A Qualitative Life Course Study of the Educational Pathways of Care-experienced Adults

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By

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Declaration

I, Eavan Brady, declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university. Apart from Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven, which are based on co-authored, peer-reviewed publications with my supervisor, Professor Robbie Gilligan, this thesis is entirely my own work.

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Eavan Brady Date

For Alan, Polly, and "Baby Number Two"

Summary

The central role of education in relation to promoting positive outcomes in adulthood is well-established in existing literature (Hammond & Feinstein, 2006; Nicaise, 2012). However, a growing body of evidence points to poor educational outcomes among young people leaving out-of-home care in the initial years after leaving care, that is, between ages 18 and 24 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Less is known however, about the educational outcomes and pathways of 'older' care-experienced adults (that is, those over age 24) and the ways in which these pathways have been shaped and influenced over time. Research in this area, and that of young people leaving care in general (Stein, 2006b), has also failed to take account of wider theoretical perspectives when seeking to understand and unravel the complexities at play when it comes to the poor educational outcomes of care leavers (Berridge, 2007).

Emerging research (Duncalf, 2010; Harrison, 2017) indicates that if educational attainment and progress are measured later than is typically the case (that is extending beyond age 24) rates of pursuit of further and higher education among care-experienced adults may increase suggesting that the 'later' pursuit of education warrants further investigation. Furthermore, O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke (2015: 13) have noted that the 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". Together with the possible impact of events and experiences in the years after leaving care and beyond, these observations point to a need for further, in-depth exploration of the nuances of the educational pathways of 'older' care-experienced adults and those factors that have shaped and influenced them over time.

This study sought to pioneer a new line of inquiry in this area exploring the educational pathways that 'older' care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives. In addition, this study drew on the life course perspective (Elder, 1994; 1998) as both guiding research paradigm and theoretical framework to explore if, and how, this

perspective could provide new insights into how the educational pathways of care-experienced adults have been shaped and influenced over time. To that end, the central research questions guiding this study were: 1) What are the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future? 2) How can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?

Data were collected via 18 educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) with care-experienced adults (aged 24-36) in Ireland. It was hoped that hearing from this 'older' sample of care-experienced adults would: 1) Provide an opportunity to gain insight into the educational pathways of this group; and 2) Illuminate our understanding of those factors that shaped and influenced these educational pathways over time by drawing on two key principles of the life course perspective – 'linked lives' and 'human agency'.

This PhD study incorporates four separate peer-reviewed journal articles and accompanying introduction, background, methodology, and discussion and conclusion chapters. The first peer-reviewed journal article (Chapter Three) outlines the relevance and value of the life course perspective to studying this issue. The second peer-reviewed journal article (Chapter Five) outlines the four educational pathway 'types' taken by study participants. The third and fourth peer-reviewed journal articles explore how the life course principles of 'linked lives' (Chapter Six) and 'human agency' (Chapter Seven) can illuminate our understanding of the ways the educational pathways of adults with care experience are shaped and influenced over time.

Findings of this study suggest that: 1) Diversity in the educational pathways of people with care experience should be expected; 2) Connections with key actors play a central role in influencing these educational pathways and are visible across the life course; 3) Human agency, as conceptualised from a life course perspective, is pivotal to shaping these educational pathways; this is done over time and in the context of various external and structural influences which both constrain and support individual agency; 4) The life course perspective provides unique insights on the educational pathways of adults with care experience; and 5) The life course principles of linked lives and agency are valuable

conceptual tools for examining issues related to education and care and developing existing knowledge regarding how educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time.

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I am incredibly thankful to the 18 people who generously gave up their time to participate in this study. Their willingness to share their experiences so openly and honestly was striking and I can only hope I have done justice to their stories.

My sincerest gratitude and thanks to my supervisor, Professor Robbie Gilligan, whose expert guidance, considered feedback, and relentless encouragement of my research and professional development over the past five years has been invaluable. Professor Gilligan's belief in this project – and in my ability to execute it – were key to the successful completion and publication of this research.

Special thanks to my colleagues in the School of Social Work and Social Policy which I joined as a member of staff during the PhD process. I could not have asked for more supportive and encouraging colleagues who maintained an interest in my progress and reminded me that I could do it on a regular basis!

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complete this journey, or how long it would take, and he has been there by my side cheering me along through it all. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself.

Finally, thank you to my daughter Polly, who entered the world mid-PhD, and to our eagerly anticipated "baby number two" who will enter the world as my PhD journey comes to an end. You bring me joy and contentment that I never knew possible and have constantly reminded me of the bigger picture throughout this process. This one is for you two.

List of Original Publications

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2018). The life course perspective: An integrative research paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers? *Children and Youth Services Review, 87*, 69-77. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.019

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2019). Exploring diversity in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults: Findings from a life course study of education and care. *Children and Youth Services Review.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.06.014

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2019). Supporting care-experienced adults' educational journeys: 'Linked lives' over the life course. *Child & Family Social Work.* DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12677

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (Under Review). The role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Insights from a life course study of education and care. *Children & Society*.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

This study is about the educational pathways of adults who spent time in out-of-home care as children ('care-experienced adults') and those factors that have influenced and shaped these pathways over time. The research is qualitative and uses the life course perspective as both a guiding research paradigm and conceptual framework.

In carrying out this research project I sought to extend existing academic knowledge in the area of education and care by exploring the educational pathways of an 'older' sample of care-experienced adults than previous studies. Much existing work in this area tends to capture educational attainment (i.e. the highest level of education an individual has completed) in the years initially after leaving care, that is ages 18 to 24 (Harrison, 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Drawing on the lived experiences of 18 care-experienced adults who were aged 24-36 at the time of interview via educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) provided an opportunity to gain insight into the educational pathways taken by this group over a *longer* period of time than previous studies while also illuminating our understanding of those factors that shape and influence their educational pathways over time.

This opening chapter serves as an introduction to the study. A brief account of how my own interest in this topic emerged is provided before background information and the rationale for carrying out this study is presented. The life course perspective is briefly introduced, and the study aims, objectives, and research questions are also presented. This chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the thesis.

About the author: Why this study?

My own interest in this subject area emerged as a result of various personal and professional experiences I have had over the course of my life. Education was central to my upbringing and my parents tirelessly and enthusiastically supported (and continue to support) my many educational pursuits. My father was a teacher, as was my mother for a short period, and they both completed PhDs in their subject areas, my father doing

so while I was in primary school. As such, the pursuit of continued and higher education, and the notion of 'lifelong learning', was a part of the everyday landscape of family life when I was growing up. After completing my Leaving Certificate[1], I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology and politics. I spent the following eight years pursuing various endeavours including working full-time in various sectors and returning to higher education completing a Higher Diploma in Psychology and a Master's in Social Work. While I always had some insight into my privileged position with regard to education, it was not until I spent time working in homeless services in Dublin and began my social work training that I realised the full extent of the critical role the opportunities and relentless support and encouragement I had received since childhood had played in shaping my own educational pathway. For example, while pursuing my early postgraduate studies I moved back to my family home to save money on rent while studying and have always had my parents and a network of friends and mentors available to discuss future plans, options, and goals in terms of education.

Further to these experiences, I have had a range of professional opportunities in my adult life and have worked in different countries, contexts, and organisations affording me a unique perspective on some of the issues at play when it comes to education and care and which led me to researching this area for my PhD. As a result of my work in homeless and housing services in Dublin and Toronto, Canada, I worked with many adults who had come through the care systems in Ireland and Canada. I observed first-hand the challenges many of them faced in terms of mental health, addiction and housing, often in the context of limited educational experiences, and the impact this had on theirs and their families' lives. During this time, I also met and worked with adults who had been in care and were pursuing education in various ways, at various stages in their lives, and through various avenues. This gave me insight into the many ways into and through education and the various stages in life that this can occur. In the 18 months before I undertook my PhD, I worked on the development and evaluation of a reading programme (*The Bookworm Club* – see Brady 2013 for more information) for children living in foster care in Ontario, Canada. This experience developed my understanding of

[1] The university matriculation examination in the Republic of Ireland is called the 'Leaving Certificate' (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

the range of daily challenges faced by many children living in foster care in relation to literacy, education, and learning, as well as the key role of carers and professionals in supporting and encouraging reading and its connection to education more generally. Finally, my training as a social worker afforded me an additional perspective on the context in which many children in care live, some of the key issues they face, and the challenges they experience. This training also enhanced my awareness and knowledge of the range of factors that influence human development across domains while developing my appreciation of the importance of considering development as ongoing and the significance of drawing on a strengths-based perspective when working with people over the life course.

Together, these experiences led me to undertake this study. My personal experiences of education as supported and valued along with my professional training and work experience ignited a curiosity and enthusiasm for developing understanding of the educational pathways of people who have been in care and those factors that shaped and influenced them over time. This PhD study is the culmination of the above experiences and my commitment to carrying out research in this area.

Background to the study

Education plays a key role in promoting positive outcomes over the life course. It is central to adult health and well-being and is one of the primary mechanisms for promoting social inclusion (Hammond & Feinstein, 2006; Nicaise, 2012). Education equips individuals with knowledge and skills that may afford them opportunities to participate in the labour market (Sparkes, 1999), supporting social mobility that may otherwise not arise. Research suggests that individuals who have spent time in out-of-home care (foster care, residential care) as children are at risk of experiencing social exclusion as adults (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) and may also experience poor outcomes across a number of domains including health, employment and housing (Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017). Education is therefore particularly important to the adult well-being of children, young people, and adults with care experience (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Jackson & Höjer, 2013). However, a considerable body of international research suggests that individuals who have spent

time in care as children tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than their majority population peers (Gypen et al., 2017; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). While discussions on this issue have begun to consider what is an appropriate comparator group for children in care (Sebba et al., 2015), for example, children in need but not in care, existing studies are broadly unanimous in their finding that educational outcomes tend to be poor for people with care experience, at least in the initial years after leaving care.

Evidence suggests that while some young people leaving care pursue higher education upon completing compulsory education, many do not, at least in these earlier years that tend to coincide with young people leaving care (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2014; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Recent research has indicated however, that some people with care experience may also choose to pursue further and higher education in their mid-late twenties and indeed later in life (Duncalf, 2010; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Harrison, 2017). While the knowledge base on this 'delayed pursuit' of education by people with care experience is still in the early stages of development, delays in the pursuit of further and higher education are certainly common among the general population (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Roksa & Velez, 2012; Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2017). Given the range of complex and challenging experiences that people who were in care may have had prior to, during, and after care (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2018; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Luke, 2015; Welbourne & Leeson, 2012), it is hardly surprising that some may also delay their pursuit of education until their mid-20s and beyond.

Outcomes for care leavers and care-experienced adults

International evidence tends to paint a relatively negative picture when it comes to care leaver[2] outcomes in domains such as education and employment, particularly when outcomes in these domains are measured in the years immediately after leaving care (Gypen et al., 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2017).

[2] The term 'care leaver' is widely used in literature on leaving care and for the most part refers to care leavers roughly aged 18–24. The term 'care-experienced adults' is used in this thesis to refer to those adults who spent time in care as children and are aged 25 and older i.e. 'older' care leavers.

Some scholars have suggested that this focus on 'narratives of failure' (Gilligan, 2017) and the absence of reporting the positive outcomes that many care leavers also experience (Boddy, Lausten, Backe-Hansen, & Gundersen, 2019) paints a disproportionately negative picture of the outcomes of young people with care experience. That is not to discount the substantial evidence of the special challenges young people leaving care face, but rather to highlight that while many young people leaving care experience difficulties and challenges, many also experience positive outcomes (Guest, 2012), particularly when such outcomes are measured beyond the ages of 18-24 (Harrison, 2017). In terms of education, for example, much existing work in this area reports educational outcomes[3] when young people with care experience leave compulsory education or in the initial years after they have left care, that is, between the ages of 18 and 24 (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Sebba et al., 2015; Trout et al., 2008). Murray and Goddard (2014) note that knowledge of outcomes in general for people with care experience tends to focus on the experiences of care leavers in their early twenties. While this is an important stage in the educational journey of many young people, arguably capturing outcomes only at this point does not provide a complete picture of the overall educational progress and attainment of people with care experience.

Care leavers in Ireland

There are just over 6,000 children living in out-of-home care in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter 'Ireland') according to the most recent figures available (Child and Family Agency, 2018). Children come into care for many reasons. For example, their parents may be unable to provide them with adequate care and protection due to illness or addiction or they may have experienced abuse or neglect (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, n.d.; Darmody, McMahon, Banks, & Gilligan, 2013). In Ireland, 92% of children in care live in foster care (both non-family and kinship care) (Child and Family Agency, 2018) representing one of the highest rates of family placement in the world (Gilligan, 2019a). Of the over 6,000 children currently in care in Ireland, approximately

[3] 'Outcomes' in this context tend to refer to educational attainment with regard to compulsory education and where relevant, post-compulsory education in early adulthood (e.g. Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Sebba et al., 2015).

500-600 will 'age out' of care at the age of 18 in line with existing legislation (Child Care Act, 1991; Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017).

Young people who have been in the care of the State for 12 months between the ages of 13 and 18 are eligible for an aftercare plan and to receive an aftercare service (Child and Family Agency, 2017b: 8) until they turn 21. If a young person is in "full time education or accredited training" this may be extended until the age of 23 (Child and Family Agency, 2017b: 3). The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 strengthened the legislative basis for the provision of aftercare services to young people leaving care in Ireland requiring authorities to provide all eligible care leavers with an aftercare plan (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). Prior to the introduction of this legislation, there was no legal entitlement to an aftercare plan for young people leaving care. As a result, aftercare was reportedly provided on an ad hoc basis (Carr, 2014). Concerns regarding the provision of aftercare plans, and access to the associated services and supports continue to be been raised however, as this remains "at the discretion of the authorities" (Gilligan, 2018: 10). Importantly, there is also limited evidence available regarding the short and longer-term outcomes across various domains (education, work, mental health) of care leavers and care-experienced adults in Ireland.

This gap in knowledge regarding outcomes of people with care experience together with international evidence suggesting that the educational outcomes of people with care experience are poorer than those in the general population points to the need to develop the national knowledge base on this issue. In particular, given emerging evidence pointing to re-entry to education later in life among people with care experience (Duncalf, 2010) there is a need to examine the educational pathways of care leavers and care-experienced adults in Ireland over time, particularly beyond age 23. This exercise has the potential to develop our understanding of the educational pathways followed by this group and those factors that may have influenced them from childhood into adulthood. Furthermore, given the conditional nature of extended aftercare depending on a young person pursuing full-time education and training up to

age 23, gaining insight into the reality of the educational pathways of this group stands to provide key insights from a policy perspective.

Introducing the life course perspective

The life course perspective provides an integrative framework for exploring human lives from birth to death (Mayer, 2009). Guided by core principles and concepts (Elder, 1994; Elder, 1998; Hutchison, 2011), this perspective provides a framework within which to analyse and understand the intricacies and nuances of individual pathways across various domains (including education) and how they are shaped *over time*. The life course perspective allows us to take a long-term view when considering various aspects of development while also enabling us to consider how individual and social factors interact and change over time (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a).

While the life course perspective has not been applied to integrated studies of education *and* care, it has been applied to these areas separately in previous studies of care leavers (Horrocks, 2002) and research related to education, lifelong learning, and educational disadvantage (Evans, Schoon, & Weale, 2013; Feinstein & Vignoles, 2008; Shafi & Rose, 2014). Applying a life course perspective to this topic has the potential to provide new insights into the overall issue of education *and* care, given its capacity to pinpoint ways in which a person's educational experiences may have been influenced at various points over time. This perspective and its relevance and value to this topic is discussed in detail in Chapter Three. The life course perspective was applied in this study as both a guiding research paradigm and theoretical framework. Drawing on this perspective informed the use of educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) as the method of data collection which facilitates the telling of a person's educational life story (Ojermark, 2007).

Rationale for the study

The importance of education for adult well-being is well-established in the literature yet much existing quantitative research points to the poor educational attainment of children and young people with care experience (Gypen et al., 2017; Trout et al., 2008). A considerable proportion of the qualitative research gathered to date on this topic has

tended to focus primarily on the views and experiences of "high-achieving", younger (up to age 24) care leavers regarding those factors that shaped their educational progress and attainment (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Little is known however, about the educational pathways of older *care-experienced adults* and the ways in which their educational pathways have been shaped and influenced *over time*. A growing body of work suggests that if educational attainment and progress is measured slightly later than it tends to be (that is extending beyond age 24) rates of pursuit of further and higher education among care-experienced adults may be seen to increase (Harrison, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2019) suggesting that this issue of the 'later' pursuit of education warrants further investigation.

The current study

This research project sought to extend existing academic knowledge in the area of education *and* care by exploring the educational pathways of an 'older' sample of care-experienced adults than previous studies. Drawing on the lived experience of 'older' care-experienced adults via educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) provided an opportunity to gain insight into the educational pathways taken by this group, and those factors that have influenced and shaped these pathways, over a *longer* period of time than previous studies.

In light of the observed "poverty" of theory when it comes to research related to young people ageing out of care (Stein, 2006b: 422) and efforts to better understand the low educational attainment of people with care experience (Berridge, 2007), this study drew on theoretical principles central to the life course perspective that have, to date, not been applied to research examining issues related to education and care: diversity of pathways, linked lives, and human agency. To this end, I sought to develop understanding of the educational pathways of care-experienced adults while also gaining insight into the complexity of *how* these educational pathways are shaped over the life course.

Aims, objectives, and central research questions

The core aims of this study were:

1. To pioneer a new line of inquiry exploring the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future, using a life course approach;
2. To draw on the life course perspective to provide new insights into how the educational pathways of care-experienced adults have been shaped and influenced since childhood.

The core objectives of this study were:

1. To explore the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future, using educational life history methods;
2. To ascertain how the life course perspective can enhance our understanding of the ways that the educational pathways of care-experienced adults have been shaped and influenced since childhood.

The central research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What are the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future?
2. How can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?

Overview of approach: PhD by publication

This PhD has been completed 'by publication'. To that end, this thesis is structured around four interconnected peer-reviewed journal articles. The first of these papers, located in Chapter Three, provides a detailed discussion about the suitability of the life course perspective for research related to education and care. The following three papers are presented in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven and discuss key findings related to the two research questions that guided this study. All four papers were co-authored with my supervisor, Professor Robbie Gilligan, and inevitably grew out of the supervision process that occurred over the course of my PhD journey. I identified the focus of each

paper and was the primary author on all four papers with Professor Gilligan providing key feedback and guidance on drafts of each paper once they were at an advanced stage of development.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter One of this thesis has introduced the author and the topic under investigation while also providing background to the study. A rationale for this study was also provided along with a clear statement of the research aims, objectives, and research questions.

Chapter Two provides relevant background information to this study. This includes a discussion of the literature related to educational outcomes, educational pathways, and factors influencing education among people with care experience. Key concepts including pathways, linked lives, and agency[4] are also introduced.

Chapter Three comprises the first published, peer-reviewed journal article[5] based on this study:

- Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2018). The life course perspective: An integrative research paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers? *Children and Youth Services Review, 87*, 69-77. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.019

- Journal impact factor: 1.383

This paper outlines the key themes and concepts of the life course perspective before providing 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

[4] The terms "human agency" and "agency" are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

[5] All published peer-reviewed articles included in this thesis are presented in the format they were accepted for publication and not the final formatted version published by the relevant journal. For the purposes of continuity, Figure/Table numbers and references in Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven have been amended to fit with the format of this thesis.

the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm may facilitate a deeper understanding of the educational progress and experiences of care-experienced adults. This paper includes a composite case example informed by the educational experiences of participants in the current study to illustrate the value of applying a life course perspective to this issue.

Chapter Four details the methodology used in carrying out this research project. Research design, sampling and recruitment, data collection and analysis, and ethical issues are presented. A critique of the study methodology is also provided.

Chapter Five comprises the second published, peer-reviewed journal article drawn from this study and is the first of three chapters focused on the findings of this study:

- Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2019). Exploring diversity in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults: Findings from a life course study of education and care. *Children and Youth Services Review.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.06.014

- Journal impact factor: 1.383

This paper identifies the educational pathways of the 18 care-experienced participants in this study and highlights some of the key factors that influenced their educational pathways. Drawing on the life course principle of 'diversity in life pathways', four 'types' of educational pathway taken by participants are presented: 1) The Typical Pathway; 2) The Typical Pathway 'Plus'; 3) The Short-term Disrupted Pathway; and 4) The Long-term Disrupted Pathway. Findings point to the diversity of educational pathways that may be taken by adults with care experience and the importance of considering the impact of multiple roles and transitions on these pathways.

Chapter Six comprises the third published, peer-reviewed journal article based on this study:

- Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2019). Supporting care-experienced adults' educational journeys: 'Linked lives' over the life course. *Child & Family Social Work.* DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12677
- Journal impact factor: 1.907

This paper explores how the life course principle of 'linked lives' can illuminate our understanding of the ways the educational journeys of adults with care experience are influenced positively over time. Findings suggest the principle of linked lives is a valuable conceptual tool for providing new insights on this issue.

Chapter Seven comprises the fourth and final peer-reviewed publication based on this study. At the time of submission of this thesis, this paper had been re-submitted to the journal *Children & Society* in the format it is presented in this thesis for consideration following incorporation of reviewer comments:

- Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (Under Review). The role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Insights from a life course study of education and care. *Children & Society.*

- Journal impact factor: 1.15

This paper explores how the life course conceptualisation of human agency can provide insights into some of the ways that the educational pathways of adults with care experience have been shaped over time. Findings suggest that agency is a valuable conceptual tool for examining the nuance and complexity of how individual actions shape the education of care-experienced adults throughout the life course and interact with contextual and structural factors over time.

Chapter Eight provides a comprehensive, integrative discussion of the four peer-reviewed journal articles that form the basis of this PhD. The original contributions to knowledge that this PhD makes is also clearly outlined in this chapter. Finally,

implications for practice, policy, and research and recommendations for future research are discussed along with final personal reflections on the research process.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the current research study by introducing the author, outlining some key features of existing knowledge in this area, providing detail on the Irish context, and briefly introducing the life course perspective. The rationale for the study along with the study aims, objectives, and research questions were also presented. Finally, the approach to this PhD was outlined and the peer-reviewed journal articles at the heart of this study were introduced before an overview of the remaining chapters was provided.

Chapter Two: Background

Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of literature on the educational outcomes of care leavers including detail regarding what is known about the educational pathways of care leavers (and, where relevant, adults with care experience). I will then outline some of the key factors that have been identified as influencing the education of care leavers. Finally, I will introduce several concepts that are central to this thesis: diverse and delayed educational pathways, transitions, linked lives, and agency.

Educational outcomes of care leavers

A continually growing body of international literature has highlighted the poor educational outcomes of care leavers as compared to their majority population peers. Much of the quantitative literature on this topic has drawn on large-scale data sets, often at a national level, and often with a focus on outcomes in the years immediately after leaving care. In their 2006 paper, Courtney and Dworsky drew on data from the US-based Midwest Study, a longitudinal study following former foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, at wave two of data collection. At the time of this second wave of data collection the majority of the 603 young people were 19 years old (95.4%). Findings for former youth in care were compared to those of a nationally representative sample of 19-year olds. While 59% of those in the national sample were enrolled in an educational programme, this figure was 39.1% for former foster youth. Sixty-two percent of the national sample were enrolled in a 4-year college course compared with 18% of care leavers.

Swedish research has also pointed to similar outcomes for care-experienced young people and considers outcomes at a slightly later age. In their 2005 study, Vinnerljung, Öman, and Gunnarson reported the findings of a large-scale exploration of the educational attainment of former child welfare clients including those who had been in short or long-term care. Data from a national register for approximately 800,000 Swedish born youth and their parents in eight birth cohorts were used. The authors compared educational attainment at age 20-27 of 31,355 former child welfare clients

(including those in short and long-term care) with those of 744,425 majority population peers. Results indicate that depending on the subgroup, 35-65% of former child welfare clients had only compulsory education. This is in comparison to 12% of the majority population. Just 3-11.5% of former child welfare clients had post-secondary education compared with 27.5% of peers. In a later Swedish study, Vinnerljung and Sallnas (2008: 144) drew on national register data to analyse long-term outcomes by the age of 25 for approximately 700 Swedish young people who had been placed in out-of-home care as teenagers due to behavioural difficulties or for "other reasons". Around two thirds of those placed for behavioural problems had only basic education by age 25 compared to 8-10% of non-placed peers. A considerable proportion (47.8%) of those placed for 'other' reasons also had only a basic education at age 25. These two Swedish studies highlight some of the nuance and complexity involved when seeking to address the educational outcomes of care leavers. Drawing on the findings of the YiPPEE project (Young People from a Public Care Background – Pathways to Education in Europe) however, Jackson and Cameron (2012) report on the educational pathways of young people aged 19-21 in five European countries with different welfare state models – Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, and England. In all five countries, the authors found that young people with a care background fared less well than their peers in education. More recently, Gypen and colleagues (2017) conducted a systematic review of literature related to the outcomes of children who grew up in foster care. The authors also found that when compared to their peers, young people who leave care struggle in a range of areas including education. All studies reviewed reported lower 'success' rates for former foster children but there was a considerable diversity in these rates, possibly explained by the wide range of ages used in the samples. The authors included studies where participants were over 17 but did not identify a maximum age range in their review. The authors note that this finding also held true across systems of child welfare with a child protection orientation *and* those with a family service orientation.

