

Discussion

The life course perspective: An integrative research paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers?



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ABSTRACT

The educational progress, experiences and attainment of children in out-of-home care and care leavers continue to be an issue of concern internationally. A growing body of research from countries such as the UK, USA, and Sweden indicates that care leavers tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than their majority population peers. Recent evidence suggests that low educational attainment of individuals with care experience may be the result of a "complex combination" of various individual characteristics as well as pre- and in-care experiences (O'Higgins et al., 2015: 13).

White and Wu (2014) have highlighted the value of applying a life course perspective to child welfare research noting the potential of this approach given its emphasis on social context, individual development, and the effect of change over time. This paper embraces their case by advocating for use of the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm when investigating the educational experiences of adult care leavers. Applying a life course perspective to research in this area has the capacity to add new dimensions to our understanding of the issue. This is due to the long-term perspective that this approach takes as well as its capacity to consider the interaction of individual and social factors and change over time.

The paper begins with an outline of the key themes and concepts of the life course perspective followed by an overview of existing literature related to the educational experiences and attainment of children in care and care leavers. There follows a discussion of how using this perspective as a guiding research paradigm, with its accompanying themes and concepts, may facilitate a deeper understanding of the educational progress and experiences of adult care leavers. Throughout this discussion we will draw on a composite worked-case example from an ongoing PhD study of the educational experiences of adult care leavers in Ireland to highlight the value of applying a life course perspective to this issue.

1. Introduction

Education serves many social purposes beyond its core focus. It is one of the primary mechanisms for preventing poverty (Snow, 2009) and is central to adult health and well-being (Hammond & Feinstein, 2006). Education is therefore of vital importance to the well-being of those at risk of social exclusion as adults, for example individuals who spent time in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, residential care; hereinafter 'care') as children and young people (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). However, international research over recent decades indicates that this group, often referred to as 'care leavers'^{1,2} experience poorer educational outcomes than their majority population peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Sebba et al., 2015; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008).

A range of factors may play a role in influencing the educational experiences and attainment (highest level of education achieved) of children in care and care leavers including a person's age when entering and leaving care, time spent in care, and number of placement changes (Pecora et al., 2006; Sebba et al., 2015; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). Berridge, Dance, Beecham, and Field (2008) note that the reasons for low educational attainment among children and young people with care experience appear to include a range of *individual* and *contextual* influences. They suggest that these need to be understood and addressed if individuals with care experience are to be afforded similar opportunities for educational success as their peers.

Recently, the life course perspective has been identified as a "useful organising research paradigm" for child welfare research given its

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¹ The term 'care leaver' is widely used in literature on this topic and for the most part refers to care leavers roughly aged 18–24. The term 'adult care leaver' is used in this paper to refer to those adults who spent time in care as children and are aged 25+ - i.e. 'older' care leavers.

² The authors acknowledge that 'care leavers' is a catch-all term that risks obscuring the diversity of experience within this group.

“emphasis on dynamic change, longitudinal effects, physical and psychosocial development, and social context” (White & Wu, 2014: 147). In this article, we respond to this claim by arguing that the life course perspective can also be a valuable guiding research paradigm for examining the education of adult care leavers in new ways. Applying a life course perspective to research in this area, for what appears to be the first time, has the potential to illuminate new dimensions of understanding regarding key issues in the education of this group - and other comparable groups experiencing educational disadvantage.

As we shall see, the life course perspective provides us with a unique way of integrating conceptually a range of disparate factors that are considered important when it comes to education *over time*, for example, school and family relationships and continuity in school experience. Approaching research in this area from a life course perspective, we argue, facilitates consideration of the cumulative consequences of life experiences, the role of early life experiences in later outcomes, and the ways in which intersecting life pathways in care and education influence one another. The particular focus in this article on applying a life course perspective to research related to ‘adult care leavers’ provides us with the opportunity to “look back” over a longer period of time than has previously been done. This approach can potentially provide insights into the long-term educational experiences of adult care leavers and influences on their education over time. Such insights could prove invaluable to future practice, policy, and research on this issue given their capacity to help us disentangle and understand potential factors that influence the education of care leavers over time including key events, relationships, and turning points.

We now present an outline of the key themes and concepts of the life course perspective followed by an overview of existing literature related to the educational experiences and attainment of children in care and care leavers. We then discuss the ways in which using this perspective as a guiding research paradigm, with its accompanying themes and concepts, may enhance our investigations and understanding of the educational experiences of adult care leavers - and what has influenced these experiences. Throughout this discussion we draw on a composite-worked case example emerging from an ongoing PhD study (undertaken by the first author) of the educational experiences of adult care leavers in Ireland in order to highlight the value of applying a life course perspective to this issue.

2. The life course perspective: overview and key components

The life course perspective provides an integrative, interdisciplinary framework for exploring human lives from birth to death (Mayer, 2009). Crossing disciplinary boundaries, academic fields, and cultural contexts (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), the life course perspective focuses on the ways in which chronological age, life transitions, relationships, and social change shape our lives from birth to death (Hutchison, 2011). Given the interdisciplinary interest in the issue of educational attainment and experiences of care leavers (from, for example, education, psychology, social work and social policy), the interdisciplinary nature of the life course perspective is an important feature when drawing on it as a guiding research paradigm. The life course perspective allows us to consider the relationship between what happens in childhood and adolescence and later experiences in adulthood (Hutchison, 2011). At the very heart of the life course perspective, lies the belief that development takes place continually over the course of a person's life while emphasising the fact that “no life stage can be understood in isolation from others” (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2011: 273).

