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CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

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Abstract

Young people in the care of the state are reported as having generally poor education and employment outcomes due to such factors as high rates of school exclusions and non-attendance; frequent placement moves with consequent school disruptions; deprived pre-care backgrounds; lack of co-ordination between education and child protection personnel; lack of attention to educational needs by professionals; and low expectations held by carers and caseworkers. This article examines child protection worker perspectives on young people's transition from school to work. Caseworkers believe that, for young people in care, factors such as unstable placements; psychological and behavioural problems; inadequate vocational options; poor caseworker knowledge of available training and education; and negative perceptions of young people in care may impede them from making a successful transition from school. Research suggests that child protection caseworkers need to integrate education and work with leaving care planning, given it is vital to the future well-being of young people in care.

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Key words: school to work, child protection, transition from care

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Introduction

Participation in the workforce yields both individual and social benefits, including self esteem and social well being, and avoiding the poverty associated with welfare dependence. For young people to be adequately prepared for work, research shows that intervention is required during compulsory school years to develop occupational knowledge, life skills, career maturity and career planning skills (Creed, Muller & Patton, 2003). The majority of Australia's youth have access to such intervention through a consistent home and school environment and the social, emotional and financial input and support of parents, family members and/or educational personnel. The pathway to workforce participation for young people in state care is often more complex. It can be compromised by practical issues such as unstable placements, inadequate access to basic resources like transport and finances, lack of a consistent case manager, and emotional issues such as a lack of 'felt security' and minimal encouragement and modelling of workplace participation by family members (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). Even though the transition from school is generally recognised as one of life's major transition points (Creed, Muller & Patton, 2003), there has been little research on work and career pathways for young people in care. In 2005 there were over 25,000 children in care Australia-wide, with numbers increasing each year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006). However, there are no data available on how this group compares with other disadvantaged young people on dimensions of educational attainment, school retention and employment outcomes. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the literature pertaining to the school to work transition and work outcomes for young people in care, to explain

why it is an important area for research and practice, and to outline the findings from a small exploratory study of child protection workers' perspectives on this issue.

Background

The transition from school to work and further education is an important policy concern for Australia, vital to improving workforce participation and productivity into the future. Early exit from education has been identified as a major issue that will negatively impact on Australia's economic growth over the next twenty years (Access Economics, 2005). Currently, around 50,000 young people leave school early and do not go on to some form of further education and training or sustainable employment (Access Economics, 2005). This places them at significant risk of experiencing long-term unemployment as adults (Kennedy and Hedley, 2003). The national skills shortage demands attention to the educational levels of the workforce, and there are labour supply problems arising from Australia's ageing population and decreasing birthrate (Access Economics, 2005). These interrelated factors have led Federal and State governments to support a range of initiatives aimed at improving the post-school transition. These include the Commonwealth/State ministerial declaration to improve education and employment outcomes for young people, 'Stepping forward: improving pathways for all young people' (2002), the New South Wales Government 'Our 15 to 19 Year Olds - Opportunities and Choice'(2006) and the Queensland Government 'Education and Training Reforms for the Future' (2002). Disadvantaged youth are identified as a focus for concern in these initiatives, but specific attention is required to address the needs of the multiply-disadvantaged population of young people in care.

Children who have grown up in care are disadvantaged in terms of their health, education

and social well-being (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Dworsky, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Stein, 1994). They are often early school leavers, having low levels of educational achievement and high rates of school suspension and exclusion, which has ramifications for future employment prospects, the ability to live independently, and active citizenship (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Queensland Government, 2003). The future life prospects for many young people in care are bleak, with growing evidence of negative long-term outcomes such as high rates of unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, persistent mental illness or substance use disorders, and poor social adjustment (Biehal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Stein, 1994). Poor educational attainment among young people in care has been linked to a constellation of factors including high rates of school exclusions and truancy, frequent placement moves with consequent school disruptions, deprived pre-care backgrounds including family breakdown, lack of co-ordination between educational and child protection personnel, lack of attention to educational needs by professionals, and low expectations held by foster carers, caseworkers and teachers (Francis, 2000; Goddard, 2000; Stein, 1994). Children themselves, as a result of maltreatment, may have low or no aspirations to achieve academically (Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen & Heckhausen, 2006; Iwaniec, Larkin & Higgins, 2006). At the age of 18 years when many young people are moving into work or further study with the help of their parents, children in care may experience an abrupt end to the formal supports of the care system, such as a caseworker or a foster home, and they generally lack ongoing family support (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Alternative pathways and institutional arrangements may be required to respond to their individual needs, abilities and preferences (Dockery, 2005).