While many studies indicate that the educational outcomes of care leavers tend to be poor when compared to majority population peers in the initial years after leaving care, when we consider outcomes a little later there appears to be more variation in educational outcomes. Recent work by Harrison (2017), drawing on English data,

suggests that when the percentage of care leavers in higher education is examined at age 23 instead of age 21 the figure doubles from 6% to 12%. This suggests we may be capturing an incomplete picture by considering educational progress and attainment only at an earlier age. Pecora and colleagues (2006) report the educational achievement of a US sample using quantitative and qualitative measures. Case records and interviews with 1087 foster alumni who were placed in family foster care between 1966 and 1987 in a national children's services agency in the US (Casey Family Programs) across 13 states were presented. Average age at time of interview was 30.5 years with foster care alumni aged between 20 and 51 years. A considerable proportion of participants had received a high school diploma or had competed a General Education Development test (GED) at the time of their case closing (72.5%). At later follow up the high school completion rate had increased to 86.1% - this figure includes those who obtained a GED. For alumni aged 25 or older only, the completion rate grows to 87.8%, higher than the rate for the general population of 80.4%. Despite these high completion rates for high school, college completion rates were comparatively low among the sample. While almost half of alumni (49.3%) had completed some college or more, actual college completion rates were 9% overall and 10.8% for those over 25 years of age, much lower than rates for the general population (24.4%). Broadly speaking these findings paint a more positive picture than those from studies focused on the years immediately after leaving care. However, it is important to note that those placed with Casey Family Programs received financial support to participate in activities such as art, sports, etc. and since the 1980s Casey Family Programs has operated a 'case-managed post-secondary education and training scholarship programme'. In a more recent, comparative piece of research, Cameron and colleagues (2018) examined outcomes for young people who were in care in Britain, Germany, and Finland. Drawing on existing longitudinal data the authors focused on outcomes at approximately age 30 across the three countries. People who had ever been in out-of-home care before age 17 were more likely to have no educational qualifications and less likely to have a higher-level qualification than their peers who had not been in care (Cameron et al., 2018). While quantitative longitudinal studies in this area can provide insights into the wider context on this issue, they cannot provide the in-depth understanding and insight into the complexity and nuance that qualitative studies on this topic can provide.

Work in this area has generally compared educational outcomes for care experienced people with their majority population peers. However, Sebba and colleagues (2015) have raised questions regarding what group is a suitable comparator for young people with care experience when it comes to their educational progress. While this work focused on children currently in care and not care leavers it is important to mention in the context of discussions of outcomes as it raises a key point to consider in relation to this topic. Drawing on national data sets linked to education and 'looked after children' the authors explored "the relationship between educational outcomes, young people's care histories and individual characteristics" (Sebba et al., 2015: 4). Data for five different groups were analysed:

1) Children who were in care for 12 months or more and were in care at the end of Key Stage 2[6] (i.e. aged 7-11);
2) Children who were in care for 12 months or more but were not in care at the end of Key Stage 2;
3) Children who were in care for less than 12 months at the end of Key Stage 4[7] (i.e. aged 14-16);
4) Children who were 'in need' at the end of Key Stage 4 but were not in care;
5) Children not in need and not in care at the end of Key Stage 4.

While children who were not in need and not in care performed best at the end of Key Stage 4 (i.e. aged 16), children from both groups who had been in care for 12 months or more came next in terms of performance. The children who were in need but not in care followed and the children who had been in care for less than 12 months performed the least well. When considering outcomes for care leavers, this research suggests that comparator groups matter and that, at least in this instance, children in care for longer periods performed best when compared to other groups experiencing disadvantage and

[6] A 'Key Stage' refers to a particular stage in the English education system. There are six stages (0-5) and each has established expectations in terms of student knowledge. Key Stage 2 refers to the 'junior' stage and is the final stage in the primary phase of education including children aged 7 to 11 (Department for Education, 2013).

[7] Key stage 4 refers to the second of three stages in the secondary phase of education in England and includes children aged 15-16 (Department for Education, 2014).

care. Mersky and Janczewski (2013) observed similar findings when they examined whether foster care was associated with decreased educational and economic attainment in the US. The authors compared educational attainment at age 27 among:

1) Individuals who had been placed in foster care after an indicated allegation of maltreatment;
2) Victims of maltreatment who did not enter care;
3) People without an indicated maltreatment allegation but who were raised in a household with a child protection record;
4) People without an individual or household record of child protection involvement.

Overall, all participants who had been involved with child protection services (groups 1-3) fared worse in terms of education when compared to those without a household child protection record and were at "elevated risk for poor secondary and post-secondary educational outcomes" (p. 371). However, foster care alumni did not differ significantly from those without a household child protection record in terms of high school completion.

When examining the educational attainment of people with care experience it is important to consider the limitations of making normative comparisons between the majority population and the care-experienced population. These normative comparisons are helpful as they generally are drawn from large datasets and often highlight the lower levels of educational attainment among the care population which is important from a policy development perspective. However, such comparisons generally do not account for pre-care factors, nor do they measure progress from entry to care into adulthood. Making comparisons with specific sub-groups as Sebba and colleagues (2015) and Mersky and Janczewski (2013) have done helps to uncover some of the nuance and detail of this issue and allows us to compare the educational progress of children and young people in care with peers who are likely to be a more similar group in terms of their demographics and, arguably, their experiences. However, with such comparisons, we do not get a clear picture of how care experienced children and young

people are faring when compared to their peers in the wider population. While Sebba and colleagues (2015) recommend comparing children in care with those 'in need' and this approach was adopted by the Department for Education in England they also continue to provide comparisons with the general population reminding us of the limitations of both approaches and the need to draw on both normative and specific comparison groups.

The above literature paints a mixed picture of the educational outcomes of care leavers and adults with care experience. While studies considering outcomes at both early and later stages indicate poor outcomes, there is a nuance and complexity behind these figures, some of which we may begin to understand better when considering the aforementioned work of Sebba and colleagues (2015) and Mersky and Janczewski (2013). In the next section I will present and discuss literature related to the educational *pathways* (i.e. the formal path through education) of care leavers and care-experienced adults in order to gain a clearer sense of how the above outcomes unfold. I will then outline some of the factors that have been identified as influencing the educational outcomes and pathways of people with care experience.

Educational pathways of care leavers and care-experienced adults

Several studies have begun to examine the educational pathways of care leavers and care-experienced adults using quantitative and qualitative data. In an early paper on this topic, Stein (1994) drew on the findings of three projects related to leaving care in England reporting that the common pathway across all studies for young people leaving care was to leave school at 16 without any qualifications, to complete training for employment, and then experience unemployment. More recent work by Jackson and Cameron (2012), drawing on the findings of the aforementioned mixed-methods YiPPEE study, identified five typical pathways through education taken by the young people aged 18-24 who participated in two rounds of interviews, roughly a year apart, during this study:

1. Progression through school in line with the age cohort on the academic route;
2. Academic route with delay;

3. Vocational pathway leading either to study at college/university or work-based training;
4. Specific short-cycle vocational training;
5. 'Yo-yo' pathways.

Young people were selected for interview as they were showing 'educational promise' at age 16. The authors note that despite this, very few followed 'pathway one' with a strong tendency identified for young people to be steered toward vocational over academic pathways in all countries. Montserrat, Casas, and Malo (2013) report specifically on the educational pathways of the Spanish (Catalonia) cohort of young people involved in the YiPPEE study aged 18-22. The authors report that while 90% of the 35 young people interviewed graduated from compulsory education at the expected age of 16, their post-compulsory education was "delayed and ultimately indefinite" with 20% no longer studying at the time of their first interview. As with the wider findings of the YiPPEE study, the academic results for the young people sampled were below those of the general population and delays in the pursuit of post-compulsory and further education were common.

Hanrahan, Boddy, and Owen (Under Review) shed more light on the educational pathways – and the complexity therein - of young adults who have been in care in their paper reporting findings from longitudinal qualitative research with care leavers (aged 16-32 years) who were in education, employment or training. Findings from the English strand of this three-country study (Denmark, England, and Norway) are reported and suggest that non-normative pathways through education are often followed by care leavers. They note that the assumption of 'normative' timing of educational transitions and pathways may lead to underestimations of the educational achievements of people with care experience (Hanrahan et al., Under Review). While some participants in this study had followed normative pathways, 10 out of the 21 people in the study had experienced "delayed, disrupted and non-linear trajectories" (p. 14) for a variety of reasons including disruptions in early education, mental health issues, and significant life events. Harrison's (2017) analysis of English data also suggests that a substantial number of care leavers achieve educational milestones outside normative timeframes

while highlighting the fact that two out of three care leavers pursuing higher education entered through alternative pathways for example, via access courses.

While the above outlined studies have provided some insight into existing literature on both the educational outcomes and pathways of care leavers and adults with care experience, we must also consider what is known in terms of factors that have been identified as *influencing* educational progress and outcomes. These factors are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Factors influencing educational outcomes

Many studies have sought to identify factors that influence the educational outcomes of care leavers. While findings vary, several issues are frequently identified including the role of placement and school instability and stability, the role of carers, and the importance of expectations and aspirations of carers and professionals in the lives of young people in, and leaving, care.

In early work on the topic of education and care, Jackson and Martin (1998) and Martin and Jackson (2002) sought the views of 'high achieving' care leavers and explored what they felt had contributed to their success in education. Jackson and Martin (1998) report that once participants entered care, they tended to experience risk factors for low educational achievement, for example, no one taking an interest in what they did at school, not having facilities to do their homework, and placement moves occurring off-time with the school year. Protective factors included stability and continuity in terms of school and placements, learning to read early and fluently, having a carer or parent who valued education, having friends outside of the care system who also did well in school, having out-of-school hobbies and interests, knowing/meeting a significant adult who acted as a mentor and source of encouragement and support, and attending school regularly. Pre-care risk factors were also identified by most participants in Jackson and Martin's (1998) study including parental conflict, poverty, mental and physical health problems, and living in poor neighbourhoods. Later Martin and Jackson (2002) identified ten key areas as having the potential to enhance the educational experiences of children in care, many of which resonate with Jackson and Martin's (1998) work. For example,

normalising children's day-to-day lives, receiving positive encouragement and support from significant others, ensuring that residential and foster carers understood the importance of education and the effort required to achieve, having a good relationship with their social worker, attending school regularly, overcoming negative stereotypes of children in care, having access to practical resources for doing homework/studying in care placements, being able to avail of additional help when necessary, having help with finances and accommodation, and having a special relationship with 'at least one person within or outside the care system, who made time to listen to them and make them feel valued'. Further research with 'successful' care leavers was carried out by Cameron (2007). The author reports on a study of use of services by a group of 80 young people aged 18-20 who left care and who held higher educational qualifications that is generally observed among care leavers. Cameron (2007) found that the care leavers who participated in this study often had a considerable "degree of interest in and commitment to education, and that central to their eventual success" was their own "motivation and initiative-taking" which Cameron refers to as "self-reliance" (p. 39)

Key findings from the YiPPEE study echo some of the findings of this earlier work (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) and provide further support for the role of care leavers in their own educational success. Barriers and facilitators which influenced young people's ability to do well and continue in education related to systemic factors (i.e. division between social services and education and their failure to work together), school-related factors (i.e. insufficient help to catch up on missed school work and not enough protection from bullying), care-related factors (i.e. change of placement, low expectations from social workers, and carers who gave little encouragement or support for educational achievement), and individual factors (i.e. lack of motivation, financial pressures and physical and mental health difficulties). Notably, young people in the YiPPEE study who were the most successful in formal education had engaged to a greater extent in leisure/culture activities providing opportunities for informal learning for example, via hobbies, volunteering, and extracurricular activities (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Hollingworth, 2012). This relationship between positive educational outcomes and leisure activities was also highlighted by Gilligan (2007) in his early work related to children in care.

Dixon's (2016) work with care leavers also points to the importance of having a personal drive and motivation to succeed when it comes to pursuing education and employment. The impact of others' expectations was identified as central when it came to reasons for participation and non-participation in education, employment and training. This referred to both the impact of high expectations *and* the ways in which low expectations and negative stereotypes of people with care experience influence care leavers. Additional obstacles were identified related to coping with personal difficulties (bereavement, housing issues), the importance of easily accessible information, and the advice and the ongoing support of carers: "The continued support of carers was also prominent amongst young people's responses and [this] clearly demonstrated ongoing encouragement and aspirations for their young person" (p. 26). Skilbred, Iversen, and Moldestad's (2017) research provides further support for the role of carers in supporting educational success among young people with care experience. Thirteen foster parents and 16 young adults aged 22-31 were interviewed as part of this Norwegian study. The young adults were either pursuing or had completed their university studies. The authors report those factors identified as important to promoting academic achievement among the foster youth. Fostering a sense of belonging, attitudes and values of foster parents, and daily structures and school routines were key. All participants emphasised the importance of strong routines in everyday life in general, and in relation to school homework, in particular.

Several quantitative studies have analysed existing data sets and published work on this topic resulting in further insights being gleaned on the issue of what influences the educational outcomes of people with care experience. Pecora (2012) reviewed the findings of three studies exploring the educational outcomes of former foster youth in the United States; Casey National Alumni Study, Northwest Alumni Study, and Salazar Study of College Completers. Pecora highlights the importance of permanency for children in care, improving efforts in relation to identifying and treating mental health problems among children in care, minimising the number of placement changes experienced by children in care, and encouraging youth in the US to attain a High School diploma and not just a GED when seeking to improve educational attainment among foster care alumni. Sebba and colleagues' (2015) aforementioned-study used multilevel

modelling with 4,489 children in care, then aged 16. With this process, the authors sought to estimate the contribution of several individual student characteristics and contextual factors related to school and local authorities to the progress of students who were in care, children in need and not in care, and those in the majority population (Sebba et al., 2015). Results demonstrated the negative impact of changing schools, particularly in the final two years of school, and of attending non-mainstream schools. Those young people who had entered care early also had better outcomes. While this study is focused on young people currently in care and not care leavers, it is one of few studies that sought to identify predictors of educational outcomes statistically. More recent work in this area carried out by Cassarino-Perez, Crous, Goemans, Montserrat, and Sarriera (2018) utilised *meta-analysis* methods to review and analyse pathways from care to education and employment. One of the key findings of this study suggests that placement stability is linked with a higher probability of having a high school diploma while significant differences were not observed in relation to educational level when other factors such as race, gender, mentoring and type of maltreatment were considered. The authors note that placement instability may "be where the problem of achieving improvements in care leavers' education lies" (p. 407). In their *systematic* review of the literature, O'Higgins, Sebba, and Gardner (2017) report that male gender, ethnic minority status and special educational needs consistently predicted poor educational outcomes adding that pre-care experiences and birth parent characteristics and behaviours likely play an important role in predicting educational outcomes. The authors also note that carers' and young people's aspirations appeared to predict greater success when it came to the educational achievement of children in care. Research by Sulimani-Aidan (2015) with young people leaving care in Israel found that having higher future expectations while *in* care was positively associated with satisfaction in a number of areas including educational achievements after they *left* care. In later work, Sulimani-Aidan (2017) reports on findings from interviews with 25 Israeli care leavers aged 18-25 noting that barriers to young people pursuing their goals included "weak and unsupportive social ties" (p. 334), obligations to their birth family, and poor personal capital, findings which resonate with aspects of the above literature.

The role of pre-care factors in shaping the educational progress of people with care experiences has been identified in some of the above literature. Further to this, O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke (2015: 5) report in the findings of their systematic review of the literature that "the relationship between being in care and low educational outcomes is partly explained by pre-care experiences, such as maltreatment and neglect". Additional work in the fields of psychology and psychiatry by Teicher and Samson (2016: 241) found that verbal abuse from parents, exposure to domestic violence, and sexual abuse affected specific areas of the brain related to the "auditory, visual and somatosensory cortex". These findings that highlight the impact of early / pre-care experiences on education must be considered when examining this issue; the impact of early experiences on later outcomes is particularly suited to examination using a life course perspective.

While a range of factors have been identified as influencing the educational attainment and outcomes of care leavers in the above literature, Berridge (2012: 1171) cautions that we must "take account of the wider attainment gap" when considering the poor educational outcomes of care leavers. The risk factors associated with family breakdown and entry to care are also closely linked with educational failure more broadly (Berridge, 2012). Furthermore, the relationships between social class and educational attainment is well-established indicating that on average, children from working class backgrounds tend to have lower levels of educational attainment that their middle-class peers (Ball, 2010; Berridge, 2012). The parents of children in care have been identified as tending to be from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bebbington & Miles, 1989; Cameron, Hollingworth, and Jackson, 2011) therefore it is arguably insufficient to simply "link low attainment with unsatisfactory social work services, which has often been the case in England" (Berridge, 2012: 1172). It is not simply the care experience that is responsible for poor educational outcomes but that the "reasons for low attainment of children in care may be more fundamental and difficult to remedy" (Berridge, 2012: 1175). Berridge (2007) also notes that existing work in this area has failed to take into account wider social theory when seeking to understand and unravel the complexity at play when it comes to the poor educational outcomes of care leavers. While some studies have

drawn on theory, for example resilience theory (Driscoll, 2013) these studies tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

The Irish context: What do we know about the educational outcomes and progress of care leavers?

The education of children in care and care leavers has received considerable attention from researchers internationally. In Ireland, however, our knowledge of how people with care experience fare when it comes to their education is extremely limited. There is a "considerable gap in knowledge and available data" on the educational progression and attainment of care leavers in Ireland (Brady, Gilligan, & Nic Fhlannchadha, 2019: 52). Darmody and colleagues (2013) carried out an initial exploratory study on the education of children in care in Ireland; the first study focused exclusively on this issue in the history of the State[8]. Findings drawn from interviews with children in care and those who had left the system highlighted the importance of stable care and school placements, the key role of school in providing stability, the importance of inter-personal relationships with peers, and the significance of interagency collaboration as a potential positive influence on educational experiences. The findings reported here echo many of those outlined in the international literature and represent a first step in understanding the educational experiences and pathways of care-experienced people in Ireland.

In Ireland, there is no data published on how young people leaving care fare when they sit their final exams in compulsory education and there is limited data available in relation to care-experienced young people's entry to higher education (Brady et al., 2019). This dearth of research in the Irish context highlights the need for further research to be done in the area of education and care in general; this project seeks to go some way to building this knowledge base and providing new insights into the long-term educational experiences of adults with experience of being in care in Ireland.

[8] A 2005 study by Daly and Gilligan explored the educational and support experiences of young people aged 13 to 14 in long-term foster care.

Relevance of the current study

The literature reviewed above has painted a complex picture of the educational outcomes and pathways of people with care experience while also highlighting just some of the factors that may influence these outcomes. A clear gap in knowledge on this issue in the Irish context has also been identified. To the best of my knowledge, no study has taken a longer-term perspective drawing on qualitative, educational life histories with care-experienced adults over age 25. Harrison's (2017) work (in England) suggests that considerable numbers of care leavers pursue non-normative educational pathways thus highlighting a need for research seeking to understand "biographies of education and care among this previously hidden group" (Hanrahan et al., Under Review: 7). Furthermore, the life course perspective has not been directly applied to the study of this issue. It has been used in work related to education more broadly (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017) and leaving care (Horrocks, 2002) but not to the two together (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a). The application of this perspective to the current study serves as a response to Berridge's (2007) call for increased use of social theory in research related to this area. As O'Higgins and colleagues (2015: 13) note, the 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". Together with the potential role of events and experiences in the years after leaving care and beyond, the above observations point to a need for further, in-depth exploration of the nuances of the educational pathways of 'older' care-experienced adults and those factors that have shaped and influenced them over time.

Key concepts

Several key concepts are discussed in later chapters of this thesis and feature in the peer-reviewed journal articles that follow. These are largely drawn from the life course perspective[9] and are introduced below. These concepts are discussed in further detail in the peer-reviewed journal articles presented in Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven.

[9] The life course perspective has been described in detail in Chapter Three.

Diverse and delayed educational pathways

'Pathways through education' generally refer to the route followed through compulsory and, where relevant, post-compulsory education. Pathways in the early school years, disruptions and timing of key events such transitioning to secondary school/high school, and the point at which higher education is pursued are often captured in discussions of educational pathways (Hanson, Horn, Sandall et al., 2001; Jamieson, 2012; Roksa & Velez, 2012). A central principle of the life course perspective, *diversity* in life course trajectories[10], reflects the reality that there is considerable diversity in life course pathways due to a range of factors including cohort variations, social class, gender, culture, and individual agency (Hutchison, 2011). This diversity is reflected in the educational pathways of people in the general population (Roksa & Velez, 2012; Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2017) and in recent research about the care-experienced population (Hanrahan et al., Under Review; Harrison, 2017). The reasons for such diverse and delayed pathways in the general population appear to be manifold including class and gender however, evidence also suggests that life events have a role to play including bereavement, birth of children, and employment (Hanrahan et al., Under Review; Roksa & Velez, 2012). For example, students who delay entry have been found to be more likely to have children and/or a spouse (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). In light of patterns in both the general population and care-experienced populations of delayed educational pathways, this concept appears central to a study of this nature that seeks to explore the educational pathways of 'older' care-experienced adults.

Transitions

The concept of transitions is related to that of delayed and diverse educational pathways. Within the life course perspective, a transition is understood as a "change in role and status that represents a distinct departure from a prior role and status"

[10] In the life course literature, the term 'trajectories' refers to long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life (Hutchison, 2005), for example their educational trajectory. 'Pathways' refer to "sets of interrelated trajectories, for example an individual's trajectories through work, education, and family life" (Brady, & Gilligan, 2018a: 71). From a life course perspective 'diversity in educational trajectories' is a more appropriate term for what is being discussed in this paper. However, as the overwhelming majority of existing literature related to education uses the term 'educational pathways' for the purposes of this paper we will use the phrase 'diversity in educational pathways' in order to align with existing literature on the topic.

(Hutchison, 2011: 22) - for example, becoming a parent or moving out of the family home. While literature on transitions traditionally conceptualised youth transitions as orderly or linear, there has been a shift away from this standpoint over the last decade (Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014). When it comes to the experiences of many young people leaving care, experiences of the transition to adulthood have been identified as "accelerated and compressed" (Stein, 2006a: 272). That is, many young people are expected to complete their journey to adulthood in a much shorter period of time than their peers (Rogers, 2011; Stein, 2008).

The concept of 'transitions' is incorporated into much research in the field of education (Cuconato & Walther, 2014; Rodrigues, Meeuwisse, Notten, & Severiens, 2018; Tett, Cree, & Christie, 2017), particularly that related to transitions from junior to senior cycle education or compulsory to post-compulsory education – among both the general population and the care-experienced population (Coertjens, Brahm, Trautwein, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017; Piel 2018). Research has also pointed to the role of transitions in delayed educational pathways (Roksa & Velez, 2012). The role of transitions in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults is likely to be an important one given the potential for accelerated and compressed transitions to adulthood, as well as the various factors that may influence education over time including major life events and emerging evidence of delayed pathways among this group (Hanrahan et al., Under Review; Harrison, 2017).

Linked lives

The principle of linked lives is central to the life course perspective (Elder, 1994). This principle emphasises the interdependence and interconnectedness of human lives across the life course and the ways our relationships and interactions with others can both support *and* constrain our behaviours (Ferrer, Grenier, Brotman, & Koehn, 2017; Hutchison, 2005). The role of carers and other professionals in influencing the educational outcomes and pathways of people with care-experience has been outlined above (Jackson & Martin, 1998; Cameron & Jackson, 2002; Skilbred et al., 2017). Key actors have also been identified as instrumental in the educational outcomes of the general population (Wilder, 2014). Implicit in the concept of linked lives is the idea that

relationships with these key actors will have a long-term or enduring quality and as such that opportunities for support and constraint of behaviours may be present over a long period of time. While to the best of my knowledge the concept of linked lives has not been applied directly to studies related to the educational pathways of adults with care experience it seems reasonable to propose that this principle may be relevant to experiences in this area given the enduring nature of some relationships with carers and key professionals (Munford & Sanders, 2016) and the potential that exists for care-experienced adults to meet key supportive actors (e.g. spouse) later in life.

Agency

Previous authors have noted that agency is a concept that is difficult to define and is discussed in the existing literature according to various definitions (Matusov, von Duyke, & Kayumova, 2016), and indeed it is not always defined in published work drawing on this concept. Existing definitions tend to draw on work in the field of psychology or sociology emphasising the influence of the individual or society on individual action depending on the discipline (Crockett, 2002). The life course understanding of agency captures both the role of the individual *and* society in shaping individual actions while also including a temporal dimension to the concept, thus allowing us to consider the interconnection of these two aspects *over time* (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b). In the context of apparent diversity of educational pathways in both the care-experienced and general populations, paying attention to the role of the individual, as well as external and temporal influences on agency appears particularly important.

Agency has been applied to research in the area of education generally (Danic, 2015; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016) *and* in a small number of studies related to education and care (Berridge, 2017; Mannay et al., 2017). Operationalisations of this concept are rare however (Matusov et al., 2016), and I argue that applying this concept, with a clear definition of how the term has been conceptualised, to a study exploring the educational pathways of care-experienced adults *and* what has influenced them has the potential to provide key insights into the nuance and complexity of how these pathways are shaped over time.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced and discussed key publications and studies related to the current study. I have also presented several concepts and principles that are relevant to the findings outlined in chapter four and the discussion of findings (i.e. peer-reviewed publications) in chapter five. Given what is already known about this topic in terms of evidence drawing attention to normative and delayed pathways as well as literature highlighting the complex range of factors that influence the education of care-experienced adults over time, this research seeks to contribute to knowledge in this area in two key ways. In the first instance, this research project seeks to *extend* existing academic knowledge by exploring the educational pathways of older care-experienced adults than previous studies that is, adults aged 25-35. This will add to existing qualitative research in this area that has, to date, tended to focus on the experiences of younger care leavers. Secondly, I will apply a life course perspective to this study thereby adding to theoretically-informed knowledge on this issue (Berridge, 2007) *and* facilitating the examination of key issues at play *over time.* By drawing on key principles and concepts of the life course perspective during the analysis of data I aim to provide new insights into the ways in which the educational pathways of care-experienced adults have been shaped and influenced over time.

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

In this chapter I present the first published peer-reviewed journal article that was written as part of the current study. This paper presents the case for drawing on the life course perspective when examining the educational experiences and pathways of adult care leavers.

Note that this paper was written using the term 'adult care leavers', prior to my decision to use the term 'care-experienced adults' when referring to adults over age 25 who had been in care.

This paper was co-authored with my PhD supervisor, Professor Robbie. Gilligan. I was the primary author of this paper and developed the current PhD study on which this article is based, carried out the field work for the project, completed data analysis, and prepared advanced drafts of the manuscript. Professor Gilligan played the usual support role in the PhD process. Once the paper was at an advanced stage of development, he contributed through discussion to the refinement of some of the conceptual ideas in the paper, and provided key feedback and guidance on drafts of the paper.

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Abstract

The educational progress, experiences and attainment of children in out-of-home care and care leavers continues 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 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 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 deepening of our 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.

***Key words*:** Life course; education; care leaver

Highlights

- The educational experiences and attainment of care leavers are likely to be influenced by a combination of individual and contextual factors over time.
- The life course perspective is a valuable integrative research paradigm to apply to this area given its emphasis on individual development and social context over time.

