

Young people leaving out-of-home care in Victoria, Australia: An exploration of factors influencing positive transitions

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Abstract

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care are globally regarded as a vulnerable group due to traumatic experiences pre-care and within the out-of-home care system, stigmatisation by the wider community, and limited and ineffective support beyond 18 years of age. Yet, many care leavers overcome this adversity to achieve positive life outcomes post-care. This exploratory qualitative study examines the views of a small group of care leavers and foster carers within Victoria on the key factors that influenced positive transition outcomes. Particular attention is drawn to the importance of ongoing support from a close relationship with a trusted adult, a sense of belonging within a placement or extended family or community, the value of advocacy by care leavers and their key support persons, and a connected autonomy beyond 18 years which allowed care leavers to assert their independence without losing their “safety net” of support. These findings are highly relevant to policy makers given the recent introduction of extended care until 21 years for care leavers in Victoria.

Keywords

Out-of-home care, transitioning from care, foster carers, care leavers, external supports, personal agency.

Introduction

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC), often called care leavers, are identified globally as a vulnerable group (Stein, 2012). “Leaving care” in the State of Victoria and all other Australian jurisdictions is formally defined as the point where the State ceases legal responsibility for a young person in out-of-home care, generally occurring before their 18th birthday, when they have been deemed to have aged out of the system (Mendes & Snow, 2016).

Unfortunately, these young people often must overcome significant barriers that their peers do not. The ongoing effects of trauma stemming from pre-care abuse or neglect, additional trauma as a result of poor or multiple care placements, and/or the lack of community and familial support networks during the leaving care process, effectively leaves many care leavers without a “safety net” during this transition to independence (Mendes & Snow, 2016). In addition, care leavers have also spoken about needing to overcome a stigma associated with growing up in care that may limit their life opportunities (Stein, 2012).

Although not a homogenous group, encompassing instead a range of experiences and outcomes (Mendes & Snow, 2016), statistics tend to paint a grim picture of what the future holds for young people leaving care. According to multiple research studies (both qualitative and quantitative and utilizing a range of experimental, quasi-experimental and longitudinal designs), care leavers in Australia and internationally are more likely to experience homelessness, criminal justice intervention, unemployment, and poorer physical and mental health outcomes than their non-care peers (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Stein, 2012). A multi-method national study examining transitions to higher education found they are also far less likely to be engaged in further or higher education (Harvey et al., 2015). Additionally, an examination of existing studies concerning the experiences of Indigenous children and young people in OOHC suggests that many of those exiting OOHC seem to be disconnected from culture and community (Krakouer, Wise, & Connolly, 2018).

As of June 2019, 44,906 children were in OOHC nationally across Australia (Productivity Commission, 2020). It is estimated that about 3,350 young people nationally aged 15 to 17 years are discharged from care each year including 871 in Victoria (AIHW, 2020). No nationally consistent framework for leaving care exists in Australia, however, with each State and Territory having their own policy and legislation (Baidawi, 2016). In Victoria, where the current study was conducted, leaving care policy requires formal transition planning to begin at 15 years of age, acknowledging that young people in OOHC require skills for independence at a much earlier age than their peers

(State of Victoria, 2012). This is because young people in care are effectively cut off from government assistance on, or before, their 18th birthday. The legislation that informs this policy is the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic)*, which outlines discretionary post-care assistance available, including limited financial provisions “to support a person to make the transition to independent living” (Department of Human Services, 2005, p. 27). Discretionary not mandatory post-care support is also common to all other states and territories.

Recently, however, following concerns from care leavers, service providers and researchers in the leaving care field (Mendes, 2018), a national campaign, *Home Stretch*, was established, advocating for the leaving care age to be raised to 21 years. To date, Victoria and three other states have announced trials of such extended care in response to this campaign (Home Stretch, 2018), and influenced by similar initiatives in the UK and USA (Mendes & Rogers, 2020). In November 2020, the Victorian Government announced that they would extend out-of-home care (OOHC) on a universal basis till 21 years of age starting 1st January 2021 (Mendes, 2021).

Given the renewed interest by policy makers in improving outcomes for young people transitioning from OOHC, the current study aimed to expand understanding of factors that may promote positive transitions for care leavers. Consequently, this study sought to answer the research question: What do successful care leavers and their carers describe as turning points in their transitions from out-of-home care, and how do internal (personal characteristics) and external (provision of material resources and other supports from external sources) factors interact to support their success? We defined turning points as vital moments or experiences that enabled young people to progress life opportunities. Hutchison (2019) usefully distinguishes between conventional life course transitions (for example marriage and birth) and turning points that drive significant changes in the life course trajectory. She frames turning points as potentially including both transformations “in how the person views the self in relation to the world and/or a transformation in how the person responds to risk and opportunity” (p.355).

