



Educational pathways in and out of child and youth care. The importance of orientation frameworks that guide care leavers' actions along their educational pathway

Maria Groinig, Stephan Sting*

University of Klagenfurt, Institute of Educational Science and Research, Austria

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Care leavers
Child and youth care
Formal education
Orientation framework
Social and emotional care
Biographical research

ABSTRACT

The increasing importance of higher levels of formal education and training leads to an extended transition phase to adulthood while care leavers are confronted with new disadvantages and with a lack of political and societal attention in Austria. Despite the absence of educational support by parents and the limited support by child and youth care workers relating to the early end of youth welfare service some of the interviewed care leavers are striving for long-standing educational pathways. Educational aspirations and achievements of care leavers seem to be linked to orientation frameworks which influence their agency and social practice in general. Relevant orientations are the quest for social and emotional care and the quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination. Our research reveals that peers act as a central source of social and emotional care in the shape of social recognition, support and belonging. For that reason they have a major influence on educational careers.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the importance of formal education and training qualifications when it comes to leading a successful, independent life has increased sharply. However, numerous studies reveal social inequalities with regard to educational opportunities of different population groups (e.g. Bruneforth, Weber, & Bacher, 2012; OECD, 2017; Schreiner, 2013). One group that has as yet attracted little attention in this context in Austria is that of care leavers: young people who have spent time in their childhood and/or youth in residential care or with foster parents “and set out on the path to adult life from that basis” (Thomas, 2013).

As higher levels of education are becoming necessary, a change is taking place in the importance given to early adulthood as a transitional phase (cf. Sting, 2011). Since the 1990s, European youth research has been constantly addressing the extension and expansion of the youth phase, which is leading to young adults living with their parents for longer. This is connected to different phenomena including longer educational pathways, youth unemployment, the late founding of a family and experimentation with youth culture lifestyles (cf. Stauber & Walther, 2013, p. 270). In Austria, for example, the average age of leaving the family home changed between the early 1990s and 2016 from 21.8 to 26.3 among men and from 19.9 to 24.2 among women. At

the same time, moving out is increasingly seen as reversible (cf. Statista, 2017).

This is not the case for care leavers. In this group, two transition processes overlap: “moving out of residential care and the transition to adult life” (Zeller & Köngeter, 2013, p. 582). Both generally take place at the age of 18. In Austria, youth welfare services can be extended to the age of 21 under certain conditions (usually if they have started, and not completed, schooling or vocational training, cf. B-KJHG, 2013). In practice, however, providers' internal studies suggest that young people are leaving youth welfare earlier, which calls their fit into question (cf. Hagleitner, 2012). Moreover, once care leavers reach the age of majority at 18, moves cannot be reversed; they cannot move back into institutional care.

Care leavers have to get by on their own correspondingly early, and usually without family support. While the lengthening of educational pathways and the extension of the youth phase have led to the concept of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000) being seen as a separate transitional phase, in which young adults undertake biographical experiments, test themselves and embark on educational pathways involving risk and reorientation, care leavers' situation in life generally does not leave space for this. They are required to make a rapid transition to adult status; “instant adulthood” (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018, p. 71), which involves a restriction of their life options (cf. Arnett, 2007; Refaeli,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Stephan.Sting@aau.at (S. Sting).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.03.037>

Received 4 January 2019; Received in revised form 21 March 2019; Accepted 21 March 2019

Available online 22 March 2019

0190-7409/© 2019 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

2017). This means they are confronted with a growing discrepancy between their own situation in life and that of their peers in the general population, and face potential structural disadvantages with regard to education and employment (cf. Cameron et al., 2018).

In Austria, there is currently no in-depth knowledge about care leavers' educational situation and opportunities. The educational achievements of this group are not discussed either by youth welfare reports (e.g. see BMFJ, 2017) or educational studies or reports (e.g. see Bruneforth et al., 2016; Schwantner, Toferer, & Schreiner, 2013). Austria's SOS Children's Village has published studies on adults who have lived in SOS Children's Village facilities, examining their situation in life ("tracking footprints"). The "tracking footprints" country report on Austria reveals that although all the respondents finished school, their qualifications mainly came from compulsory education (67.4% of respondents) and vocational training (79.1%). Only 8.7% had a *Matura* (university entrance level) qualification and only one out of 46 respondents was a student (Spanning & Steden, 2008).

In international research we can find much evidence of care leavers being at an educational disadvantage. Studies on the educational success of children and adolescents in youth welfare facilities suggest that care leavers start out in less favourable educational circumstances compared with the population as a whole (cf. Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Gharabaghi, 2011; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Luke, 2015; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2015). For Germany, Köngeter et al. note that when the youth welfare measure comes to an end, almost a third of adolescents and young adults are not attending a school, training or an employment (Köngeter, Schröder, & Zeller, 2012, p. 266). A study on the educational status of 19-year-olds in England who were in looked after at 16 produces similar findings: 33% of the group studied were not in education, employment or training, 6% were no longer in touch with authorities and 6% were in higher education. Comparison with the total cohort of 19-year-olds, 13% of whom are not in employment, education or training, and 38% of whom go to university, reveals care leavers' striking educational disadvantage (Department for Education, 2011). A comparison of the situation of care leavers aged 28 to 31 in Britain, Finland and Germany shows that this group's level of education is still lower than that of their contemporaries who have not been in care (Cameron et al., 2018, p. 167). In the transition from out-of-home care to independence, the topic of formal education seems to be neglected in many countries (cf. Häggman-Laitila, Saloekkilä, & Karki, 2018; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Jackson & Cameron, 2011).