Educational participation and attainment for children in care are now important performance indicators for child welfare agencies worldwide, because they are recognised as pivotal to young people's long-term outcomes (Poertner, McDonald & Murray, 2000; Tilbury, 2004). While some care leavers cope well, it is clear generally that many in this population are ill-equipped to compete in the workforce. In the United Kingdom, for example, it was found that most care leavers inhabited a world of benefits, casual labour and work schemes, with 'proper' full-time jobs being very rare (Stein, 1994). Similarly, a United States study found that while 80 per cent of care leavers were employed in at least one quarter of the first eight quarters after discharge, few were employed in all eight (Dworsky, 2005). This research recommends that education and career advice is included in case planning for in-care youth to encourage and support them to achieve at school and post-school. Further, there have been calls for co-ordination between education and child protection agencies and more resources for care leavers to assist with post-secondary education, housing and independent living (Dworsky, 2005; Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hirpi, O'Brien, Emerson, Herrick & Torres, 2006; Stein, 1994). Despite the research findings, significant gaps in knowledge remain concerning this issue, particularly in Australia. For example, there is limited Australian research on (i) work or further education outcomes for young people in care, (ii) young people's perspectives on their school to work transition (Goddard, 2000), (iii) evaluating support services for care leavers (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004) and (iv) career development pathways for such populations (Buys, Buys, Kendall & Davis, 2001).

Research on career development (Creed, Muller & Patton, 2003) suggests that a specific focus on the cognitive and contextual variables impacting upon individuals may lead to more effective interventions to assist the transition to work for young people in care. Social

cognitive career theory recognises the complex and reciprocal links between the developing individual and changes in her/his social, physical, and cultural environment (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000). It emphasises the importance of contextual factors in influencing career self-efficacy, aspirations and expectations. For example, economic need, educational limitations, peer influences and lack of family support may inhibit the pursuit of one's primary interests or preferred career goals (Lent et al., 2000). Such conditions can constitute barriers to individuals' career choices and career development, and are especially relevant to the situation of youth in care. A perception that some things are beyond their reach influences their hopes for the future and can narrow their horizons. This concern about context is consistent with sociological research suggesting that changes in the labour market and the economy in the last three decades have reshaped young people's decision-making about work (White & Wyn, 2004). Normative patterns of transition are changing as young people are taking longer to move to 'adulthood' or 'independence' (Wade & Dixon, 2006). Notions of personal identity and resources, both material and non-material, are influential in constructing the conditions under which young people make their lives 'work' (White & Wyn, 2004). This literature has implications for conceptualising the school to work transition, especially for young people in care for whom there are few established pathways to 'success'. It suggests not only that structural barriers may impede positive work outcomes, but also that young people in care may limit their career aspirations because of factors such as low levels of educational attainment, lack of mentors and adult role models, disrupted relations with family and other personal support networks, instability in their living situation and economic hardships. Both structural and individual factors are vital to understanding this life transition.

An exploratory study of caseworkers' perceptions

The authors conducted a small exploratory study with the aim of exploring the way in which child protection caseworkers viewed the individual and contextual factors that might influence the post-school transition for young people in care. Data was collected using a qualitative approach: two focus groups were conducted with a convenience sample of experienced child protection workers who worked with young people in care aged 14 years and over. The focus groups involved a planned discussion designed to elicit the experiences, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, values and behaviours of participants in relation to the school to work transition for young people in care. The group interaction in focus groups facilitates probing different viewpoints on the topic being discussed, thereby enhancing the range and depth of opinions expressed (Blaikie, 2000). Questions for the focus groups were grouped within two major themes: caseworker preparations, or how the state as a 'corporate parent' prepared young people in care for leaving school; and caseworker perceptions of young people's aspirations and influences on their life choices. In relation to caseworker preparation, the focus group participants were asked to consider their own level of optimism regarding young people in care moving into work or future education; the educational experience for young people in care; coordination between caseworkers and teachers; support for young people's education and training once they have turned 18 years and are released from their child protection order; explanations of young people's successes or failures; and case planning and review. In relation to young people's aspirations and influences on their life choices, the focus group participants were asked to consider how they thought young people in care developed ideas about future work prospects; who in young people's networks contributed to their ideas about future work aspirations; their access to career guidance and counselling; and social and environmental factors, such as age, gender, disability, cultural background, placement type, placement stability, relationships with significant others and school performance that

influenced the process of school to work transition; and the structural processes influencing views and behaviours such as access to income support, the availability of post care accommodation and support and the availability of jobs.