Utilising a strengths-based approach (Alston & Bowles, 2012), our study aimed to illuminate the experiences of care leavers who have “beaten the odds” and had successful life outcomes post-care. Given the limited scholarship in this area, the definition of success in this study was intentionally broad, encompassing tangible achievements, such as sustained engagement in higher education and/or employment, as well as personally defined positives such as an articulation of satisfaction with present life, and an optimistic view of the future. This paper is based on an unfunded study undertaken as a Social Work Honours Thesis completed in 2018.

A review of leaving care literature

Given the very exploratory nature of this study and the limited attention to positive transitions from OOHC, a narrative review (Carey, 2012) was identified as the most appropriate approach. This involved an extensive search for relevant literature by the first author, identification by all three authors of the significant studies in this area, and subsequent evaluation of their conceptual contribution to this emerging area. Initially, a total of 30 studies were identified via the Informit data base using search terms such as “young people transitioning from OOHC” and “positive outcomes” and/or “success“. No specific dates were imposed on the search. This number was eventually reduced to a total of 11 publications (seven international and four Australian). These were the studies identified as most closely aligned to the research question (specifically positive transitions and success), as well as ensuring the inclusion of the key theorists/researchers whose work (principally from the UK and USA) was relevant to the Australian practice and policy context. There was also a preference for studies from post 2000. Some studies from European and African jurisdictions were discarded because we didn’t feel their findings were directly applicable to Australia. Others were discarded because they covered general leaving care policy issues and/or poor outcomes but didn’t specifically examine factors impacting on positive transitions. This limited search also reflected the time constraints and word limits of an Honours thesis and did not capture any book chapters or grey literature.

Six of the international studies present a range of research evidence and associated theory from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Israel, while Stein’s work (2012) in the UK, categorizes the varied or heterogenous outcomes that care leavers experience. Stein (2012) argues that by understanding the transition process and obstacles faced, researchers can identify what is needed to give care leavers the best possible chance at success. Drawing on over three decades of UK research findings involving a range of methods, Stein notes the importance of young people having strong formal and informal support networks that provide positive attachment experiences, practical information, and responsive and readily available assistance.

Stein’s framework places young people leaving care into one of three categories: “moving on”, “survivors”, and “strugglers” (Stein, 2012, pp.170-72). Rather than these being static groups, Stein notes that there can be some degree of movement between them as circumstances change in an individual’s life. As the name suggests, the “moving on” group refers to care leavers who are developing an identity and sense of self, have supportive social networks and stability in their lives, and have welcomed the opportunity for independence. Those in the “survivor” group are characterised as seeing themselves

as having a fierce sense of self-reliance and toughness despite instability, literally “surviving” the process of leaving care and often becoming dependent on support services. The final group, the “strugglers” are characterised by having the most complex needs and the most difficult and traumatic pre-care experiences. According to Stein (2012), they are also more likely to be isolated and lack positive social supports, with their in-care and leaving care supports typically unable to reverse the impacts of their pre-care experiences.

Other researchers have specifically attempted to identify factors that help care leavers move on. Refaeli (2017) used resilience theory to identify coping behaviours in care leavers in Israel, examining how participants navigated the transition into emerging adulthood. That study was conducted using a narrative approach, analysing the life stories of 16 care leavers from a larger study of 222, approximately four years after leaving residential care. Much like Stein’s (2012) categorisations, Refaeli (2017) found two distinct groupings emerged from the research, which she termed “struggling to survive” and “surviving through struggle” (p.6). The first group referred to participants who spoke about distress and difficulties, identified as “at risk”. The second group tended to have more positive attitudes, focused on achievements and invested in overcoming obstacles rather than being defined or victimised by them. While the research emphasised the need for care leavers to “take deliberate steps to shape their own lives” (Refaeli, 2017, p.6) - exerting personal agency - it also acknowledged the positive influence of strong informal and formal external support for those in the “surviving through struggle” group. It is this combination of personal agency and resources and supportive social relationships via family and friends that aid the advancement of care leavers’ life aspirations (Refaeli, 2017).