- The key themes and concepts of the life course perspective provide a new and integrative way of conceptualising the many factors that may influence the educational experiences of adult care leavers.

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'[11, 12], 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 "emphasis on dynamic change, longitudinal effects, physical and psychosocial development, and social context" (White

[11] 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.

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

& Wu, 2014: 147). In this article, we respond to this call 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 influence one another when designing research in this area. 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 to highlight the value of applying a life course perspective to this issue.

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, and 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, and Elder, 2011: 273).

A number of themes and concepts are considered central to the life course perspective. These are represented in *Figure 3.1* below and addressed in detail below.

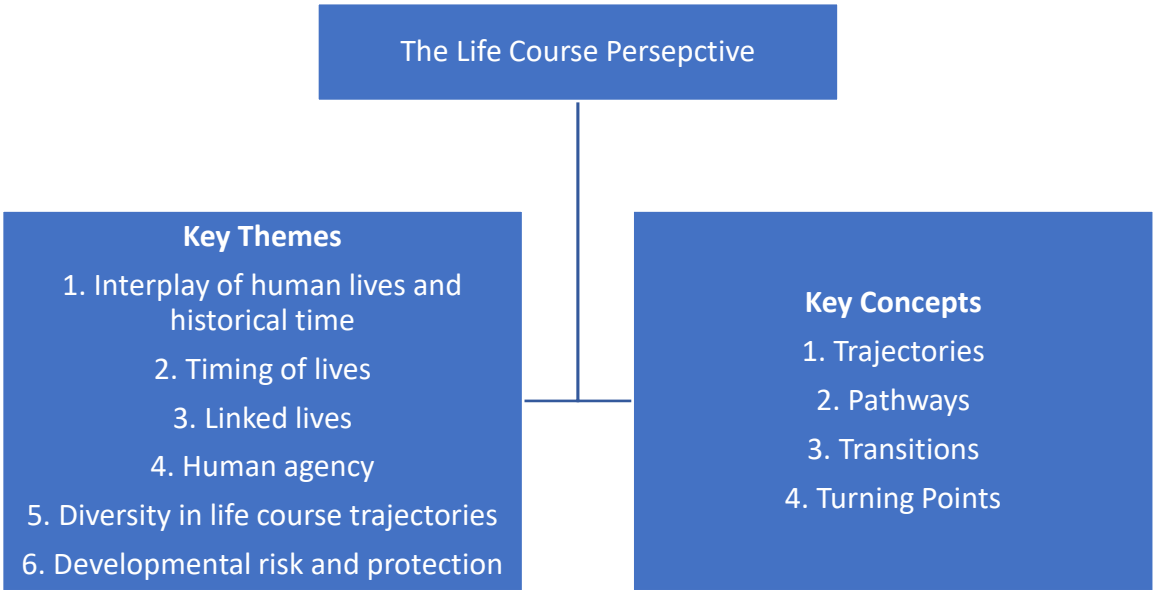

Figure 3.1: Key themes and concepts of the life course perspective

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 by 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 outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that diversity should exist in individual life course trajectories, as influenced for example by their relationships and the social, cultural, and historical context in which a person 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).

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 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 influences of various aspects of human development over time while also enabling us to conceptualise the long-term impact of such events and experiences.

The education of children in care and care leavers

Cameron and colleagues (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 (Waldfogel, 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 & Höjer, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). 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 et al., 2015; Trout et al., 2008; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008).

A minority of care leavers appear to achieve high levels of educational attainment, for example, pursuing university education (Cotton et al., 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).

A complex issue

Sebba and colleagues (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.

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 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 & Ajayi, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Neal, 2017). Furthermore, a systematic review of the literature (O'Higgins et al., 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 and colleagues (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 under-performance 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, 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, the timing of various life events, and critical turning points) makes this perspective an invaluable one for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers.

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 & Goodham-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 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?[13, 14]

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 pathways 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

[13] 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.

[14] Minor revisions were made to these research questions since the publication of this article as this study progressed. These revisions are reflected in the research questions outlined in Chapter One.

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, 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 Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

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 schoolwork. 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[15]. 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 programme. He also shares a flat with a co-worker and has done so for the past three years.

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.

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 context in which 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 7,000-8,000 at any one time (Buckley, Skehill, & O'Sullivan, 1997). From the 1950s on, these numbers began to decline. In 1995 16% of

[15] 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).

children in care were in residential care (Buckley et al., 1997). By August 2017 92% of the 6,237 children in care in Ireland were in foster care (relative foster care, non-relative foster care). The remaining 8% of children and young people in other care settings including general residential care and specialist care units (Child and Family Agency, 2017a). 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 play a significant role in terms of better understanding an individual's particular experience of opportunities and support, and their educational pathway.

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 et al., 2006; Pecora, 2012).

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 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, 2018b), 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.

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 et al., 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 (i.e. their expressions of agency), 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 with 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).

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, pathways, 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, and 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.

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 their factors including social status, care status, gender, 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, 2012) 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 Mannay and colleagues' (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 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.

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 et al., 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.

Developmental risk and 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 perspective, 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 their 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.

The role of the key concepts of the life course perspective

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 valuable qualities of investigating the educational experiences of adult care leavers 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.

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 (Murphy & 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 the research examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers, it has been applied separately to studies of both education (Evans et al., 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 two strands of research issues in order to open up a new way of exploring, unpacking and conceptualising the educational experiences of adult care leavers.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Introduction

The aims of this study were 1) To pioneer a new line of inquiry exploring the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future, using a life course approach; and 2) To draw on the life course perspective to provide new insights into how the educational pathways of care-experienced adults have been shaped/influenced since childhood. In this chapter I will outline the methods used to conduct this research project. I will provide details of the selected research design and how the life course perspective was used as a guiding research paradigm and conceptual framework in this study. This will be followed by information relating to sampling, recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Ethical considerations, trustworthiness of the research, and a critique of the study methodology will also be discussed.

Situating the study: Ontology, epistemology, and research design

This study was informed by a relativist ontological stance and an interpretivist epistemological stance. To that end, I adopted a qualitative approach to carrying out this study.

Quantitative research is generally underpinned by a realist ontological stance, assuming a "knowable world" with one truth existing about the nature of being (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 27). In contrast, a relativist ontological stance posits that there are in fact multiple realities, acknowledging that what is "real" and "true" is different across time and context (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 27). This perspective on the nature of being is highly relevant to a study such as this examining educational pathways and how they have been shaped and influenced *over time* from the perspective of the individuals who lived through those experiences. Furthermore, given its focus on differences across time and context, a relativist ontological stance is particularly well-suited to this study which is guided by a life course perspective and therefore takes a long-term, ongoing view of development as impacted by individual and structural factors.

Epistemology refers to our understanding of "what counts as legitimate knowledge" (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 28). Quantitative research is informed by a *positivist* epistemological stance (Alston & Bowles, 2012; Whittaker, 2009) based on the idea that there is an objective 'reality' which can be accurately measured, and which operates according to natural laws which can be 'discovered' by rigorous and objective research (Marlow, 2011). Interpretivism is a broad term used to describe a variety of approaches that challenge the traditional scientific approach of positivism (Alston & Bowles, 2012). According to interpretivism, the research methods of the natural sciences are "inappropriate to study social phenomena because they do not take into account the viewpoints of the social actors involved" (Whittaker, 2009: 9). Qualitative research, informed by an interpretivist epistemological stance, seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena through exploring the ways in which individuals make sense of, and understand, their social worlds (Whittaker, 2009). Further, qualitative research "tends *not* to assume there is only one correct version of reality or knowledge", uses words (and sometimes images) as data, and tends to be experiential (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 6). While both positivist and interpretivist approaches have many core differences, they are not necessarily dichotomous; qualitative research can represent one element of a study that also draws on quantitative methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on examining educational pathways, and those factors that have shaped and influenced them over time, from the perspective of care-experienced adults, an interpretivist stance was identified as best suited to this study.

Murray and Goddard (2014: 105) note that there is a need for a "strongly qualitative element" to research related to care experience and lifelong experiences as this allows us to make "use of the narrative accounts of individual lives to trace the connections between past and present in ways that quantitative data would fail to achieve". A qualitative approach, informed by a relativist and interpretivist stance, was therefore identified as most suited to this study seeking to gain insight into the unique perspectives of care-experienced participants' educational pathways.

The life course perspective

The life course perspective, which has been discussed in detail in Chapter Three, was used as both a guiding research paradigm for this research project *and* as a conceptual framework providing a theoretical lens for considering key issues related to the study research questions. Drawing on this perspective informed the use of educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) as the method of data collection which facilitates the telling of a person's educational life story (Ojermark, 2007). The life course perspective is one of the foremost theoretical orientations for use in the study of biographical trajectories (Elder et al., 2003). Central to the life course perspective lies the conviction 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 et al., 2011: 273). The life course approach provides an interdisciplinary framework for exploring human lives from birth to death (Mayer, 2009) while allowing us to consider the relationship between childhood and adolescent experiences and later experiences in adulthood (Hutchison, 2011) - a relevant consideration in the context of this study examining education *over time*.

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). This study was guided by the life course perspective given its capacity to act as an integrative research paradigm for examining issues that play out over time while also accounting for structural and contextual influences (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a). This dual focus of the life course perspective along with the opportunity it presented for 'looking back' over experiences made it a suitable fit for this study which sought to gain new insights into the educational pathways of care-experienced adults. As a guiding research paradigm, the life course perspective informed my decisions related to research design and analysis (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), for example ontological stance and choice of data collection method. In the previous chapter (Chapter Three) I have provided a comprehensive discussion of the core principles and concepts of the life course perspective while also detailing how drawing on this perspective as a guiding research

paradigm can facilitate a deeper understanding of the educational pathways and experiences of adults who spent time in care as children.

The life course perspective: A conceptual framework

I also applied the life course perspective as a conceptual framework within this study. While arguably there is a certain amount of overlap between research paradigms and conceptual frameworks it strikes me as important to distinguish between how the life course was applied in both ways to this study. A conceptual framework, often referred to as a theoretical framework (Maxwell, 2005), refers to the "system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research" (Maxwell, 2005: 39). Understanding of the core principles and concepts of the life course perspective was central to my decision to draw on this perspective as a conceptual/theoretical framework. In the context of qualitative research, theories provide the researcher with focus, direction, and consistency (Carey, 2013). When it came to analysis of the data in relation to the second research question guiding this study - *how can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?* – two core principles of the life course perspective (linked lives and human agency) provided the focus, or theoretical lens, through which theoretical thematic analysis was carried out (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Drawing on these principles of the life course perspective during the data analysis stage of this study provided an opportunity to explore if and how these theoretical principles impacted on educational pathways over time. Data analysis in relation to both research questions is discussed further later in this chapter.

Sampling

As this study aimed to explore the educational pathways of care-experienced adults aged 25 to 35 a purposive approach to sampling was identified as the most appropriate. Purposive sampling is frequently used in qualitative research which is often exploratory (Carey, 2013) and focuses on in-depth, small samples (Patton, 1990). The priority with purposive – or non-probability sampling – is to gather enough people to be able to collect sufficient data and begin to interpret, explore and understand the topic under investigation (Carey, 2013). In addition to purposive sampling, I drew on snowball

sampling when recruiting for this study that is, the process whereby a sample (or part of a sample) is recruited because of reference from one person to the next (Denscombe, 2010). For example, several participants shared the study information with other people in their networks or social circles who they felt might be interested and who met the recruitment criteria. Alternative sampling approaches, such as theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2015), may have allowed for more refined theoretical observations and a more complex analysis to have been conducted. Given the exploratory nature of this study however, and the limited research in this area of 'older' care-experienced adults, I decided to keep the recruitment process as open as possible and identified the following two recruitment criteria as part of developing the sampling strategy:

1. *Participants must have spent a minimum of two years in care in the Republic of Ireland*

   Rationale: I wanted to ensure participants had spent a sizeable portion of their childhood in care so that any potential positive or negative influence of being in care on education could be captured. I had originally planned to recruit people who had spent a minimum of five years in care. However, once I began the recruitment process I found people who had spent less than 5 years in care were keen to participate. The recruitment process was slow for this study and so I opted to reduce the time frame to two years to include as many people who got in touch as possible. This timeframe was slightly longer than that of other studies in this area for example participants in the YiPPEE study had to have spent at least one year in care (Cameron et al., 2011; Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

2. *Participants were aged 25-35 at time of interview*

   Rationale: I wanted to hear the experiences of an 'older' population with care experience than tends to be reported in the literature; much existing research on 'care leavers' focuses on the experiences of young people who have left care up to age 24. I capped the maximum age at 35 in order that participants' experiences of care would be *relatively* recent and the system of care they would

have experienced would be reasonably similar to that of children and young people in care today. Hearing from people in this 'older' age range also allowed for the possible re-entry to education in adulthood and for distance from the care experience and as a result the possibility of individuals having had time to reflect upon this experience (Guest, 2012). The final sample was aged 24-36 reflecting a small amount of flexibility in terms of the age range recruited. I was keen not to let the age range fall below 24 given the focus of prior research on young people up to this age and was successful in this endeavour.

While these were the only two specific recruitment criteria I also made efforts to include a clear message on all recruitment materials (see Appendices 3-8) that I wanted to hear from people who had had all types of educational experiences including those that were positive, challenging, and/or ongoing in order to capture varied experiences of education. I did not include any requirements regarding for example, the type of placement participants had or age of entry to care; given the exploratory nature of the study I aimed to recruit as widely as possible. I made efforts to strive for diversity within the sample regarding educational experience, gender, ethnicity, race, and care setting, and educational needs. This was primarily done via my recruitment strategy which is outlined below. By recruiting through a variety of different networks and organisations I had hoped that this diversity would be more achievable.

Recruitment

The recruitment process required considerable planning and preparation before study information was shared. For example, advisory conversations, detailed development of recruitment materials, and consideration of appropriate networks, organisations, and groups to approach to support recruitment (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Steps involved in recruitment process

Advisory conversations

Before commencing recruitment, I engaged in informal advisory conversations with individuals working in relevant organisations including Focus Ireland and Empowering People in Care (EPIC). These conversations helped me to clarify and refine the recruitment process. I developed an understanding of the best ways to approach recruitment based on the experience of staff at these organisations and also gained insight into the types of information required to assist with recruitment for this study.

Developing recruitment materials

Following these advisory conversations, I began the process of developing and refining study recruitment materials including a recruitment flyer (Appendix 3). Numerous drafts of recruitment materials were developed and shared with peers and colleagues in order to gain feedback on their clarity and helpfulness. I tried to ensure that my recruitment materials were as accessible as possible and consulted with the *National Adult Literacy Agency* (NALA - https://www.nala.ie/) while developing these materials.

A multi-pronged recruitment strategy: Identifying networks and organisations to support recruitment

In an effort to recruit people with a range of educational experiences, I considered ways to access both visible (e.g. those connected to care leaving and advocacy organisations for care-experienced adults) and less visible care-experienced adults (e.g. those not accessing these organisations but who may access homeless/housing services, those not engaged with any formal services) via a multi-pronged recruitment strategy. Such multi-pronged strategies have been used in existing qualitative research on 'older' (i.e. age 25+) care-experienced adults (Guest, 2012; Mendis, 2015). Information regarding the study including a *Gatekeeper Information Sheet* (Appendix 6)*, Gatekeeper Consent Form* (Appendix 7)*, Participant Information Sheet* (Appendix 4) and a *Letter of Invitation* (Appendix 8), was distributed to organisational gatekeepers in relevant organisations, roles, and networks including the Irish Care Leavers Network, Empowering People in Care (EPIC), Adult Education Access Programmes, Homeless Services, Exchange House (Ireland's National Traveller Service), the Irish Refugee Council, and the Irish Aftercare Network. As potential participants in the study would no longer be in receipt of services from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla[16], this organisation was not in a position to support recruitment for the study. Gatekeepers shared information regarding the study with colleagues and service users, via organisation websites and social media accounts, an information flyer, and word of mouth.

In addition to this multi-pronged recruitment strategy I shared the study information widely on social media via Facebook and Twitter. I did this in an effort to reach potential participants who had been in care but who were not engaged with any formal services.

To facilitate ease-of-learning about the study I also developed a study website (https://educationalpathwayssite.wordpress.com/) for potential participants to review (see Image 4.1). Details of this website were included in the recruitment flyer and in all social media posts about the study.

[16] The Child and Family Agency – Tusla is the national body responsible for "improving wellbeing and outcomes for children". Among the responsibilities of the Child and Family Agency are issues relating to child protection and welfare and alternative care (www.tusla.ie).

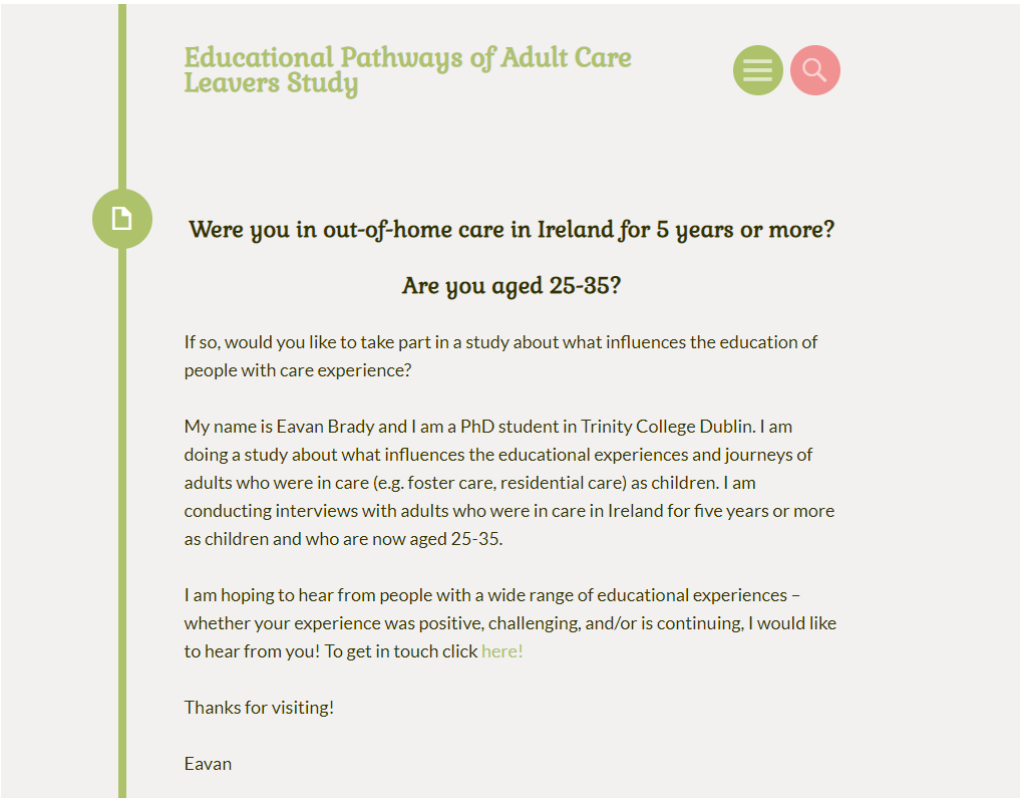

Image 4.1: Homepage of study website

Recruiting participants

People who were interested in finding out more about the study were able to contact me by email via a Gmail account that was set up specifically for this study or by telephone on a phone that was used only for this study. My contact details were included on all recruitment materials. When potential participants made initial contact, I responded in the medium they had used, for example, by text or email. I also spoke to most participants on the phone prior to sending them a *Participant Information Sheet* by email for them to review and then offered to discuss any questions they had by phone. Per my recruitment materials, I planned to give participants 3-4 weeks to decide if they would like to participate in the study. However, all participants confirmed their intention to participate within days of receiving the *Participant Information Sheet*.

All but two potential participants who inquired about the study went on to participate. One person, who's name and contact details, had been provided to me with her consent by a professional acquaintance did not respond to my initial text which I took as an

indication that she did not wish to participate. Another potential participant from the UK got in touch after seeing the study information on Twitter. As her care experience was in England, she did not meet the recruitment criteria for this study. I did let her know that I would keep in touch regarding future research opportunities which she was keen for me to do.

Future research

At the point of recruitment, participants were advised that, should they consent, I would invite them to participate in a follow-up interview five to 10 years in the future. The purpose of this interview would be to see how things have been in the years since the first set of interviews and to learn if and how individual educational pathways had developed over time. This feature of the study was particularly important in light of my use of the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm given its conviction that development takes place continually over the course of a person's life (Johnson et al., 2011). To this end, the following steps were taken:

- At the end of each interview participants were asked to indicate if they were open to being contacted in the future.
- If so, they were asked to provide their contact information on a designated form (Appendix 9).
- It was made clear to participants that they were under no obligation to provide contact information should they not wish to be contacted in future.
- It was also made clear to participants that consent to be contacted again did not mean they had consented to participate in a future interview.

All participants were happy to provide their contact information with a view to being contacted in the future.

The final sample

Eighteen people with care experience participated in this study. The average age of participants was 29 with a range of 24 to 36. Eleven participants were female and seven were male. Participants had spent between two years and 18 years in care. Six

participants had been in foster care only, and six residential care only. A further six had been in both residential *and* foster care. Several participants had also spent brief periods in hotel accommodation, bed and breakfasts, and high support/secure care units. These are reported as 'other' in Table 4.1 below which provides details related to participant demographics, placements, and education. There was considerable diversity in the number of placements participants had been in from one to over 21 with two participants noting that they did not know how many placements they had been in altogether but that it was over 20 for one, and over 21 for the other participant. Participants were from all over Ireland living in a wide range of counties representing both urban and rural living contexts.

In terms of education, the average age when participants left school was 18 with five leaving school between the ages of 14 and 16. As with placements, there was considerable diversity when it came to the number of schools participants had attended ranging from two schools to nine schools with an average of four schools attended[17]. Fourteen participants were currently pursuing, or had successfully completed, higher education in the form of undergraduate and in some cases, Master's degrees. Ten participants had completed Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses[18], and one participant was planning to complete a PLC course the following year. One further participant had completed equivalent further education courses in another jurisdiction. Six participants had been diagnosed with dyslexia. The age at which participants were diagnosed ranged from 6th class in primary school to when one participant was pursuing a Master's degree.

[17] In the Irish context the majority of children will attend two schools – one primary school and one secondary school (Citizens Information, 2019b).

[18] Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are full-time and last for one to two years. They offer a mixture of practical work, academic work and work experience (Citizens Information, 2018).

Table 4.1: Overview of participant demographics, placements, and education

Participant	Age*	Sex	Age when first entered care*	Type of placement(s)	Number of placements*	Age when left school	Highest level of education: completed or in progress
1	24-27	Male	15-17	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
2	32-36	Male	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Undergraduate degree
3	28-31	Female	15-17	Residential Care (+ other)	11+	14-16	Undergraduate degree
4	24-27	Male	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Post Leaving Cert (PLC) course
5	24-27	Female	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care	11+	14-16	Diploma
6	24-27	Female	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care (+ other)	4-6	14-16	Master's degree
7	24-27	Male	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	14-16	Undergraduate degree
8	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care + Residential Care	7-10	17-19	PLC Course
9	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
10	32-36	Male	0-4	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
11	32-36	Male	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Higher Diploma
12	24-27	Female	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Leaving Certificate
13	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care	4-6	14-16	Undergraduate degree
14	28-31	Male	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care (+ other)	11+	17-19	Undergraduate degree
15	32-36	Female	0-4	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree

16	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care + Residential Care	4-6	17-19	Master's degree
17	32-36	Female	10-14	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
18	32-36	Female	5-9	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Undergraduate degree

* In order to maintain participant anonymity exact details regarding participant age, age when entered care, and number of placements are not provided.

Where did participants hear about the study?

Of the 18 participants interviewed seven heard about the study via the EPIC website or social media account, four via the Care Leavers' Network website or social media account, six heard about the study by word of mouth from friends and former professionals involved in their lives, and one participant did not mention where she heard about the study. While study information was shared with a wide range of groups and organisations, 11 participants heard about the study via care-related organisations. This suggests a possible bias in the sample towards those who are engaged with and tuned in to supports and networks related to care experience.

A possible methodological flaw?

Despite considerable efforts I was unable to recruit any study participants who had left education early and not returned at all; this is perhaps evidence of a wider methodological issue of carrying out research in this issue. It is possible that people who have not returned to education since leaving early would not see a study such as this as relevant to them, or perhaps they would feel they would have little to say. It is also possible that the recruitment materials simply did not reach anyone who had had this experience though efforts were made to address this via the above outlined multi-pronged recruitment strategy. While the reasons for this are unknown, it is important to acknowledge this issue as a limitation of both the sample and the study.

A comment on sample size

As is common practice in qualitative research, I identified an anticipated sample size in advance of data collection (Young & Casey, 2018). This was necessary in order to develop a comprehensive research proposal, secure ethical approval, and plan the project. During these processes I identified a target sample of 25-30 participants. Having considered the focus and aim of the study, reviewed relevant literature in the field, familiarised myself with literature on qualitative methodologies, and reflected on the time and resources available, this seemed like a reasonable and achievable number that would enable me to collect enough data to adequately answer the research questions guiding this study (Kuzel, 1992).

During the recruitment phase of the study, which took 17 months, I became more familiar with literature on data saturation and sampling in qualitative research. Some authors provide suggestions in terms of sample size. For example, Terry and Braun (2011) suggest that between 15 and 30 individual interviews are common in research which seeks to identify patterns and themes across data. Researchers working within a particular methodological approach are also able to avail of guidance, for example grounded theory scholars suggest researchers plan for 30 interviews in order to sufficiently access patterns, concepts, and dimensions of the issue in question (Thomson, 2011). However, broadly speaking there is currently little guidance available in terms of minimum sample sizes and what is required in order to adequately identify codes and themes in a particular area of inquiry (Young & Casey, 2018). In his paper discussing the "hotly debated" concept of data saturation, Mason (2010) sought to determine how many participants were used in PhD studies utilising qualitative interviews. A wide range of sample sizes was observed in this study with the most common sample sizes 20 and 30 participants. Studies included in Mason's analysis that drew on life history approaches (similar to those used in this study) had a mean of 23 participants with a high of 62 and a low of one participant.

