Going Full Circle - The Transition from Service User to Student Social Worker

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Abstract

There is increasing emphasis on the importance of service user input to social work education, yet there is very little research that considers those who have made the transition from service user to becoming a qualified Social Worker. One reason for this is the low numbers of care leavers achieving high grades within academia, and therefore failing to secure a place in Higher Education (HE). Research suggests a widening gap in attainment between non-care leavers and care leavers and low expectations of achievement by both Social Workers and carers as being contributory factors. This was not however the case for two Care leavers, who successfully graduated in BA (Hons) Social work. This paper uses a narrative approach to explore service users' experiences with reference to Kolb's (1984) model of learning and lifespan perspectives, and in doing so, challenge some stereotypical views relating to care leavers failing to achieve in education. Recommendations include raising Social Worker awareness that care leavers can be resilient, and make a positive contribution to the field of social work, by the use of their personal experience in order to promote a good standard of practice within the UK (Health and Care Professions Council, 2012) and internationally (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Further research is needed in this area, including looking more specifically at barriers and advantages to Care leavers entering professional social work and formal tracking of care leavers who enter the social work profession. care leavers can successfully go full circle from receiving support from Local Authority (LA) Social Services, to delivering quality social work and can potentially have a key role in enabling other young people who have been in a similar situation.

Keywords

Social work; care leaver; transition; education; reflection

Introduction

The low numbers of care leavers achieving in education, could be a direct result of being abused or neglected through childhood. The Who Cares Trust (2015) identifies that one third of care leavers are not in education, employment or training - compared with 13% of all young people. These statistics, combined with the knowledge that just over half of all children and young people are in care in the UK, as a result of abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2012), establish that people in care may not have the opportunities or desire to access education.

This paper will argue that there are wider factors which need to be acknowledged in understanding the relationship between being "in care" and educational achievement, and that stereotypical views of care leavers failing to achieve needs to be challenged.

It is important that children and young people, who are in the care of the LA, are able to adapt to change in a way that they can reach their own life potential. According to Newman (2004), resilience is the way in which individuals respond to stressful life events. Newman

(2004) continues to explain that resilience is also the ability to respond with 'hope and optimism in the face of adversity'. As research from Newman (2004) suggests, resilience is important for young people who have spent time in local authority care and those who have left the care system. In understanding resilience, particular reference will be given within this paper to developmental theories that the authors consider to have affected the way in which they have progressed and developed through life during and after their background in care.

According to Kolb (1984) an individual can learn from experiences, by reflecting upon their experiences and applying the learning to new situations. The idea that reflection is a cycle assumes that learning from experiences is ongoing; learning from experiences may not lead to positive outcomes on the first attempt. However if a person continues to reflect upon experiences, the outcomes from the experiences may eventually improve.

A lifespan perspective that has been considered for this paper is Erikson's psychosocial model (1959). Erikson (1963) states that a young person needs consistent and reliable care in order to feel secure and trust the environment in which they are surrounded by. Erikson suggests that if a young person does not trust the environment that they are in, insecurities could arise. Erikson (1959) argued that during the ages of 12-15, a young person is in the stage of ego identity versus role confusion. This stage of development is critical in terms of preparation and aspiration for a young person to progress towards HE.

The aims of this study therefore are to review the literature available in this area; explore theories in relation to lifespan development; to challenge labelling and stereotypes of care leavers, in relation to educational attainment; identify the role and impact of resilience; and use a narrative approach to explore the personal experiences of two care leavers embarking on a Social Work Degree.

Literature review

The literature search focused on papers relating to care leavers in the UK, using the following search terms - care leavers and education; in educational attainment; and Care leaver to student Social Worker. The literature search was conducted using electronic databases and search engines, such as Oxford journals, Social Care Online, Nexus Lexus, Athens and Google Scholar.

Ajayi and Quigley (2006) and Stein, (2008) identified factors that contribute to the successfulness (or unsuccessfulness) of the educational attainment of Care leavers. Both imply that the stability of the LA foster or residential placement can create a link between a care leaver and their successful educational achievement.

The instability of a placement can have a detrimental impact on a child's educational attainment. Fernandez (2008) identifies that people who are looked after by the LA are more likely to have problems adapting to the educational experience. This could be due to inconsistencies with their motivation or a poor attitude towards education. Fernandez (2008) further suggests that 62 per cent of children have had three or more school changes, which could be a trigger for the above problems. This could have a negative effect on the grades that a child can achieve.