The lack of in-depth findings on the educational situation of care leavers in Austria as a whole led us to carry out the research project "Educational opportunities and the influence of social contextual conditions on educational biographies of care leavers".¹ This quantitative sub-study of this project, consisting in a questionnaire survey of 148 care leavers aged 20 to 29, confirmed that care leavers in Austria experience the educational disadvantage that is seen internationally. This disadvantage mainly comes from the fact that although they are more likely than their total age group to have lower secondary level vocational qualifications, relatively few of them go on to higher education.

In our work, we focus on the project's qualitative sub-study examining care leavers' educational biographies in terms of the implicit *orientation frameworks* (in German: "Orientierungsrahmen", cf. Nohl, 2017), that guided their actions, and how they interacted with social contexts (family, child and youth welfare, school, peers, etc.). As perceptions of care leavers are often heavily influenced by professional descriptions and institutional categorisations, it appeared worthwhile to us to integrate the target group itself in the form of a participatory

research approach. For this purpose, a reference group was formed with a total of eight people with experience of youth welfare (cf. Sigot, 2013), who assisted with the study as co-researchers. This involved them at different stages of the research process (sample selection, development of data collection and data analysis instruments, data analysis).

2. Research design

2.1. Aim of the study

The *aim* of the study was to collect information on the educational biographies of young adults with experience of youth welfare, in terms of their perceptions and experiences. The stories they told about their lives were to be used to derive the implicit "*orientation frameworks*" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 110) guiding their actions, arising from the care leavers' experiences in their different social contexts such as the family, peer groups, school or youth welfare. These *orientation frameworks* are part of their habitus. They are subjective structures of meaning which nonetheless come from a shared background of experience, expressed in the form of collective habitual patterns and tacit knowledge common to multiple cases (cf. Bohnsack, Pfaff, & Weller, 2010; Nohl, 2017) and which have a significant influence on education-related decisions and actions. In detail the study was led by the following research questions:

- Which educational pathways can be derived from the biographies of young people with experience of youth welfare?
- What kind of orientation frameworks result from care leavers growing up in various social and institutional contexts, and how do they influence their education-related decisions and actions?

2.2. Data collection

A narrative, qualitative research method was chosen for the study. The data was collected by means of *problem-focused semi-structured interviews* (cf. Witzel, 2000). This type of interview combines an open initial question which leaves space for biographical narratives with interview guidelines enabling the focus to be placed on the topic of education and training. The interviews were complemented by the creation of *ego-centric network diagrams* (cf. Hollstein, 2006), used to activate further narratives about the relevance of different people in the network. This means that the interviews were continued during the process of designing and explaining the network diagram. At the same time, network analysis offered an insight into the "totality of social relationships" (Hollstein, 2006, p.13), helping to document the social context of educational careers and providing information about relationships and the significance of contextual links (cf. Bernardi, Keim, & Lippe, 2006; Kühn, 2006).

2.3. Focal group

The *focal group* of the study was young adults who, while growing up, spent some time in one or more out-of-home youth welfare facilities in Austria (such as group homes for children and youth, SOS Children's Villages and supported housing units), and went straight from there to independent living. A total of 23 biographical interviews were conducted throughout Austria. The young adults interviewed were aged between 20 and 27, and had between 1 and 17 years of experience with child and youth welfare; 12 of the interviewees were female and 11 male. During theoretical sampling, care was taken to ensure that care leavers with heterogeneous educational qualifications were found. The interviewees were allowed to choose where the interviews took place. Some of the interviews were conducted in the researchers' offices, others in coffee houses, restaurants, interviewees' homes, institutions (e.g. for the homeless or street work) or outdoors (e.g. in the park or at a pavilion by a lake). The interviews lasted between 70 and 170 min.

¹ The research project carried out at Klagenfurt University was funded by the Anniversary Fund of the Austrian National Bank (OeNB) and supported by SOS Kinderdorf and Pro Juventute. The project team consisted in Maria Groinig, Wolfgang Hagleitner, Thomas Maran and Stephan Sting. Maria Groinig and Stephan Sting were responsible for the qualitative sub-study.

2.4. Data analysis

The *data analysis* was based on the *documentary method* (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Bohnsack, Nentwig-Gesemann, & Nohl, 2007; Nohl, 2017) and took place in three steps. First, for comparative analysis, we selected six contrasting cases which were analysed in detail. Case portraits were created from the six main selected interviews, outlining subjects' educational biographies and transition to independent living and giving a short overview of each case, combining their educational pathway and youth welfare experience.

In the second step, these six contrasting key cases were used to work out central action-guiding *orientation frameworks*. For that purpose, “focusing metaphors” (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 105) were reconstructed. These are culminating points in the storyline of reported experiences with social contexts such as families, youth welfare facilities, schools or peer groups. They were found by analysing emphasized and repeated statements in individual interviews or by comparing different cases. The focusing metaphors relate to a specific focal group's “centres of common experience”. “We call this a ‘conjunctive space of experience’ (in German: ‘konjunkativer Erfahrungsraum’). Those, who have biographic experience in common, have commonalities in their history of socialization and, thus, have a common or conjunctive experiential space, understand each other immediately insofar as these biographical commonalities become relevant in interaction and discourse” (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 105). By reconstructing focusing metaphors it was possible to elaborate comprehensive and common orientation frameworks that influence education-related practice in some way “independent of individual intentions and motives” (Bohnsack et al., 2010, p. 20).

In the third step, further cases from the sample were included by means of computer-assisted content analysis evaluation using the MAXQDA data analysis program. The content analysis served to enhance and consolidate the results of the documentary analysis.