Participants were recruited with the assistance of the statutory child protection department. Local managers provided information about the study to casework staff, who indicated if they were prepared to participate. The final sample comprised a mix of caseworkers, with a minimum of six months experience, and more senior practitioners. All participants held qualifications in social work or human services. The participants were drawn from three different metropolitan offices of the statutory agency. University ethics approval was obtained and participants provided written consent to participate in the study.

The focus group discussions were audio taped and the contents transcribed for analysis. Data analysis was undertaken by the researchers who also conducted the focus groups. Reflections were recorded immediately after data collection. The transcripts were initially coded according to whether the data related to the role of the caseworker or whether it related to the assumed aspirations of young people in care. The coded transcripts were analysed inductively to draw the main ideas and themes from the data, and these were compared with findings from the literature. A rough narrative of the major points, patterns and themes in the data was then developed. This article outlines the caseworkers' experiences of assisting young people in care with the move to work or further education.

Preparing young people for the transition to work or further education

A common experience was that finding suitable and stable placements dominated casework with young people, leaving little or no time to make preparations for further

education or workplace participation. Participants reported that education and workplace participation were given minimal attention by caseworkers as issues such as placement and accommodation took priority. Some young people had such a high degree of instability that they needed to locate new accommodation on a daily basis, leaving little time for education or other case planning. One caseworker reported that:

> *The priority is where are they going to live and how are they going to live there, and continuing education or moving onto a job is something that is not the hierarchy of needs I guess, if you look at it that way.* (Participant #7)
>
> *There are bigger issues in their life than school. School is not a foremost issue.* (Participant #1)

Further there was agreement that the behavioural, psychological and learning difficulties experienced by young people in care impaired their ability to function within the traditional school environment and that there were few treatment options available for these children. The majority of participants agreed that young people in care often experienced significant levels of maltreatment, resulting in trauma, stress and a range of behavioural, emotional and psychological difficulties. Their ability to remain engaged and to conform to a structured school environment was thus impaired. For example, young people who have been neglected or rejected often have no experience of rules or consistency, making the traditional school environment very challenging. Even when school principals are provided with information regarding these histories they did not have the knowledge or resources to manage the young person's behaviour within the school environment. Hence comments such as, 'these kids have problems, they are not compatible with the education system ... we need more alternative high schools' and 'these children have so much going on in their lives that school is the last thing on their minds' (Participant #1).

The general view among participants was that schools were inflexible and authoritarian and were quick to label young people in care as problematic, leading to negative assumptions and treatment within the school environment. For example, one respondent noted that 'if you are a kid in care there is an expectation that you will be a difficult child, therefore you won't excel in education, you will never be an upstanding citizen and all of that'(Participant #9). It was apparent that there was no effective advocacy for the needs of these individual young people within the education system, and that many caseworkers did not see this as part of their role. There were mixed views about the extent to which caseworkers were involved in the educational process and the child's thinking about future work. One respondent said that 'lots of kids probably don't know what they want to do. And if you don't ask they won't tell you. So you've really got to ask, and encourage them once they tell you' (Participant #2). Another participant thought that education planning was not the child protection agency's core business: 'Our role is more concerned with safety rather than education or work' (Participant #3). Education plans, which should be developed collaboratively by child or young person, their family or carer, and school and child protection personnel, might be developed, but they are not always implemented because of the unavailability of education staff, child protection personnel and resources. As one participant said, 'you've got these great ideas like Education Support Plans … the idea is good but the lack of resources means they are not achievable … a logistical nightmare' (Participant #3). Another said, 'the Education Support Plan is seen as – 'Education' do that, I just have to make sure it happened. (Child protection workers) don't tend to engage in the specifics of it - the focus (of the plan) is not coming back to child safety, it is educational' (Participant #8).