While it was originally hoped that 25-30 participants would be recruited to participate in this study, after actively recruiting for 18 months from March 2017 to August 2018, I had carried out 18 individual interviews. At this point, I opted to end active recruitment. Several factors informed this decision:

1. Data saturation had been reached – I had reached a point where no new information was emerging (Bolivar & Domingo, 2006);
2. I did not receive any further inquiries regarding participation;
3. I felt I had a sample that was large enough, and the stories diverse enough, to produce meaningful findings (Young & Casey, 2018);
4. I needed to be mindful of the time I had available as well as the importance of minimizing the burden on participants (Young & Casey, 2018).

I remained open to carrying out further interviews as analysis progressed, but no further potential participants made contact. While there may have been issues with the

recruitment process that I was not aware of (for example, study information may not have reached all possible service users/clients engaging with the various organisations who were involved in sharing the information), the multi-pronged recruitment strategy and long period of time allowed for recruiting were two key steps I took to try and ensure participation of as many people as possible. I would suggest that the 'older' age group I was hoping to hear from was part of the challenge of recruitment as adults over 25 were not generally the key users of some of the groups and organisations I recruited through. For example, the Irish Aftercare Network primarily only work with young people leaving care up to age 23 however, I had hoped that some aftercare workers would still be in touch with people they had worked with previously. Similarly, the Irish Refugee Council reported that they did not have any people involved in their service who met the age criteria of 25-35.

As this study was exploratory, I believe the approach to sampling and recruitment undertaken was appropriate. However, if conducting the study again I would expand my recruitment efforts and seek to achieve more publicity for the study for example, by writing an article about it in regional and national newspapers and contacting radio stations in an effort to ensure the information was shared as widely as possible. This would mean the study information would potentially reach a wider audience and more in-depth information about the recruitment criteria could be shared – particularly that the stories of those who left school early and had not returned to education were welcome and actively being sought.

Data collection

Selecting individual interviews

Given the focus on individual educational pathways one-to-one interviews were identified as the most appropriate method of data collection. Other methods of qualitative data collection, such as focus groups, may have allowed for a more social process of data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2013) with participants exploring and developing their opinions through interactions with other group members (Whittaker, 2009). However, given the focus of this study on the unique and personal educational pathways of study participants and those factors that shap ed and influenced them over time, the more

personal *individual interview* was selected as the method of data collection. As Darlington and Scott (2002: 48) note:

> *"The in-depth interview takes seriously the notion that people are experts on their own experience and so are best able to report how they experienced a particular event or phenomenon."*

Selecting educational life history interviews

Having identified that individual interviews were the most appropriate method of data collection for this study, I began to consider what 'type' of interview would best enable me to answer the research questions that guided this study.

Biographical approaches have been identified as suitable for researching learning across the lifespan (Gouthro, 2014) and have been used in research with care leavers in general (Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014) and in research examining the education of children and young people in and leaving care (Cameron et al., 2011). Biographical and life history approaches enable researchers to "trace learning experiences over a longer period of time, and take into consideration social, political, economic, and cultural factors as well as reflections from the learners themselves regarding their own experiences" (Gouthro, 2014: 90). Life history approaches have also been used in previous studies that have drawn on the life course perspective in relation to women returning to education following the transition to motherhood (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1995) and career paths (Verd & Lopez, 2011). 'Educational life history' interviews (Moore, 2006) were identified as the most appropriate biographical method to use in this study for a number of reasons. This method, which draws on life history approaches, places individual stories in their historical, social, and local contexts reflecting wider societal issues of the time and prevailing cultural norms (Bron & West, 2000; Moore, 2006). An approach that incorporated these wider contextual factors seemed particularly relevant and valuable given that the study was guided by a life course perspective. Cuconato and Walther (2015: 287) suggest that the life course perspective should be "complemented by a biographical perspective" that allows us to incorporate both subjective life histories that people construct while "progressing through the institutionalised life course". As this study was

exploratory and seeking to examine participant educational pathways and those factors that had influenced these pathways over the course of individual's wider educational journeys[19], this method was seen as highly appropriate given the tendency for life histories to be seen as useful at such exploration stages of researching an issue where "information is scarce and conceptualisation is limited" (Ojermark, 2007: 3).

A focus on the *educational* aspect of individuals' life histories ensured that the key elements of participant educational experiences were the focal point of the interview but were told in the context of other life experiences for example, experiences of coming into care. In earlier plans for the study I had proposed to carry out general life history interviews. However, after reflecting on this and discussing with my supervisor I felt that in a general life history interview the educational story could become a very minor part of the person's overall story. I had also intended to collect data via timelines *and* interviews. In earlier plans for this study I had planned to invite participants to draw a timeline of their life indicating key experiences that shaped their educational pathways (Bagnoli, 2009). However, during the pilot interview I found this tool to be overly arduous and unnecessary and so decided against using it in the main interviews. This decision will be discussed further later in this chapter.

The interview

Borrowing from the more general life history approach (Atkinson, 1998) interviews began with an open invitation to participants to tell their educational story from their earliest memory to present day (see Interview Topic Guide – Appendix 11). Interviews focused primarily on participant education experiences. During the interviews I did not ask participants to share experiences of their time in care beyond those that impacted on their education. However, participants often volunteered this information in the course of sharing their stories. When participants had finished telling their story I then asked a number of follow-up questions drawing on my knowledge of the relevant literature to

[19] In this context, an 'educational journey' refers, not just to a person's formal pathway through education, but to their journey through care and formal education, as well as the influence of other experiences on their education for example, peer relationships, or parenthood. That is, the many and varied factors that shape and influence educational pathways over time.

probe issues participants had raised in their initial narrative for example, the role of relationships in participant educational stories and hopes and plans for the future. These questions were drawn from the interview topic guide (Appendix 11) which was used following participants' telling of their educational life history in order to follow-up on certain aspects of participant narratives. This topic guide was not gone through in detail. I had anticipated that some interviews would last longer than 90 minutes. I discussed this possibility with participants before beginning the interview and noted that a second interview could potentially be arranged should the participant feel they had a lot more they wanted to say. This did not happen during any of the interviews and so a second interview was not required at any stage during data collection. While one interview ran for 107 minutes, the conversation was winding down once we reached 90 minutes so I opted to continue the interview.

Interview location and length

All participants were interviewed once in a location of their choice. Interviews took place in a variety of locations including participants' homes, public libraries, family resource centres, and meeting rooms in Trinity College Dublin. Interviews lasted between 61 minutes and 107 minutes with the average length of interviews 84 minutes.

Participant expenses

At the end of the interview all participants were given a €20 Dunnes Stores (an Irish department store with branches nationwide) gift card in order to reimburse 'expenses' that may have been incurred as a result of participating in interviews e.g. travel costs, missed hours of work, child care. Two participants said they did not want the gift card and would prefer a €20 donation be made to a children's charity in their name. In these instances, I donated €20 to the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) and forwarded email confirmation of the donation to the relevant participants. Participants were notified of a contribution being made to their expenses when they emailed me inquiring about participation. This information was not included in the Participant Information Sheet or Recruitment Flyer in order to limit any possibility that it may act as an 'incentive' to participate in the study (Head, 2009).

Data analysis

I began transcribing interviews as soon as the first interview was complete. This allowed for reflection and learning from each interview as I progressed through the data collection phase of the project. I fully transcribed all interviews myself (see Appendix 12 – Extract from transcript of interview). Transcripts were then fully anonymised and all participants were given an initial pseudonym. As this PhD was completed 'by publication' participants were given different pseudonyms for each of the three findings-focused peer-reviewed publications in order to maintain anonymity. Anonymised transcripts were entered into the N-Vivo qualitative data analysis package. As the two guiding research questions for this study focused on educational pathways and those factors that shaped and influenced these pathways, I decided that different approaches to analysis would be required. These approaches to analysis are outlined in detail below.

Research question #1: Data Analysis

To answer the first research question - *what are the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future?* – I borrowed from the principles of case study research to analyse study data (Kohlbacher, 2006; Yin, 2003). Given the focus of this research question on exploring the educational pathways taken by participants, I decided that an initial review of each case to examine individual experiences over time was the best way to approach answering this research question.

To begin this process, I reviewed all participant transcripts and prepared individual case summaries focusing on the educational pathway taken by participants. Next, an individual timeline was created by hand for each participant marking out key events along the course of their educational pathway in primary school, secondary school, and post-compulsory education using colour coding to delineate experiences related to primary school, secondary school, care experiences etc. Key events related to participant experiences of care were also noted, for example participant age when entering care. Attention was paid to the latter portion of participant educational pathways (that is secondary and post-compulsory education) during this phase of analysis in an effort to interpret, track and map participants' pathways into and through secondary and, where relevant, post-

compulsory education. Once case summaries and individual timelines had been compiled, data *across* cases was reviewed borrowing from principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a search for thematic patterns across participant stories was undertaken. As a result, four common groups or 'types' of educational pathways taken by participants were identified highlighting the relevance of the life course principle of diversity in life trajectories/pathways. See Chapter Five for further details and discussion of these pathways.

Research question #2: Data Analysis

I drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) theoretical thematic analysis when examining data in relation to the second research question - *how can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?* Theoretical thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's own theoretical interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This deductive approach to thematic analysis generally provides "less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 11). This allowed me to examine the data in relation to two key principles from the selected conceptual framework: the life course perspective.

Having 'immersed' myself in the data I reflected on the key principles and concepts of the life course perspective. The two principles that repeatedly came to mind as I read and reviewed the interview transcripts were 'linked lives' (that is the interconnectedness of human lives and the role of other people in shaping our behaviour) and 'human agency' (that is, that we play an active role in shaping our lives but within the constraints of our context over time). The role of relationships and key actors as well as agency had been addressed in previous studies related to education and care (Berridge, 2017; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Jackson & Cameron, 2012) and I decided that these two principles warranted further examination within the current data set. To that end the focus of the theoretical thematic analysis was on the role of linked lives and agency within the data.

Two rounds of theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), were carried out on the data: one to analyse for the principle of 'linked lives' and another to analyse for the principle of 'human agency'. The process of theoretical thematic analysis was completed

in full for the principle of linked lives before the process was begun again for the principle of agency. I followed the six-step process to theoretical thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87):

1. I spent a considerable amount of time **familiarising myself with the data**. This began with transcription and review of transcripts as I was necessarily immersed in participant narratives during this process. Anonymising transcripts led to further immersion in the data. This was followed by active reading of all transcripts while simultaneously noting key points and observations as memos[20] in N-Vivo (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014).

2. For each life course principle, I engaged in separate processes of **generating initial codes** (or 'nodes' as they are called in the N-Vivo software package). This involved generating an "initial list of ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 18) with specific reference to each life course principle. Codes are the most basic elements of the data and generating codes requires the researcher to organise the data into meaningful groups. As I was guided by two specific theoretical lenses throughout this process I searched the data and identified codes related to the principles of linked lives and human agency.

   In the case of the principle of linked lives, analysis focused on examining the extent to which linked lives *positively* influenced the educational journeys of study participants with relevance to the following four key components of the principle of linked lives (Elder, 1994; Hutchison, 2005; Black, Holditch-Davis, & Miles, 2009): i) Human lives are connected across the life course, ii) Family is the primary source of support, iii) The lives of family members are linked across generations, and iv) Relationships beyond the family can also be influential e.g. friends, neighbours work colleagues. To that end, when generating initial codes and searching for themes the focus was on aspects of linked lives related to interdependence,

[20] In the N-Vivo software package a project journal is recorded as a memo (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014).

positive intergenerational influences, and positive support received. That is not to suggest that the presence of linked lives did not also influence educational journeys *negatively.* However, I opted to focus on the positives of participants' stories to glean insights into what has *helped* and *facilitated* the pursuit of education among those stories.

In the case of the principle of human agency analysis focused on examining the data for evidence of individual agency (intentional actions, reactive actions, long-term planning, coping mechanisms) and contextual or structural factors impacting on these expressions of agency over time (Crockett, 2002; Hitlin & Elder, 2007b).

3. There followed a **search for themes** related to each of these life course principles. This was done in a variety of ways including sorting and grouping codes that were similar, reviewing the related data extracts, and using visual representations to sort different codes into themes. See Image 4.2 below for concept map of initial themes identified in relation to the principle of linked lives developed in N-Vivo.

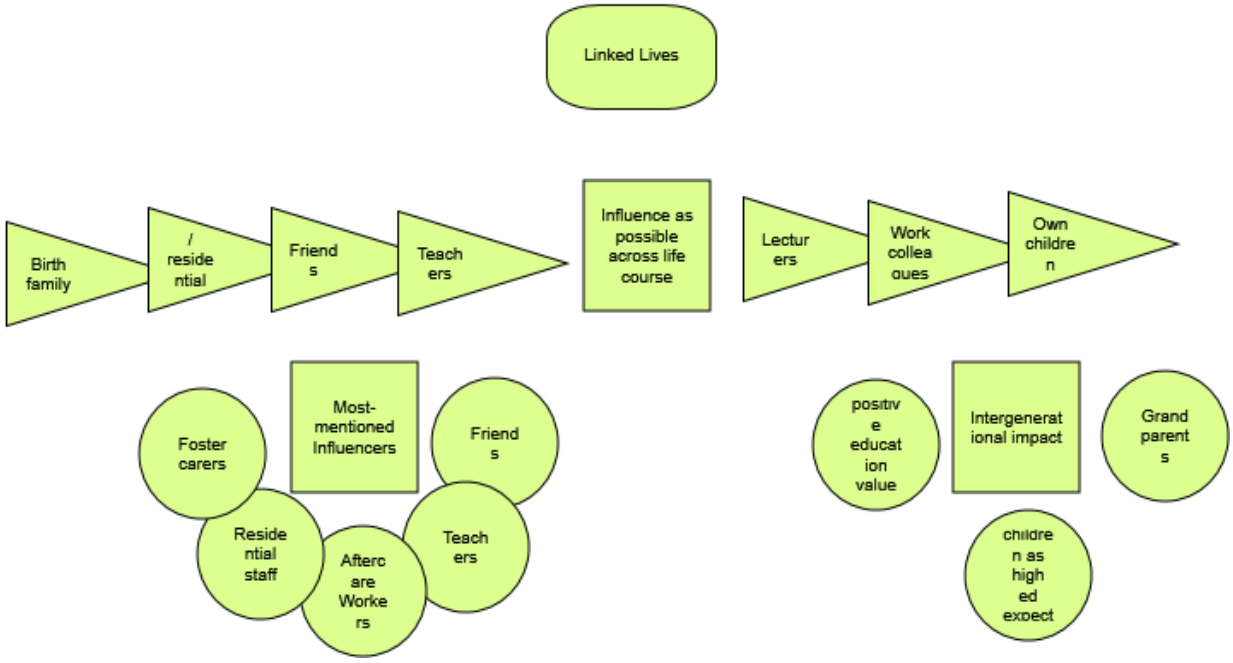

Image 4.2: Early concept map for Linked Lives themes

4. During the process of **reviewing themes** I engaged in a process of refining existing themes, reviewing codes that the themes were based on, and reviewing data extracts again to ensure they were in fact themes. I then considered the validity of the identified themes in relation to the full data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. I then began the process of **"defining and refining" identified themes** (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 22). This process involved reviewing data extracts for each theme again and writing up an account or narrative for each theme commenting on what was noteworthy about each theme and why. In some instances, sub-themes were identified and addressed in this narrative.

6. The final phase of analysis in each instance involved **writing the relevant paper** for each principle incorporating relevant quotes that captured "the essence" of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 23). This process involved much revision, re-writing, reflection, and discussion with my supervisor to ensure that the themes were accurately represented and that the theoretical, methodological, and substantive implications of each paper were fully addressed.

Trustworthiness of the research

Criteria such as reliability and validity are appropriate measures for assessing the quality of quantitative research (Bryman, 2012). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that alternative criteria should be applied to qualitative research as principles such as validity and reliability "presuppose that a single, absolute account of social reality is feasible" (Bryman, 2012: 390). Four criteria have been identified as central to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Establishing the credibility of qualitative findings requires the researcher to ensure that their project is carried out in accordance with good research practice and that findings are submitted to study participants in order to confirm that the researcher has correctly understood their social world (Bryman, 2012). This project was carried out transparently

and in accordance with the principles of good research practice as can be seen from the account provided in this chapter. I did not however, share transcripts of interviews with study participants. I had initially planned to invite a number of participants to meet with me individually following a preliminary analysis of all data to share emerging findings with them and to gain their insights on findings. However, I ultimately opted to share a summary of findings with all participants and invite them to get in touch with questions as this meant the findings would reach *all* participants and also be less time-consuming for participants, many of whom had busy lives with young families. To that end, towards the end of the analysis process I shared key findings in a summary email (see Appendix 13) to participants and invited them to get in touch with any questions or comments. I also sent participants copies of the three findings-focused journal peer-reviewed journal articles in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven as they became available (at the time of submitting this PhD I had not yet sent participants copies of the final article – Chapter Seven – that was still 'Under Review'). In light of the above, arguably the standard of credibility has only been partially met, a potential limitation of this study.

Transferability

To provide what Geertz (1973) termed "thick description" – and to meet the requirement of *transferability* – participant interviews were in-depth covering various aspects of each person's educational pathway and those factors that shaped and influenced these pathways. Efforts have been made to provide the reader with a detailed description of various aspects of participant narratives in relation to the relevant themes outlined in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that researchers should adopt an 'auditing' approach to the research process. This involves keeping accurate and complete records of all stages of the research process while also inviting peers to act as 'auditors' during the research process (Bryman, 2012). I kept full and accurate records of the research process from the very beginning in the form of a research journal, various excel spreadsheets tracking information such as where participants heard about the study, date and time of interviews, and participant information. As is evidenced in this chapter, I also kept track

of the various decisions made in relation to each stage of the research process and my rationale for each decision. Finally, the four peer-reviewed journal articles that form the basis of this research study were subject to peer review from between two and six reviewers each. This process of peer 'auditing' strengthens the dependability of the study findings reported in this thesis.

Confirmability

Efforts to ensure confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the study findings were made at various stages in the research process. This was done in two ways. Firstly, decisions made during the research process and key information related to the research process were recorded throughout this study. Many of these decisions have been outlined and clarified in this chapter. Secondly, researcher reflexivity was exercised throughout the research process. Researcher reflexivity is the practice of researchers being self-aware of their own values and beliefs regarding their research (Payne & Payne, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2013: 303) suggest that reflexivity is an important part of the research process that enables the researcher to "locate [their] standpoint". In the context of a research study such as this that drew on life history methods as a means of gathering data, the situation and background of the researcher inevitably comes into play (Gouthro, 2014). As a white, middle-class, hetero-sexual woman who has never been in care, has trained as a social worker, and was carrying out research on education and care at PhD level, it was important that I was aware of the possible impact this may have on participants volunteering to participate in the study as well as on the interview itself. I also come from a family where education is highly valued, and my own pursuit of education was supported and encouraged at every stage. My parents and only sibling all have PhDs and while I did not disclose this information, I was mindful of this position when recruiting and interviewing participants.

Reflexivity was used throughout the research process to maintain self-awareness of my own position and experiences while also being mindful of how I may be perceived by participants. Throughout the data collection phase of this study I recorded reflections, observations, and notes in a reflective research journal and via the 'memo' function in N-Vivo. I also remained mindful of how participants might perceive me and the impact this

could potentially have on the data gathered and study findings. At each point of contact with participants I endeavoured to be open and to answer all questions as best I could. I also spent time at the beginning of each interview getting to know participants and telling them a little about myself (for example, that as well as being a PhD researcher, I was a college lecturer and parent). I hoped that such self-disclosure might help participants to feel more comfortable in my presence and go some small way to redressing the imbalance that was to come whereby they shared the details of their educational life histories.

Throughout the interview process it was difficult not to reflect on participant experiences through the lens of my own experiences of education which have been overwhelmingly positive. It was these positive experiences of education along with my professional experience working in homeless services and training as a social worker that sparked my interest in the topic of the education of people with care experience and so it seemed fitting that I should be reminded of them throughout the research process. While I did not draw on a particular framework for reflexivity, through my own reflective research journal, discussions with my supervisor, and the writing process I endeavoured to practice researcher reflexivity throughout this project.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was secured from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, prior to recruitment and data collection (Appendix 1). Once School approval was secured I applied to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, in line with their guideline that REC review is required where research relates to "Potential research participants identified from, or because of their past or present use of services provided by the Agency" (Tusla Research Office). Having submitted the required documentation I was informed that because potential participants would no longer be in receipt of Agency services due to being over age 23 (the maximum age aftercare support can be received in Ireland), I did not in fact require ethical approval from the Child and Family Agency to carry out this study (Appendix 2).

Participants in this research were adults who had spent time in care as children. It was therefore likely that participants would have experienced trauma, loss, and possible abuse and neglect, over the course of their lives. While the focus of the interviews was on participant education, I felt there was a possibility that for some people telling their educational story and the associated experienced may involve revisiting distressing memories and experiences, for example the experience of coming into care, moving schools, and possible experiences of bullying. Measures were therefore put in place to ensure that this project was ethically robust, and that participant safety and well-being were guaranteed in as much as was possible:

- Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis;
- Participants were given 3-4 weeks to consider whether they would like to participate in the study after receiving the *Participant Information Sheet* (Appendix 4);
- Participants were given time and opportunities to ask me questions from the point of making initial contact to the point of the interview finishing and beyond;
- Anonymity and confidentiality of participant identities was guaranteed;
- Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants (see *Participant Consent Form* – Appendix 5);
- Participants were provided with a clear statement of what the research was about and what participating would involve;
- Participants were informed that all interviews would be audio recorded and transcribed;
- Every effort was made to ensure that interviews were conducted in locations that were quiet, private, and in which participants felt comfortable;
- Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research before and during the study without having to offer any explanation up to two weeks after their interview was completed;
- Participants were offered a break if they became visibly upset during the interview;

- All soft and hard copies of data were (and continue to be) safely stored in compliance with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, 1997 and the Data Protection Act, 1997;
- Given the likelihood of participants revisiting distressing memories, all participants received information on relevant support services that they could access after interviews (Appendix 10).

While distressing memories came up for some participants, a number of participants commented on their experiences of telling their educational story as being positive and enjoyable.

An ethical dilemma

I encountered several ethical dilemmas while carrying out this study. One such dilemma related to one of the interviews I had done with a participant. During this interview the participant reported that they had experienced a sexual assault while in school. In the course of telling me about this experience the participant in question mentioned that they had engaged with several professional services around this experience which they had found helpful. In the course of transcribing this interview it occurred to me that I had not inquired as to whether or not this incident had been reported to the relevant authorities. I had assumed it was as the participant spoke about the related services they had been involved with but had not clarified this directly. In consultation with my supervisor I decided that I would need to follow up with the participant to clarify this issue. I was very mindful of the potentially distressing impact of phoning this participant out of the blue to raise this issue with them and worried that this could be a hugely upsetting experience for them. I opted to text the participant to arrange a time to talk by phone that suited them so that they would not be caught off guard by my call. I then spoke with the participant at the prearranged time who confirmed that the assault had been reported to the police and that nothing had come of the report. I apologised for raising this issue out of the blue and thanked the participant for discussing this issue with me. I also let them know that they could ring me back should they become distressed following the call or if they wished to discuss the issue any further.

This ethical dilemma highlighted the complexity and nuance of ethical issues in the research process (Daley, 2012) and represented an important learning opportunity. I was reminded of the ongoing need to be alert to, and mindful of, the many and varied ways that ethical dilemmas and challenges can arise throughout the research process. Had I been attuned to this during this particular interview I could have clarified if the assault was reported in the moment and not had to follow-up with the participant in question. The key lessons I took from this experience were as follows:

1. It is important to ensure that I am tuned into what may need further follow up and clarification during the interview process
2. Sensitive and distressing experiences can be raised in the context of conversations about general topics
3. It is critical to address these issues as they arise with sensitivity and care.

A critique of the study methodology

While this study yielded rich and informative findings there were several limitations. Firstly, the sample recruited was small and not as varied as I had first hoped. I was unable to recruit anyone who had left school early and had not returned to education reflecting a potential bias in the sample. As the majority of participants had ultimately completed or were pursuing an undergraduate degree it could be argued that this sample were, ultimately, predominantly 'high achieving' like other studies in this area (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). I would temper this limitation however by noting that for many participants, if their stories had been gathered when still in their early twenties, they would not yet have achieved – or even begun to pursue higher education – and so by hearing from this older sample it is possible that this high achievement is captured *as a result of* hearing their stories 'later' in life.

Despite efforts to recruit an ethnically diverse sample for example, sharing the study information with social workers working with members of the Traveller Community as well as the Irish Refugee Council, the final sample only included White Irish participants. The perspective and experience of adults who spent time in care and are also from an ethnic minority is not therefore captured in this study. Importantly in the context of

reports of increased rates of 'special educational needs' among people with care experience, six of the 18 participants had been diagnosed with dyslexia. Several participants also discussed various mental health difficulties they had experienced over the course of their lives.

In terms of data collection, while I removed the timeline tool after an initial pilot interview, when it came to analysis and writing case summaries, I realised that undertaking this exercise *with* participants, perhaps at the end of interviews, would have been a useful way of summarising their experiences and of ensuring the accuracy of participant timelines. As is to be expected for many participants telling their educational story was not a linear process and involved a lot of jumping around and switching from placement-related experiences to school-related experiences which when reviewing transcripts was often hard to follow and required detailed review of transcripts in order to track participant stories. In future work I would draw on timelines – and potentially other more creative, visual methods of data collection – to support gathering participant stories. In addition, the use of a single retrospective interview is a potential limitation of this study. While interviews were in-depth and arguably covered many relevant topics, having the opportunity to carry out a follow-up interview with participants would have provided opportunities to clarify various aspects of interviews, facilitated a process of member checking, and may also have allowed for participants to share additional reflections and achievements that had taken place in the time between interviews. With hindsight I appreciate that carrying out follow-up interviews – or indeed using the timeline tool discussed above – may have facilitated a more intensive process of data collection.

This study was guided by a single theoretical framework: the life course perspective. While this approach has many strengths and has provided valuable insights on the topic in question (outlined in Chapter Three), the study is arguably limited by the application of just one theoretical framework. As an early career researcher, I was keen to apply one theoretical framework effectively rather than draw on multiple frameworks and the life course perspective, with its emphasis on development over time and limited application in this context, was selected. However, application of other theories such as attachment theory and resilience theory (Stein, 2006b) may have provided additional insights and

further policy and practice implications grounded in theories that have already been applied to research and practice with children and young people with care experience (Gilligan, 2000; Schofield & Beek, 2005).