A number of themes and concepts are considered central to the life course perspective. These are represented in Fig. 1 and addressed in detail below.

2.1. Key themes of the life course perspective

There are six interrelated themes in the life course perspective. Initially four themes were seen as relevant: 1) The interplay of human lives and historical time; 2) The timing of lives; 3) Linked/independent lives; and 4) Human agency (Elder, 1994; Elder & Giele, 2009). Two additional themes have subsequently been added to the life course perspective: Diversity in life course trajectories; and Developmental risk and protection (Elder, 1998; Shanahan, 2000).

The *interplay of human lives and historical time* reminds us that both individual and family development must be understood within the relevant historical context; individuals born in different years are inevitably exposed to differing historical worlds (Elder, 1994; Hutchison, 2011).

The *timing of lives* theme refers to the age at which specific life events and transitions take place in an individual's life (Hutchison, 2005). While varying behaviours and roles are associated with different age groups based on biological, psychological, and social age (Hutchison, 2011), an individual may move into or out of a particular role ‘on-time’ or ‘off-time’ according to social norms or expectations; for example, teenage parenthood is now likely to be considered an ‘off-time’ life event in some Western societies (Hutchison, 2005).

Linked lives, arguably the most central theme within the life course perspective (Elder, 1994), relates to the interdependence of human lives and the ways that relationships with others can both “support and control an individual's behaviour” (Hutchison, 2005: 24). Our lives are generally rooted and reciprocally connected within social relationships with family and friends across the course of our lives (Elder, 1994; Hutchison, 2011). The lives of family members, in particular, are linked and influence each other, with these relatives acting as sources of support and control for individuals, often across generations (Hutchison, 2005). The theme of linked lives refers to the interdependence and the ‘linked’ nature of family members' relationships but also to the interactions between the lives of individuals and those of their friends, peers, co-workers and other key people over the course of their lives (Elder, 1994). Importantly in the context of this paper, new relationships can “shape” lives, “fostering “turning points”” that lead to a change in behaviour (Elder et al., 2003: 13).

The last of the core themes of the life course perspective is *human agency*. According to this theme, individuals ‘construct’ their life course via choices they make and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of their historical, cultural, and social context (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2005). That is, people play an active role in shaping their lives (Hardgrove, Pells, Boyden, & Dornan, 2014). It is important to note however, that unequal opportunities, which lead to members of society having varied levels of such power, also influence the exercise of human agency (Hutchison, 2005).

If we consider the range of experiences individuals may have under each of the four core themes of the life course perspective outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that diversity should exist in individual life course trajectories, as influenced for example by the person's relationships and the social, cultural, and historical context in which s/he lives. In his 1998 paper, Elder outlined a number of longitudinal life course studies that demonstrated this diversity depending on individual experiences (Elder, 1986; 1987). Finally, the theme of developmental risk and protection proposes that an individual's experience of a transition or event in his/her life will impact on successive transitions and events in such a way that may either sustain the individual's life course trajectory or indeed, disrupt it (Hutchison, 2011).

2.2. Key concepts in the life course perspective

In addition to the above themes, a number of key concepts have emerged as central to the life course perspective. These include trajectories, pathways, transitions, and turning points. Trajectories are long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life, for example

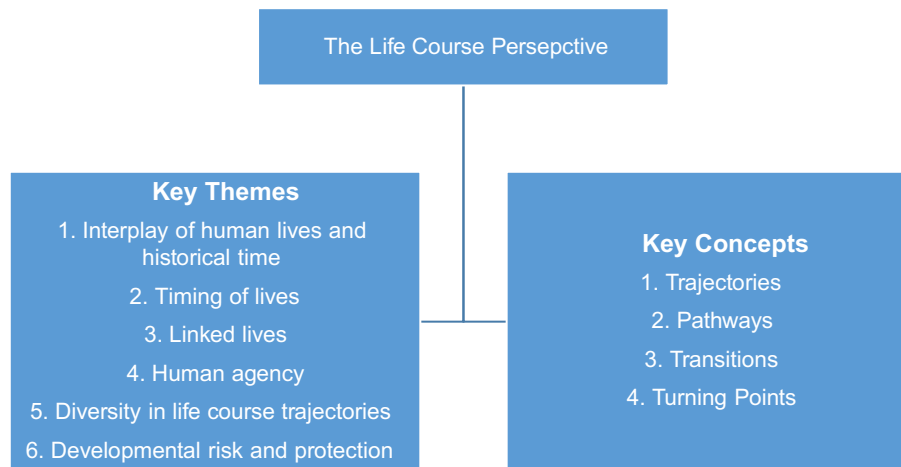


Fig. 1. Key themes and concepts of the life course perspective.

an individual's permanency trajectory (Hutchison, 2005: 144). Pathways refer to sets of interrelated trajectories, for example, an individual's trajectories through work, education, and family life. Transitions refer to changes in role and/or status that involve a departure from a previous role or status. Finally, turning points occur when a life event or transition results in a lasting shift in the overall life course trajectory (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2011). These concepts of the life course help us to structure further our understanding of key experiences and moments across the life course. They enhance our ability to identify potential influencers of various aspects of human development over time while also enabling us to conceptualise the long-term impact of such events and experiences.