2.5. Reflection on research ethics

The University of Klagenfurt has not yet developed any formal ethical approval procedure, but the university's *research ethics guidelines* were taken into account when carrying out the study. These include the point that participation in a study should be entirely voluntary, as was the case here. The interviews took place in an impartial, confidential atmosphere. Participants were explicitly advised that they could themselves decide what they wanted to say about their biographies, and that their anonymity was guaranteed. The names used to present the findings are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewees themselves. All the people interviewed gave their agreement for the data to be used for the research project.

3. Findings

The life stories of the interviewed care leavers show that the young people's educational choices are part of their general leaning towards certain actions and ways of thinking, resulting from growing up in various social and institutional contexts and related not only to their educational pathway but to the way they cope with and shape their lives as a whole. Analysing their educational pathways revealed two especially significant *orientation frameworks* which guided their actions in multiple cases, and which we would like to examine more closely when setting out the findings. These are the orientation frameworks of a *quest for social and emotional care* and a *quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination*, both of which affect their actions in different ways. As there are signs that these two orientation frameworks interact in specific ways, it seems appropriate to list these examples from the empirical material together. We will thus first briefly outline the two orientation frameworks in an overview, then present *case examples* offering evidence from the empirical data and illustrating the

balancing act between the two orientation frameworks in detail.

3.1. The quest for social and emotional care

The social networks of young people with experience of child and youth welfare are frequently characterised by discontinuity. They comprise changing relationships with family members, care workers and peers and often changing placements, while same-age peers can usually rely on the continuity of their family of origin. In this context, the quest for social and emotional care is of particular relevance. *Social and emotional care* is used as a general term for relationships which provide both social support and emotional belonging. The search for social and emotional care becomes apparent in relationships with partners or groups of friends, in school or in their involvement in work relationships. Same-age peers are of particular relevance, while older generations are named as relevant in terms of social support and emotional belonging depending on the context.

One central aspect of this orientation framework is the search for coherent relationships and ties in the form of partnerships or friendships. This includes a search for backing and social stability that is sometimes seen in looser groups of same-age peers, groups of schoolchildren or employment relationships (see the cases of Anja and Franz Joseph). Individuals are also seen to temporarily take on relevant roles as mentors and supporters (e.g. a bank consultant, a caretaker, a neighbour or the mother of a best friend). Another manifestation of this quest for social and emotional care is a desire to be noticed. This can take the form of trying to be unusual or special. By “being unusual”, we mean practices which differ from normal actions and serve to attract attention and make people notice them. These actions may take on a destructive, excessive dimension that crosses lines and has a disruptive effect on their social environment (see the case of Chantal). “Being special” means practices designed to make people notice them through socially acceptable actions which they achieve especially well (see the cases of Jasmine and Pascal).

3.2. The quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination

The interviewees' quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination becomes particularly evident in their narratives with regard to their adolescence. During this stage in their life, they develop a stronger need for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination. Moreover, growing up in neglectful contexts of origin involves the experience of being left to their own devices, which can lead them to develop a self-reliant way of living their lives at a very early age, so as to survive their social environment. The young people frequently find that what they perceive as the “rigid” conditions of child and youth welfare institutions are at odds with their needs for autonomy. At the same time, they feel a lack of social and emotional care. This can then lead to rebellious acts (in the case of Jasmine) or become the decisive factor in the young people “escaping” or being “expelled” from the placements (in the case of Anja or Franz Joseph).

Another experience that is relevant in this context can be seen from the fact that further education prospects are limited to skilled trades, in anticipation of care coming to an end at an early age and the unfavourable structural conditions for independent living following the status passage of leaving care. The idea that they cannot be sure of supporting themselves without having their own income makes young people in youth welfare facilities lean towards skilled trades which can secure their livelihood. At the same time, it offers them an early opportunity to leave the care setting, which is perceived as restrictive (see Jasmine). Conversely, it is often the actual institutions and their staff that restrict their further education prospects to the skilled trades. They often want to get the young people in their care into training as quickly as possible so as to prepare them for independent living after leaving youth welfare (see Franz Joseph). In some case, this means the young

people's own interests receive little attention, and the door to higher education pathways is closed.

3.3. Case examples

3.3.1. Jasmine: rebellion against the “system”

In the care leavers' biographical narratives, the “rigid” conditions in out-of-home care are frequently depicted as an unsatisfactory environment. Jasmine, for example, who moves from a SOS Children's Village family to supported housing at the age of 16, starts “rebellious” against the system (Jasmine, lines 462–500):

“... and I do understand that afterwards the young people there re-, in there rebel, because (.) after all you've got out of a broken relationship, get somewhere that you don't know anyone, and have to listen to people you don't even know telling you stuff. (.) And then I think to myself too: ‘Who are they that they get to tell me anything?’” (Jasmine, lines 462–500).

Jasmine grows up as the eldest sister in a group of five siblings and takes on responsibility for her siblings until the age of nine, while their parents are usually absent or inebriated. In a neglectful context of origin she has thus learned to care for herself and others at an early stage, and to organise her everyday life herself. Due to this background, later on in the shared housing unit she criticises the practice of control and punishment there and the fact that she has to listen to instructions coming from people she does not know, while there is a lack of social and emotional care.