Hiles et al (2013) completed a literature review around young people's experiences of social support during the leaving care process drawing a number of conclusions from the studies reviewed. One conclusion relates to how past experiences can influence current experiences for care leavers. Hiles et al (2013) further conclude that it is imperative to focus on the importance of supportive relationships during transition from foster care to independence. The paper also comments on the importance of a care leaver's relationship with their biological parents, and of practical support, incorporating the experience of those currently going through the leaving care process.

Contemporary research from Myall et al (2015) was conducted to identify care leavers that are undertaking social work training. It was highlighted within this article that some teaching on care leavers tend to portray the negative aspects of people in care, rather than identifying the positive aspects, such as embarking on a social work degree. Myall et al (2015) and Jackson and Cameron (2012) continue to suggest that the negative portrayal of care leavers could be damaging, especially as people in care would act in a negative way, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948).

Legal context

There are a number of pathways in which a young person or child can be accommodated within the local authority. The pathways are set out in the Children Act (1989). There are a number of assessments that in some cases are completed by a Social Worker to assess the family situation and the care provided to young people. It is at the conclusion of the assessment that a decision is made about how best to support the family and the child. For example in some cases this could be in the form of a voluntary care order Section 20 or a full care order, Section 31.

In some emergency situations an Emergency police protection order; Section 46 of the Children Act (1989) could be used to protect a child or young person if a police constable has reason to believe that the child may be subject to a risk of significant harm, in which case a child will be placed in a safe place, such as a hospital, for example.

It can be suggested that there are positive and negative aspects concerning voluntary accommodation and full care orders in relation to educational attainment. Section 20 can be used when a family conflict is present within the home, to accommodate the child (or teenager) into a safer environment. However, Children Act (1989) states that the children are better placed within their own families.

Section 20 Children Act (1989) is whereby parents can place their children into the care of the LA on a voluntary basis. In relation to education, it can be said that Section 20 could have a positive influence on the person, as they have been removed from the confrontation of the family, and therefore more able to focus on education. Equally, this could be counteracted by the parent having ongoing responsibility over the child even though they are in care. The decisions that a parent makes could potentially have a detrimental effect on the educational attainment, if decisions are based on their own needs rather than those of the child. In relation to education, due to personal experiences it is the opinion of the authors that parents who have an addiction could forget to take their children to school. It is important to note that this is not the case in every situation, as some Section 20 orders are made due to parental illness or the inability to parent their child (Children Act, 1989).

Methodology

The authors used a narrative approach to reflect upon their own lives both as care leavers, and professionally as student Social Workers. This culminated in a case study which is a qualitative account of the experience of Laura and Alan, which aims to bring depth and validity to an under researched topic area, rather than a quantitative approach which is not appropriate for just two cases. A narrative approach seeks to consider social identity, from the "stories" of participants (Crossley, 1996), in this case by the authors, Alan and Laura. This narrative process began informally and then progressed to the systematic exchange of stories, drawing out and documenting similarities, differences and personal meaning in relation to their experience of the care system, psychosocial influences regarding education and the decision to become social workers. Emerging stories or themes were explored in more detail and form the basis for the current paper.

Case studies: Introducing Alan and Laura

Alan is a male care leaver, previously accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act (1989) for a period of 13 years. During this time, Alan lived in 10 foster homes and one residential home. Laura is a female care leaver previously accommodated under Section 31 of the Children Act (1989) for a period of nine years. For the duration of this time, Laura was accommodated in one stable Kinship Care placement.

Alan was accommodated under Section 20 Children Act (1989) at aged five, whereby his parents agreed that removing their child was the best course of action for them. The investigation revealed that Alan's mother had a learning disability, which restricted her ability to attach and parent a child (Walsh et al, 2009). As the father of Alan was caring for his wife, it was a mutual decision for the child to be looked after by the LA.

Laura was accommodated under a full care order, section 31 which meant that the corporate parenting panel and the local authority have parental responsibility. Alan was accommodated under Section 20 Children Act (1989) which is a voluntary agreement made by the child's biological parents, which means that they still retain parental responsibility for their child. This enables the parents to make decisions in relation to the welfare of the child, including making schooling and other educational related decisions (Cocker and Allain, 2013). However, Social Workers remain involved and continue to monitor the decisions that are made by the parents for a number of reasons. One reason is that they needed to ensure that the children are living in accordance to the Every Child Matters (ECM, 2003) outcomes. Every Child Matters was a government initiative developed in order to support young people to meet five outcomes; Be Safe, Be Healthy, Enjoy and Achieve, Achieve Economic Wellbeing and Make a Positive Contribution.