3. The education of children in care & care leavers

Cameron et al. (2011: 3) note that young men and women with care backgrounds are "among the most economically and socially excluded groups in European nations". With its capacity to support opportunities for social mobility and reduce social exclusion (Waldfoegel, 2004), education is particularly important for the adult well-being of this group who are at increased risk of social exclusion in later life (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Jackson & Höjer, 2013). Yet children, young people, and young adults who have spent time in care as children have been found to have lower levels of educational attainment than their majority population peers (Cameron et al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Luke, 2015; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008).

A minority of care leavers appear to achieve high levels of educational attainment through, for example, pursuing university education (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2014; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). However, this is far from the norm in spite of the fact that it has been suggested that "poor educational performance should be regarded as a main determinant for care leavers' future life chances" (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011: 2496).

3.1. A complex issue

Sebba et al. (2015) recently moved empirical work in this area to a new level conducting a large-scale study linking care and education data for a cohort of children in England. They found that educational outcomes for children who were in care for 12 months or more were better than for children in need but not in care and children in care for less than 12 months. The overall comparison group (children neither in care nor in need) performed best overall. While this study was carried out using data related to children *currently* in care, the findings also have implications for how we view and interpret the educational

outcomes of care leavers. Findings of a recent systematic review (O'Higgins et al., 2015: 13) exploring the effects of the care system on educational outcomes suggest that poor educational outcomes of individuals with care experience may result from "a complex combination of individual characteristics and pre-care and potentially in-care experiences, such as placement instability". This review also concluded that a range of individual, family, school, community, and policy factors must be considered when seeking to predict educational attainment (O'Higgins et al., 2015). The implications of such a complex combination of factors warrant further, in-depth exploration of the nuances of individual experiences of care and education in order to examine these issues *over time*.

If we consider the findings of these two key pieces of work in this area, they arguably highlight the complexity of the issues at play in regard to education and care emphasising the need for an integrative organising *research paradigm* within which to examine and tease out the nuance and detail of how these issues influence one another over time.

3.2. Factors influencing educational attainment

A number of qualitative and quantitative studies have identified various factors that may influence the educational progress and experiences of care-experienced children and young people; these studies drew on data related to the outcomes and experiences of care leavers and children in care. These factors include a person's age when entering and leaving care, time spent in care, and number of placement changes (Pecora et al., 2006; Sebba et al., 2015; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). Further to this, pre-care factors including parental alcohol misuse, in-care factors including level of interest/encouragement of education by carers, and post-care factors including a lack of continuing relationships (Mallon, 2007; Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014) have been identified as influencing educational attainment among care leavers.

Gilligan (2007) points to the value of participation in spare time activities in supporting educational progress among young people in care. Receiving support and encouragement from a significant adult emerged as a key influencer on the education of care leavers and adult care leavers in a number of qualitative studies (Driscoll, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Jackson & Höjer, 2013; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Neal, 2017). Furthermore, a systematic review of the literature (O'Higgins, Sebba, & Gardner, 2017: 198) and an analysis of a large scale Canadian data set (Tessier, O'Higgins, & Flynn, 2017: 1) indicated an association between caregiver educational aspirations and the "educational success" of children in care.

Mannay et al. (2017) carried out qualitative research in Wales with 67 care-experienced children and young people ranging from age six to 27. The sample included children and young people who were still in

care and care leavers. One of the key findings to emerge from this study was the role that policies and practices play in shaping the educational experiences of children and young people in care. They found the children and young people in their study experienced these policies and practices as alienating, removing care-experienced children and young people “from dominant discourses of educational achievement” (2017: 683). Children and young people with care experiences appear to be assigned the “supported” subject position leading to their being permitted and even encouraged not to succeed academically given their complex and often disrupted home circumstances (Mannay et al., 2017). Interestingly, participants rejected these “diminished expectations” instead seeking to be “pushed and challenged” in order to realise their full potential (Mannay et al., 2017: 683). These findings highlight the interplay of individual and structural factors in influencing the educational experiences of care-experienced children and young people over time.

Findings from two additional studies provide further support for the role of individual factors regarding educational experiences and outcomes for children, young people, and adults with care experience. Jackson and Cameron (2012) drew on data from the ‘Young People from a Public Care Background: Pathways to Education in Europe (YIPPEE)’ study which explored the reasons for the educational underperformance of young people who had spent time in care across five EU countries; Denmark, England, Hungary, Spain (Catalonia), and Sweden. Study findings point to a number of individual factors that care leaver participants indicated had acted as both barriers and facilitators to their educational progress. These included inadequate basic skills, for example literacy, and an absence or presence of motivation, persistence, and determination. Berridge (2017) examined the responses of 26 young people in care when asked about what contributed to their educational progress while in secondary school. Interestingly – and critically from a life course perspective – findings revealed that the young people were “exercising control over their educational experiences” by way of engaging with learning when they had a sense that other difficulties in their lives were being managed (p. 88). Berridge (2017) regarded this as the young people expressing their agency.