Finally, while I did share findings with participants early in the analysis process, I did not engage in a full process of member checking. The process of member checking involves sharing a draft report of a research project or the results of data analysis to participants and seeking their views with regard to the trustworthiness and authenticity of what the researcher has found (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Sharing findings and asking participants to get in touch with me with any questions was one way that I sought to include participants in latter stages of the research process. A full process of member checking was not carried out and it is acknowledged that this could potentially have impacted on data analysis and shaped the findings identified. This was due to the specified timeframe within which this PhD was to be completed and because the study was informed by an interpretivist stance acknowledging that there is no one reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To this end, it is my interpretation as the researcher that formed the basis of the analysis of data.

Conclusion

This chapter has positioned the study within a qualitative research paradigm and outlined the relevance of an ontological position of relativism and an epistemological position of interpretivism. Application of the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm *and* theoretical framework for considering key issues related to study research questions has been discussed. The key steps of the research process have also been outlined including detail related to sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Finally, the trustworthiness of the research and a critique of the study methodology was provided.

Chapter Five: Exploring diversity in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults: Findings from a life course study of education and care

In this chapter I present the second published peer-reviewed journal article that was written as part of the current study. This paper identifies the pathways taken through education among the 18 participants in this study and some of the factors, experiences, and events that influenced these pathways.

This paper was co-authored with my PhD supervisor, Professor Robbie. Gilligan. I was the primary author of this paper and developed the current PhD study on which this article is based, carried out the field work for the project, completed data analysis, and prepared advanced drafts of the manuscript. Professor Gilligan played the usual support role in the PhD process. Once the paper was at an advanced stage of development, he contributed through discussion to the refinement of some of the conceptual ideas in the paper, and provided key feedback and guidance on drafts of the paper.

Full reference:

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Abstract

The low educational attainment of young people in care and leaving care has been well-established in a continually-growing body of international research. Existing research has identified some of the pathways taken by care leavers into further and higher education in the years after leaving care (i.e. ages 18-24), particularly among 'high achieving' care leavers. We know less however, about the longer-term pathways taken through education from the perspective of 'older' adults with care experience (i.e. those aged 25 and over). Guided by the life course principle of expected 'diversity in life course trajectories' this paper identifies the pathways taken through education among 18 care-experienced adults (aged 24-36) in Ireland and some of the experiences and events that influenced these pathways. We outline four types of educational pathway taken by participants: 1) The

Typical Pathway; 2) The Typical Pathway 'Plus'; 3) The Short-term Disrupted Pathway; and 4) The Long-term Disrupted Pathway. Study findings illustrate the diversity of educational pathways that may be taken by adults with care experience and the importance of considering the impact of multiple roles and transitions on these pathways. The value of taking a longer-term view when exploring educational pathways is also highlighted in this paper. Implications for practice, policy, and future research are discussed.

Key words: Care-experienced, care leaver, education, pathway, diversity, life course perspective

Highlights

- Qualitative study of educational pathways of care-experienced adults
- Guided by life course principle of expected 'diversity in life course trajectories'
- Diverse educational pathways identified including 'typical and 'disrupted' pathways
- Multiple roles and transitions impact the educational pathways taken by participants

Introduction

A continually growing body of research on the educational progress and attainment of children in care and care leavers[21] points to poor outcomes for this group when compared to majority population peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Gypen et al., 2017; Pecora et al., 2006, Trout et al., 2008). While the discussion on this issue has begun to consider who is an appropriate comparator for children in care (Sebba et al., 2015), for example, children in need but not in care, existing studies are broadly unanimous in their finding that educational outcomes tend to be poor for people with care experience. The majority of research undertaken on this issue reports educational pathways, progress, and/or attainment when children leave post-compulsory education or in the initial years after they have left care, that is, between the ages of 18 and 24 (Jackson & Cameron, 2012;

[21] The term 'care leaver' is widely used in literature on leaving care and for the most part refers to care leavers roughly aged 18–24. The term 'care-experienced adults' is used in this paper to refer to those adults who spent time in care as children and are aged 25+.

Sebba et al., 2015; Trout et al., 2008). Furthermore, much of the qualitative work in this area has focused on the experiences of 'high achieving' care leavers (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002). Our knowledge of outcomes in general for people with care experience tends to be limited to outcomes of care leavers in their early twenties (Murray & Goddard, 2014). This is particularly true when it comes to the educational pathways of 'older' care leavers, that is, those over the age of 25.

The transition from care to adulthood is accelerated and compressed for many young people leaving care (Stein, 2006a). This transition can involve multiple changes for young people including those related to their status, relationships and support, and housing situation (Bengtsson, Sjöblom, Öberg, 2017; Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014; Stein, 2006a). It is perhaps unsurprising then that for some, though not all, young people with care experience the pursuit of further and higher education in early adulthood and immediately after leaving care may not be feasible, practical, or desired. A small body of work in the UK, Australia, and the United States points to the pursuit of education 'later in life' among care-experienced adults (Duncalf, 2010; Murray, Murphy, Branigan, & Malone, 2009; Pecora et al., 2006). Furthermore, recent work by Harrison (2017) in England which analysed the educational pathways of young people who were aged 18 in 2008 (n = 650,220), including 6,470 care leavers, suggests that when we examine the percentage of care leavers in higher education at age 23 instead of age 21 the rate doubles from 6% to 12%. These findings together suggest a need to examine the educational pathways of people with care experience beyond the age of 24 as we may only be capturing a small part of the picture by considering their educational progress and attainment solely at an earlier age.

A wide range of factors have been identified as influencing the education of children in care and care leavers including age when entering care (Kääriälä, Berlin, Lausten, Hiilamo, & Ristikari, 2018), carer expectations (Jackson & Cameron, 2012), and interagency communication (Darmody et al, 2013; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). In light of this, we suggest that a life course perspective and the accompanying principle of expected

'diversity in life course trajectories[22]' is particularly useful when examining this issue. The principle of diversity in life course trajectories acknowledges that given the range of factors that shape our development over time including individual, historical, and structural factors, diversity in individual trajectories should be expected (Elder, 1998; Hutchison, 2011). We suggest that this principle will resonate with the experiences of care-experienced adults when it comes to their educational pathways.

In this paper we aim to highlight the diversity of the educational pathways taken by people with care experience and provide insight into some of the events and experiences that have influenced these pathways by drawing on data collected as part of a qualitative life course study of the educational pathways of care-experienced adults aged 24 to 36 in Ireland. We apply a life course perspective to examine the educational pathways taken by this 'older' group of care-experienced adults *over time*. We draw on the stories of care-experienced adults with a range of educational experiences, including some who left school early. In doing so we seek to contribute to the knowledge base regarding the educational experiences and pathways of 'older' care leavers.

Why a life course perspective on educational pathways?

The life course perspective is an interdisciplinary framework for understanding human development from birth to death (Mayer, 2009). Central to this perspective is the conviction that development takes place continually over the course of a person's life with *opportunities* for development and growth ever-present (Walker & Crawford, 2017). In addition, the life course perspective provides a framework for considering the relationship between childhood and adolescent experiences and our later experiences in adulthood (Hutchison, 2011). Several principles (for example human agency and the timing of lives) and concepts (for example transitions and turning points) are central to the life course

[22] In the life course literature, the term 'trajectories' are long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life (Hutchison, 2005), for example their educational trajectory. 'Pathways' refer to "sets of interrelated trajectories, for example an individual's trajectories through work, education, and family life" (Brady, & Gilligan, 2018a: 71). From a life course perspective 'diversity in educational trajectories' is a more appropriate term for what is being discussed in this paper. However, as the overwhelming majority of existing literature related to education uses the term 'educational pathways' for the purposes of this paper we will use the phrase 'diversity in educational pathways' in order to align with existing literature on the topic.

perspective (Hutchison, 2005). Together these principles and concepts address a varied and multidimensional range of factors that shape human development over time providing a unique insight into the nuances of development. Given the complex range of factors that may influence the education of people with care experience over time (O'Higgins et al., 2015), the life course perspective acts as a valuable integrative paradigm through which to consider this issue (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a).

Academics in the field of education have highlighted the value of applying a life course perspective. Roska and Velez (2012) note that education is a 'process' that occurs over time, regularly becoming entwined with other transitions and events in the life course pointing to the value of taking a long-term view of experiences. The weight given to the socio-historical context in which human development takes place has also been cited as an important element of the life course perspective in this context (Schoon & Duckworth, 2010). Others have pointed to the capacity of the life course perspective to allow us to describe the heterogeneity and complexity in pathways into and beyond higher education (Feinstein & Vignoles, 2008; Sacker & Schoon, 2007).

Diversity in Educational Pathways

The life course perspective has evolved to include the theme of 'diversity in life course trajectories' (Elder, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). This theme acknowledges that there is considerable diversity in life course trajectories due to a range of factors including cohort variations, social class, gender, culture, and individual agency (Hutchison, 2011). Given the varied life experiences children in care will have had before coming into care, while in care, and after leaving care, not to mention the heterogeneity of this group in terms of individual aspirations and needs (Darmody et al., 2013), it is important to acknowledge the potential for diversity in their life pathways. The life course perspective, and the accompanying principle of diversity in life course trajectories/pathways, provides a framework for conceptualising this potential diversity in the context of the educational pathways of adults with care experience.

Educational pathways in the general population

Existing literature indicates that in the general population while many people progress to post-compulsory education straight after they finish their compulsory schooling, many also take different and delayed routes into further and higher education at different times in their lives (Bozick & DeLuca 2005; Roksa & Velez, 2012). A number of studies have considered this issue from a life course perspective (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Evans et al., 2013; Roksa & Velex, 2012) and as a result, we have some insight into the reasons for these alternative routes into further and higher education. While students from all backgrounds may delay the pursuit of higher education, the literature suggests that some factors associated with delays include being from a disadvantaged background, being less academically prepared, having lower literacy skills, not performing well on standardised tests, and being an ex-offender (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2007; Roksa & Velez, 2012). However, when compared to those who enrol "on-time", those with delayed pathways into higher education have also been identified as being more likely to have transitioned to other roles such as becoming spouses or parents before they entered college (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Meiners (2018) notes that among working students, when multiple roles are held, these are not independent of each other and negotiation is required between roles; arguably this is also the case for other roles such as 'parent' or 'carer'. While negotiating this balance can be difficult, Meiners (2018) adds that enrichment in one role can have benefits for other roles.

Existing research has considered the influence of leaving school early on the pursuit of education in later adulthood. Davey and Jamieson (2003) note that while some "buck the trend" (p. 266), in general, adults who leave school early tend to be under-represented in education later in life (2003). Schoon and Duckworth (2010: 283) observe that early school leaving is often associated with relatively "poor adult outcomes" such as low income and poor mental health while also noting that some people who leave school early do "find continuous employment and achieve financial independence". Drawing on two British Birth Cohort studies (1958 and 1970), Schoon and Duckworth (2010) examined factors associated with a successful transition for early school leavers by the age of 34. School motivation and positive attitudes to learning were identified as important. Guided by a life course perspective the authors also considered macro issues (for example the

economic impact of recession) and point to the importance of having "structured education and employment pathways and policies for young people from relative disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 291). The authors (2010: 291) note that the transition to adulthood does not follow a "standard trajectory". Davey and Jamieson (2003) also note the importance of developing our understanding of the range of pathways followed into and through education at various stages in the life course in order to develop appropriate policy and service responses.

Educational pathways of people with care experience

Existing research with young care leavers has shown that, when it comes to their educational pathways, former children in care tend to experience delayed progressions through education in comparison with their peers (Driscoll, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Montserrat et al., 2013). In an early paper examining educational pathways and experiences, Stein (1994) reports on the findings of three studies on the topic of leaving care. The common career trajectory observed among participants in all three studies (aged 16-19) was: leave school aged 16 without any qualifications, undertake "employment training", followed by unemployment. Stein (1994: 8) goes on to consider what factors might influence this trajectory pointing to the need to consider "societal factors" including the link between deprivation and coming into care; this resonates with the above literature from the general field of education highlighting the role of disadvantage and background when it comes to the pursuit of education. The more recent YiPPEE study[23] investigated the educational pathways of care leavers aged 18-24 after the end of compulsory schooling in five European countries - England, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, and Hungary (Cameron et al., 2011; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). While focused on those demonstrating 'educational promise', this study was one of the first to examine the educational pathways of young people with a care background across jurisdictions. The authors identified five 'typical' educational pathways travelled by young people:

[23] The YiPPEE study (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe) investigated the education pathways of care leavers beyond age 18 in five European countries - England, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, and Hungary.

1. Those who progressed through school in line with their peers on the academic route;
2. Those who pursued the academic route but with a delay (i.e. repeating years, retaking courses of study, starting university later than normal);
3. Those taking a vocational pathway leading to study at college or university or work-based training;
4. Those taking short-cycle vocational training;
5. Those on 'yo-yo' pathways: Young people in this group were enrolled and dropped out of courses and had frequent changes of direction (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Additional papers reporting national level findings of the YiPPEE study detail similar pathways, for example findings from Spain and Hungary (Montserrat et al., 2013; Rácz & Korintus, 2013). Montserrat and colleagues (2013) note that delays in education were common among the young people that they interviewed (aged 18-22) in Spain, even among those who had demonstrated "educational promise" and "were highly motivated" in relation to pursuing education (p. 6). Reasons for this pattern of delay included a lack of priority given to young people's education by professionals, low expectations among those adults providing young people with support, and the presence of additional difficulties experienced during the transition to adulthood (Montserrat et al., 2013). In Hungary, where young people leaving care can avail of aftercare support up to the age of 25 if they are engaged in post-secondary education on a full-time basis, findings from the YiPPEE study indicate four educational pathways taken by young people leaving care with two leading to higher education and two to obtaining vocational qualifications (Rácz & Korintus, 2013). Driscoll (2013: 142) reports the findings of a small-scale study of care leavers aged 16-20 in England and notes that all participants commented that they had not achieved "the educational qualifications that they considered should be expected of them". While the pathways identified in the above studies provide valuable insights, we suggest that examining the educational pathways of people with care experience would benefit from a more long-term perspective drawing on the views and experiences of 'older' care leavers in order to examine the extent of any 'delay' as well as those factors that have shaped and influenced the educational pathways of care-experienced adults.

A small number of qualitative studies have examined the educational experiences of 'older' people with care experience in various jurisdictions, particularly in regard to their pursuit of higher education (Mallon, 2007; Milligan, 2005; Mendis, 2015; Mendis, Lehmann, & Gardner, 2018). Mendis (2015, 2018) report the findings of a qualitative study of the experiences of 18 women university graduates in Australia now aged 25-65 who had spent at least three years in care. The author identified five groups according to their educational experiences: Destined, Decided, Determined, Denied, or Delayed. The author reports the experiences of the women in each group from those in the *Destined* group who received assistance and resources towards their education through to those in the *Delayed* group who had a negative experience of school all the way through contributing to poor performance and challenging behaviour while at school. Members of the *Delayed* group realised the value of education later in life and decided to remedy their earlier lack of qualifications. Findings of this small-scale study point to considerable diversity in background and educational experiences and pathways among the women who shared their stories.

Two recent English studies also report delayed pathways among care leavers. Hanrahan and colleagues (Under Review) report findings from an English longitudinal study of care leavers aged 16 to 32 noting the "complex pathways" through education reported by participants who self-identified as "doing well" (p. 8). The authors highlight the importance of appropriately supporting people on these pathways in the context of intersecting structural and relational factors that influence them. Harrison (2017) reports "fractured" and "disrupted" pathways into higher education among respondents to an online questionnaire on this topic adding that "alternative pathways are actually the most frequent ones by which care leavers reach HE [higher education]" (p. 72). In a more recent paper, Harrison (2019) synthesises three English datasets to map participation in higher education among care-experienced young people. Among the findings of this study, Harrison (2019) reports that care-experienced students pursuing Higher Education as identified in this study, are, on average, older than other students and many have returned to education following a considerable gap. Many also pursue Higher Education later via further education adult/work-based education.

Drawing on data related to people with care experience more generally – not just those who went on to higher education or were 'doing well' – findings from the Midwest Study in the United States (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006) show that 64% of former foster youth had completed high school at age 19 but at age 29 this had risen to 85% (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). Reporting the findings of an online survey of 310 care leavers in the UK aged 17-78, Duncalf (2010) points to a considerable number of respondents who returned to education later in life, often beyond the age of forty. Returning to Harrison's (2017) work, he points to the limitations of data capturing entry to higher education up to the age of 21 as this only records those who enter higher education 'early' or at a similar time to many in the majority population. Findings from these studies suggest that the pursuit of education 'later' in life that is, after the age of 25, may be complex and varied pointing to the need for further consideration of this issue.

The value of a longer-term perspective

While the perception is that it is the norm to pursue further and higher education immediately after completing compulsory schooling, evidence from the wider literature on education suggests that many people in the general population delay or postpone entry. From the perspective of young people leaving care, for many, perhaps it makes sense to postpone entry to further and higher education to manage more immediate matters such as finding somewhere to live and managing finances. Bengtsson and colleagues (2018) point to this potential early focus for young people leaving care. The authors report findings from a small-scale Swedish qualitative longitudinal study of 15 care leavers' (aged 16 to 21) expectations of the future. Participant short-term expectations were primarily focused on their worries in relation to leaving care and how they would cope upon leaving care with the challenges of life. Long-term expectations however, were quite different and reflected positive expectations about their futures suggesting that, in the case of this study at least, young people anticipated difficult times ahead in the short-term but were optimistic and hopeful about their long-term experiences. Findings such as these point to the need to consider 'outcomes' and experiences after leaving care from a much longer-term perspective in order to capture a more complete picture of the pathways taken by people with care experience. A

qualitative life course perspective on the educational pathways of care-experienced adults, particularly drawing on the experiences of 'older' adults, stands to provide unique insights into these pathways and those experiences and events that have shaped them over time from a longer-term perspective. This has the potential to provide insights into the support and information needs of care-experienced adults.

This paper seeks to contribute to existing academic knowledge by exploring the educational pathways of an older sample of care-experienced adults than previous studies and providing insight into those experiences and events that have influenced these pathways.

Methods

This study was completed using qualitative methods. Prior to recruitment and data collection taking place the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Efforts were made to ensure that this study was carried out in an ethical manner including ensuring participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, securing written, informed consent from participants prior to interview, and ensuring that all data were stored safely and securely in accordance with Irish legal requirements. Eighteen adults with care experience were recruited to participate in this study. The following criteria were used to recruit participants: 1) spent a minimum of two years in care as a child in Ireland at any age. Given the exploratory nature of this study we did not specify the age at which time in care had to have occurred for example, during adolescence; 2) were currently aged 25-35. We sought the views of this 'older' group of adults with care experience as this perspective tends to be missing from the literature (Murray & Goddard, 2014). Furthermore, in an effort to explore the longer-term educational pathways of this group we felt it was important to hear from 'older' adults who had moved beyond the 'care leaving' stage. We also hoped to hear the experiences and pathways taken by people with many different educational experiences including those that were positive, challenging, interrupted, extended, or ongoing. To that end, we adopted a 'multi-pronged' recruitment strategy in order to hear from individuals in a range of contexts. Study information was shared with gatekeepers from various advocacy organisations such as Empowering People in Care and the Care Leavers'

Network Ireland as well as university Access Programmes, colleges of further education, and homeless services. We also shared study information on social media.

Eighteen participants volunteered to participate in the study. A further two made initial contact but one did not follow up after receiving the study information and the other was based in, and had grown up in care, in the UK and so did not meet the recruitment criteria. The final sample was aged 24-36 reflecting a small amount of flexibility in terms of the age range recruited. Educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) were conducted with all 18 participants in a location of their choice. Interviews took place in a range of settings including participant homes, community centres, and public libraries. Each interview began with the first author inviting participants to tell their educational story from their earliest memory to the present day. When participants had finished telling their story the first author asked a range of follow-up questions drawing on her knowledge of the topic literature and to probe issues participants had raised in their initial narrative. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and all participants were allocated a pseudonym during the transcription process. All other identifying information (e.g. areas participants lived, school names) were also anonymised.

Borrowing from the principles of case study research (Kohlbacher, 2006; Yin, 2003), all transcripts were reviewed and individual case summaries focusing on the educational pathway taken by participants were prepared. Next, an individual timeline was created for each participant marking out key events along the course of their educational pathway in primary school, secondary school, and post-compulsory education using colour coding to delineate experiences related to primary school, secondary school etc. Key events related to participant experiences of care were also noted, for example participant age when entering care and placement breakdown. Attention was paid to the latter portion of participant educational pathways (that is secondary and post-compulsory education) during this phase of analysis in an effort to interpret, track, and map participants' pathways into and through secondary and, where relevant, post-compulsory education. Once case summaries and individual timelines had been compiled, data across cases was reviewed borrowing from principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a

search for thematic patterns across participant stories was undertaken. As a result, four common groups or 'types' of educational pathways taken by participants were identified.

The trustworthiness of this research was addressed according to the four criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In order to address the criterion of 'credibility' this research was carried out in accordance with the principles of good research practice for example, decisions made at every stage of the research process being recorded and accounted for. While transcripts of interviews were not shared with study participants as is recommended to meet this criterion, towards the end of the analysis process key findings were shared with participants in a summary email and they were invited to get in touch with any questions, comments, or feedback. As a result, arguably the standard of credibility has been only partially met, a potential limitation of this study. To meet the criterion of 'transferability', we sought to provide what Geertz (1973) termed "thick description". Participant interviews were in-depth covering various factors related to each person's educational pathway. Efforts have been made to provide the reader with detailed descriptions of participant experiences and pathways in the below findings section in order to further satisfy this criterion. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that researchers should adopt an 'auditing' approach to the research process in order to satisfy the criterion of 'dependability'. Full and accurate records of the research process were kept from the very beginning of this project in the form of a research journal, various excel spreadsheets tracking information such as where participants heard about the study, date and time of interviews, and participant information. Relatedly, 'confirmability' was ensured by recording key decisions made, and critical information gathered, during the research process. To further ensure the confirmability of this study, researcher reflexivity was exercised throughout the research process, that is, the practice of the researcher being self-aware of their own values and beliefs regarding their research (Payne & Payne, 2004).

Findings

We will now present participant demographic information followed by a description of the four educational pathways identified as a result of data analysis. The average age of participants was 29 with a range of 24 to 36. Eleven participants were female and seven

were male. Participants had spent between two years and 18 years in care. Six participants had been in foster care only, and six residential care only. A further six had been in both residential *and* foster care. Several participants also spent brief periods in hotel accommodation, bed and breakfasts, and high support/secure care units. These are reported as 'other' in Table 5.1 below which provides details related to participant demographics, placements, and education. There was considerable diversity in the number of placements participants had been in from one to over 21 with two participants noting that they did not know how many placements they had had altogether but that it was over 20 for one, and over 21 for the other. Six participants reported that they had been diagnosed with dyslexia. The age at which participants were diagnosed ranged from the end of primary school to when one participant was pursuing a Master's degree.

In terms of education, the average age when participants left school was 18 with five leaving school between the ages of 14 and 16. As with placements, there was considerable diversity when it came to the number of schools participants had attended ranging from two schools to nine schools with an average of four schools attended[24]. Fourteen participants were currently pursuing, or had successfully completed, higher education in the form of undergraduate and in some cases, Master's degrees. Ten participants had completed Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses[25], and one participant was planning to complete a PLC course the following year. One further participant had completed equivalent further education courses in another jurisdiction.

[24] In the Irish context, children generally attend primary school from approximately age five to age 12 and secondary school from age 12 to age 18.

[25] Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are full-time and last for one to two years. They offer a mixture of practical work, academic work and work experience (Citizens Information, 2018).

Table 5.1: Overview of participant demographics, placements, and education

Participant	**Age***	**Sex**	**Age when first entered care***	**Type of placement(s)**	**Number of placements***	**Age when left school**	**Highest level of education: completed or in progress**
1	24-27	Male	15-17	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
2	32-36	Male	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Undergraduate degree
3	28-31	Female	15-17	Residential Care (+ other)	11+	14-16	Undergraduate degree
4	24-27	Male	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Post Leaving Cert (PLC) course
5	24-27	Female	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care	11+	14-16	Diploma
6	24-27	Female	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care (+ other)	4-6	14-16	Master's degree
7	24-27	Male	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	14-16	Undergraduate degree
8	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care + Residential Care	7-10	17-19	PLC Course
9	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
10	32-36	Male	0-4	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree

11	32-36	Male	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Higher Diploma
12	24-27	Female	5-9	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Leaving Certificate
13	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care	4-6	14-16	Undergraduate degree
14	28-31	Male	5-9	Foster Care + Residential Care (+ other)	11+	17-19	Undergraduate degree
15	32-36	Female	0-4	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
16	24-27	Female	0-4	Foster Care + Residential Care	4-6	17-19	Master's degree
17	32-36	Female	10-14	Residential Care	1-3	17-19	Master's degree
18	32-36	Female	5-9	Foster Care	1-3	17-19	Undergraduate degree

* In order to maintain participant anonymity exact details regarding participant age, age when entered care, number of placements, and age when participants left school are not provided. In the findings section the above age categories are also be used in order to ensure participant anonymity.

Four 'types' of educational pathways taken by participants were identified following data analysis:

1. Typical Pathway
2. Typical Pathway 'plus'
3. Short-term Disrupted Pathway
4. Long-term Disrupted Pathway

A description of these pathways and those experiences and events that shaped them over time now follows. The four pathways focus on the latter stages of participant education, primarily secondary education, post-compulsory education, current 'outcome', and plans for the future. Pathways one and two – the 'typical' groups reflect typical pathways in education taken by those in the majority population. Pathways three and four reflect alternative pathways that were 'disrupted' and involved delays and detours as a result of various experiences in participant lives. Illustrative case examples are provided for each pathway. These cases were selected as they illustrate many, though not all, of the core elements of the pathway under discussion. Some details in these cases are deliberately non-specific in order to ensure participant anonymity. While the four pathways identified were found to best represent the multitude of pathways identified, not all participants fitted neatly into a single discrete pathway and there was some overlap.