The resulting rebellion against the “system” has an impact on her educational choices. She decides not to attend further education, explaining this as due on the one hand to a lack of social connections at the school and on the other to her earning her own money on an apprenticeship and thus no longer being dependent on residential care, which she sees as restrictive. She sees the financial security associated with apprenticeships as a means of satisfying her need for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination:

“... and I just wanted to be independent and make my own money and sort it out myself somehow and not always kind of get the money from the Children's Village. Because you have-, they always link that to ‘You live there and it isn't free of charge and you have to play your part in it’. You kind of never got the feeling you were at home there. Or in the youth centre. ... It was always just about what you have to do and what you ought to do and what you're not allowed to do. You didn't come home, go in the door and have someone ask, ‘Yes, hi Jasi, how are you? How was your day? Anything new? Want to talk about anything?’” (Jasmine, lines 444–462).

3.3.2. Anja: finding a “little family” during her apprenticeship

A similar view of the lack of social and emotional care in supported housing can be seen in the case of Anja. She moves from her family of origin into a group home for young people at the age of 14. She often gets back to the group home too late and does not comply with the rules and consequences (e.g. being grounded), and is thus thrown out. She experiences care from her then partner, with whom she moves into a flat. In addition, she finds support in her apprenticeship as a textiles industry sales clerk. There, friendships with female workmates create a “little family” (Anja, line 560) and she comes across an “amazingly nice boss” (Anja, line 553) who takes the time to talk to Anja “on an equal footing”, “without pushing her down”, “accepts” her and is interested in encouraging her potential. It thus becomes clear that Anja perceives the training company as a social environment with a more stabilising, supportive effect than life in the group home run by care workers.

“Somehow she also motivated me to do-, to do it and also when it was just (.) a bad day and the group home was getting on my nerves

then she was like: ‘Stuff the flat-share. It'll be fine.’ And at that time, that really helped me.” (Anja, lines 975–979).

The examples of Jasmine and Anja offer a good illustration of how the implicit orientations that guide young people's actions significantly affect their decisions with regard to formal education and whether they accept socio-educational support. While the young women are in search of social and emotional care, which they do not see supported housing as providing, their quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination makes them want to lead their lives without relying on the child and youth welfare services. In both cases, this makes them gravitate in a self-determined manner towards apprenticeships, allowing them to earn a livelihood at an early age, while they act out their quest for social and emotional care in partnerships, friendships and employment relationships.

3.3.3. Franz Joseph: criticism of limited educational expectations in youth welfare

Franz Joseph very clearly criticises the fixation on apprenticeships and a limited repertoire of “standard occupations” on the part of youth welfare professionals (Franz Joseph, line 602). In his experience, “100%” of those around him in the setting of his school and Children's Village have completed an apprenticeship. “Everyone's fixated on then doing an apprenticeship” (Franz Joseph, lines 417 f.). He questions the practice of careers guidance at youth welfare facilities and schools which provide young people with “zero information” about starting a job (Franz Joseph, line 55), and whose only aim is to get them “independent fast” by means of skilled trades:

“I was just lazy, right. (.) But actually I was quite intelligent. (.) But (clears throat) if you're not motivated, you know, if you don't see a future-. [...] No-one told us, ‘If you're good in school it'll be worth for you later. (.) You have to think ahead, because you're going to start work or you want to stay on in further education’. No-one said that because they just assumed, nine years of school, apprenticeship, end of story. (2) //Mhm.// ‘Yeah.’ (2)” (Franz Joseph, lines 633–635).

Franz Joseph's stories also show the tension between a quest for social and emotional care and a quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination. Franz Joseph, who spends his childhood in a *Children's Village* from the age of seven, has to cope with the transition to shared supported housing at the age of 16. Shortly afterwards, he drops out of his apprenticeship as a bricklayer, as he rejects both the work itself and the way people treat one another at the workplace. At the same time, he coincidentally sees the contents of his record, bringing about a turning point in which he reflects on his situation in life:

“Now I think that back then, I simply started to realise. Or I asked myself, ‘Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I? What do I want to be? What happened to me?’ You know, just the whole Children's Village stories and stuff. Simply came to the realisation that wasn't normal life. I'm not like everyone else, I dunno. Or if a workmate back then was really fucked up, ‘OK, that's it. I'm going back home to Mum, I'm done. Or I'm going to Dad, I'm done.’ What was there for me? Yeah, I'm going back to my flat. Have to sort it out myself. (2) I never (.) had any support. If I was fucked up, I was fucked up. End of story. If I sort it out, great. If not, bad luck. (tuts briefly) (3) Yeah, I simply realised, I dunno, ‘I've got no support in my life. There's no-one.’” (Franz Joseph, lines 353–543).

Reflection on his biographical experiences leads to uncertainty and a lack of orientation. Franz Joseph realises that he is “different” to his peers. He links that “being different” to his being left to his own devices, while friends have the opportunity to retreat into their family of origin for support in challenging situations in life. In this situation, Franz Joseph looks for support in a circle of delinquent friends he

describes as a “gang”. He is thrown out of the supported housing for carrying out criminal acts, breaking rules and crossing lines – and this hits him hard:

“And they just wanted to get rid of me. Their excuse was, ‘You have to get away from those people.’ (2) That was their excuse. But if you’ve kind of been left alone all your life now, and then realise when you’re a teenager that you’re actually alone, you don’t have anyone, you’ve got no support and that the one bit of support you have, the supported housing, just drops you like that, wants to get rid of you. (.) Uh, where do you think you look for, uh, support then? From your friends. And if they then say, ‘Yeah, get OUT of there!’ ‘Yeah’, do they think you’re going to make progress?” (Franz Joseph, lines 472–479).

Due to the suspected negative influence of his same-age peer group, the social workers responsible for Franz Joseph try to put a spatial distance between him and his peers. Franz Joseph is housed in another town far away, but returns to his peers after a short time, gets a bachelor flat there and continues his “gang time” (Franz Joseph, line 528) until he starts national service with the army. Even after military service, he stays in contact with the group, from whom he has experienced social and emotional care, stability and support that is of personal relevance to him.