Another significant study is the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Outcomes of Former Foster Youth, a longitudinal study of US care leavers in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois (Courtney et al., 2011). This research, more commonly referred to as the “Midwest Study”, is an ongoing examination of the journey of a cohort of care leavers. The study originated as a response to US Federal legislation established to increase the eligibility of services to assist young people transitioning from care, as well as giving jurisdictions the option of extending care services until 21 years of age (Courtney et al., 2011). The Midwest Study began in 2002 with a sample of 732 young people aged 17-18 years. Participants engaged in a series of interviews over time, looking into their experiences and preparations around leaving care. The findings consistently indicated that care leavers were faring poorly compared to their mainstream peers. There was mention, however, of some care leavers “beating the odds” and succeeding despite adversity. Success was mostly measured via tangible outcomes, such as: graduating from school or college; being in stable employment and housing; having maintained good health; or not being involved in the

criminal justice system. These care leavers also expressed an optimistic view of the future and were satisfied with their lives (Courtney et al., 2011).

In similarly focused, but much smaller scale, research in England and Wales, Horrocks (2002) used a life course approach to examine transitions from OOHC, focusing on the notion of “pathways”. Using life stories as told by participants, the aim of that study was to consider the patterns and interactions young people faced as they transition to independence in order to determine what helped and hindered them. Involving 14 young people (11 females and 3 males), four interviews were conducted with each participant over a period of 12 to 18 months using biographical research methods. A key finding of the study was that young people held a perception that “independence” implied self-reliance. Additionally, the findings indicated the rarity of a clear pathway to independence, concluding the transition from care instead to be a fluid process reflecting the different developmental levels of care leavers and the varied availability of forms of social support (Horrocks, 2002).

Two other US studies also suggested that care leavers associated successful transitions from care with a capacity for self-reliance. Samuels and Pryce (2008) interviewed 44 young people aged 20 drawn from participants in the Midwest study. These young people expressed pride in their self-reliance, and a reluctance to rely on emotional support from others. Similarly, Goodkind, Schelbe and Schook (2011) conducted interviews with 45 young people in or transitioning from OOHC in Pennsylvania. They reported that participants highlighted the importance of taking up adult responsibilities, rather than a reliance on supportive relationships. Martin and Jackson (2002) interviewed 38 high-achieving care leavers in the United Kingdom about their educational experiences in, and after leaving, care. They identified a range of personal and systemic supports that assisted their educational outcomes including teachers, social workers, mentors, and broader assistance with finances and accommodation.

The seven international studies above have clearly informed an understanding of the factors that may underlie positive transitions. These seem to include a combination of personal agency, and the availability of formal and informal support networks. Nevertheless, there are major differences between those jurisdictions and Australia in terms of legislation, policy, type of OOHC experienced, and cultural factors. The four local Australian studies now discussed add further to the existing knowledge. They present research evidence and associated theory from three individual states plus a national perspective.

More than a decade ago, Australian researchers Cashmore and Paxman (2006) conducted a longitudinal study in New South Wales, analysing the links between stability,

perceptions of security and outcomes for 41 young people 4-5 years after leaving care. Their interviews sought information on current and previous living arrangements, and measured resilience and outcomes using a quantitative “success index” model. Here, the study analysed seven tangible domains of functioning: employment, housing stability, education, substance use, mental health, criminal behaviour, and relationships. They found that feeling secure and stable in care, and a sense of continuity and social support post-care were the most critical factors in determining the future outcomes of care leavers (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006).

A more recent multi-method national study examining transitions to higher education for care leavers was conducted by Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha and Luckman (2015). Their findings identified the need for external resources, including mentors and role models, education for carers, trauma recovery and mental health support, improved school inclusion policies, advocacy, and academic tutoring as positive intervention strategies. Additionally, a need to actively listen to the voices of care leavers who had successfully transitioned into higher education, was emphasised to identify factors that contributed to them wanting to extend their education (Harvey et al., 2015). Similarly, Michell and Scalzi (2016) held two focus groups with care leavers aged 18-24 years in South Australia to discuss their educational experiences. They identified a range of factors that enhanced their educational access and outcomes including encouragement and support from adults such as carers and teachers, and personal resilience and determination. This seems to be another example of personal resources being facilitated by support from external sources.

Further Australian research expands on the exploration of positive factors supporting young people’s transitions from OOHC to also consider the impact of “turning points”. Whilst Stein (2012) acknowledges that classifications of care leaver cohorts are not necessarily static, Johnson and Mendes (2014) note that leaving care research and theory tends to lack a perception and focus on the potential for positive change. They analysed data from an earlier study which explored the housing experiences of 77 care leavers aged 18-25 in Victoria and Western Australia. From the findings of the study, researchers suggested that young peoples’ transitions from care could be defined as “smooth”, or “volatile”. Smooth was defined as a relatively untroubled transition to safe and stable housing, whilst volatile was defined as a problematic transition which involved acute housing instability and/or outright homelessness.