Pathway 1: Typical Pathway

Participants who had taken this pathway completed their compulsory education 'on time' and went on to pursue undergraduate degrees straight after completing their compulsory education – see Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Typical Pathway

While all three participants in this group took a 'typical' pathway from secondary to higher education, they had notably different early school and home experiences. One participant was in the same long-term placement from infancy, one came into care aged eight after chaotic early years with her birth family, and the other came into care aged 15. All three however, spoke of a focus on academics and education either in their secondary schools and/or in their foster homes and wider birth family that was instrumental in their pursuit of higher education immediately after finishing school.

For example, Ben (32-36) who arguably had the most 'normative' educational pathway of all participants noted that *"academics was a big thing for our* [secondary] *school like the particular school I went to… it was academic to the point of… the norm, as, that was, it was a culture of that was the norm"*.

Similarly, for Thea (28-31), despite her chaotic experience in care between the ages of 15 and 17, the positive culture of education in her birth family remained influential:

> Interviewer: *Education seems to mean a lot to you and you've huge value on it, do you know where that comes from or have you always had that?*
>
> Thea: *My family… yea all my family, we all have eh degrees every one of us… I mean, eh it would be very strong in the family.*

All three participants in this group were exposed to high expectations and positive attitudes towards education at varying points in their educational pathway. By the time they reached their early twenties, all three participants who took this pathway had completed undergraduate degrees. One participant in this group had also completed a Higher Diploma and a Master's degree. Another participant hoped to pursue a Master's degree in the future.

Typical Pathway Case Example: Ashley (32-36)

Ashley's memories of early childhood are vague and hazy. She remembers starting primary school and soon after this experiencing a significant loss in her life, changing her daily circumstances. She noted that during the early part of her education school was not a priority in her home and there was no routine. She attended two different primary schools during the early and middle stages of her primary education. When a social work intervention resulted in her moving to live with 'distant relatives' she was initially able to remain in the same school. However, within a year of this move Ashley was placed with a foster family where she noted expectations regarding education were high:

> *"I think it was a combination of having… ah… an environment at home that, that, it wasn't even, it was just a given like that there was expectations for us all and the expectation is we would go onto tertiary education, it was just an expectation."*

Ashley moved to a new primary school toward the end of her primary education. She then moved to secondary school where she 'thrived'. She made a lot of friends who had high aspirations when it came to their education. Immediately after finishing school Ashley went on to complete an undergraduate degree and has worked both in Ireland and abroad since. She would like to study further and spoke about post graduate programmes that she is considering applying for in the future.

Pathway 2: Typical Pathway 'Plus'

Participants on this pathway had all successfully pursued higher education in the years after they left school. For participants in this group this progression involved completion of a one-year further education course prior to entering higher education – see Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2: Typical Pathway 'Plus'

The three participants who had taken this pathway ultimately spent the longest period of their time in care in foster placements, but all had reasonably turbulent experiences in childhood as a result of multiple home moves with their birth family or multiple placement moves. All three found themselves struggling in different ways towards the end of secondary school and this manifested itself in skipping school, worrying about support after they left care, and acting out. After completing their Leaving Certificate[26] exam, all three reported not achieving high grades and opted to pursue a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course as a next step[27]. Immediately after completing their PLC course all three went on to complete undergraduate degrees in their chosen area followed directly after by Master's degrees. All three had recently completed their Masters' degrees.

Two participants in this group commented on the support they received from their foster carers, feeling that they had a 'safety net' to fall back on if things did not work out when it came to their education. This was invaluable in terms of enabling them to take risks. Harry (24-27), who came into care in his late teens, recalls the support he felt from his foster mother at various stages in his education:

> *"[I]t was cushioning you know, it was nice, it was kind of like, ok I'm gonna do this, I can be brave and I ca- I'm not gonna fall to the beds of the earth if it doesn't work out and [be] stuck in a hole, like she's, she [foster mother] has a plan, she's like, she'll help me get back up again…"*

Typical Pathway 'Plus' Case example: Rebecca (24-27)

Rebecca came into care in early childhood and initially went into residential care. She was unclear on the years and dates but remembers that she was already in foster care when she started primary school. During her first year in primary school she moved placement. She recalls a period of approximately two years where she had in the region of eight placements. During this time, she moved to two or three different

[26] The university matriculation examination in the Republic of Ireland is called the 'Leaving Certificate' (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

[27] PLC courses can act as an alternative pathway into Higher Education in Ireland (www.careersportal.ie).

primary schools. Approximately halfway through her primary education she moved to what would be her final, long-term placement. At this stage she also repeated a school year as she was "too young" to move ahead. She stayed in this school for the remainder of her primary education, following which she went to secondary school. Her early years in secondary school were uneventful but during her later years she notes that she got interested in "drink" and "boys". She also became worried about not having support from her foster carers once she finished school. In the run up to her Leaving Certificate examination, Rebecca had a conversation with her foster mother that put her "worries to rest". She went on to complete her Leaving Certificate and while she notes that she did not achieve "great points", she passed everything. Upon leaving school she opted to complete a one-year Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course. She then completed an undergraduate degree, followed by a Master's degree. Having completed her Master's degree she wanted to go travelling to "rebuild" and reflect upon her recent past. Rebecca believed she needed a break from education at that stage but during the interview she indicated an interest in eventually returning to education and potentially pursuing a PhD in the future:

> *"…* [P]*rior to the interview recording I think it's important to say… you know* [I was] *asking you questions about the PhD process… because I firmly believe that I will do one."*

Pathway 3: Short-term Disrupted Pathway

Participants on this pathway had taken a period of time out of education in their teenage years before returning to further and/or higher education in their late teens or early 20s – see Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Short-term Disrupted Pathway

The six participants who had taken this pathway, for the most part, had quite disjointed educational experiences, particularly in secondary school, with four leaving school early between the ages of 14 and 16. The remaining two participants in this group had children in their late teens. All participants in this group spent the years after leaving secondary education in a range of contexts and roles. For some the time was spent working and pursuing short-term courses or caring for their young babies while others experienced addiction and homelessness.

Returning to education was prompted by various factors including the possibility of gaining financial support for pursuing education, a concern regarding losing financial support related to aftercare, consistent and regular encouragement of extended family, wanting to prove those who doubted them wrong, and wanting to provide for young children. For Louise (24-27), having dropped out of secondary school towards the end of her compulsory education, at age 17 she found herself homeless and not in education. She then realised that she would not receive financial support after she turned 18 if she was not in an education programme and took action in relation to this:

> *"I just kept saying to meself like you need to do something because like the HSE* [former provider of child protection and welfare services] *are gonna cut you at 18 if you don't em… basically… get enrolled in a course so I was like, what am I going to do* […] *and then em so I decided to go back to* [secondary school] *and* […] *I had a meeting with her and I was like [principal's name] you need to put me on the school roll."*

After some discussion Louise was re-enrolled in the secondary school in question and went on to pursue a PLC course, an undergraduate degree, and at the time of interview was completing her Master's degree.

The return to education happened for most participants in this group one to three years after they had left school. Their return to education was by way of PLC course - or the equivalent in another jurisdiction in the case of one participant. Some completed several PLC courses before entering an undergraduate degree programme. All

participants in this group had *commenced* an undergraduate degree by their early 20s. At the time of interview two had completed a Master's degree, one was in the process of completing her Master's degree, one was about to commence a Master's degree and one was pursuing her undergraduate degree and planning to complete a Master's degree once this was finished. One participant was pursuing a further education qualification and hoped to complete her undergraduate degree in the future.

Short-term Disrupted Pathway Case Example: Sam (24-27)

Sam began pre-school aged three before entering primary school. He recalls experiencing bullying and stigma in primary school and remembers acting out and not being supported. He went into residential care when he was in the early stages of his primary school education. Sam remained in the same residential placement for his entire time in care. However, when he went into care he moved to a new school, repeating his previous school year. Sam started secondary school but reports wanting to leave during the early years of secondary school. Early in his time in secondary school, the girl that Sam was seeing became pregnant. Sam decided to leave school to work and earn money. In his mid-teens Sam completed several short-term courses. The staff teaching these courses encouraged Sam to complete his Leaving Certificate Applied[28] which he did. At this time, he was also discharged from care. He then completed a PLC course, followed by an undergraduate degree. Sam recalls a fear of failure as he pursued his undergraduate degree knowing what he was up against:

> *"*[In] *third year I was like this can't, this just can't be going right for me… I can, I just can't do it em, I don't know was it, I don't know in some senses like, some people kind of self-fulfilling prophecy where you're thinking that look eh you're only out of the care system, you're going to, it's only gonna go shit up for you like and reading up on the statistics and knowing all the rest of it that you're*

[28] The Leaving Certificate Applied is a "self-contained two-year Leaving Certificate programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. The programme sets out to recognise the talents of all students and to provide opportunities for developing personal responsibility, self-esteem and self-knowledge" (Citizens Information, 2019a).

going against… I suppose the… [pauses] *what the, the norm, the unfortunate norm for so many care leavers."*

Having completed his undergraduate degree, Sam secured a place on a Master's programme. At the time of the interview Sam had not yet completed this Master's degree. He plans to pursue a career in the field of his masters and has a lot of plans for work he would like to complete after he graduates.

Pathway 4: Long-term Disrupted Pathway

Participants on this pathway had taken an extended break from education before returning, or planning to return, to further or higher education – see Figure 5.4.

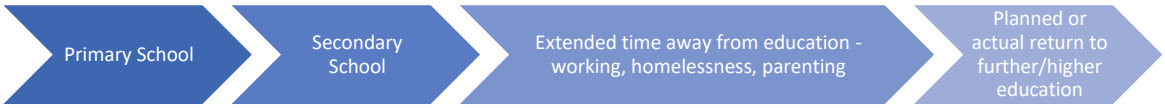

Figure 5.4: Long-term Disrupted Pathway

Six participants had taken this pathway. While some in this group had had chaotic and highly disjointed school and placement experiences, one had had a highly stable placement and educational experience. Another had had a lot of placement moves but a very stable education attending just two primary schools and one secondary school. These latter two participants had plans to return to further education in the future. The other four participants had spent time away from education having completed their compulsory schooling, and in some cases made unsuccessful efforts to pursue further education in the initial years after leaving care. In the years between their secondary education and their most recent return – or planned return – to further and/or higher education participants, had been engaged in diverse activities including working in various sectors (for example, retail, the hospitality industry, and the voluntary sector), learning a trade, experiencing homelessness, parenting, and caring for birth parents reflecting various life experiences. For Jim (28-31), the death of his mother prompted his decision to pursue higher education. He had worked in retail for many years and cared for his mother as she became quite unwell in the years preceding his return to education:

> *"[M]y role in that stage of my life was that I was a full-time carer for my mam and a part-time worker and you know the care for my mother came before anything else even my own needs you know […] so yea I suppose then em… like I always wanted to… since even the time I was doing my Leaving Cert I always wanted to go to college."*

The length of time spent away from education ranged from three to over 10 years. Some participants in this group clearly stated that they had not felt ready to pursue further or higher education until their late twenties. For example, Brian (32-36) who returned to education in his mid-twenties having done his Leaving Certificate in his late teens and worked in various roles in the intervening years notes *"I always knew I'd do college later, I mean, I think in life…"*. Several participants in this group noted that they planned to continue their education beyond their initial undergraduate degree.

Long-term Disrupted Pathway Case Example: John (32-36)

John started primary school aged four and recalls experiencing bullying during this time. He first came into care mid-way through his primary education, returning home after a short period. He stayed in the same primary school during this time. He again came into care at the end of his primary education which led to him moving school and finishing the final stages of his primary education in a new school. He attended two different secondary schools having to move early on when he moved care placement. John reports skipping school a lot and getting heavily involved in alcohol and drug use in his late teens. In his late teens he was also told by the care home he had been living in that he had to do his Leaving Certificate after which he could either go home or get a flat. He completed his Leaving Certificate but reports that he got poor results. After this he opted to go home and at this time, he got an apprenticeship in a trade. Over ten years later he returned to education to study for his undergraduate degree. During that ten years he worked, both in paid employment, and as a carer for a family member.

"I do work part-time in an [name of shop] *so that's my part-time job yea, so I did get a job in,* [year] *it's only part-time so, maybe 20 hours a week, but like I was like doing something, I can't sit at home too long, I get itchy and stuff… so… I was like I'm not doing this for the rest of my life so in* [year] *I went back to college like so but I was so happy I went back to college, even if I don't get my degree I'm so happy I went back."*

At the time of the interview John was working towards completing his undergraduate degree and has ambitions to go as far as possible in his education.

Summary

By viewing educational pathways from this longer-term perspective, we get a strong sense of the variation in experience and range of pathways taken by participants as well as the various experiences and events that have shaped these pathways. The above pathway 'types' and case examples illustrate the diverse educational pathways taken by participants and the varying timeframes within which they pursued post-compulsory education. We also gain insight into the impact of various life experiences on these educational pathways for example, due to the onset of different roles and influence of various transitions linked to these roles experienced by participants. The potential, capacity, and commitment to education among participants is also evident in the progress made in these pathways.

Discussion

In the case of the 18 adults interviewed for this study, the pursuit of post-compulsory education occurred in different ways and within different timeframes. The pursuit of education is not always a linear endeavour (Davey & Jamieson, 2003; Feinstein & Peck, 2008). By considering the various pathways of participants, and those experiences and events that likely influenced these pathways, we argue that we gain a more complete picture of potential routes into and through further and higher education that are taken by adults with care experience. The alternative disrupted pathways identified in this paper resonate with some of those identified in previous studies, for example in the YiPPEE study (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) and Harrison's (2017) recent work in England.

Many participants in this study pursued higher education via 'PLC' courses echoing Harrison's (2019) finding that many care-experienced young people in England pursued pathways into higher education via further education and adult education courses. The pathways identified in this paper also extend our knowledge on this topic as the routes into and through further and higher education of those who left school early and those who have not yet returned to education since completing compulsory education are captured.

It is important to note the higher numbers of participants who had taken alternative, 'disrupted' educational pathways in what could ultimately be considered a predominantly 'successful' group as most had completed or were pursuing undergraduate degrees and/or further education qualifications at the time of interview. This would suggest that delays in educational pathways may be the *norm* for this group of care-experienced adults. While many participants pursued further and higher education, this often took place in participants' late twenties and early thirties, a finding that resonates with Gilligan's (2019b: 1) call for "deeper engagement with the life-long learning model of education" when it comes to people with care experience. This finding appears to challenge the often-dominant and stigmatising narrative surrounding care leavers and higher education that is, that only a small percentage go to university. While the early school leavers in this study sample "bucked the trend" and returned to further and higher education (Davey & Jamieson, 2003: 266), this may not be the case for all people with care experience who leave school early. The achieved sample recruited for this study was limited as it did not include anyone who had *not* returned to education after leaving school early. Future research exploring the educational experiences and perspectives of care-experienced adults who left school early and did not return to education would likely provide useful insights on another aspect of the issue of the education of care-experienced adults.

A range of factors related to family and structural issues influenced participant pathways including family and school culture, support from carers, financial support available, and the role of work and family life. These findings resonate with both the life course perspective's conceptualisation of individual and structural factors influencing

diversity in pathways (Hutchison, 2011) as well as existing evidence that suggests that when compared to students who pursue post-compulsory education "on-time" students who delay the pursuit of further and higher education may have transitioned to other roles prior to re-entering the world of education (Roksa & Velez, 2012). This was particularly the case for those participants in this study in the *Disrupted Pathway* groups who were managing various roles including being parents, carers, and employees prior to returning to education. The various responsibilities associated with these roles and the limits these may place on individuals highlight the potential for these structural and familial factors to intersect and shape educational pathways over time. Study findings resonate further with evidence from the wider education literature on progression to post-compulsory pathways. While some participants did progress to post-compulsory education immediately after their compulsory education (those in the *Typical* Pathways), others took different routes into further and higher education (those in the *Disrupted* Pathways) (Bozick & DeLuca 2005; Roksa & Velez, 2012). For some participants, various difficulties experienced in the years after leaving care were related to subsequent delays in the pursuit of education similar to Montserrat and colleagues' (2013) findings. For example, several participants in both 'Disrupted' groups experienced homelessness and addiction prior to returning to education.

To begin unpacking the dynamics behind these 'disrupted' pathways, we draw on the concepts of *roles* and *transitions* and how they have influenced participant educational pathways. Participants reported navigating various roles and related transitions they had experienced prior to returning to education suggesting a need to consider the impact of holding multiple roles and the accompanying transitions, when it comes to educational progress.

Many participants in this study identified multiple roles that they were navigating while pursuing, or seeking to pursue, further and higher education including being parents, employees, and carers. Several participants transitioned to being a student from, for example, being a parent, and were consequently navigating and managing both (and often other) roles at the same time. This resonates with Fairchild's (2003: 11) observation that "[h]igher education is only one of the many activities in which adult

students are involved." Meiners' (2018) assertion that negotiation is required between roles and that negotiating a balance between roles can be difficult is arguably relevant in light of the data presented here indicating that care-experienced adults returning to education 'later' in life may have had to navigate – and continue to navigate – multiple roles along the way. This has the potential to enhance learning and educational opportunities as a result of varied life experiences (Bradley & Graham, 2000). However, holding and navigating multiple roles may also present challenges to entering and progressing through further and higher education. We suggest that the presence, experience, and impact of these multiple roles in the educational pathways of adults with care experience represents a key area for future investigation and research.

Related to the experience of holding multiple roles is the concept of transitions which involves a "change in roles and statuses that represents a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses" (Hutchison, 2011: 22). Transitions have been discussed in a considerable body of literature related to leaving care (Storø, 2017) and in relation to transitions in education more broadly (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Evans et al., 2013; Jamieson, 2012; Smyth, 2016). These bodies of work address transitions such as the transition from care to independence and from compulsory to higher education respectively. We know less about the ways that *other* transitions may shape the educational pathways of people with care experience, for example, the transition from parent or employee to student, or the transition from experiencing homelessness and addiction to becoming a student. In his paper examining the concept of transitions in literature related to young people leaving care, Storø (2017) notes that transitions in this context were described using terms such as extended, complex, multiple, and prolonged, terms which arguably resonate with the types of transitions observed in the pathways outlined in this paper. The transitions experienced by participants in this study during their educational journey suggest multiple, multi-layered, complex, and potentially "off-time" transitions (for example becoming a parent or caring for a parent during the late teens/early twenties[29]) may be linked to the disrupted educational pathways of care-experienced adults. This issue warrants further investigation.

[29] According to available data, in 2017 the average age of first-time mothers in Ireland was 30 (www.cso.ie).

Limitations

This small-scale study is subject to several limitations. Despite considerable efforts we were unable to recruit any study participants who had left education early and not returned at all. This is perhaps evidence of a wider methodological issue related to carrying out research on this topic; for example, it is possible that people who had left education early and not returned did not feel the study was relevant to them. The study sample were all white Irish and therefore the perspectives of members of ethnic minority communities are not represented. Finally, the pathways and stories presented are based only on participant retelling of their stories from their perspective. Participant case files were not accessed and reviewed to confirm dates of various moves, for example. While this is a potential limitation, we suggest that by inviting participants to share their educational life history we were able to capture their unique perspective on their own lived experience and pathway through education.

Conclusion

In this paper we drew on data collected from 18 adults with care experience in order to identify the range and diversity of pathways taken through education by this group. Most participants in the current study had 'disrupted' pathways through education, many of which were continuing to unfold and involved managing multiple roles and navigating multiple transitions.

Several implications for practice, policy, and research have been identified in light of the above discussion. Firstly, the life course principle of expected 'diversity in life trajectories' provides a valuable lens through which to consider the educational pathways of adults with care experience. Taking a long-term perspective on this issue and starting from a point of *expecting* diversity allows us to observe, and develop our understanding of, how pathways unfold in many and varied ways which are often non-linear and disrupted. This facilitates thinking about education as a lifelong endeavour as well as conveying a message of aspiration, hope, and potential (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a; Gilligan, 2017; Gilligan, 2019b). Secondly, the potential for the concepts of *roles* and *transitions* to enhance our knowledge of this issue warrants further investigation. Arguably these theoretical concepts could be helpfully applied to future research efforts

to disentangle and unravel the complexity of factors at play in the educational pathways of adults with care experience over time. Thirdly, the pathways identified in this paper challenge our existing notions of educational "outcomes" when it comes to people with care experience. Considering outcomes as ongoing and evolving instead of as "endpoints" (Boddy, 2018a) is perhaps a more useful conceptualisation when it comes to education. Fourthly, the pursuit of disrupted pathways into and through further and higher education by adults with care experience has implications for key professionals and adults working with children, young people, and adults with care experience. For example, it demonstrates the importance of developing awareness and understanding of the many routes into and through further and higher education among professionals (Brady & Gilligan, 2018b). This point also has potential relevance to people in the wider population who have experienced educational disadvantage. Promoting awareness and information regarding alternative pathways into education is potentially a key factor in fostering participation in education later in life more generally. Finally, the diverse and disrupted pathways through education taken by many participants in this study have implications for both policy and research in this area. While participants in this study were not influenced by the *current* aftercare policy in Ireland[30], the pathways identified suggest that tying aftercare support to education up to a certain age may exclude people with care experience from receiving support at a later point. While policies such as these may encourage some young people to pursue education in early adulthood, what about those young people who are not ready, able, or interested in doing so at this point in their lives? This 'implicit condition of eligibility for extended care or after care support' may lead to those not in education suffering and being excluded from a service which may be very much needed (Gilligan, 2018: 12). We would also suggest that only providing support for education up to the early/mid-twenties misses an opportunity to support a return to education later in life for many care-experienced adults. Further

[30] Current Aftercare Policy in Ireland was introduced in 2017 following the enactment of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 on 1st September 2017 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017) which strengthened the legislative provision of aftercare. The 2017 policy states that "[y]oung people who have had a care history with Tusla are entitled to an aftercare service based on their assessed needs. The core eligible age range for aftercare is from 18 years up to 21 years. This can be extended until the completion of a course of education in which a young person is engaged, up to the age of 23 years" (Child and Family Agency, 2017: 6). Prior to this aftercare services were delivered on an ad hoc basis (Carr, 2014) in the absence of a statutory obligation for provision of services resulting in some areas of the country having "little or no aftercare provision" (Daly, 2012: 310).

research to examine this issue on a wider scale will provide insights into the most appropriate and inclusive model of educational support for people with care experience.

This study has highlighted the value of drawing on the life course perspective when examining the educational experiences of adults with care experience. Life course principles and concepts such as 'diversity in life course trajectories' and 'transitions' provide useful conceptual tools for understanding and disentangling the complexity at the heart of this issue. Arguably extending the body of research in this area to include the perspectives of care-experienced adults over age 36 would further enhance our understanding of the diversity of pathways into and through further and higher education. A commitment to approaching this issue from a long-term perspective (at research, policy, and practice levels) suggests a willingness to include those people with care experience who are not in a position to pursue further and higher education in the years immediately after leaving care, for whatever reasons, and a commitment to supporting the lifelong educational endeavours of people who were, and continue to be, children of the State.

Chapter Six: Supporting care-experienced adults' educational journeys: 'Linked lives' over the life course

In this chapter I present the third published peer-reviewed journal article that was written as part of the current study. This paper explores how the life course principle of 'linked lives' can illuminate our understanding of how relationships positively influence the educational journeys of adults with care experience over time.

This paper was co-authored with my PhD supervisor, Professor Robbie. Gilligan. I was the primary author of this paper and developed the current PhD study on which this article is based, carried out the field work for the project, completed data analysis, and prepared advanced drafts of the manuscript. Professor Gilligan played the usual support role in the PhD process. Once the paper was at an advanced stage of development, he contributed through discussion to the refinement of some of the conceptual ideas in the paper, and provided key feedback and guidance on drafts of the paper.

Full reference:

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Abstract

Research highlights the role of key actors and relationships in supporting the educational attainment and progress of children in care and care leavers. We know less about how relationships influence the educational journeys of people with care experience *over time* and how to support the educational progress and engagement of *adults* with care experience. The principle of 'linked lives' is central to the life course perspective referring to the interdependence of human lives throughout the life course. This paper explores how the principle of linked lives can illuminate our understanding of how relationships positively influence the educational journeys of adults with care experience over time. Educational life history interviews were conducted with 18 care-experienced adults (aged 24-36) in Ireland. Findings suggest the principle of linked lives

is a valuable conceptual tool for providing new insights on this issue. Four key themes were identified: 1) Opportunities for educational support are present across the life course; 2) 'Family' is a central source of educational support; 3) There is intergenerational capacity for educational support; and 4) Relationships beyond the 'family' are supportive of education. Implications for practice, policy, and research are explored.

Key words: Education; care leaver; care-experienced; life course perspective; linked lives; relationships

Introduction

The educational progress and attainment of young people who spend time in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, residential care) has been the focus of a growing body of international research (Sebba et al., 2015; Trout et al., 2008). Research in this area continues to highlight the low educational attainment and poor progress of care-experienced young people (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Stone, 2007) and 'care leavers' as less likely to pursue further and higher education (McNamara, Harvey, & Andrewartha, 2017).

A number of factors have been identified as influencing the educational outcomes (i.e. attainment in compulsory and post-compulsory education) of care-experienced people as a result of international research with children in care (i.e. children under age 18) and young people who have aged out of care (i.e. young people aged 18-24). These include high numbers of school moves and the accompanying disruption in schooling, early childhood trauma, high numbers of school exclusions, and higher than average rates of special educational needs (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; O'Sullivan & Westerman, 2007; Sebba et al., 2015; Trout et al., 2008). Work has also been done to identify factors that support positive educational outcomes among care-experienced young people such as having supportive adults in their social network, high carer aspirations, and self-motivation and determination (Harker et al., 2003; Martin & Jackson, 2002; O'Higgins, 2018).

While our understanding of *why* people with care experience tend to have lower levels of educational attainment is developing, we have a limited understanding of what has supported the educational journeys of 'older' (i.e. those over age 25) care-experienced adults *over time*. In this context, an 'educational journey' refers, not just to a person's formal path through education, but to their journey through care and formal education, as well as the influence of other experiences on their education for example, peer relationships, or parenthood. There is a further gap in knowledge when it comes to understanding and identifying sources of educational support for adults with care-experience who wish to return to education in adulthood, a phenomenon identified in recent research (Duncalf, 2010).