3.3.4. Pascal: school as a coherent social environment

For Pascal, meanwhile, the school becomes the central place for support. While he changes between seven different out-of-home placements until he leaves care, from the age of 10 he attends the same high school until he passes his *Matura*. As he grows up, the school offers him a coherent environment as an “all-inclusive deal”. In school, Pascal can add to his skills and explore his interests more closely; he sees formal education as a route to later financial security and a “cosy” social environment he feels part of; that offers him support and relationships with “normal” peers. His narratives about the transition from lower to upper secondary education make it clear how relevant the school is to Pascal as a social place. Where previously he has always learned with the same children, that changes during the transition, giving him new schoolmates. At the same time, the scholastic requirements change:

“... there was just so much-, so little harmony in the classroom that you wanted to learn even less, then I said, ‘OK, that’s not at all as cool as it used to be.’ And everything together meant that I then couldn’t be bothered with the class at all any more [...]. And afterwards I kind of was (.) persuaded, ‘Yeah, then you can just go back and resit Year 5.’ [...] And then I went into the new class and suddenly everything was totally different. Everything was, yeah, nice, friendly (.) (laughs). Um, and then it was easier to learn, people got on better in the class, (.) at the end of the day everything was nicer and (.) basically it gave you so much motivation in that one year that you said, ‘Yeah, I’m going to finish this.’” (Pascal, lines 605–628).

The transition from lower to upper secondary involves conflict-ridden clashes in the new class that make Pascal lose direction. Clashes with his same-age peers mean that Pascal becomes bored with attending school, and his grades suffer. During that time he is on the brink of dropping out of school, but on the advice of classmates, and with the support of care workers, he decides to resit a year. On his second attempt, Pascal finds a friendly class atmosphere that enables him to cope with the scholastic requirements, and he passes his *Matura*.

3.3.5. Chantal, Jasmine and Pascal: striving to be noticed as individuals

With some of the interviewees, tension can be seen between a quest for social and emotional care and a quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination, in the form of needing people to take notice of them. Growing up in unclear background circumstances, in

different social places, with relationships lacking continuity or quality, and in child and youth welfare institutions, leads to an experience of being different that is sometimes linked to stigmatisation, being put down and feeling shame. Having people take notice of them is on one hand meant to give them attention and a feeling of belonging, and on the other, make them be recognised as an independent, autonomous person who resists negative attributions.

When Chantal starts school, for instance, she experiences a discrepancy between the daily routine in her family and the school’s behavioural expectations. She grows up with two aunts and several siblings, half-siblings and cousins on a multi-generational farm. As her biological father is not present and her mother is away doing seasonal work or mentally ill, her grandmother takes over the childcare. This leads to Chantal growing up in an environment she sees as lacking a “personal connection” and “warmth” (Chantal, line 112). Chantal tries to overcome the discrepancy between her experiences of her everyday family life and those at school by provocative, attention-seeking behaviour, which makes people notice her – she becomes the “class clown” (Chantal, line 484). Chantal is involved in “all kinds of shit” (Chantal, line 485) in school and clashes with teachers. The attention she gets from her disruptive behaviour, and the impression that her classmates are “somehow behind her” (Chantal, line 487) give her “a good feeling” (Chantal, line 486). This means that she gains her peers’ attention by disruptive, unusual behaviour which, however, has a negative effect on her educational pathway due to clashes with teachers and a lack of interest in scholastic success.

When things go as far as violation in the context of her family, Chantal’s behaviour comes to a head. It leads to self-harm, alcohol consumption in the classroom and violent confrontations with a classmate, after which she is expelled from school. Following a suicide attempt, she is sent to a child and adolescent psychiatry institution. She goes on to spend two years in a clinical setting. The turnaround comes when she is moved to shared housing run by care workers, in which she experiences new, harmonious forms of social and emotional care, of being noticed and of belonging (e.g. from care workers, housemates, workmates and her partner). These then help her successfully fulfil formal educational requirements in the form of vocational training.

Unlike Chantal, Jasmine strives to gain attention through special achievements. Though she only starts school at the age of nine, when transitioning from her family of origin to a Children’s Village, she constantly improves her performance throughout her school career. Having initially completing vocational training, she goes on to study at a university:

“The higher it went up, lower secondary, upper secondary, uni, the better my marks got, because I like tried harder and harder to catch up, to be at the same standard as everyone else, which then wasn’t enough for me either, as I just don’t (.) want to be like everyone else. I want to like st-, stand out from the crowd, which is probably why I’m doing three subjects (laughs), because I kind of want to do my own thing. I want to kind of do something special, not something everyone does, like run-of-the-mill.” (Jasmine, lines 709–717).

The only one from her educationally unaware background to go to university, Jasmine takes “being different” and turns it into an inclination towards “being special”. She constantly improves her performance so as not only to achieve the “same standard as everyone else” but then to stand out for her special achievements and do something “special”. “Standing out from the crowd” and Jasmine’s drive to achieve are signs of her need to be noticed, and to distance herself from the stigmatising attributions of coming from an educationally disadvantaged family and growing up in a “home”. Similarly, Pascal chooses an especially difficult special subject for his oral Maths *Matura* examination:

“...that was pretty complex, was pretty cool and (.) not run-of-the-mill, and as a showcase in the oral *Matura* for certain teachers who

were then not entirely convinced that you'd get that far, that was definitely a thing then, um. And to basically drive it home to them that you had made it after all and that you'd made it to a relatively high level" (Pascal, lines 752–757).