Attending school or training might be seen as a means of occupying a young person during the day rather than a pathway to future education and employment. When structured case planning did not occur, the issues of education and planning for independent adult living were overlooked. As one participant said:

> *I think also not having a structured case plan - it is something that falls away, like you are not looking that a child has to be in school - but sometimes it is incredibly difficult to get a child to school and unless they are in a stable placement and the carer is committed - that again falls to the worker which at that point it is not so much that their education is important it is about getting them out of the office - 'cause that is where they are sitting all the time - or getting them into something that will keep them occupied during the day as opposed to getting them an education so they can move on to something else.* (Participant #7)

Most caseworkers did not have a comprehensive knowledge of the educational and vocational options available for young people. Caseworkers identified the need for more vocational and educational opportunities that complemented the talents and interests of the young person in care. A number of the participants said that some young people in care were artistic and creative but could not develop their talents because of the school's focus on academic performance: 'We spend all our time trying to fit a square peg in a round hole' (Participant #1). A few mentioned referring young people to specialised agencies to address education and work options: 'We are not guidance officers, we need resources, need to know what agencies can help, what businesses will take young people on work experience' (Participant #3).

Young people's access to further education and employment is impeded by inadequate record keeping. School reports, photos and records of achievement, which could assist the

young person in gaining employment or further education, were rarely retained on their case file. As one respondent said, 'if we're not great at keeping their medical stuff on record we're not going to be great at keeping their educational stuff on file' (Participant #9).

Influences on the work aspirations of young people in care

Participants reported that carers, youth workers and other support workers influenced young people's choices about education and work decisions, whereas caseworkers had little influence on young people's decision making. It was thought that many young people distrusted the statutory child protection workers and their organisation while youth workers who provided practical assistance and advice had the most influence on young peoples' choices regarding education and work because 'youth workers work outside our system. They can establish trust that they don't have for government workers' (Participant #3).

Participants reported that family members were unlikely to encourage further education and workplace participation since most family contact discussions centred on day to day activities and not education and work decisions, which were more likely to be a focus in discussions with carers. The general view was that most families would not encourage or support participation in work or education and may have a negative influence by modelling non-participation in the workforce. The caseworkers' general view was that for young people who refuse to attend school, legislative and policy changes that required them to be 'learning or earning' would have no impact on their decision to exit early. One respondent said, 'if they weren't going to school when they were 12, it's not going to make any difference when they are 16' (Participant #7).

Many caseworkers were positive about the influence of peer support from other young people in care and believed that advocacy and support groups, such as the Create Foundation, can play an important part in motivating and guiding young people. One of the participants referred to a young person whose life was changed as a result of involvement in a Create workshop. The young person came away more motivated, happier to engage with the statutory worker and more prepared to view the statutory department as a source of support.

Engaging in educational and extra curricular activities enhanced young people's capacity to relate to others, to form networks and engage in structured activities. If young people were in stable placements then it would be more possible for them to become engaged in extra curricular activities. It was recognised that engagement in extra curricular activities broadened a young person's circle, facilitating contact with someone who might influence their decision making and planning.

> *If they are stable they've usually been with the carer long term and those carers are motivated to help those children.* (Participant #6)

> *Placement stability is the key to doing activities. If a placement breaks down the next carer may not be able to provide the transport.* (Participant #5)

It was generally recognised by participants that engagement in casual employment, work experience or volunteer work increased young people's feelings of self worth; engagement in some form of work provided young people with very real skills and a discernible increase in self confidence, feelings of self worth and achievement. As one respondent said, 'they see themselves in a different light - I'm not just a kid in care, I can actually do something …they get a real sense of accomplishment' (Participant #2) and another said, 'a

lot of kids learn on the job. Learn about themselves and how to behave in society' (Participant #4).

Most success stories resulted from the young person's own motivation and desire. However, there were few success stories to tell though some examples were provided of young people who had remained engaged in education or gone on to paid employment. Caseworkers said these young people's aspirations were usually supported by their carers.

> *I think unless a child is particularly proactive in coming to the worker around wanting information around transitioning from school, or around getting a job, unless the young person or carer is pushing that, then it doesn't [happen], like I said, it is not something the worker would do.* (Participant #9)

Research limitations

This is an exploratory study in an under-researched area, so its limitations must be noted. The participants were self-selected and the sample of nine was small. Information was obtained in focus groups where a range of views were difficult to probe in-depth. In one focus group, there was a schism between workers who sought to help young people with all aspects of their lives versus those who saw their role more narrowly, mainly as finding placements and referring young people to other services because of time limitations. Dialogue may have been limited because the former group did not want to contradict the latter or imply any criticism of how they were undertaking their role. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study does provide some insights into the range of views held by caseworkers, and highlights possible policy and practice challenges for both child protection and education agencies in facilitating further education and work opportunities. Further research examining this issue from other stakeholder perspectives and using

multiple methods is underway. The next stage of the project explores the views of young people in care on their aspirations and expectations about leaving school and undertaking work or further education.