Subsequently, the researchers focused specifically on the responses of participants categorised as having “volatile” transitions, approximately three-quarters of the sample. From these remaining 59 young people, researchers found that 32 participants’ circumstances had improved significantly over time (considered as “moving on”) and 27

had remained the same (referred to as “stuck”). Focusing on the change, the “moving on” group often held a strong sense of personal agency, and similar to the second group in the Refaeli study above, were galvanised by a determination to improve their lives. Others in this group were fuelled by different internal factors, using anger as motivation for change. Importantly, while the “moving on” group had internal strengths that assisted with change, researchers found that these factors needed to be supported by external resources and opportunities such as improving family relationships, assistance with addressing substance use and accessing employment for positive life changes to occur (Johnson & Mendes, 2014).

The four Australian studies reviewed covered a range of jurisdictions, and utilized a variety of research methods and data sources. Nevertheless, as per the seven international studies, they suggest that a combination of internal agency including in some cases a powerful form of self-reliance, and external supports via positive relationships and networks, may facilitate successful outcomes. It is evident that care leavers are not a homogenous group, and whilst many experience initially challenging transitions from care, outcomes are not fixed, and some are able to take advantage of opportunities for personal advancement and achievement. However, most of the 11 studies reviewed focused on tangible outcomes such as education and employment, and did not seek information from care leavers on their personal definitions of success. The literature surveyed confirms the need for further research involving care leavers who have transitioned successfully to explore their personal narratives around successful transitions.

Methodology

Given the limited existing research on positive transitions from OOHC and influencing internal and external processes, we chose to utilize an exploratory design with the aim of identifying new knowledge about this area (Flynn & McDermott, 2016). That approach did not seek to measure or test variables, rather we aimed to identify potential factors and processes at play as groundwork for more substantial research. Consequently, we adopted a flexible approach to capture as much initial data as possible which led us to use varied methods including an emailed interview. Additionally, a qualitative approach was chosen as it “expands the knowledge and understanding of the world beyond the researchers themselves” (Grinnell & Unrau, 2014, p.95) and is preferable when gathering participant experiences is the focus.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Type of participant	Type of consultation	Time spent in OOHC	of OOHC	Gender	Age at time of interview
Care Leaver 1	Interview	Six Years	Foster and Residential Care	Male	24
Care Leaver 2	Interview	Six Years	Residential Care	Female	26
Care Leaver 3	Interview	Three Years	Foster and Kinship Care	Female	20
Care Leaver 4	Interview	Fourteen Years	Foster Care	Male	19
Care Leaver 5	Interview	Fifteen Years	Foster Care	Male	18
Foster Carer 1	Focus Group	-	-	-	-
Foster Carer 2	Focus Group	-	-	-	-
Foster Carer 3	Focus Group	-	-	-	-
Foster Carer 4	Focus Group	-	-	-	-
Foster Carer 5	Interview	-	-	-	-
Foster Carer 6	Interview	-	-	-	-
Foster Carer 7	Focus Group via email	-	-	-	-

Data collection consisted of five interviews and one focus group. Interviews were conducted with five care leavers who had left care in the last five years (See Table 1 for demographic details) and two foster carers (who were interviewed jointly with two of the young people they had fostered). The care leavers were recruited from OOHC support and advocacy organisations assisting young people transitioning from care in the State of Victoria. The idea of the “family interview” was proposed by one of the young people and one of his carers to capture the voices of care leavers and carers within the family context, and arguably resulted in a more robust and inclusive discussion than may have otherwise occurred (Grinnell & Unrau, 2014). The study prioritized the care leavers’ lived experience both to enable them to tell their story, and also to empower them to have an input and influence over how they are represented in research.

Additionally, a focus group was held with four foster carers, plus a further email response was received from one foster carer. These participants were recruited via the Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) and were not connected to the care leaver participants.

The foster carer perspective was viewed as providing an important reflection from a different vantage point on factors that contribute to positive outcomes. Participants for this study were identified via a combination of extreme case sampling and convenience sampling (Flynn & McDermott, 2016), as the study was specifically seeking care leavers who had experienced positive transitions from OOHC and carers who had observations of such transitions. Although, as Hewitt-Taylor (2011) notes, an exploratory study typically only requires a small number of participants, there is limited guidance about the appropriate sample size. The small sample size utilised in this study allows for the gathering of rich data and comprehensive exploration of the issues discussed. The sample size here also reflected the fact that care leavers are a challenging group to recruit.