The examples of Chantal, Jasmine and Pascal illustrate how the young people strive to be seen as individuals. To this end, Chantal develops provocative, unusual behaviour so as to stand out. Jasmine takes the route of being something special through special achievements. Finally, Pascal, who sees himself as facing some schoolteachers' prejudices that a young person with experience of the youth welfare services might not fulfil the requirements for the *Matura*, counters that stigmatisation by doing an especially difficult examination task showcasing his particular skills. While Chantal's behaviour ultimately leads to her being suspended from school and gives her a discontinuous educational pathway, it can be seen that Jasmine and Pascal are especially motivated to overcome their educationally deprived background by going on to higher education.

4. Discussion

In our present society, formal education is a central factor behind social participation. This is especially true of young people with experience of the youth welfare services, whose chances of participating in different walks of life are in question. Because of their social class background and history of youth welfare, care leavers are confronted with educational disadvantages (cf. Dählen, 2017, p. 318; Tilbury, Creed, Buys, & Crawford, 2011, p. 346). For the sample in our study, we found that almost all parents of the interviewees have very poor educational qualifications. Compared with their parents, the care leavers themselves achieve significantly higher educational qualifications. This shows that they are fundamentally motivated to take longer educational pathways (see also Driscoll, 2013, p. 147) and participate in the mass expansion of education that is taking place within society.

Child and youth welfare facilities seem likely to be beneficial in this context, as they fundamentally support the acquisition of scholastic and vocational qualifications, and can thus to some extent compensate for the children's inherited legacy of non-existent qualifications at the lower end of the educational scale. Child and youth care workers' potential when it comes to supporting educational and career goals has now been internationally recognised (cf. Refaeli, 2017, p. 8; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018, p. 73–74). In contrast, the young people with experience of youth welfare do not themselves see their parents as relevant resources for educational support. Similar findings are seen in the investigations by Driscoll and Sulimani-Aidan (cf. Driscoll, 2013, p. 143; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018, p. 75).

The findings of our study show that the *orientation frameworks* displayed by the interviewed care leavers – their habitual patterns of perception, thinking and action – are closely linked to their experiences in different social environments and structures. The orientation frameworks *quest for social and emotional care* and *quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination* influence the care leavers' educational aspirations and the educational pathways they follow.

In many cases, their experience of social support and emotional belonging plays a decisive role in which educational pathway they select, and whether or not they can follow that pathway with success. Our research reveals that friendships and relationships with peers have a major influence on educational careers. In the case of Jasmine and Anja, it was their partnerships and workmates; with Franz Joseph it was being involved in a clique of youths, and for Pascal it was friendship with his classmates. The high significance of peers when it comes to educational success is backed up by previous studies (Adley & Kina, 2017; Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Salazar, Keller, & Courtney, 2011). Peers act as a central source of social and emotional care in the shape of social recognition, support and belonging (see also Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014). Our study shows that the young people's experience of

social support, emotional belonging and “empathy” from their peers (cf. Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018, p. 139) is often the decisive factor behind which educational pathway they take and whether they can successfully complete it or not. It also shows that, in many cases, friends or partners are the only people who encourage them to go on to further education, and who express trust in their abilities.

In youth welfare, by contrast, they increasingly switch facilities, especially as they enter adolescence. In residential youth welfare, the typical processes of young people locking horns with and distancing themselves from adults come up against a relatively flimsy structure characterised by a high turnover of staff and young residents. Accommodation in youth welfare facilities is thus shaped by discontinuities which can lead the young people to see carers as a succession of unknown people or “strangers” who come into their lives with no time for trusting relationships to develop (see also Driscoll, 2013, p. 144). To bring order to everyday life in these situations, staff rely less on mutual trust and stable relationships and more on the enforcement of binding rules and regulations. The young people often see these rules as rigid, inappropriate and externally determined (see also Gradaïlle, Montserrat, & Ballester, 2018, p. 58) and, in response, develop a *quest for individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination*. On one hand, that quest is typical of adolescence; on the other, it leads to conflicts in the institutions, which can again lead them to switch facility. The lack of stable care and relationships providing continuity, and the absence of social and emotional care in out-of-home care causes them to question the behavioural expectations and structural conditions imposed on them by the institutions. In this situation, their peers come across as a constant factor providing stability and secure relationships.

In youth welfare facilities, education and training tend to be promoted as a means of starting work at an early age, rather than completing longer educational pathways. Firstly, the tendency to favour skilled trades partly comes down to the professionals not trusting most of the young people in their care to successfully complete further education. In different studies, a climate of low expectations and limited educational support in out-of-home care is documented (cf. Köngeter, Mangold, & Strahl, 2016; McNamara, Harvey, & Andrewartha, 2019; Tilbury, Buys, & Creed, 2009). In our study this climate is criticized by Franz Joseph. Another example comes from Martin: when he expresses his childhood wish to become a doctor, the professionals' reaction is to laugh at him: “So if you had any more ambitious goals [...] that was immediately ridiculed” (Martin, line 1060). Secondly, the anticipation of care coming to an end at an early age leads the professionals to guide the young people towards skilled trades and starting work early as they need to secure their livelihood. In this process, little or no attention is often paid to the young people's interests and needs. This result confirms the findings of Tilbury et al., who point out that career development is lacking in the transition from care to independent living (Tilbury et al., 2011).