In relation to Section 31 orders in the instance of Laura regular contact was organised to see her birth mother who had differing views upon education in relation to Laura. Laura aspired to go to university; her mother was unable to understand Laura's aspirations and exposed Laura to unhealthy life choices such as consuming alcohol, before the contact was supervised.

Laura's placement was considered as stable as she had one placement, whereas Alan was relocated a total of 11 times, into different foster family settings. This included time spent within a residential setting. The experiences of Alan and Laura will be considered throughout this paper, in contrasting their experiences within the context of previous research and theoretical frameworks.

It has been acknowledged that this paper could include a bias in relation to the authors being of white British heritage. However the authors argue that the personal perspectives and the literature used can be transferrable and that being "in care" itself is a shared specific characteristic. Furthermore the perspectives are from both male and female care leavers, with varying experiences of life in care, from two different LAs. Age could be a limitation, as both Alan and Laura are 21 and 29 so it was not possible to provide a wider age group comparison.

It has been recognised that the position in which the authors write from could impact the research. Reflexivity has been defined by Mansfield (2006) as a further form of reflection that is the examination of lenses and filters through which an individual sees the world. Laura and Alan may have specific views in relation to their outlook on life as a result of their care experienced background.

The overall aim of this paper is to contribute towards the improvement of knowledge in relation to care leavers and educational attainment.

Discussion

The authors of this paper did not receive consistent and reliable care whilst accommodated by their birth parents in early years, which has been identified as being important for educational achievement (Hiles et al 2013; Erikson 1963). Despite the lack of care by birth parents, Alan and Laura found an escape in academic studies and school, where they received reliable care and support. For both Alan and Laura, education provided them with more of a focus, so that they could ensure they continued to develop skills, in order to obtain a better quality of life. It can be suggested from this that the education environment instilled confidence for Alan and Laura and as a result they overcame potential difficulties that may have been faced according to Erikson (1963). A further factor to contribute to this and to promote "ego identity versus role confusion" was the support received by Alan and Laura from their personal advisors. Personal advisors are provided by the local authority with a role to support young people in the transition from care to independence. It can be said that Alan and Laura did not experience role confusion as they were supported by the LA, who provided guidance and support to ensure that they progressed in a positive way. Recent legislative changes include the Children and Families Act (2014), which introduced the Staying Put agenda. This means that some LAs are offering LA foster placements, for care leavers post 16 to 18 years. This would therefore create prolonged stability and potentially be critical in improving the likelihood of care leavers attending and achieving in education (Coleman and Hagell, 2007). In times of austerity, the potential of this improvement of support for care leavers should not be underestimated.

Driscoll (2013) concludes that educational attainment 'needs to be founded on relationships of care and trust'. Despite the absence of a stable caring and trusting relationship, Alan achieved highly within education. Coleman and Hagell (2007) suggest that females depend on social relationships for support when in stressful conditions. Males are likely to be more resilient when coping with a breakdown within the family structure. This could be an explanation for the achievements made by Alan, despite the range of unsettled placements due to him being able to cope with the stresses of life effectively. In contrast, Laura had a stable placement throughout her time in Kinship care, which shows that both Alan and Laura can achieve highly in education, regardless of the stability (or instability) that they have experienced throughout their lives.

Due to the positive support of Social Worker professionals and Kinship care, it is the belief of Laura that she got to the university stage because she was encouraged to do well. This links in self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948), as because she has done well for herself, it could be implied that it is due to the encouragement of her Social Workers and Kinship care throughout her life. Furthermore Laura was supported by foster carers, both practically and emotionally. Laura argues that motivation was instilled by the people that were also being motivated around her. However, without self-motivation and determination, she would not have developed the skills and attributes to do well within education. According to research, the young people are motivated to improve their situations and progress further in life, implying that once young people are motivated, they 'desire to develop skills and knowledge and to gain experience' (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013, p.11),

Similarly, Alan found positive motivation in the form of his Social Workers, and his partner. Both Social Workers and his partner encouraged him to be the best that he could be. It is safe to suggest that if it was not for them, then he would not be where he is now. Alan has also experienced a negative form of self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby his secondary school told him that he would not achieve in his GCSE's, owing to him being in foster care. If Alan did not have the resilience to cope with this information, then he could have potentially failed in education. As a result, Alan was able to challenge against this stereotype by

working towards becoming a Social Worker. These experiences both serve to highlight the importance of challenging stereotypes about care leavers and lack of achievement.