The sources that have been reviewed so far highlight the complexity that underlies the issues of the educational progress, experiences and attainment of both children in care and care leavers. However, these sources do not appear to overtly incorporate principles of the life course perspective in their consideration and analysis of the educational experiences and progress of children in care or care leavers. We argue that the absence of such a perspective on this issue results in an incomplete understanding of the factors that influence the education of individuals with care experience. We suggest that the long-term view that a life course perspective provides – and its potential to capture the fluidity, complexity and nuance of the various elements that may influence education (for example, human agency, historical context, and the timing of various life events, and critical turning points) – makes this perspective invaluable for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers.

4. The life course perspective: a guiding research paradigm

A *research paradigm* is “a perspective held by a community of researchers that is based on a set of shared assumptions, concepts, values, and practices” or put “more simply, it is an approach to thinking about and doing research” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012: 31). Identifying a research paradigm is one of the central starting points for many research studies. The guiding paradigm will generally inform decisions related to questions of research design, conceptual framework, and analysis (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

The life course perspective is applied and discussed in the wider existing research literature in a range of ways including as a guiding research paradigm (Elder, 1994; White & Wu, 2014), as a conceptual framework (Coulter, Ham, & Findlay, 2016; Hser, Longshore, & Anglin, 2007), and as

a methodological approach (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014; Locke & Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011). Arguably, all of these ways of applying the life course perspective are based on its application as a guiding paradigm. White and Wu (2014) stress the value of the life course perspective as a research paradigm in light of the range of relevant concepts and themes (as outlined above) it provides. Drawing on the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm arguably provides an integrative framework for conceptualising issues related to education and care over time while also providing options for subsequent choices regarding research design and analysis (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

The key components of the life course perspective as outlined above provide us with a multi-dimensional lens with which to strengthen research related to the educational experiences of care leavers. One of the primary reasons that the life course perspective is so suited to guiding research in this area relates to the long-term perspective it offers in considering how individual or group experiences have been influenced over time. Indeed, one of the fundamental ideas at the heart of this perspective is the recognition that earlier life events shape later life experiences (Elder et al., 2003). Consideration of, for example, the cumulative consequences of life experiences allows us to paint a rich, in-depth picture of how a person comes to be where they are today, particularly if we draw on qualitative methodologies to explore the issue. In particular, for adults who spent time in care as children, their experiences of care and education, key life events, and relationships with others are likely to be complex and intersect with one another; experiences in one area will likely shape and influence experiences in another. The life course perspective provides a framework within which to conceptualise and explore the intricacies and nuances of these individual pathways and how they interact and shape various areas of individual lives. The life course perspective allows us to explore such research questions as:

- What is the nature of the educational experiences that adult care leavers have had over the course of their lives, and expect to have in the future?
- What are the critical experiences in the life course that have influenced the educational experiences of adult care leavers and how have these interacted?³

Existing studies examining the issue of the educational progress and experiences of children in care and care leavers have done so through various theoretical lenses, for example resilience theory (Cotton et al., 2014; Driscoll, 2013; Milligan, 2005) and focal theory (Hollingworth & Jackson, 2016). While application of these theories can contribute to aspects of our understanding of the educational experiences and progress of care leavers and undoubtedly provide valuable insights, the life course perspective provides a distinctive and integrative *long-term*, interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and multidimensional perspective on this issue as well as acting as a guiding paradigm within which to conceptualise and develop research in this area. White and Wu (2014: 147) note that the life course perspective is “similar” to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems perspective – a framework that has been widely used to inform concepts and theories in child welfare. However, they argue that the life course perspective pays specific attention to the ways in which the timing of change in our lives will have differing impacts on individual biographies. Furthermore, they suggest that the life course perspective pays more specific attention to the interaction of individual and social change in individual biographies over time.

The life course perspective is also compatible with other influential theories and thus facilitates researchers drawing on additional theories,

³ These research questions are the focus of the first author’s ongoing PhD study which is being supervised by the second author and undertaken in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Funding for the study is based on a combination of self-funding and grants from the School of Social Work and Social Policy.

such as resilience theory and actor network theory, in analysing data in the context of this long-term perspective.

The value of drawing on the life course perspective when conducting qualitative research on this issue lies in its capacity to pinpoint particular ways in which a person's experiences may have been influenced at various points over time. Seeing the work of such influencers over time has considerable implications for practice and policy given the potential to begin to discern and highlight practical ways in which educational experiences have been shaped.