Interviews were semi-structured to explore topics relating to the transition from care experience including what previous research had identified as some of the strengths that care leavers had drawn upon as well as their responses to challenges faced. For example, they were asked to talk about challenges in the leaving care process, and the factors that enabled them to overcome these challenges. They were also asked to talk about specific “turning points” that influenced them in a positive direction. Additionally, they were requested to discuss supports that they received in areas such as housing, social networks, education, employment, and finances as well as personal motivations to succeed.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire prior to the interview gathering basic demographic information and a broad understanding of their time in, and transitioning from, OOHC. The interviews and focus group session were audio recorded, with participant consent, for transcribing purposes and to ensure participant views were accurately recorded.

The transcribed interviews were analysed beginning with deductive thematic analysis, drawing on core concepts from previous research. Incorporating an inductive approach allowed for unanticipated ideas to be presented and explored (Flynn & McDermott, 2016). The focus of analysis was idiographic. However, whilst the interviews were initially analysed within cases, the aim was to look across cases to build initial knowledge of factors at play.

Figure 1: Internal and external factors identified in the existing literature.

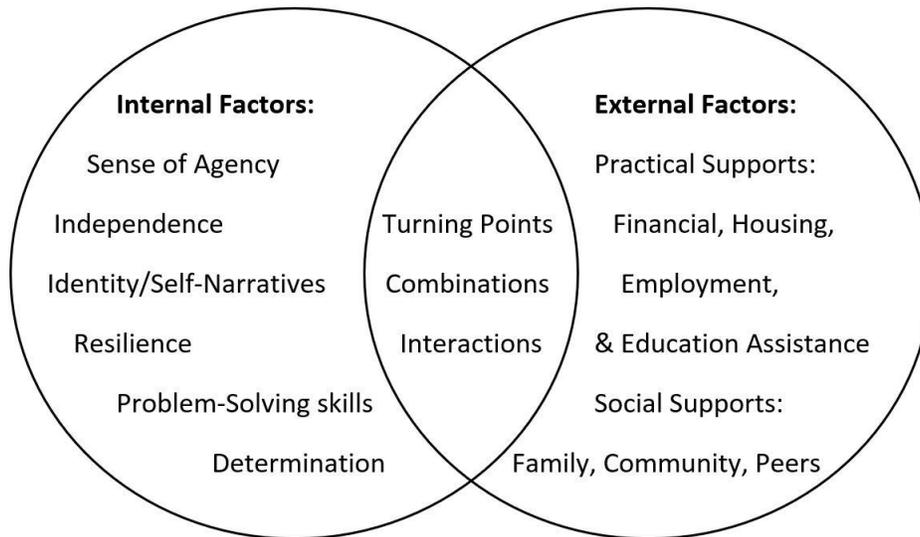


Figure 1 depicts how each concept from the previous literature was grouped as internal, external, as well as interweaving factors. Identifying what previous research indicated as assisting care leavers to transition successfully meant the data collected could be effectively compared with previous theory, and differing perspectives identified. The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) process of data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Initial coding was open (Alston & Bowles, 2012), going beyond what was identified in Figure 1. Concepts were raised through the narratives of participants, not via a narrow alignment with pre-existing themes or frameworks. This involved extracting any repetitive concepts and ideas pertaining to internal and external factors, challenges, and positive turning point moments and/or combinations. The views of care leavers and foster carers were coded separately and are differentiated within the Findings section that follows. However, given the exploratory nature of this study, the data was treated as one group which was arguably a limitation that may need to be reconsidered in further research. Once initial coding was complete, the data was organised by the lead author into core categories, patterns were identified including the presence of emerging themes complementing themes congruent with the existing literature, and the results analysed. The quotes selected for inclusion in the Findings section reflected a key theme/pattern that arose from across the interviews. Some were self-identified by participants as key moments. Author two read transcripts of the family interview and one other care leaver interview to check for reliability of coding process and themes. The study was approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

The findings from the research demonstrate that internal (i.e. personal agency) and external processes were at times inextricably linked with care leaver transitions, with turning points often occurring after internal and external interactions positively combined to allow opportunities for growth and change. Turning points also tended to occur through internal insights, with external support crucial for these “points” to become positive influential events in the care leavers’ lives. Although the focus was on transitions from care, all participants spoke of their experiences in care as well, demonstrating the importance of looking at the transition from care within the context of the wider care experience.

Connection and Belonging

One of the most important aspects of successful transitions from care identified by care leavers and carers was having an ongoing sense of connection and belonging.

“I know that I’m not going through life alone...There’s a group of people around me. That really helps when I’m feeling down, they actually care about me.” Care Leaver 1

For participants, connection and belonging came from a range of sources; these were described as including community and church groups, workplaces, sporting and recreation clubs, foster families and families of origin, as well as peers and mentors. One care leaver also found this sense of belonging in their residential care placement.