Acceptance of the education-promoting schemes and encouragement found in some youth welfare facilities depends on how much scope these facilities have to support individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination. Many young people themselves choose to learn simple skilled trades that lead to faster financial independence as they want to gain independence from youth welfare, and because they have no prospect of support if they go on to further education after the age of 18. Continuing educational aspirations then have to be achieved with considerable difficulty at a later stage and usually without support, meaning that young people with experience of youth welfare are frequently unable to unlock their full educational potential.

5. Consequences and prospects

The findings of our study show that many young people with experience of child and youth welfare are basically motivated and capable of completing the lengthy educational pathways required by modern

society. The leaning towards vocational occupations and early entry into work which predominates in youth welfare facilities must therefore be called into question. Young people in out-of-home care need an encouraging environment which promotes their education, along with comprehensive educational and occupational guidance that opens doors to a broad range of career options. With this in mind, the transition to independent living must be prepared for and accompanied by individually tailored careers planning (cf. Tilbury et al., 2011) offering scope for autonomous, self-determined decision-making.

The experience of social and emotional care is an important condition for successfully coping with educational demands. In this respect, one problem is the discontinuity and the frequently disrupted relationships in child and youth welfare, demanding reflection on how continuity can be guaranteed despite the tendency for changes to take place in the institutions. Greater attention also needs to be paid to the positive aspects of peer relationships and, accordingly, encouraging the young people to be part of social networks.

The fact that care ends at an early age, and the lack of support after the status passage of leaving care, are obstacles to the successful completion of higher educational pathways. Young people with experience of youth welfare need sufficient time to complete educational pathways, as education and training may take longer in their case due to their biographical experiences. To enable them to continue their education, in the form of studying at institutes of higher education, financial security is required (e.g. through scholarships). Practical support is also necessary, along with mentoring related to the requirements of their course of study. Finally, the feeling of loneliness and isolation after care leaving that is reported in numerous studies (cf. Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Gradañlle et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018) indicates that involvement in peer networks and buddy systems can provide useful social and emotional stabilisation.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Jubilaeumsfonds der Oesterreichischen Nationalbank (project no. 16821). Additional support we got from SOS children's village Austria and from Pro Juventute Austria. The publication was supported by the Forschungsrat of the university of Klagenfurt.