There follows a composite-worked case example which we will refer to throughout the following discussion to illustrate the potential value of the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm for investigating the educational experiences of adult care leavers. This case is derived from the 'educational life histories' of a number of participants in an ongoing PhD research project to form a composite case example (based on selected features found in the cases already interviewed). As this study is ongoing and data analysis is not yet complete, a composite example was deemed the most appropriate way to present an exemplar 'case'. The PhD study in question is a qualitative investigation of the lifetime educational experiences of adults aged 25–35 who spent a minimum of five years in care in Ireland. Data is being collected via in-depth educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006). At the time of writing, the first author is approximately halfway through data collection. Participants have been recruited via care leaver networks and organisations in Ireland, social media, word of mouth, and snowball sampling. Prior to commencing data collection ethical approval was secured from the School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

5. Composite case example: Ben

Ben (28) came into foster care when he was six years of age having experienced considerable neglect in his early years. At the same time that he came into care, Ben also started school – he was one year behind his peers in school at this point. Ben's first teacher was both encouraging and supportive of Ben in his school work.

At age seven, Ben's first placement broke down and he was moved to a second foster home. He was able to stay in the same school and his new foster carers were noticeably supportive of his education, conveying high expectations to Ben in regard to his school work. Ben remained on track in this placement (and his schools) until he was 15 when this second placement broke down and Ben was moved to a residential home. Again, Ben was able to stay in the secondary school he had moved to following his primary education (at age 12). His secondary school teachers were supportive and encouraging, as were the staff in his residential placement.

When he turned 18 – the legal age at which young people leave care in Ireland, Ben had to leave his residential placement and he was moved into his own flat. He also sat his Leaving Certificate (final year school exams in Ireland) in the same year and then began a post-Leaving Certificate course in social science. With limited social support, Ben struggled to cope living alone during this year and found it increasingly difficult to manage his finances, his part-time job and his college course. This led to Ben dropping out of his social science course after five months. Ben also became homeless soon after this having found it difficult to pay his rent. By age 19, Ben was not in education, training, or employment and was living in emergency accommodation. His confidence was low and his social circle was limited to people he met in the homeless services.

Having had intermittent contact with his birth family over the years, at age 20 Ben made contact with his sister and maternal aunt. With their support (emotional, practical and financial) Ben moved in with his aunt temporarily and enrolled in a University Access Programme.⁴ After

completing this programme, Ben began a three year undergraduate degree in social science and moved into shared university accommodation. After this he gained full-time employment working as a social care worker in a residential care home for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Ben has worked there for three and a half years and is currently in the process of applying to undertake a Masters in art therapy. He also shares a flat with a co-worker and has done so for the past three years.

6. Applying the life course perspective to examine the educational experiences of adult care leavers

The core themes and concepts of the life course will now be discussed in relation to the value that they bring to developing and carrying out research investigating the educational experiences of adult care leavers. We will return to Ben's experience throughout this section to illustrate how the themes and concepts of the life course perspective help us to better conceptualise and understand his experience.

6.1. The interplay of human lives and historical time

The historical context in which individual and family development takes place is a key consideration when it comes to the educational experiences of adult care leavers. The historical time when an individual is born and lives will play a role in informing their opportunities and experiences – regardless of whether they are in care or not; "differences in birth year expose individuals to different historical worlds, with their constraints and options" (Elder, 1994: 5).

Historical context can play a critical role in shaping an individual's care and education experience as these two systems evolve and change over time. For example, during the first half of the twentieth century in Ireland, large numbers of children were in institutional care, approximately 7000–8000 at any one time (Buckley, Skehill, & O'Sullivan, 1997). From the 1950s on, these numbers began to decline. In 1995 16% of children in care were in residential care (Buckley et al., 1997). By August 2017, 92% of the 6237 children in care in Ireland were in foster care (relative foster care, non-relative foster care). The remaining 8% of children and young people are in other care settings including general residential care and specialist care units (Child and Family Agency, 2017). The historical context of a person's time in care must be considered when examining or seeking to understand educational experiences and attainment. With such a strong previous emphasis on institutional/residential care in Ireland, and some evidence pointing to differences in material and personal support for education in residential and foster care (Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2003), this issue of placement type in given historical periods may be significant for better understanding an individual's particular experience of educational opportunities and support.

Recently, there has been an increased focus on seeking to understand and support the education of children and youth in care, particularly in Britain and the USA. This added emphasis and the resultant emergence of a number of policies and interventions, for example, the Virtual School Head programmes in England (Berridge, Henry, Jackson, & Turney, 2009) may have increased awareness and expectations regarding the education of children and young people in care among social workers, carers, and teachers. This increased awareness may have played a role in shaping the educational experiences of more recent cohorts of children and young people in care, for example, in light of evidence suggesting the potential impact that the timing of placement changes and school changes may have on educational outcomes (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Pecora, 2012; Pecora et al., 2006).

