)

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study suggests that the workplace can be a setting where young care leavers may be able to access friendship and support of different kinds, including ‘natural’ mentoring support where bosses or co-workers serve as resources and role models in work performance.

More than half of the young people from the study reported positively on the relationships they had with their managers, in some cases building strong bonds with them. They received such support not only while a worker, but also in some cases, after they had moved on.

Bosses were reported as being very helpful in a number of ways whether in terms of work issues (task related information, helping young people develop and refine ‘hard’ skills relevant to their performance, etc.) or in terms of providing personal and emotional support (trust, encouragement, providing opportunities and recognition, increasing their aspirations, etc.).

Employers often proved to be “natural” mentors in the workplace who helped young people develop not only their ‘hard’ skills relevant to their performance but also some ‘soft’ skills such as initiative, work-ethic, and their trust and confidence in themselves. This support that employers gave to young people informally could increase their confidence and general work competence, thus enhancing potentially their wider employability.

In many cases, the young people reported being in contact or still being friends with their previous managers or co-workers, thus highlighting the potentially longer term value of connections first made in the workplace. This may be especially helpful for young care

leavers who may sometimes lack connections to their birth family or strong social networks beyond the care setting (Collins, Spencer & Ward, 2010; Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 1999).

Our findings suggest possible benefits the workplace may confer on young care leavers. The workplace may be a natural source of precious opportunities for friendships – with bosses and with fellow workers; friendships which may endure well into the future, thus potentially strengthening the care leaver's social network. It can also facilitate "inter-generational connections" which Korkiamäki & Kallio, (2018) found were highly valued by young people in their study of youth friendships.

The findings show that the work environment may also offer supportive relationships which can help care experienced young people develop (hard-to-acquire) work relevant skills. Regardless of the level of formal qualifications a young person may have obtained, these employability competencies (hard and soft skills) are widely recognized as essential for a young person in establishing his / herself in the labour market (Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell & Cullen, 2012). Workplace support in developing relevant skills may thus be especially valuable for care experienced young people.

On a related point, the workplace can be a site for "natural mentoring" (Thompson, Greeson & Brunsink, 2016). Bosses, when acting as natural mentors, may actively encourage young care leavers to build and sustain skills and what might be termed as their "workplace resilience" (their capacity to respond to work pressure and demands effectively). Moreover, the workplace may also become a site where the care experienced young person may be able to access personal and emotional support from their boss or fellow worker on work or non-work matters. As noted earlier, care leavers may lack ready access to emotional support (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017), thus adding extra value to this potential dimension of workplace support.

Therefore, one of the main conclusions is that, overall, the workplace can be a potential source of new social network members for care experienced young people and help them to build social capital.

The value of accessing connections and supports at and through work is rarely recognized in the literature. This study shows the work setting and the social relationships with workplace managers and colleagues is a potential resource for care experienced young people. Our findings highlight how these relationships may offer support, informal mentoring and friendships. In the workplace, care experienced young people may also find new members for their social network. Furthermore, our findings also suggest that in addition to these tangible gains, new connections in the workplace may also offer more subtle but very valuable experiences in the form of being trusted and being recognized. These experiences may help to build a young person's sense of confidence and competence, something which is of great value in the world of work and in other parts of their life.

Implications for practice and research

This paper provides initial evidence that workplace relationships may offer precious opportunities that hold considerable potential value for care experienced young people. Workplace relationships may offer connections, and practical and emotional support. They may also help to cultivate work relevant skills. They may sometimes provide new members of the young person's long-term social network. It reinforces arguments in our earlier papers (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017) about the positive value of work place experience and work-related supports for care

experienced young people. It also lends further weight to our case that progression in the world of work requires attention alongside the issue of promoting progress in education, a point also highlighted in a forthcoming paper (Gilligan, 2019).

The message for practice seems clear. When working with young people in care and care leavers, there is a strong case for attention to supporting entry into and progress in the world of work. Our previous papers also showed the value of supporting early experience in the world of work (part time, volunteering, etc.) (before age 18) (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015). We have also stressed the importance of supporting young people in their work progress, and of alerting and encouraging carers as to their potential roles in support work progress (Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017). This paper highlights the potential contribution of another set of actors – bosses and work colleagues. Those working with care experienced young people should seek to encourage positive connections between the young people and their workplace bosses and colleagues.

In terms of research, this preliminary consideration of the contribution of positive workplace relationships suggests that this is potentially a fruitful area for further study. We can benefit from deeper insights into the pre-conditions, processes, and outcomes of positive connections between care experienced young people and their bosses and colleagues in the workplace. Our evidence also suggests the importance of learning more about the impact of connections formed in the workplace that endure over time, even when the young person may have moved away from the particular workplace.

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