“I had a very good experience in residential care, it became like a pseudo family for me it was where people actually gave a fuck about me and were there to support me... They provided me with such stability, structure, routine, guidance, discipline, everything that I needed...They didn’t just take care of me, they brought me into their lives...” Care Leaver 2

Some participants found this sense of belonging in their foster or permanent care placement, where from the beginning children were considered part of the family, which continued to provide them with an ongoing base once they turned 18. Others found it in their family of origin, with extended family, or siblings.

“What really stopped me from doing all of that was my little brother and sister cos they like, they’re my world really, I’d be lost without them...I can’t count the number of times they’ve helped me...helped me in ways that a lot of people probably couldn’t have...” Care Leaver 3

One carer commented that having connections and belonging not only provided emotional support, but also gave care leavers a sense of having someone or somewhere to fall back on.

“There’s always that option of being able to sort of move back home until they can regroup and then you know go out into the world again.” Foster Carer 2

While participants in foster and permanent care mostly had this secure base well after they had turned 18, other participants, particularly those from residential care settings, had to find this on their own. Once these connections were found, participants’ successful outcomes grew.

“Once I found that group that believed in me life became so much easier...I don’t think I could’ve done it without the people around me. The more I rely on that network of people, the further I go in life, the bigger the opportunities I get...” Care Leaver 1

“Rocks” and Key Supports

Throughout the interviews, the idea of having at least one source of key support, or a “rock” repeatedly emerged. These were people that were trusted, that could be turned to at any time, providing ongoing and unwavering support.

“I think that is really important...there needs to be someone there who is absolutely committed to that young person for however long it takes, forever, but especially to get them on their feet through whatever road they have to travel.” Foster Carer 3

Unlike many young people, the care leavers interviewed did not have this need met by their biological parents. Instead, sources of key support came from a range of places including extended family, partners and professional workers. Some were consistent throughout care and post-care, with others coming and going across the care and post-care journey.

Like care leavers’ sense of belonging and connection being more than just having people around them, “rocks” had to be a good “fit” to promote success and positively support their transitions from care.

“It was those moments where people treated me like a normal person that was just so profound and had made such an impact...That really stuck with me throughout my whole life.” Care Leaver 2

“Well like the partner I’ve got now he’s helping me, he supports me with everything and he looks after me...I don’t know what I’d do without him to be honest.” Care Leaver 3

Key supports were able to adapt their support and had significant understanding of the care leavers’ needs. They were also able to “stick it out” with the care leaver, through the ups and downs. These key supports were also able to support care leavers’ transitions by advocating on behalf of the care leaver or instilling a sense of self-advocacy in them.

“When (Care Leaver 4) was young he took a bit of convincing that he was capable of going a long way, then once we’d convinced him of that and that he should reach as high as he’d like to there was no looking back for him.” Foster Carer 6

Advocacy and Advocates

Another key finding was that care leavers and their key supports engage in advocacy. From this idea stemmed two concepts: “self-advocacy”, whereby care leavers asserted their own needs; and the presence of external “advocates” who would advocate on behalf of the needs of care leavers. Self-advocacy required a degree of internal agency and initiative on the part of the care leaver to advocate on their own behalf, and ensure their voices were heard.

External advocates were identified as carers, school teachers, residential care workers or disability support workers, often also classed as the “rocks” in the previous section. They advocated for access to resources, school inclusion, and financial supports amongst other things, and were able to role model advocacy strategies for the care leavers to internalise.

“I mean my high school, like home, group teacher...she like started advocating for me for a number of scholarships and every year she’d like loan me like half of my text books... I always had teachers willing to help out...I was put into this scholarship in year 10 and the like leader of that took a liking to me and has helped me with lots of things so I’m like at college now, non-residential, um so she got me that and she got me a bunch of other scholarships so yeah she’s done a lot of advocating for me.” Care Leaver 4

There was often a sense of care leavers and foster carers needing to “fight” to access services and support, and a feeling as though the system was pitted against them.

“I advocated for myself and a lot of that stems from the amazing workers that I had in residential care...I always kind of advocated for myself, like I had to.” Care Leaver 2

Agency and Choice vs Forced and Fierce Independence

The concept of independence also emerged strongly from the research with one carer defining successful transitions as such:

“Success is when the young person can imagine their own life and are able to pursue it independently.” Foster Carer 7

For some care leavers, independence stemmed from having a stable base, much like their non-care peers. This gave them a sense of choice and agency in their lives and helped support a successful transition into adulthood often through the idea of a “soft transition”, which provided ongoing emotional and practical supports to care leavers, and an acknowledgement that they had somewhere to return to if needed.