If we consider Ben's experience, he spent the majority of his time in foster care placements – a product, perhaps, of his time given that the focus has been on promoting foster care in Ireland over the past number of decades. Particularly in his second foster home, Ben found his foster carers to be supportive and to have high expectations of him in terms of his educational progress. Ben left his residential care home at 18 as is

⁴ University Access Programmes in the Irish context work across the education sector to 'widen participation in higher education of students who for social, economic and cultural reasons have not yet realised their educational potential' (Share & Carroll, 2013).

the norm for young people in residential care. In line with aftercare policy at the time, Ben did receive some support in securing his own flat, yet the support he received was not sufficient for him to keep up with all of his commitments highlighting a weakness in the education supports traditionally provided for young people in aftercare. While at a policy and research level there have been some moves to begin to address and examine the educational experiences of children in care and care leavers in Ireland (Brady & Gilligan, *In Press*), this is a relatively recent development compared to progress in certain other jurisdictions, for example the UK. If we consider this aspect of the policy context when reviewing Ben's experience then perhaps his return to education and subsequent completion of an undergraduate degree having been homeless for a period and having become disconnected from his aftercare supports takes on a new light. Ben's experience also highlights a key strength of the Irish educational system; there have been a number of policy initiatives aimed at supporting more flexible access to university for disadvantaged students in general including the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008–2013), and National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019. The value of the life course perspective for interpreting Ben's return to education is seen here as it highlights the interaction of Ben's own agency, the support he received from his sister and aunt, and the impact of relevant national policy in facilitating his return to education. This is an example of how the life course paradigm enables us to hold in the frame simultaneously contemporaneous and inter-linking developments at a stage in the person's life and in the broader policy context. The historical policy context of Ben's experience is important to consider when reflecting on his educational experiences as this appears to have influenced his experience in quite specific ways.

6.2. Timing of lives

For individuals who have spent time in care, the timing of different events across their lives would appear to be hugely relevant to understanding their educational experiences. If we consider some of the predictors of educational outcomes we see that an individual's age when he/she enters care may play a role in predicting their educational outcomes (Cheung & Heath, 1994; Pecora et al., 2006; Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarson, 2005; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). For example, being older when placed in care has been linked to better outcomes regarding basic education by age 25 (Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008).

Further to this, the timing of educational transitions (for example, moving from primary to secondary school), key events related to education (for example, sitting State exams, consideration of options upon completion of secondary school), and the presence/timing of educational turning points may shape and influence an individual's educational experiences depending on the timing of these events in his/her life. When seeking to examine the educational experiences and progress of adult care leavers, the age of that person at the time of various life events, experiences, and transitions must be considered. In particular, their 'age' and indeed expressions of agency (discussed further below) must be considered regarding decisions and choices made for them, and by them, in relation to their education.

In Ben's case there were a number of key events that took place over his life so far and the timing of these is noteworthy. For example, Ben came into care at the relatively young age of six and as a result of this began school but did so one year behind his peers. Ben also had two subsequent placement moves – one when he was age 7 and one aged 15. Following these moves however, Ben was able to remain in the same schools; school stability has been identified as a factor associated with educational success among foster care alumni (Pecora, 2012). Ben's transition from primary to secondary school – a time that can be challenging for many children (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002) – occurred while he was in his second placement which was relatively stable at the time. Ben's transition out of care (i.e. 'home') occurred 'on time' in comparison to peers in care but 'off time' in comparison to peers in

the majority population; a 2015 analysis of Eurostat data found that the average age at which young people leave the parental home in the European Union rose from 26.5 to 27.2 for boys and from 24.3 to 25 for girls years between 2000 and 2013 (Eurostat, 2015).

6.3. Linked lives

The centrality of relationships to almost every aspect of human lives is undeniable and according to existing evidence is just as critical to the educational experiences and attainment of care leavers. Relationships and emotional support – or lack thereof – are often central to shaping and influencing the educational outcomes of care leavers, for better or worse (Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Driscoll, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Neal, 2017; Pecora et al., 2006).

Findings from the YIPPEE study mentioned above identified a number of barriers which appeared to prevent young people from 'doing well at school' and continuing in education beyond the compulsory age. These included care-related factors such as receiving little encouragement or support from carers and low expectations or a lack of interest in the young person's education and learning from their social worker, all highlighting the potential importance of considering 'linked lives' when examining educational experiences. This study drew on qualitative interviews ($n = 170$), revealing similar experiences across the five countries. A more recent qualitative study (Mendis, 2015) explored the needs and experiences of 18 women with a care background who had gone to university. Mendis identified five groups within the sample informed by the women's life histories: Destined, Decided, Determined, Denied, and Delayed. Those in the 'Destined' group received resources and support for their education above the standard level of public care. Mendis suggests that the women felt that by investing in their education, their carers were demonstrating the high expectations they had for them. She concludes that this experience reveals that when adults caring for children invest in their education the children in their care "internalise this as adults holding high expectations for them" (Mendis, 2015: 138). Arguably, carer, parent, and professionals' expectations are inextricably linked to a child or young person's relationship with that individual. By considering the context, nature, and importance of such relationships over the course of an individual's life, we may begin to piece together a picture of the ways in which these linkages shape individual educational experiences, progress, and outcomes. The concept of *linked lives* that is so central to the life course perspective provides a framework within which to begin exploring the influence of these key relationships – whether experienced as positive or negative – on the educational experiences of adult care leavers.

The role of linked lives over time can be seen in Ben's life via the supportive roles that his foster parents, teachers, aunt and sister played in his educational journey across his life course. The value of these relationships over time can be viewed as one of a number of key influences on Ben's educational experience. In particular, the connection with Ben's aunt and sister that had been 'intermittent' over the years appears to have acted as the catalyst for a turning point with regard to Ben's education as it provided him with emotional, practical, and financial supports he needed to pursue third level education. The focus on linked lives (along with the other themes/concepts) that is inherent in research using a life course perspective provides a framework within which to examine the influence of relationships over time across various areas including education and work.