The life course perspective provides a useful conceptual and theoretical framework for considering development over time and is particularly suited to examining the educational journeys of care-experienced adults (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a). One of the central principles of the life course perspective is that of 'linked lives' which emphasises the interdependence of human lives over time and the ways in which relationships can both support and constrain behaviours (Hutchison, 2005). This article explores how the principle of linked lives can illuminate our understanding of how the educational journeys of adults with care experience are influenced positively *over time.* It also examines potential resources to support the educational journeys of care-experienced adults.

Overview of relevant literature

While identifying barriers to educational progress and attainment is an important part of understanding challenges to the educational progress of people with care experience, so too is developing our knowledge in relation to what *helps* and *supports* care-experienced people along their educational journey. Existing research carried out with children in care, care leavers, and carers has illuminated our understanding of the ways in which relationships with others can support educational progress and attainment. This support may arise in different contexts, involve individuals and groups, and come from formal and informal relationships. Both the *source* and *nature* of support received

are of interest, particularly in the context of this study which seeks to examine the ways in which others have positively influenced educational journeys over time.

Key Actors

Carers, teachers, lecturers, peers, social workers, and birth families are cited as having supported and positively influenced the educational progress and attainment of care-experienced young people (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Driscoll, 2013; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Harker et al., 2003; Darmody et al., 2013). In their exploratory study of the education of children in care in Ireland, Darmody and colleagues (2013) interviewed 15 children currently in care and care leavers. Foster parents and residential care home staff were identified as supporting education. Participants in this study had mixed responses when asked if they discussed school regularly with their social worker. Some participants said their social workers were very interested in their educational progress, while others felt their social workers were more concerned with 'how they were getting on with their lives in general' (Darmody et al., 2013: 95). This possible lack of attention to education from social workers was also noted by participants in previous studies for example, in the YiPPEE study that investigated the education pathways of care leavers beyond age 18 in five European countries: England, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, and Hungary (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). On the other hand, one participant in Darmody and colleagues' study (2013) noted that her birth mother wanted her children to do their best when it came to school - a factor that appeared to be particularly important for this child. Sebba and colleagues (2015) also report that parents, or other members of children's birth families, were supportive of their children's education from a young age.

In their study of 80 children in care in England, Harker and colleagues' (2003) found that teachers, carers, peers, family members, and social workers were frequently identified as supportive with teachers being most cited followed by foster carers. Work by Rios and Rocco (2014) resonates with these findings suggesting that teachers, guidance counsellors, foster carers, relatives, and members of local communities were key in providing academic support. Finally, Driscoll (2013: 145) notes the sometimes 'informal and surprising sources' of educational support in her study of the significance of

supportive relationships when it comes to educational aspirations, for example neighbours of a foster carer who provided support to one particular participant.

The Nature of Support

Considering the *nature* of support that is provided is important when developing our understanding of how people with care-experience can be supported in their educational endeavours. In their 2002 paper, Martin and Jackson focused on 'successful care leavers' with a mean age of 25 and asked them what had made them successful academically. Receiving encouragement from others was the most frequently cited experience. Most respondents stressed the 'vital importance of residential carers, foster carers, or parents showing an active interest in their education and giving them support and encouragement to do well' (p. 124). Many respondents in this study also spoke of having a 'special relationship' with at least one person who acted as a role model or mentor (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Similarly, Rios and Rocco (2014) note that support from key actors came in the form of special attention from teachers, practical support in relation to financial issues, high educational expectations, and older relatives acting as role models. Participants in Driscoll's (2013) study cited practical and emotional support and encouragement provided by foster carers, lecturers, and teachers as important. Driscoll also notes that participants were willing to accept support where 'trust and care' was established (2013: 145).

Foster carers are mentioned frequently in the literature on this topic. Skilbred and colleagues (2017) detail *how* foster carers support academic achievement, reporting from their study examining the qualities of the foster home that were important in successful academic achievement among foster children. Providing a sense of belonging in the foster home, emphasis of core values in relation to education (for example, the importance of doing your best), and providing structure and routine around education were identified as key. Munford and Sanders (2016) offer further insight on what support foster parents provide for children in their care. One of the key themes identified in this study was foster parents becoming an 'enduring presence' and holding young people's 'hopes and dreams' (p. 271). Sentiments such as the 'door always being open' and including the children in their care in family events all contributed to this

sense of an enduring relationship. Similar findings were identified in Jackson and Ajayi's (2007) study of young people in the UK with care experience who went on to university. Foster parents were central to supporting many participants to "stay the course" through difficult times (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007: 68).

While the above studies identify similar actors as supportive of education (e.g. carers, teachers) and provide insights into the ways support is provided, they do not draw on the principle of *linked lives* in doing this, nor do they tend to take a *long-term* view of the role of support and how it plays out over time - particularly in the lives of care-experienced adults. Drawing on the life course principle of linked lives to examine this issue will potentially allow for a more focused understanding of the complexity of factors influencing the education of care-experienced adults. Taking a long-term view of the role or impact of others in supporting the educational journeys of care-experienced adults can provide more nuanced and detailed information about the ways educational support has been provided – and may continue to be provided - over time.

Linked lives and the life course perspective

The life course perspective is an interdisciplinary framework for examining human lives from birth to death (Mayer, 2009) providing a way of conceptualising and understanding human development over time. Born out of work across several disciplines including sociology, anthropology, and demography, the life course emphasises how historical time and a person's culture affect and shape their experiences over time (Hutchison, 2011). The suitability of the life course perspective to the study of the educational experiences of adult care leavers has been discussed in a previous paper by the authors (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a). In this earlier paper, the authors emphasise the potential of the life course perspective to facilitate a deeper understanding of the educational experiences of adult care leavers by considering the core concepts and principles (or 'themes') of life course theory. In this current paper we focus on one of these core principles: *linked lives*.

'Linked lives' has been heralded as the most central principle of the life course perspective (Elder, 1994). The principle of linked lives emphasises the interdependence

of human lives across the life course and the ways our relationships and interactions with others can both support *and* constrain our behaviours (Ferrer et al., 2017; Hutchison, 2005). We move through life as members of groups, communities, and networks and as such our lives are shaped by those around us including our parents, children, partners, and peers (White & Wu, 2014). Implicit in many of these relationships is a long-term or enduring quality for example, our relationship with our parents and children exists over the course of our and their lives, albeit sometimes with varying levels of interaction and contact. The theme of linked lives emphasises the role of the family as the primary source of support and constraint while paying special attention to the ways in which the 'lives of family members are linked across generations' (Hutchison, 2005: 147). The principle of linked lives also considers the influence of relationships that extend beyond the family including those with friends, neighbours, and work colleagues (Black et al., 2009).

To the best of the authors' knowledge, the principle of linked lives has not previously been applied in the context of the educational journeys of care-experienced adults. We argue that the principle of linked lives offers potential new insights into the ways in which educational journeys are supported over time by various actors.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used to carry out this study[31] which was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Eighteen adults with care experience were recruited to participate in 'educational life history interviews' (Moore, 2006). Participants were recruited according to the following criteria: 1) spent at least two years living in care in Ireland as a child at any age. Given the exploratory nature of this study we did not specify the age at which time in care had to have occurred for example, during adolescence; 2) were now aged 25-35. This age range was selected to capture the views of 'older' care leavers, a group whose lived experiences are notably absent from much of the existing literature

[31] This study forms part of the first author's PhD study which is being supervised by the second author and undertaken in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

on this topic (Murray & Goddard, 2014). We sought to recruit participants with a wide range of educational experiences including those with more conventional, 'successful' experiences involving the pursuit of further and higher education as well as those with challenging, disrupted, or abridged experiences. The recruitment strategy was therefore 'multi-pronged' and sought to access 'visible' (e.g. those connected to organisations supporting care leavers/care-experienced adults) and 'less visible' care-experienced adults (e.g. those not accessing these organisations, those accessing homeless services). Study information was shared with gatekeepers in a range of organisations and networks including the Care Leavers Network Ireland, Empowering People in Care, homeless services, and university Access Programmes. Study information was also shared widely via Facebook and Twitter.

Participants were aged 24 to 36 with an average age of 29. Seven participants were male and 11 were female. Participants were from nine counties across Ireland representing rural and urban contexts. Length of time spent in care ranged from two years to 18 years. The average time spent in care was 11 years. Six participants were in foster care only, six in residential care only, and six were in both residential and foster care. Several participants also spent brief periods in hotel accommodation, bed and breakfasts, and high support/secure care units. The number of placements participants had lived in ranged from one to more than 21 with two participants unable to give a final number of placements noting that they were in '20 plus' and '21 plus' placements respectively.

On average, participants left school at age 18 with three leaving school between the ages of 14 and 15. Participants had been in between two and nine schools over the course of their lives. The average number of schools attended by participants (including primary and secondary schools) was four. At the time of interview fourteen participants were currently, or had previously successfully pursued higher education, ten had pursued short-term further education courses and one had not pursued further or higher education since completing the final State exams in secondary school.

Educational life history interviews were carried out with participants in a location of their choice including participants' homes, public libraries, and family resource centres.

Interviews varied in length from 61 minutes to 107 minutes; the average interview length was 84 minutes. At the start of the interview participants were invited to tell their educational story from their earliest memory to the present day. Follow-up questions were then asked based on points raised by participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym during the transcription process and all identifying information was anonymised.

Once transcribed and fully anonymised, all interview transcripts were entered into the N-Vivo qualitative data analysis package. All interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to data analysis is necessarily guided by the researcher's theoretical interest, in this case the extent to which linked lives *positively* influenced the educational journeys of study participants. The relevance of the following four key components of the principle of linked lives (Elder, 1994; Hutchison, 2005, Black et al., 2009) were considered during analysis:

1. Human lives are connected across the life course
2. Family is the primary source of support
3. The lives of family members are linked across generations
4. Relationships beyond the family can also be influential e.g. friends, neighbours work colleagues

Findings

Key actors were identified by participants as providing support during their educational journey, either in their primary narrative or in response to direct follow-up questions. Teachers, friends, foster carers, and aftercare workers were mentioned most often, see Table 6.1 for further details.

Table 6.1: Individuals who positively supported participant educational journeys.

Supportive individual	**Number of participants who mentioned individual**
Teachers (at primary and secondary level)	14
Friends (from childhood, school, college, work etc.)	10
Aftercare workers	7
Foster carers	7
Other professionals (e.g. Judge, school administrative staff)	7
College lecturers	6
Residential care staff	5
Birth parents	4
Own children	4
Aunt/Uncle	3
Grandparent	3
Partner/spouse	3
Work mentor	2
Birth parent social worker	1
Birth sibling	1
Foster sibling	1
Participant social worker	1
School principal	1

When it came to the *types* of support provided, participants reported that they had received encouragement and a sense of having high expectations from their supporters. They had also been made aware of a range of educational possibilities and had received practical support.

Key Themes

Four key themes were identified during data analysis (see Figure 6.1):

1. Opportunities to positively influence education are present across the life course
2. 'Family' as a central source of educational support
3. There is intergenerational capacity for educational support
4. Relationships beyond the 'family' are a potential source of educational support

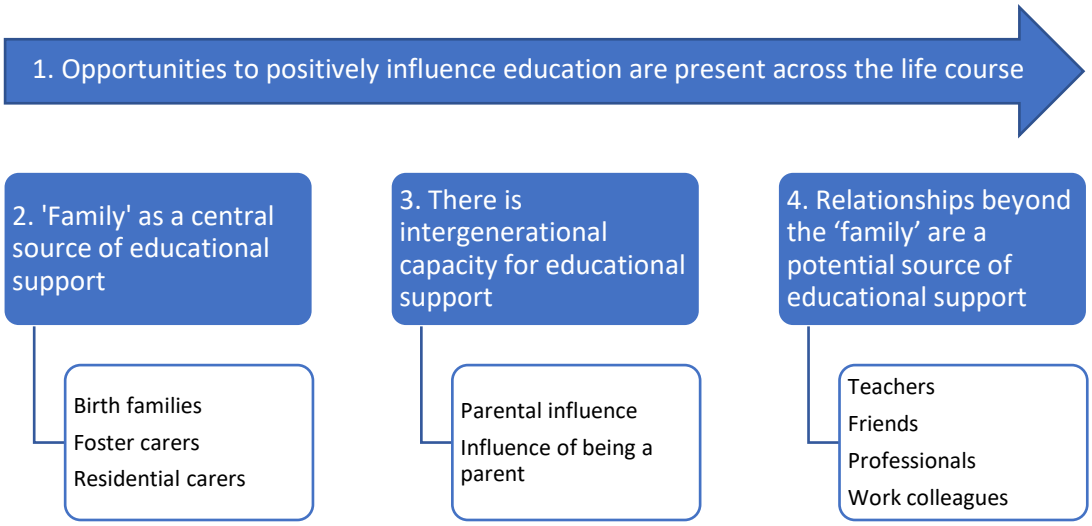

Figure 6.1: Key Themes

Opportunities to positively influence education are present across the life course

In keeping with the principle of linked lives and its emphasis on the connectedness of human lives over time, opportunities to positively influence participant educational journeys were present throughout participant lives. From positive birth family values in relation to education, to enduring support from foster carers and residential carers, to influential friends, teachers, and colleagues, evidence of support was continually visible in the data. While support from some actors, for example long-term foster carers, was present throughout participant educational journeys, other support was received at later points for example, from teachers in primary and secondary school, from lecturers when undertaking post-secondary study, and from friends made at various points in

participant lives. See Figure 6.2. These ongoing opportunities for support are evidenced within the following three themes.

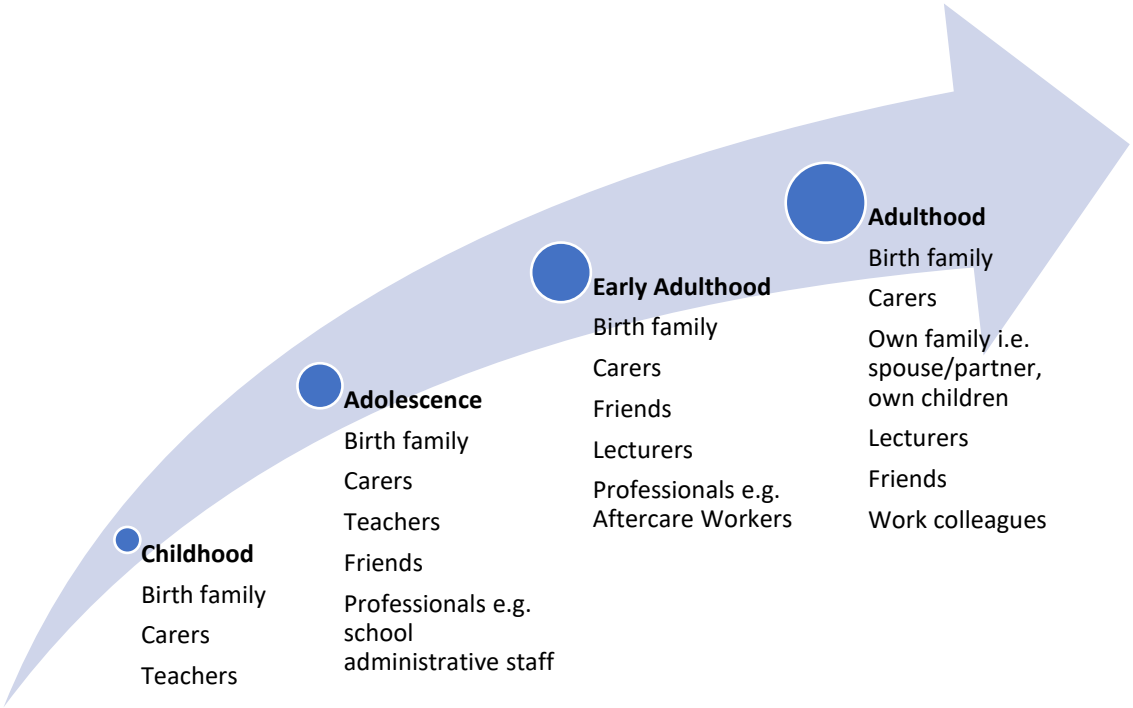

Figure 6.2: Opportunities to positively influence education were visible throughout participants' lives

'Family' as a central source of educational support

The principle of linked lives emphasises the role of the family as a primary source of support over the life course. While this was evident in the current study, our conceptualisation of 'family' was broader than that in the literature on linked lives given that participants did not live with their birth families throughout their childhood. To that end, 'family' in this context included birth families, foster carers, and residential care staff. Members of birth families were cited frequently by participants in telling their educational stories including parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. For Emma who became pregnant just before sitting her intermediate State exams in secondary school, her grandmother proved to be instrumental in supporting and encouraging her return to education after the birth of her child:

> *"It was around June my grandmother decided [laughs] turned around… 'when are you going back to school? September is only around the corner' I was like 'how can I go back to school I have a baby?!' and she was like 'well, well you've nothing to do now' she goes 'the child's inside in bed' you can start researching it, she goes you can see the options yourself, so of course once* [grandmother] *said it you had to do it."* [Emma, 31]

For several participants, foster carers and staff in their residential care homes had been, and often continued to be, a vital and enduring source of support throughout their educational journey. Amy (25), who recently completed a Master's, came into care aged three and finally settled in what would be her long-term foster placement at the age of eight. She recalls the support of her foster carers as being 'vital' to her educational success:

> *"I always felt that support from them* [foster carers] *which was so vital and they always told me that I was so smart and I could do this."* [Amy, 25]

For Emily (27) who came into care when she was seven and stayed in the same residential care home until she was 18, staff in the care home were unwavering in their encouragement and support of her educational endeavours. Their positive messages have stayed with her:

> *"The staff were always like, Emily, whatever you wanna do, you can do it, doesn't matter if it's hard, you'll get there you'll do it and that always with education, that always stuck in me head I was like d'you know what, I can do what I wanna do."* [Emily, 27]

There is intergenerational capacity for educational support

When it came to educational support, links across generations of families were evident in the data in two key ways, parental influence and the influence of *being* a parent.

Parental Influence

The influence of participant birth parents was visible in the narratives of several participants, particularly when it came to instilling a sense of the value of education. This was felt keenly by Steven (31) who came into care when he was six. He spent eight years in care and had over 10 placements in that time. He attended seven different schools but notes that his birth mother always encouraged his siblings and him to do well and had a strong belief in the value of education:

> *"My mother always had a strong value system and belief in education I think it's from her own upbringing as well and she always wanted us to do well in it, she always pushed us you know to, to do our best and, encourage us you know in an unusual way but it was very positive like…"* [Steven, 31]

Influence of being a parent

Eight study participants had their own children, some of whom were born to participants in their teenage years. Many of these participants reported that the birth of their child and becoming a parent gave them a new sense of purpose and a determination to 'do well' and achieve in relation to their education. Grace (34), who became pregnant at the end of her first year in college, credits the birth of her child with driving her to finish college:

> *"If I didn't have* [child] *I would have never finished college like… I wouldn't have had any reason so to stay like* […] *I suppose I felt that I needed to have something behind me* [I: Yea] *like cause I was a mother now and I had to like* [I: Yea] *provide, d'you know what I mean?"* [Grace, 34]

Several participants who were parents also spoke of wanting to influence the educational opportunities that their children had for the better, for example, by ensuring their children knew the value of education and had access to opportunities they did not. Matthew (32) left school at age 17 at which point he undertook an apprenticeship. After completing his apprenticeship, Matthew entered a period of

heavy drug use and unemployment before returning to study for an undergraduate degree at the age of 30. Speaking about his views on education today Matthew notes:

> *"I never saw the relevance of education, now I see the importance of education like and I'd be telling* [child]*."* [Matthew, 32]

Similarly, Terry (25) who left school in his early teens and was about to undertake a Master's degree at the time of the interview notes that:

> *"Trying to be, you know, a positive role model but even like the simplest things like helping* [child] *with homework is so important and then to show* [child]*… like the interest like… like* [child] *goes to more book shops now than anything."* [Terry, 25]

Relationships beyond the 'family' as supportive of education

Individuals beyond the 'family' context also had a positive influence on participant educational journeys over time. This non-family support included encouragement from friends, supportive aftercare workers, teachers and lecturers, and work colleagues who acted as mentors. The potential for positive input was observed at many different points in participant lives. For Clare (26), one friend has been key to her progress and persistence, particularly as she completes her undergraduate degree:

> *"She* [friend] *would be… a massive… encouragement and a massive help in the last four years* [while completing college degree] *… and even in terms of my confidence and positive thinking."* [Clare, 26]

Teachers were cited by 14 participants as being supportive. Max (27) spent 12 years in residential care living in two centres during this time. Max commented on the availability of support from his class tutor from his first year to his sixth (and final) year of secondary school:

> *"One teacher would have been em* [teacher's name] *like he would have been my em … what is it rep would you say? Em… I think tutor em… Yea, yea he would have, like he was there since first class* [year] *right up to 6th class* [year] *em – so he was really good and he gave extra when it was needed."* [Max, 27]

College lecturers, who tended to enter participant lives in early adulthood, were also identified as key actors by many when it came to influencing participants' education positively. Terry spoke fondly of one particular lecturer who he felt had been a 'catalyst' in terms of his education:

> *"The woman* [lecturer] *believes in me more than I've ever believed in myself em… and like repeatedly telling me* […] *since the first day I've met her I think she has been yea the absolute catalyst."* [Terry, 25]

Work colleagues were cited as important in supporting the educational journeys and future plans of participants. For Susie, a former manager who had become a friend and mentor was a steady source of guidance and support and someone with whom Susie felt she could discuss her future plans:

> *"She* [former manager] *you know, she's a significant person and I, I look at her cause… you know, returning to a Master's I would definitely confide in her em… you know, just to kind of get advice or to talk it through."* [Susie, 36]

The above themes highlight the value of considering the educational journeys of adults with care experience through the lens of linked lives. Based on the experience of participants in this study, opportunities for support occur throughout the life course, the role of the 'family' is key, there is an (two-way) intergenerational aspect to educational support, and support is also provided, at varying points in time, by actors outside of the 'family'.

Discussion

This article explores how the life course principle of linked lives can illuminate how the educational journeys of adults with care experience are influenced positively over time. It also identifies relevant and feasible resources that support the educational journeys of care-experienced adults.

Opportunities to receive support were continually present reminding us that there is no limit on the time or context in which educational support can and should be provided be it pre-care, in-care, soon after leaving care, or long after an individual has left care. It is never too late to offer educational support to care leavers. The range of contexts in which this support was received was also notable including in further and higher education settings and the work place. This point is of interest in the context of developing our understanding of opportunities to support the educational progress of care-experienced *adults.* The principle of linked lives reveals that not only are there a range of relevant and feasible resources to support the educational progress of adults with care experience, but that these are available throughout the life course.

The principle of linked lives also emphasises the role of the family as a source of support and constraint over time (Hutchison, 2005). While members of birth families were identified as supportive by many participants, findings suggest the need for a broader conceptualisation of 'family' within the principle of linked lives when it comes to care-experienced individuals. Foster carers and residential carers were named by many participants as key in their educational journey. In its strictest sense, support from foster and residential carers may not be considered 'familial' support yet for many participants their foster carers and the residential staff were (and often continued to be) a close and enduring presence in their lives (echoing Munford and Sanders' (2016) findings) with several participants referring to them as their family. While the nature and composition of family can be complex for people with care-experience (Boddy, 2018b), findings from this study suggest that a flexible and dynamic understanding of 'family', informed by the perspective of children, young people, and adults with care experience, may be helpful in considering the many potential and often enduring sources of educational support available to people with care experience.

The influence of inter-generational ties across families was evident in the study findings. For several participants, an enduring sense of the value of education was imparted by their own parents. In turn, for many participants who had become parents, the birth of their own child represented a shift in their sense of purpose and motivation when it came to their education. This resonates with findings from previous research such as Mendes' (2009) review of the literature on improving outcomes for teenage pregnancy and early parenthood for young people in out-of-home care. Mendes (2009: 15) highlights the positive effects of early parenthood noting that in several studies young mothers described parenthood as a 'life-changing event' giving them a new sense of purpose. Within the experience of becoming a parent, perhaps at a young age, lies the potential to positively shift an individual's educational journey. For many participants who had become parents their current circumstances and educational attainment and prospects, and those of their children, were dramatically different to those of their own childhood. This challenges existing discourses on educational disadvantage which suggest that parents pass on educational advantage or disadvantage to their children (Hertz, Jayasundera, Piraino, Selcuk, Smith, & Verashchagina, 2007). Conceptualising this issue via the lens of linked lives enables us to consider the dynamic impact of parental and parenting influences across generations.

The role of those beyond the 'family' environment was central in supporting the educational journeys of many participants. Similar to findings of other research, this support came from both formal (teachers, lecturers) and informal (friends, work colleagues) sources (Driscoll, 2013; Martin & Jackson, 2002). Two participants referred to social workers as supporting participant educational progress. Previous studies have pointed to a perceived lack of interest or focus on education by social workers, perhaps not surprising in the context of many other competing needs and demands (Darmody et al., 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Aftercare workers were mentioned regularly by participants in this study, possibly a result of an increased focus on education in the later years spent in care and post-care years due to the aftercare planning process. When conceptualising possible sources of educational support for children in care, young people leaving care, and adults with care experience, this finding serves as a reminder of the myriad of potential sources of support beyond the 'family' that may prove

influential. Often participant relationships with these individuals had an enduring quality, for example, long-lasting friendships and relationships with work colleagues that lasted beyond the formal length of the relationship.

Identifying ways to support and promote the educational attainment and progress of people with care experience is a critical issue. To that end, several implications for policy, practice, and research have been identified in light of the study findings:

- While 'family' is a key source of support when it comes to education, it is important to consider who is included when talking about 'family', particularly from the perspective of children, young people, and adults with care experience; these 'family' members may be the primary influencers in their lives.
- Formal and informal relationships have the potential to positively influence and support educational progress and attainment. This is true across a wide range of relationships and points in time, and sometimes from unexpected sources, such as participants' own children.
- Opportunities to support and encourage do not end when young people leave care or formal aftercare services. Participants in this study identified support from key people they had met and relationships that had developed in their late 20s and early 30s through, for example, work and further education experiences. Research suggests that some care-experienced adults return to education later in life (Duncalf, 2010) highlighting the importance of being aware of the ongoing potential for support.
- While there are important messages from this study in relation to supporting 'older' care leavers, findings are also relevant to practice and policy with children and young people currently in care and those leaving care in terms of identifying sources of support while being mindful of the continuing presence of opportunities to support educational progress and attainment over time.
- The linked lives principle provides a valuable lens through which to gain new insights into the ways in which educational journeys are influenced over time allowing us to conceptualise this issue from a long-term and multi-faceted

perspective. This principle may also provide valuable insights for research and practice in other domains of the lives of care-experienced young people (for example, work, mental health). Further research is required to explore this.