References

- Adley, N., & Kina, V. J. (2017). Getting behind the closed door of care leavers: Understanding the role of emotional support for young people leaving care. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22(1), 97–105.
- Arnau-Sabatés, L., & Gilligan, R. (2015). What helps young care leavers to enter the world of work? Possible lessons learned from an exploratory study in Ireland and Catalonia. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 53(C), 185–191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.03.027>.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood. A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Afterword: Aging out of care – Toward realizing the possibilities of emerging adulthood Special Issue. *New Directions of Youth Development*, 113, 151–161.
- Attar-Schwartz, S. (2009). School functioning of children in residential care: The contributions of multilevel correlates. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 33, 429–440.
- Bernardi, L., Keim, S., & von der Lippe, H. (2006). Freunde, Familie und das eigene Leben. Zum Einfluss sozialer Netzwerke auf die Lebens- und Familienplanung junger Erwachsener in Lübeck und Rostock. In B. Hollstein & F. Straus (Eds.), *Qualitative Netzwerkanalyse*. Wiesbaden: VS, pp. 359–390.
- Bohnsack, R. (2010). Documentary method and group discussions. In R. Bohnsack, N. Pfaff, & W. Weller (Eds.), *Qualitative analysis and documentary method in international educational research* (pp. 99–124). Opladen: Barbara Budrich. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-317253>.
- Bohnsack, R., Nentwig-Gesemann, I., & Nohl, A. M. (2007). *Die dokumentarische Methode und ihre Forschungspraxis. Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung*. Wiesbaden: VS.
- Bohnsack, R., Pfaff, N., & Weller, W. (2010). Reconstructive research and documentary method in Brazilian and German educational science – An introduction. In R. Bohnsack, N. Pfaff, & W. Weller (Eds.), *Qualitative analysis and documentary method in international educational research* (pp. 7–38). Opladen: Barbara Budrich. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-317253>.
- Bruneoforth, M., Eder, F., Krainer, K., Schreiner, C., Seel, A., & Spiel, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Österreich 2015, Band 2: Fokussierte Analysen bildungspolitischer Schwerpunktthemen*. Graz: Leykam.
- Bruneoforth, M., Weber, C., & Bacher, J. (2012). Chancengleichheit und garantiertes Bildungsminimum in Österreich. In B. Herzog-Punzenberger (Ed.), *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Österreich 2012, Band 2: Fokussierte Analysen bildungspolitischer Schwerpunktthemen* (pp. 189–227). Graz: Leykam.
- Bundes-Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz (B-KJHG). <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20008375>. [Accessed: 14.07.2015].
- Bundesministerium für Familien und Jugend (BMFJ) (2017). *Kinder- und Jugendhilfestatistik 2016*. (Vienna).
- Cameron, C., Hollingworth, K., Schoon, I., van Santen, E., Schöer, W., Ristikari, T., ... Pekkarinen, E. (2018). Care leavers in early adulthood: How do they fare in Britain, Finland and Germany? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 87, 163–172.
- Dählen, M. (2017). Child welfare clients and educational transitions. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22, 317–329.
- Department for Education. *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers)*. (2011). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219041/main_20text_20fsr212011.pdf (report of 28.09.2011). [Accessed: 25.06.2015].
- Driscoll, J. (2013). Supporting care leavers to fulfil their educational aspirations: Resilience, relationships and resistance to help. *Children & Society*, 27, 139–149.
- Dworsky, A., & Pérez, A. (2010). Helping former foster youth graduate from college through campus support programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 255–263.
- Gharabaghi, K. (2011). A culture of education: Enhancing school performance of youth living in residential group care in Ontario. *Child Welfare*, 90(1), 75–91.
- Gradañlle, R., Montserrat, C., & Ballester, L. (2018). Transition to adulthood from foster care in Spain: A biographical approach. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 89, 54–61.
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Salokkela, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 95, 134–143.
- Hagleitner, W. (2012). *Längsschnittanalyse von Stichtagserhebungsdaten von 1981 bis 2009*. Innsbruck: SOS Kinderdorf.
- Höjer, I., & Sjöblom, Y. (2014). Voices of 65 young people leaving care in Sweden: "There is so much I need to know!". *Australian Social Work*, 67(1), 71–87.
- Hollstein, B. (2006). Qualitative Methoden und Netzwerkanalyse – ein Widerspruch? In B. Hollstein, & F. Straus (Eds.), *Qualitative Netzwerkanalyse* (pp. 11–35). Wiesbaden: VS.
- Jackson, S., & Cameron, C. (2011). Final report of the YIPPEE project WP12: Young people from a public care background: Pathways to further and higher education in five European countries. London <http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/yippee/Portals/1/Final%20Report%20of%20the%20YIPPEE%20Project%20-%20WP12%20Mar11.pdf>. Accessed date: 25 June 2015.
- Köngeter, S., Mangold, K., & Strahl, B. (2016). *Bildung zwischen Heimerziehung und Schule*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.
- Köngeter, S., Schröer, W., & Zeller, M. (2012). Statuspassage "Leaving Care": Biographische Herausforderungen nach der Heimerziehung. *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung*, 7(3), 261–276.
- Kühn, T. (2006). Soziale Netzwerke im Fokus von qualitativen Sekundäranalysen – Am Beispiel einer Studie zur Biographiegestaltung junger Erwachsener. In B. Hollstein, & F. Straus (Eds.), *Qualitative Netzwerkanalyse* (pp. 391–415). Wiesbaden: VS.
- McNamara, P., Harvey, A., & Andrewartha, L. (2019). Passports out of poverty: Raising access to higher education for care leavers in Australia. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 97, 85–93.
- Nohl, A.-M. (2017). *Interview und dokumentarische Methode. Anleitungen für die Forschungspraxis*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- OECD (2017). *Education at a glance 2017: OECD indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>. [Accessed: 10.07.2018].
- O'Higgins, A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review*. Oxford: Rees Centre. http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ReesCentreReview_EducationalOutcomes.pdf, Accessed date: 15 September 2017.
- Rafaelli, T. (2017). Narratives of care leavers: What promotes resilience in transitions to independent lives? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 1–9.
- Romano, E., Babchishin, L., Marquis, R., & Fréchette, S. (2015). Childhood maltreatment and educational outcomes. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 16(4), 418–437.
- Salazar, A. M., Keller, T. E., & Courtney, M. E. (2011). Understanding social support's role in the relationship between maltreatment and depression in youth with foster care experience. *Child Maltreatment*, 16(2), 102–113.
- Schreiner, C. (2013). Familiärer Hintergrund und Leistung. In U. Schwantner, B. Toferer, & C. Schreiner (Eds.), *PISA 2012. Internationaler Vergleich von Schülerleistungen*. Graz: Leykam.
- Schwantner, U., Toferer, B., & Schreiner, C. (Eds.). (2013). *PISA 2012. Internationaler Vergleich von Schülerleistungen*. Graz: Leykam.
- Sigot, M. (2013). Selbstbestimmung aus der Perspektive von Frauen mit Lernschwierigkeit. In A. Heimgartner, K. Laermann, & S. Sting (Eds.), *Perspektiven der AkteurInnen in der Sozialen Arbeit* (pp. 83–90). Vienna: LIT.
- Spanning, R., & Steden, M. (2008). *Tracking footprints Österreich. Project report*. Innsbruck: SOS-Children's Village.
- Statista (2017). *Durchschnittsalter junger Menschen beim Verlassen des Elternhauses nach Geschlecht in Ländern Europas im Jahr 2016*. <http://de.statista.com/statistik/> [Accessed 03 November 2017].
- Stauber, B., & Walther, A. (2013). Junge Erwachsene – eine Lebenslage des Übergangs? In W. Schröer, B. Stauber, A. Walther, & L. Böhnisch (Eds.), *Handbuch Übergänge* (pp. 270–290). Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Sting, S. (2011). Jugend aus pädagogischer Sicht. In Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Familie und Jugend (Ed.), *Sechster Bericht zur Lage der Jugend* (pp. 39–42). Vienna:

- BMWfJ.
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2018). Assets and pathways in achieving future goals of residential alumni. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 89, 71–76.
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y., & Melkman, E. (2018). Risk and resilience in the transition to adulthood from the point of view of care leavers and case workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 88, 135–140.
- Thomas, S. (2013). *Erwachsenwerden in stationären Erziehungshilfen*. Vol. 4, PFAD12–13.
- Tilbury, C., Buys, N., & Creed, P. (2009). Perspectives of young people in care about their school-to-work transition. *Australian Social Work*, 62, 476–490.
- Tilbury, C., Creed, P., Buys, N., & Crawford, M. (2011). The school to work transition for young people in state care: Perspectives from young people, carers and professionals. *Child and Family Social Work*, 16, 345–352.
- Witzel, A. (2000). Das problemzentrierte interview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(1), 22.
- Zeller, M., & Köngeter, S. (2013). Übergänge in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe. In W. Schröer, B. Stauber, A. Walther, & L. Böhnisch (Eds.). *Handbuch Übergänge* (pp. 568–588). Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.