6.4. Individual agency

The role that individuals play in influencing their life course, within the context of their social and cultural environments, is a key theme within the life course perspective. While adult care leavers are not passive in shaping their educational experiences, they are inevitably constrained by the structural and systemic contexts in which they live.

Being able to conceptualise this dynamic through the application of the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm, facilitates a deeper understanding of the educational experiences of adult care leavers. We are able to consider the role of the individual and the structural limitations imposed on them by other factors including social status, care status, gender, and ethnicity (Antikainen, 1998). Indeed, conceptualising agency in this way may also highlight the, at times, 'invisible' constraints within which care leavers live and experience their education and care.

Shafi and Rose (2014) observe that the opportunities afforded by an individual's background can have an impact on their agency and therefore on whether and how they take up opportunities offered by the education system. This conceptualisation of agency resonates with other perspectives on agency such as 'constrained agency' i.e. when an individual's structural position influences the resources available to them (Gulati & Srivastava, 2014) and "thick and thin" agency (Klocker, 2007). It has been noted that decisions made over the course of an individual's educational journey are part of "complex negotiations between different actors in which individual agency and structural factors interact" (Cuconato & Walther, 2015: 286). As such, if we consider the case of adult care leavers and their education using a life course perspective, we can see their experiences as influenced by both their own agency, and the structural forces within which they live, for example, the care system, access to schools, family/care setting. This was exemplified in the Mannay et al.' (2017: 690) study mentioned earlier. Some participants found that they experienced policies and practices regarding their education as assigning them "the supported subject position". That is, participants felt they were permitted not to succeed in education due to their challenging and complex home lives. Participants exercised their agency by rejecting these expectations which they viewed as "diminished".

Ben's expression of agency can be seen in a number of ways including his wish to pursue further education upon leaving school and his reconnecting with his aunt and sister; the life course view on agency as being tied to structural context also appears relevant given that he had to drop out of his post-Leaving Certificate course after a few months due to his financial and housing situation. The life course perspective's conceptualisation of agency in this way provides a way of considering expressions of agency overtime in light of current (and past) structural constraints and contexts.

6.5. Diversity in trajectories

The life course perspective has evolved to include diversity in life course trajectories as part of its framework. This theme acknowledges the considerable diversity in life course trajectories due to social class, gender, culture, and individual agency to name but a few (Hutchison, 2011). Given the diverse range of life experiences adult care leavers will have had while in care, not to mention their pre-care experiences, acknowledging this diversity and the many reasons for it is important in the context of considering their educational experiences and pathways. The life course perspective provides a more comprehensive framework for considering the reasons for this diversity beyond the fact of being in care and pre-care experiences, allowing us to consider for example, individual agency, the role of relationships with others, the timing of life events, and the role of transitions and turning points.

Existing research has shown that, when it comes to their education, care leavers tend to experience delayed progressions through education in comparison with their peers (Driscoll, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Montserrat, Casas, & Malo, 2013). The YIPPEE study, mentioned above, identified five typical pathways among 'educationally promising' former youth in care across Denmark, England, Hungary, Spain, and Sweden (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). One such pathway involved pursuit of an academic route in line with peers. However, the other four featured delays, vocational courses, short-cycle training, and "yo-yo" pathways i.e. "enrolling and dropping out of courses, frequent changes

of direction" (Jackson & Cameron, 2012: 1111). This finding reflects the diversity of pathways apparent within this sample of care leavers and therefore the relevance of the theme *diversity in life course trajectories*.

While considering diversity in life course trajectories, it is important also to remember that the life course perspective provides a framework within which to explore the dynamics of several interrelated trajectories (Elder, 1994) such that, for example, we may consider an individual's care and educational trajectory together and the ways in which these intersect and shape one another.

While Ben's individual experience is unique to him, his overall educational experiences are perhaps not atypical of other care leavers but represent one of a number of potential educational trajectories that may occur in light of the range of experiences people with care experience may have. As the PhD study in question progresses, diversity of life course trajectories will potentially emerge across participant experiences. However, it is also possible that patterns or clusters of similar experiences or trajectories may emerge within the final sample thus potentially providing a way of conceptualising the range of ways the educational experiences of adult care leavers may be both similar and different. The potential to identify diverse patterns across this sample provides further support for the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm when examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers. By beginning to identify patterns or groups with similar experiences we can begin to untangle those experiences and influences that may make one group of care leavers more likely to succeed or progress in terms of their education and another less likely to do so.

6.6. Developmental Risk & Protection

This theme reflects the way that our experiences of life transitions or events may influence subsequent transitions or events, sustaining one's positive life course trajectory or disrupting it (Hutchison, 2011). Adult care leavers arguably experience more challenging and difficult life events and transitions than most individuals in the majority population (Bruskas, 2008). Considering the role that such events may play in a person's overall life trajectory – that is whether they steer a person toward a negative trajectory or a positive one – appears to be a critical factor when we are looking at the overall educational experiences and outcomes of such a vulnerable group.