Discussion

The findings from this small exploratory study are consistent with the literature. Factors such as frequent placement moves with consequent school disruptions, little family encouragement, lack of collaboration between educational and child protection personnel, and lack of attention to educational needs were identified as barriers to a successful transition to further education or work. Personal factors were also identified as having both positive and negative effects on likely work outcomes: young people with behavioural and psychological problems were seen as very disadvantaged, whereas it was thought that young people could succeed if they were personally motivated and received encouragement from a youth worker or a carer. It seems that this group of caseworkers lacked optimism about the future work prospects for young people in care, and they needed guidance about how to assist young people with this aspect of their life, as is required within their caseworker role. There is a legislative requirement to provide appropriate educational and job training opportunities for children in care in Queensland (*Child Protection Act*, 1999, Schedule 1), however education and work were not at the forefront of caseworker activity or planning, even when they were working with young people in the age group who are soon to leave care. This is unfortunate because young people in care can succeed in further education and work with the right practical, educational and emotional support. Resilience theory can contribute to a broader conceptualisation of leaving care work (Stein, 2006). Helping young people build a positive sense of identity and positive experiences at school are factors associated with resilience, and for some children

placement instability can be compensated for by school continuity or identification with a strong adult role model (Stein, 2006). Even if parents were not supportive, another important adult in the child's life could play a positive role in adolescent development (Farruggia et al., 2006).

The Create Foundation's *Education Report Card 2006* revealed that while each Australian State and Territory had increased its focus on the education of children in care, mostly with the use of an individualised education plan, none could claim to have a comprehensive picture of the educational participation and performance of children and young people in care (Create Foundation, 2006). The Create report, and the findings of the present study, suggest that within Australia the education of children in care is still seen as a 'special topic' rather than as an integral and vitally important aspect of care in itself (Jackson, 2006). This has serious implications for the long-term prospects for young people in care, and highlights the importance of this issue for child protection practice and further research on children in care. Although child protection workers may not be giving much attention to education and work, the Create Foundation (2006) found that most young people in care aimed to obtain a post-secondary or university qualification, reinforcing the importance of not underestimating the ability and potential of young people in care. The evidence strongly suggests that educational and work outcomes could be improved if care were improved. Fewer placement and school changes; involvement in extracurricular activities; youth employment or volunteer experience while in care; access to career advice and guidance; independent living skills training; educational advocacy; integrated child protection and education case management; flexible financial support, scholarships and professional support beyond the age of eighteen years; focussed and regular caseworker contact; promotion of educational achievements; and monitoring of education outcomes

are all likely to be useful (Jackson, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006; Stein, 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006). This is not to suggest that lower levels of achievement in the school and workplace for children in care can be attributed to the care system. Clearly educational institutions have a vital role to play. Moreover, there are entrenched social inequalities and social risk factors that are linked to under-achievement in education, it is a problem much wider than children in care (Berridge, 2007). But for individual children and case planning, the role and responsibility of the carer and the caseworker in promoting education as a route to a better quality of life is vital.

Conclusion

This article examines child protection caseworker perspectives of young people's transition from school to work. Caseworkers believed that, for young people in care, factors such as unstable placements, psychological and behavioural problems, inadequate vocational options, and their own lack of knowledge of about training and education options, may impede young people in care from making a successful transition from school. Career development was not a priority for caseworkers, who generally had a narrow view of their role and influence upon young people in care. However, the caseworker should play an important role in helping young people in care with the school to work transition. Every upward step in educational qualifications results in improvements in every aspect of adult life: employment, housing, mental and physical health, family and parenting, resilience, self efficacy, respect for law, absence of addictions and lifelong learning (Schuller et al., 2001; Jackson & Simon cited in Jackson, 2006). It must be reinforced with policy makers, caseworkers, teachers and carers that work undertaken to assist young people in care to remain in education, and plan for workplace participation, helps them achieve fulfilling adult lives. This work needs to start early. Career planning may not spring to mind as an

immediate priority, but ignoring it has serious consequences. Young people in care need and deserve help to gain the confidence and motivation to prepare for work and have a sense of direction about their future.

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