“So my eldest wanted to go to university in (Regional Victoria) so that we would pay for his accommodation at university so that was a real soft way of moving out sort of thing... so it’s interesting, so mine they would say they, you know, that they moved out. But you know but my washing machine would say they didn’t, and my bank account would say they didn’t.” Foster Carer 1

“Well even though I’ve turned 18 and mum and dad aren’t kicking me out, I want to move out for my own reasons.” Care Leaver 5

Carers and other key supports were also able to enhance a care leaver’s preparation for independence by providing assistance with applying for jobs and obtaining a tax file number, setting up bank accounts and helping them obtain a driver’s licence. Other care leavers lacked an ongoing and consistent support person, but drew strength from the idea of forced independence, in that they had no one else to rely on. For some, this became a sort of “fierce independence”, where they prided themselves on achieving and succeeding on their own, sometimes rejecting offers of support to maintain this self-sufficiency.

“I think my whole life I’ve just been learning the hard way, whether that be relationships, just general learning milestones. I’ve always been very self-sufficient because I’ve never had anyone to rely on, so I’ve always just relied on myself and knowing what I didn’t want.” Care Leaver 2

Self-Narratives, Meaning and Purpose

Another theme that emerged from the interviews with care leavers was the amount of positive motivation that came from care leavers striving to be different to their biological families.

“You know, I didn’t want to end up in commission housing because I’d seen what it’s like and I didn’t want to be like that...I wanted something completely different from what my family had...I wanted better than that...I didn’t know what I wanted but I knew what I didn’t want.” Care Leaver 2

“I wanted to finish school because I wanted to prove to everybody that I could it because everybody else in my family didn’t, so I was the only one that actually went through with it and finished Year 12.” Care Leaver 3

Another common thread with some of the care leavers interviewed was the idea of turning their painful and traumatic experiences into positive change and outcomes for others. This appeared to give care leavers a sense of meaning and ownership over their life stories and created opportunities and motivation for helping others.

“Knowing myself, like I never had a role model, I never had a parent figure that I looked up to, I wanted to be the best person I could be to be that role model for my daughter and I want the best for her I want her to know she can, if she puts her mind to it, she can achieve great things.” Care Leaver 2

“But I suppose it made me who I am today, like Im stronger and stuff...I know how the system works and I know how everything works now cos Ive been through it all and I had to do it myself so I dont want to have to watch them (younger siblings) do the same.” Care Leaver 3

Care leavers career aspirations were also intertwined with their successful transitions. Notably, all the care leavers interviewed are either in, or planning to enter, helping professions such as childcare, social work, medicine, or advocacy for vulnerable groups.

Turning Points and “Taking a Chance”

Throughout this section key moments in care leavers lives have been noted. According to one care leaver, there was no singular point in time that changed the trajectory of their life from negative to positive, rather, they viewed turning points as a fluid concept, occurring multiple times over the life course. This care leaver proposed the idea of changing the language to “influential moments” instead. The idea that change can occur

at any point of the life course was also demonstrated with one carer describing the challenging journey of supporting a care leaver now aged 24:

“...he”’s in a really good place...but that’s taken like 6 years to get him there...”
Foster Carer 3

A significant concept that arose from discussions with care leavers about turning points was the idea of “taking a chance”, making an active choice to embrace the opportunities that presented for growth and positive change. They also highlighted the importance of having external supportive relationships to enable these “chances” to be as successful as possible.

Other turning points, or “influential moments”, identified by care leavers included the pervasive influence of loved ones in the toughest of times:

“Um I havent always been motivated, um I was I was really, really depressed a lot for like a long period of time and I never wanted to do anything, never wanted to leave my house...every time I was down or suicidal I just thought of my little brother and sister and their role model or big sister to be like that, I want to be a role model to them so that’s what really encouraged me to lift myself up...and like I eventually like, well I’m hoping I can do this soon, I want to get them in my care.” Care Leaver 3

Practical and Leaving Care Specific Assistance

In addition to supportive relationships with key people and their communities, the importance of practical and tangible assistance was also noted by many participants, particularly in relation to housing and financial support. Some care leavers were able to navigate the practical challenges of living independently through well-developed problem-solving skills, often learnt through necessity, as they had no one to seek assistance from. As one care leaver described:

“I had to like learn how to pay bills and pay rent and buy groceries and all that stuff...the first few times I received a bill I rang the company and I’m like how do I do this? and like what’s the ways I can pay?” Care Leaver 3

In terms of financial support, care leavers rarely spoke about government assistance in positive terms, suggesting that it was often not enough to survive on and was difficult to manage without budgeting skills. For other care leavers, their foster/permanent care families were financially supporting the care leavers post 18, despite the government payments no longer being provided to the families. As one carer described:

“I continue to support her with money every time I see her as she never has funds”
Foster Carer 7

Discussion

The findings suggest that the concept of turning points, rather than being easily identified and articulated as single specific events or experiences, were described more fluidly as moments of internal realisation, or “taking a chance”. This seems congruent with Hutchison’s (2019) depiction of turning points as both internal awareness and/or action to progress positive changes in life trajectories. Additionally, it seems that positive transitions from care were facilitated by a linking of what we have defined as “internal factors” (the individual aspects and perceptions of the care leavers’ lives such as personal agency) with the “external” (the people and social support networks around them). For example, the mere presence of a community of people around a care leaver made little difference unless the care leaver was able to engage and connect, forming a sense of belonging. Further, in relation to more practical supports, it was difficult for care leavers to obtain housing and finances, without also being able to self-advocate and have their voice heard.

One of the most prominent themes arising from the data collected was the concept of connection and belonging, as well as having a key support person or persons that the care leaver could turn to. This is also a recurrent theme in the literature, with previous studies identifying the importance of supportive relationships and networks (Independent Care Review 2020; Mendes & Purtell 2020). Stein (2012) articulates the need for care leavers to have strong formal and informal supports, and while this study found that formal support networks were somewhat lacking, this was made up for through the significant amount of informal support that care leavers engaged with.

The idea of a “rock” or key person providing ongoing emotional support is congruent with Cashmore and Paxman’s presentation of the importance of “felt security in care” (2006, p.232) via a secure and trusting attachment with a supportive carer. This continuing positive relationship was spoken about in every interview with care leavers and carers as critical for ongoing success.

The findings suggested varied experiences in terms of achieving the right balance between providing care leavers with an ongoing safety net of support that facilitated a pathway to independence that reflected their individual needs and capacity, whilst still encouraging the development of independent living skills and opportunities. Those who had access to an ongoing and consistent support person were able to use this security to exert a degree of agency and choice around important life decisions and directions such

as commencing further or higher education or employment (Stein, 2012). In contrast, those who lacked stable support drew strength from what has been described as an expectation of self-sufficiency and reliance (Horrocks, 2002). This suggests a fluid linkage between personal agency (albeit within a social context) and external supports in facilitating positive transitions.

The study findings confirm care leavers propensity for positive change, suggesting that care leavers from all backgrounds and stages of their life course can be supported and resourced to overcome adverse childhood experiences to ensure more positive outcomes. They also suggest that the current Home Stretch campaign to extend the leaving care age to 21 years (to date introduced by governments in varied form in four states: Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia plus a pre-existing program in the ACT) may be beneficial so that care leavers are provided with the same ongoing secure base in terms of access to housing and other material supports and sense of connection, meaning and belonging as their non-care peers.

A limitation of this research is that the small sample of care leavers and foster carers mean the findings are not representative of all care leavers who have positive transitions from care. Additionally, the combining of the findings from the care leavers and the foster carers into one data set made it harder to disaggregate the specific perspectives of the two groups. Further research would ideally examine the impact of current trials of extending OOHC until 21 years to ascertain their effectiveness in advancing positive outcomes for care leavers. Additionally, there is a pressing need for specific research on outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children leaving care particularly around the development of positive links with culture and community.

Conclusion

Much existing research has tended to emphasize the disadvantages and struggles experienced by care leavers. However, this study, via engagement with care leavers and carer voices, aimed in contrast to examine how internal and external factors can interconnect to promote successful outcomes for young people transitioning from care. It also sought to provide further insight into what previous research has deemed turning point opportunities that enable positive change in care leavers lives. Care leavers seemed to be able to have successful outcomes post-care if they were able to form a sense of belonging and connection with a wider community network; had one, or a number of, key support people who could advocate on their behalf; had the opportunity to make independent choices; and retained a sense of meaning and ownership over their life stories. Being able to take a calculated chance when opportunities arose in order to create positive turning points and a sense of connection also helped support success. It became

clear that it was people that made the difference by “going the extra mile” and supporting care leavers, often done through informal connections as there was a distinct lack of government assistance.

The research findings reinforce the importance of all care leavers, whether leaving foster or kinship care or residential care, having access to supportive relationships and networks paid or unpaid that assist them to navigate the transition from childhood to independent adulthood. They are consistent with previous research in that, for transitions to be successful, care leavers required ongoing support and a sense of belonging that was able to extend past their 18th birthday so that they could take advantage when they were developmentally ready of opportunities for personal growth and success. It also reinforces the importance of the lived experience of care leavers being heard in research so that their priorities (i.e. housing and finances) are identified and addressed by policy makers.

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