The impact of the disruption potentially caused by being accommodated under the Children Act (1989) can be mediated by the role of resilience, and this will now be considered in relation to Alan and Laura. Alan has demonstrated resilience throughout his time within the care of the LA. It has become evident that Alan has coped under stressful situations and has successfully maintained optimism, which has continued to thrive throughout his life. Rajan-Rankin (2014) identifies that resilience enables young people to 'overcome stressors or withstand negative life events and, not only recover from such experiences, but also find personal meaning in them' (Grant and Kinman, 2012, p1). This could be transferrable to education as Laura was able to use resilience, so that she was less adversely affected by her past experiences, which gave her a source of strength to progress through education to obtain a Social Work degree.

In relation to social work practice, Golombok (2000) states that the qualities of the carer and other relationships have an impact upon the child more than living in numerous foster care placements. This relates to the experience of Laura as she was placed within a Kinship care placement, whereby the quality of the caregiver and relationship was positive which resulted in a stable, long term placement. From this placement, Laura was able to adapt from the previous caregiver to the care provided by the foster carer and therefore able to adapt to change.

In the case of Alan and Laura it can be concluded that learning from experiences took place as both made an informed decision during their adult life to enter into higher education, despite having been unfocused during their primary school years as a result of being preoccupied by home-life anxieties. It is argued therefore that resilience has not only helped Alan and Laura cope with their negative childhood experiences, but in finding meaning, be motivated to use their knowledge and personal experience within a professional social work role.

Laura and Alan chose to enter the social work profession to ensure that service users were afforded their lawful entitlements and rights, and to advocate for service users who are unable to speak out for themselves within society. Further to this, both wanted to challenge stereotypes and oppression, primarily in relation to care leavers and to place service users at the heart of their profession and practice and also wanting to change the quality of life of others, using elements of their own personal experience such as empathy (Trevithick, 2012). It is argued that Alan and Laura have reflected upon many life events, using resilience and internalised optimism in order to make informed decisions about the future including the pursuit of a BA Social Work. The authors identify that Alan and Laura used this learning cycle as young people, but did not recognise that it was a learning theory until it was introduced during academic study.

The Impact of the Social Worker

Throughout the life of Alan it can be suggested that it could have been difficult for his development as a child and also for the transition to adulthood. Whilst Alan was a child, he was uprooted from his parents, lived in many different homes and had many different care givers, this meant that his ability to form secure attachments was flawed. His Social Worker provided the support of a corporate parent, ensuring that all of his choices are good which provided a continuous attachment until the time had come for him to leave LA care. In Laura's experience the Social Worker provided support in the same way and Laura reflects that the statutory review visits were a good opportunity for her to voice her views and wishes in relation to her placement and for her Social Worker to provide support in relation to them.

Cocker and Allain (2013) argue that the role of Social Workers can have crucial effect upon the lives of their service users. Although they may not be providing day to day care for their service users, they continue to have the responsibility of making life altering decision, like that of a parent. The relationship between the service user and the Social Worker may be positive, however due to the high turnover of social work staff, a Service user is not guaranteed to have the same Social Worker for the amount of time that they spend in LA care. Whilst their relationship is important, the Social Worker must ensure that the relationship which has been created is of a professional nature. This aspect of professional attachment poses a unique question; does the service user attach to the Social Worker or the role of the Social Worker?

From the personal experiences of both Alan and Laura positive attachments were formed towards the Social Worker. However, upon further reflection it was determined that it was the role of the Social Worker that both Alan and Laura attached to. The reason for this is that even though there is a high turnover of Social Workers, the professionalism and overall role of a Social Worker still remains. It was imperative that the Social Worker explained their role to the service user, to establish professional boundaries from initial contact.

Alan identified from an early age that he was homosexual, which forced him to have mixed feelings with regards to attaching with others. Whilst in the early years of secondary school, Alan was forced to internalise his views as they were considered as not socially acceptable, this resulted in him being a victim of bullying from his peer group. A study was conducted by Mishna et al (2009), with regards to identifying gay and lesbian youths who have been the victims of bullying. They identified that some homosexual people are bullied to the extent that they believe that 'being different was bad'. Alan has experienced this feeling as it was common for him to hear comments with regards to his sexuality, such as 'that's so gay' or 'you're such a fag' (Mishna et al, 2009). This added an extra dynamic to the experience of being in care, and determination to succeed. This is due to the resilience of Alan, who also felt empowered by the knowledge gained during the Social Work degree. He continuously ensures that he works with his service users to not only empower them, but to appreciate their differences based on the protected characteristics of the Human rights Act (1998). Article two of this act gives every person the right to have an education, upon which would need to be enforced with every child within the care of the LA. It is therefore imperative that Social Workers and education providers have the appropriate training in order to support service user groups who form other communities.