Turning points, a key concept of the life course, provide a way of conceptualising how a life event, episode, or transition may shape an individual's life trajectory and may facilitate our understanding of the educational experiences of adult care leavers. A number of participants in Driscoll's (2013) study of seven care leavers in England noted the role of key events in their lives which they identified as 'turning points' regarding their education. Hollingworth's (2012) observation of the role that social and leisure activities can play in creating opportunities for positive educational turning points among some of the participants in the YIPPEE study is also relevant to our application of the life course perspective in seeking to understand the educational pathways of care-experienced adults. These two examples highlight the role that life events or transitions can play in shaping an individual's life course trajectory by sustaining or disrupting that trajectory.

Ben has experienced a number of transitions and turning points throughout his life to date, each directing his life path in a new or continued direction. For example, when Ben came into care and started school this could be considered a developmentally 'protective' experience. Similarly, Ben's reconnecting with his sister and aunt served to act as a positive 'turning point' in his life. Conversely, Ben's experience of leaving care and ultimately becoming homeless lead him down a developmentally 'risky' path, if only for a short period. By looking back at Ben's experience from a more long-term view, in this instance at the age of 28 years, we are able to consider how various influences may play out over time. For example, Ben made contact with his aunt and sister at the age of 20, a decision which arguably influenced his education for many years after.

6.7. The role of the key concepts of the life course

The concepts at the heart of the life course perspective (including transitions, and turning points) have the potential to illuminate key aspects of the educational experiences and progress of care leavers (see White & Wu, 2014 for a detailed discussion of how these concepts may apply to child welfare research more generally).

The concepts of turning points and transitions are incorporated into existing literature related to care leavers' experiences of leaving care and transitioning to adulthood (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014) and research about care leavers accessing higher education (Refaeli & Strahl, 2014). Furthermore, Gilligan (2009: 31) has argued that "the concept of turning points is key to understanding positive developmental change". By approaching research on the educational experiences and progress of care leavers through the lens of the life course perspective using the central themes and key concepts of the life course, we may gain unique insights into these pathways and the multifaceted ways in which they have been shaped. Considering the themes and concepts of the life course together may provide a cumulative and long-term understanding of how educational pathways are shaped in the context of pre-, in-, and post-care experiences, and critical life events and experience.

As was noted above, Ben has experienced a number of key transitions and turning points/turning point episodes to date. For example, his departure from his residential care home, his period of homelessness, his return to further education, and what could be considered his 'turning point relationships' with his aunt and sister. The importance of these experiences in influencing Ben's educational experiences over time cannot be overestimated. Having a framework for conceptualising these factors while also being able to hold onto the role of historical context, agency, and linked lives is one of the many benefits of investigating the educational experiences of adult care leavers while using the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm.

Concluding thoughts on Ben's experience: This long term, "look back" over Ben's educational journey provides us with a way of teasing out the various events that took place along the way and how they interact with each other and are very much intertwined. This perspective highlights the influence of cumulative advantage (for example supportive relationships) and cumulative disadvantage (for example Ben's abrupt move from care to his own flat, to homeless services) and provides a more detailed insight into how Ben's educational experiences over time are interlinked. We can also see how challenges faced in early adulthood (such as dropping out, becoming homeless) can potentially be addressed and turned around in later life.

7. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the key themes and concepts of the life course perspective while also providing some insight into the educational experiences of care leavers. The educational experiences, progress, and attainment of care leavers have been identified as complex. We have argued that applying a life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm for research examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers is a valuable and integrative way to approach research of this kind. This argument responds to, and builds on, the call of White and Wu (2014) to draw on a life course perspective to disentangle the complex issues at the heart of child welfare research.

Using the life course perspective to guide research in this area of education and care experiences has the potential to facilitate a 'look back' from further down the line; that is, life course-based research with adult care leavers provides a longer-term perspective and has the potential to capture the current experiences of adult care leavers and how their current circumstances have been influenced over time. This stands to provide valuable fresh insights with the potential to inform policy and practice as regards the longer-term needs of this group, as well as the nuance and detail of key influencers on their lives over time.

Research that draws on the life course perspective is well-suited to narrative approaches to data collection and analysis given the emphasis on capturing the detail of participant experiences while also taking account of the immediate and broader social contexts in which human experience takes place (Moen, 2006). Greater use of life history and biographical narrative approaches to data collection would potentially lead to a rich, in-depth knowledge base grounded in the lived experiences of care-experienced adults, a perspective that has been identified as largely absent from existing research (Murray & Goddard, 2014).

The flexibility of the life course perspective and its capacity to integrate numerous types of individual, social, and cultural variation (Giele & Elder, 1998) is one of its greatest strengths and one of the many reasons it is so valuable to studies of the educational experiences of groups such as adult care leavers. While the life course perspective has – to the best of our knowledge – never been applied to research examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers, it has been applied separately to studies of both education (Evans, Schoon, & Weale, 2013; Shafi & Rose, 2014) and the experiences of young people leaving care (Horrocks, 2002). This indicates its suitability for studies in these discrete areas and highlights its potential to combine these two strands of research in order to open up a new way of exploring, unpacking and conceptualising the educational experiences of adult care leavers.

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