Recommendations

The authors recommend that awareness across the profession is needed to encourage positive attitudes towards care leavers accessing higher education. Social Workers must ensure that young people are given the opportunity to explore higher education as a potential progression pathway if it would be deemed as appropriate on an individual basis. This may involve Social Workers questioning any unconscious beliefs they may hold about care leavers' potential to achieve academically. Social Workers must remain open-minded and practice in a non-oppressive and non-judgmental manner when working with young people who may require support to enter into higher education. Whilst acknowledging the challenges that are faced by care leavers, Social Workers (and indeed other key staff such as teachers) should not assume that because a young person is in care, they will not achieve academically. It could be argued, that given their personal experience, care leavers are potentially better placed to enter the social work profession due to their resilience and specialist knowledge. It is suggested that key professionals may need to reevaluate their perceptions of care leavers in order to embrace this.

A further recommendation is that organisations such as Educational providers, police, LA, Health and voluntary services, develop links to signpost young people to other services, if

their service is small, and the needs of the young person cannot be met internally. An example of this could be in relation to the voluntary sector. Some voluntary sector organisations have very little funding to provide a young person the help that they need. It would be their duty to work with other organisations to ensure that the young person is supported. This would encourage multi agency working, and further enhance social work practice. This is beneficial because all agencies would be working together to benefit the service user, and would effectively safeguard children and young people to give them the best service delivery (Working together to Safeguard Children, 2015). This could be useful in communicating to promote that care leavers can achieve in education.

It is recommended that the Staying Put Agenda (Children and Families, Act 2014) and arrangements for young people to have care following their eighteenth birthday is transferrable across residential care as well as foster care placements. This would entitle more young people to have support for education, life skills and placement stability post eighteen. This could also be an opportunity for young people to prepare further for independence and the transition into adulthood. It is noted at this point that the recommendation may not be financially feasible for some local authorities but the recommendation can be considered.

Schools, as well as other educational providers, could potentially develop a 'peer mentor' role whereby care leavers who have gone on to achieve in higher education are able to provide support, guidance and assistance to care leavers who are considering the option of higher education. This could be beneficial in providing care leavers with a positive role model and care leavers may benefit from information that can be shared. Further to this, the peer mentor can provide encouragement, motivation and self-belief to a Care leaver who is considering higher education.

It is recommended that further research is required into the topic area. This should include a quantitative study to obtain some baseline data of care leavers who enter education and succeed, in particular looking at the number of care leavers who go on to become social work students would be a key starting point. Consideration of how this could be achieved would need to be discussed with HEIs.

A further recommendation is that further qualitative studies are conducted In order to explore in more depth the experiences of individual care leavers in relation to higher education. This could include the experience of practitioners and those supporting Care leavers who express an interest and show academic capability in order to enter higher education. A qualitative study could also explore the experiences of care leavers entering higher education from different BME backgrounds or those with disabilities, as information around these specific groups is very limited.

A final recommendation is that personal advisors working with care leavers are given appropriate and in depth training to improve their awareness of the transition that can be taken into higher education in order to promote and encourage care leavers into education if they chose too. Owing to the direct impact that the personal advisors can have upon young people, and in some cases being a single point of support and contact, personal advisors need to be aware of how their guidance can be influential.

Conclusion

It is important that professionals and individuals are aware that young people who have been looked after by the local authority can and do achieve in higher education, which should be promoted and encouraged. This can be achieved by ensuring that labelling and stereotypes do not stand in the way of care leavers reaching their full potential.

Both Alan and Laura had decided to continue with education, with the aim of becoming qualified Social Workers. From the personal experience that both have encountered, it can be said that they may be more aware of the impact, and also the importance of resilience in

a professional setting. As a Social Worker, it is important to be resilient from the emotions of the service user. This is in order to maintain professional boundaries, and also to ensure that the service user is empowered to take more of an active role in their own lives (Morrison, 2007). In the case of Alan and Laura they were empowered to take an active role and therefore it can be said that encouragement and empowerment have contributed to the decision making and success in higher education that has been achieved by both care leavers. If all Social Workers could provide each of their care leavers with belief, support and motivation, then this could potentially give some care leavers the opportunity of becoming Student Social Workers, thus contributing to the profession and 'going full circle'.

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