Limitations

The current study was small in scale and gathered the views of 18 adults with care experience, most of whom were pursuing or had pursued further or higher education. Study participants appear to fall within Stein's (2008) 'moving on' and 'surviving' groups of care leavers, with no participants who were primarily 'victims'. Despite extensive efforts, the authors were unable to recruit any participants who had left school early and had *never* returned to education – a possible methodological issue with conducting research in this area. Study information was shared widely via relevant organisations and on social media. Perhaps further efforts to recruit, for example via local newspapers and radio, might have led to successful recruitment of participants who had never returned to education having left early as the information would have reached a wider audience. The achieved sample proved to be all white Irish and as a result the perspectives of ethnic minority (e.g. members of the Traveller community) and non-Irish people with care experience were not captured. The sample size and composition should of course be borne in mind when considering the wider relevance of the findings. Finally, the focus of this paper was on how educational journeys were influenced *positively* over time. Further analysis of the study data would likely reveal themes related to the complexity and constraining impact of relationships on education both within and outside of the family.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on a previously unexamined aspect of the education of people with care experience - the role of key actors in supporting education *over time* from the perspective of care-experienced adults. The application of the principle of linked lives as a conceptual tool for examining this issue has highlighted the key role of 'family', broadly understood as including birth families, foster carers, and residential care staff, in supporting education in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and adulthood as well as the intergenerational nature of educational support. Considering this issue

through the lens of linked lives also emphasises the importance of connections over time with key actors (within and beyond 'family') highlighting the enduring nature of many of these connections and how they often translated into supportive actions at various stages in the life course. This study highlights how opportunities to support the educational progress and attainment of people with care experience are many and varied - *and* are present over time. The potential to offer information and support is ever-present, an important proposition for both practice and policy in this area.

Chapter Seven: The role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Insights from a life course study of education and care

In this chapter I present the fourth peer-reviewed journal article that was written as part of the current study. This paper explores how the life course conceptualisation of agency can illuminate our understanding of how educational pathways are shaped over time in the context of structural constraints and opportunities.

This paper was co-authored with my PhD supervisor, Professor Robbie. Gilligan. I was the primary author of this paper and developed the current PhD study on which this article is based, carried out the field work for the project, completed data analysis, and prepared advanced drafts of the manuscript. Professor Gilligan played the usual support role in the PhD process. Once the paper was at an advanced stage of development, he contributed through discussion to the refinement of some of the conceptual ideas in the paper, and provided key feedback and guidance on drafts of the paper.

At the time of submission of this thesis this paper had been re-submitted to the journal *Children & Society* in the below format for consideration following incorporation of reviewer comments.

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Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (Under Review). The role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Insights from a life course study of education and care. *Children & Society.*

Abstract

Research examining the low educational attainment of children in care and care leavers tends to underuse social theory (Berridge, 2007). To contribute to addressing this gap, we use life course theory to explore the role of agency in shaping the educational pathways of 18 Irish adults (aged 24-36) with care experience. Findings suggest that agency is a valuable conceptual tool for examining the nuance and complexity of how

individual actions shape the education of care-experienced adults throughout the life course *and* interact with contextual and structural factors over time.

Key words: Agency, life course perspective, care-experienced, education

Introduction

The educational attainment and progress of children in care and care leavers continues to be the focus of a growing body of international research with findings across jurisdictions pointing to poor educational attainment (Gypen et al., 2017; Sebba et al., 2015). While some young people with care experience progress to later stages of education (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Jackson & Cameron, 2012), lower numbers of care-experienced young people pursue higher education when compared to peers (Harrison, 2017; Mendes et al., 2014). However, recent research has raised important questions regarding which groups might be a more appropriate comparator, for example, children in need but not in care (Sebba et al., 2015). Much work in this area has sought to identify factors influencing educational attainment and progress (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Pecora, 2012). However, there has been limited application of wider social theory to efforts aimed at understanding the reasons for the low educational attainment of those with care experience (Berridge, 2007); an issue similar to that raised by Stein (2006b) in relation to empirical work on young people leaving care. This limited application of theory has led to "insufficient and simplistic explanations from researchers and policymakers of low achievement" among those with care experience (Berridge, 2007: 1). In this paper, we aim to contribute to the theoretical examination of this issue by applying a core principle of the life course perspective – human agency – to the analysis of data gathered as part of a life course study[32] of the educational journeys of care-experienced adults. We will explore the ways in which the life course principle of agency can illuminate our understanding of how educational pathways are shaped over time in the context of structural constraints and opportunities.

[32] This study forms part of the first author's PhD study which is being supervised by the second author and undertaken in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Agency and the life course perspective

The principle of human agency has a long tradition in psychology with literature in this area generally focusing on individual concepts such as self-efficacy, control, and self-regulation (Crockett, 2002; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). While the psychological literature on agency has provided many insights into those processes that underlie agency, the focus has been on the individual, with little consideration given to the environment in which agency is enacted (Crockett, 2002). Conversely, sociological literature, has tended to focus on social structure and the role it plays in shaping people's lives (Crockett, 2002). Both perspectives provide important insights into the role individuals and society play in shaping human lives. However, neither the psychological nor the sociological perspective "fully elucidates the process through which ongoing interactions between person and environment result in a unique life path or biography that is patterned after societal templates but retains the mark of the individual in its details and nuances" (Crockett, 2002: 2). The life course conceptualisation of human agency facilitates consideration of these issues in a more integrated way.

Agency has been described as a "slippery" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b: 170) and "tricky" (Matusov et al., 2016: 420) concept with many definitions found across the extensive literature on the topic. While an influential and prominent concept in the social sciences, agency remains a contested term with many competing definitions (Sugarman & Sokol, 2012). For example, Bandura's (1986; 2001; 2006: 164) work on agency emphasises the role of individuals as intentionally influencing their life circumstances and being "self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting". Evans' (2007: 93) conceptualisation of 'bounded agency' considers agency as "socially situated" that is, agency is influenced but not determined by our environment. Evans emphasises the role of internal frames of reference and our own external actions. Other authors have highlighted the role that our own life histories and context play in shaping our agency and identity (Sisson, 2016). While each of these 'takes' on agency arguably provide important insights into the role of agency in various aspects of our lives and development, it is the life course conceptualisation of agency that is the focus of this

paper that draws on data gathered as part of a qualitative life course study of education and care.

The life course perspective is an interdisciplinary framework for examining development across human lives from birth to death (Mayer, 2009). Through its core principles (e.g. human agency, linked lives) and core concepts (e.g. turning points, transitions) the life course perspective provides an integrative framework for conceptualising development across multiple domains over time. The life course conceptualisation of agency assumes that we are not "passive recipients of a predetermined life course" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b: 3). Rather, we make choices, actions, and decisions that shape our lives and these actions are taken within systems of opportunities and constraints (Hutchison, 2011). The life course conceptualisation of agency also facilitates consideration of the "temporal nature of human activity" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b: 174). From a life course perspective, agentic actions are influenced by a person's "temporal orientation" to their given situation; some decisions will require intense focus on the present while others are influenced by long-term goals (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b: 171). Furthermore, choices in one area of life (for example, leaving school early) may have a "ripple effect throughout a person's life" and shape a person's circumstances at that point as well as future opportunities (Crockett, 2002: 7). As we mature and develop, goals and plans may shift, particularly as we move to new life stages and experience significant life events (Crockett, 2002). This emphasis on the role of age and the passage of time in expressions of agency is critical as with time and maturity our personal capacities and resources may change, our social networks may grow or decrease, and our goals may change in light of various major life events such as becoming a parent and relationships beginning and ending (Crockett, 2002).

When studying human lives, Hitlin and Elder (2007a) assert that we are becoming more concerned with how agentic action is exercised and expressed and less concerned with what agentic action is. In this paper, we will explore how agentic action is exercised and the role it plays in shaping the educational pathways of care-experienced adults over time.

Overview of relevant literature

Several studies in the education field have considered the role of agency and structure in shaping educational pathways (Danic, 2015; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016; 2017), with some adopting a life course perspective (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). Danic (2015), draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected from eight European countries as part of the Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE) research project and considers how 'disadvantaged' students negotiate access to higher education within the context of structural – and institutional – frameworks and individual student agency. The author found that access to higher education was 'defined' by student attitudes, professionals' discourse, and national schooling regulations. Drawing on two British cohort studies (2016) and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (2017), Schoon and Lyons-Amos also conclude that structural factors *and* those related to individual agency are linked to variations in youth transitions and diversity in pathways to further and higher education. In their 2017 paper, the authors found that many young people steered "the course of their lives, and actively cope[d] with given structural constraints" (p. 50). However, they also found that for some young people a lack of socio-economic and psycho-social resources led to long-term experiences of not being in education or training and difficulty in accessing employment.

While the concept of agency has been applied to educational research broadly, it has been applied overtly in only a small number of studies in relation to the education of people with care experience. Work in this area has tended to focus on children in care (Berridge, 2017; Mannay et al., 2017) and care leavers up to their mid-twenties (Mannay et al., 2017) and has not specifically considered the role of agency in the education of people with care experience from a life course perspective. Recent work by Berridge (2017: 86) in England suggests that young people in care exercise "control" over their educational experiences highlighting the active role individuals can play in shaping their educational journey. Drawing on interviews with 26 children in care Berridge (2017: 86) observes that young people often "chose to engage with learning once they felt the problems in their lives were being managed" indicating the potential need for time to have passed to allow for certain issues and difficulties to have been addressed as well

as the interaction between individual agency and contextual factors. The author notes that participants in this study demonstrated agency in a variety of ways including exercising their choice, developing their own coping styles (echoing Schoon and Lyons-Amos' 2017 findings) and deciding if they wanted to engage with supports offered. For most participants coming into care had "led to an improvement in their lives" and across the sample participants' birth families continued to influence their lives and education in both positive and negative ways (p. 89). These observations point to the role of external influences in participant education and expressions of agency. While the *interaction* between individual and external factors is not overtly addressed by Berridge (2017), it is apparent in the ways external forces impacted on participant engagement with learning. For example, factors that led young people to being more prepared to engage with learning included living somewhere that was stable and secure, feeling genuinely cared for, and having issues with their birth family managed.

Mannay and colleagues' (2017) address the impact of external forces on agency in their study examining the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people (aged 6-27) in Wales. Most participants in this study reported that professionals had low expectations in terms of children and young people's expected achievements and future careers. Participants also discussed the ways that they both challenged and contested the labels that were ascribed to them by teachers and other professionals. One participant, Nadine, reports that "it was kind of like, I don't know, like that will show her that I could get there [to university]" (p. 692). Participants in the YiPPEE study[33] (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) also reported that when it came to education, their choices were driven by personal determination. Similarly, choices were driven by the expectations of the professionals in their lives and availability of financial resources that would enable them to pursue higher education, once again highlighting the interplay between individual agency and structural factors.

[33] The YiPPEE study (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe) investigated the education pathways of care leavers beyond age 18 in five European countries - England, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, and Hungary.

The above studies highlight some of the nuances of the role of agency in the context of education and care. However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explicitly applied the life course perspective conceptualisation of human agency to the study of the educational journeys of care-experienced adults from childhood to adulthood. Through examining the educational life histories of *older* adults (aged 24-36) with care experience, we seek to further extend the application of the concept of agency to the issue of education and care. We propose that this exercise will yield insights into the role of time in the expression of agency while also shedding light on the complexity and nuance of how individual agentic actions shape educational pathways in the context of structural constraints and opportunities over time.

Methodology

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected via educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) with 18 care-experienced adults in Ireland. Participants who had spent at least two years living in care at any age in Ireland and who were aged 25-35 at the time of interview were invited to participate in this study. Given the exploratory nature of this study we did not specify the age at which time in care had to have occurred for example, during adolescence. People in this age range were sought in order to capture 'older' care leavers' views of their education; very few reports of the experience of 'older' care leavers exist within the literature on this topic (Murray & Goddard, 2014). The final sample was aged 24-36 reflecting a small amount of flexibility in terms of the age range recruited. Using a multi-pronged recruitment strategy, we sought to recruit participants with diverse educational experiences from the conventional to those who had more interrupted, challenging experiences via a number of routes. Study information was shared with gatekeepers in a range of organisations and networks including university Access Programmes, advocacy groups for care leavers, and homeless services. Study information was also shared widely via social media.

Participants were interviewed in a location of their choice for example, public libraries, participant homes, and family resource centres. The average length of interviews was

84 minutes. The first author began each interview by inviting participants to tell their educational story from their earliest memory to the present day. The first author then asked follow-up questions drawing on points raised by participants and informed by her knowledge of the topic from the literature. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. All participants were allocated a pseudonym during the transcription process and all identifying information was anonymised.

Each anonymised interview transcript was entered into the N-Vivo qualitative data analysis package. All interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for theoretical thematic analysis. This deductive approach to data analysis is guided by the first researcher's theoretical interest, in this case the extent to which human agency, as conceptualised from a life course perspective, influenced the educational journeys of study participants.

Strengths and limitations

The current study drew on the experiences of 18 adults who had spent time in care as children in Ireland providing a snapshot into the diversity of experiences of this group in terms of education. Participants were 'older' than those who tend to be represented in literature related to 'care leavers' and education (i.e. over 25). The study design facilitated the collection of 18 narratives about participant educational journeys yielding rich and nuanced information. In addition to these strengths, there are several limitations to this study. While some participants had left school early, most had pursued, or were pursuing, further and higher education at the time of interview. The sample recruited were therefore broadly 'high achieving' and not as diverse as had been hoped when the study was designed as the experiences of adults who had been in care, had left school early, and had *not* returned to education were not captured. Perspectives of ethnic minorities, for example members of the Traveller community, and non-Irish people who had been in care were not captured either as the sample were all white Irish.

Findings

Of the 18 participants, 11 were female and seven were male. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 36 with an average age of 29. Participants had spent between two and 18 years in care with six having placements in foster care only, six having placements in residential care only, and six experiencing placements in both residential and foster care. The number of placements participants had ranged from one to over 21 with two participants noting that they did not know how many placements they had been in altogether.

Participants left school aged 18 while five participants left school early between the ages of 14 and 16. The number of schools participants had attended ranged from two to nine with an average of four schools attended[34]. Of the 18 participants, 14 were currently pursuing, or had successfully completed, higher education in the form of undergraduate degrees. Ten of these participants were also currently pursuing or had completed Master's degrees. Ten participants had undertaken Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses[35], and one participant was planning to complete a PLC course the following year. One further participant had completed equivalent further education courses in another jurisdiction.

There now follows a description of the key themes identified (see Figure 7.1):

1. Big *and* small acts of agency have the capacity to influence educational pathways
2. Agentic actions can have a positive *and* negative impact on educational pathways
3. Agency is visible in intentional actions focused on long-term goals *and* reactive actions focused on short-term effects
4. Agency and the passage of time are inextricably linked

[34] In the Irish context, children generally attend primary school from approximately age five to age 12 and secondary school from age 12 to age 18.
[35] Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are full-time and last for one to two years. They offer a mixture of practical work, academic work and work experience (Citizens Information, 2018).

5. The impact of context and structural forces on individual agency is ubiquitous over time

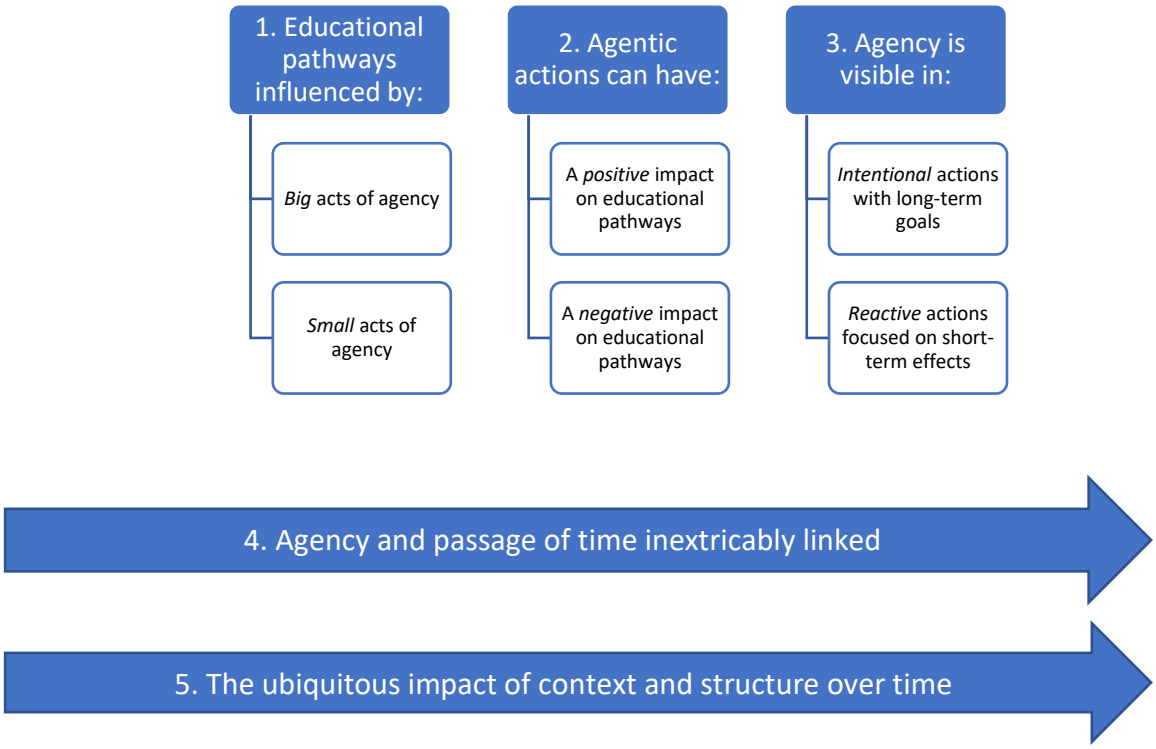

Figure 7.1: Key Themes

Big and small acts of agency have the capacity to influence educational pathways

Throughout participant narratives there was evidence of big and small acts of agency being influential in shaping individual educational pathways. 'Bigger' agentic actions were naturally more obvious, and their impact clearer to see. For example, when participants left school early or advocated extensively on their own behalf to access funding for their education. These bigger actions often illustrated the ways individual agentic actions and contextual and structural factors interacted throughout participant narratives. Paula (25) recalled a complex and drawn out process regarding accessing funding for her undergraduate degree involving an initial refusal to pay the funds by the Health Service Executive[36] (HSE) followed by repeated letters from her to the HSE appealing the decision. She ultimately secured funding for her undergraduate degree

[36] The Health Service Executive had responsibility for child welfare and protection in Ireland until 2014 when this role taken over by the Child and Family Agency – Tusla.

receiving notice of this in the middle of her first year of undergraduate study. While she ultimately got through her degree, Paula recounts the impact this 'battle' had on her studies: *"I was actually like, falling out of college as well like I wasn't attending 'cause I was so focused on fighting like".* Had this funding not been secured Paula may have had to drop out of her degree programme.

Other participants reported taking issues they encountered with funding to the Ombudsman for Children[37], various politicians, and other senior officials. Participants had varying degrees of success in these endeavours. For example, Mary (31) who had had a baby just after completing her Junior Certificate[38], asked for financial support to buy a computer needed for her college course from the head of the regional Health Board when beginning her undergraduate degree in her late teens. This was refused and Mary had to take out a loan herself to buy a computer. Contacting the head of the regional Health Board followed by Mary's decision to secure the loan herself (without which she would not have been able to complete her college course) demonstrates the often-long-term impact of 'big' agentic actions.

Smaller acts of agency were also apparent in study data. While these 'micro' acts were more subtle and 'low key' they were nonetheless impactful and in many cases the repercussions of these micro behaviours were visible at later points in participant narratives. Returning to Mary's story, in the months after she had her child, Mary was encouraged by her grandmother to return to education. When exploring her options regarding returning to education Mary contacted the principal of her local secondary school to see if she would be able to enrol. After considering this option, Mary soon realised it would not be sustainable as she was caring for her young child. As a result, she explored home-school options and secured the relevant materials to home-school herself:

[37] In Ireland, the Ombudsman for Children investigates complaints about services provided to children by public organisations (www.oco.ie).
[38] The Junior Certificate examination is held at the end of the Junior Cycle in post-primary schools in Ireland. The Junior Cycle caters for students aged 13 to 15 (www.examinations.ie).

> "[I] *rang the Board of Education, explained the situation to them and said that I was looking at the option of home school so that I'd kind of work it around me and my schedule."*

Mary went on to complete her Leaving Certificate[39] and secured a place on an undergraduate degree which she successfully completed. This led to her securing full-time employment in her field for five years. These seemingly small acts of contacting the principal of a local school, making the decision that mainstream education would not be suitable, and ultimately accessing the relevant resources to home school herself all contributed to Mary's successful pursuit of higher education and ultimately employment. Here we once again see the interaction of the context and structures in which Mary was acting as she had to ask the Health Board for financial support for her home school resources as she was in care. They agreed to pay half of her fees: *"I said it to them* [Health Board] *and they said that they would pay for half the term fees, I said fine."*

Agentic actions have a positive and negative impact on educational pathways

While it was clear from the participant narratives that many behaviours, decisions, and actions had a positive impact on educational pathways, there were also behaviours that had a more negative impact. Some participant educational pathway involved positive *and* negative actions, both of which reflect some of the contextual and structural factors at play. Rosie's (26) story illustrates how both positive and negative actions may be present and influential over the course of an individual's educational pathway. Rosie reports experiencing severe bullying while in her final two years of secondary school leading to her 'skipping' school for most of those two years. While on the surface this behaviour was negative, it was by all accounts, an act of self-preservation by Rosie and illustrates the potential impact of context (i.e. peer influence) on an individual's educational journey. Upon completing her Leaving Certificate, Rosie was not happy with her results and attempted to repeat her final academic year but ultimately made the decision to drop out of her repeat year:

[39] The university matriculation examination in the Republic of Ireland is called the 'Leaving Certificate' (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

> *"I said I need to go and I need to repeat my Leaving Cert., I wasn't happy I needed to go do that and I, I did, I went and I was there from September to December and I felt like ok this is a revise year and I was like but I'm revising something that I haven't even learned you know and I, I didn't do it* [hadn't done it before] *so I felt like I was at a loss and I just said to, to my, my* [foster] *dad I was like I just can't, it's not for me."*

This 'negative' behaviour led to Rosie working for the rest of the year before being contacted by a friend who encouraged her to apply for a PLC course in an area that her friend was convinced would suit Rosie. This friend was right, and Rosie was accepted on to the PLC course and went on to compete her undergraduate and Master's degrees in this field. We see from Rosie's story how individual agency is bound to external factors and how what appears to be a negative act (for example, dropping out of a repeat year) can ultimately open a space for other, more positive actions, to take place over time.

Agency is visible in intentional actions focused on long-term goals and reactive actions focused on short-term concerns

Intentional actions related to long-term goals were visible among many participant narratives. For most participants this focus emerged in their late teens, early twenties and beyond. Plans in terms of education were often connected to a future goal, for example wanting to pursue a Master's degree or work in a particular area. Ava (27), who had not pursued further or higher education since she finished school, planned to complete a PLC course in the next year and had begun the process of applying. She ultimately hoped to pursue a career in social work: *"I do wanna go back to college and get* [PLC] *level 5 cause I'd love to do social work* […] *that's my dream now* […] *before I'm 30 I'm gonna get into action and become a social worker."* Daniel (25) and Lynne (26) who had left school in their early teens spoke about the intentional action of returning to education at a later point following critical experiences such as the birth of their child (Daniel) and ongoing encouragement from a relative (Lynne).

While many participants reported intentional actions linked to a long-term plan, several also spoke of the absence of a long-term plan and having difficulty with the idea of

having a long-term plan due to instability and challenges in their home lives. Paula (25) reports *"not being able to think longitudinally"* and her narrative contained numerous accounts of reactive actions focused on achieving short-term results. Paula describes losing her focus in her second last year of secondary school resulting in her leaving school in her mid-teens. There followed a period during which she was homeless and out of education. When she was 17 she realised that upon turning 18 she would be discharged from care and as a result would not receive any support. She therefore sought to return to her previous secondary school:

> *"I had a meeting with [school principal] and I was like [principal's name] you need to put me on the school roll and she was like what?* […] *I was like, listen… it's December. I'm turning 18 in [month] if I'm not on a school roll I'm gone with the HSE like I and I'm fecked."*

The goal here was to get back into education to continue to receive support from the State. We are reminded once again of the role of structural forces, in this case the age at which young people are discharged from care and the requirements around securing aftercare support, in influencing individual behaviours. Paula was successful in re-enrolling and completed one Leaving Certificate exam which enabled her to repeat the academic year *with* Aftercare support, an intentional, strategic move on her part:

> *"In my head I'm like that funding gets cut at 23 you need to like, be strategic about this, I did not care about education all I had in my head was like you're gonna be homeless at 18 like and proper homeless like you know."*

Paula went on to pursue a PLC course, an undergraduate degree, and at the time of interview she was completing her Master's degree.

Agency and the passage of time as inextricably linked

The findings outlined so far capture the relationship between agency and the passage of time. For many participants, the wider impact of an action at one point in time was not visible until later. For example, in the case of Mary and her pursuit of home-

schooling resources. In all cases, the passage of time led to shifts and changes in individual pathways. Furthermore, early actions that may have had a negative impact on individual pathways were often redressed later following key life events or experiences. Gary's (32) story illustrates this process along with the role of external and structural forces including professionals, peers, and the economy. Prior to coming into care Gary recalls not liking school and being bullied. Upon coming into care and experiencing multiple residential placements and multiple school moves during his time in care, again Gary reports that he *"hated school'"* and did not want to go and skipped school a lot. During his late teens Gary also reports becoming heavily involved in drug and alcohol use. Despite this, he completed his Leaving Certificate achieving relatively poor results. His partner (and mother of his child) *"swooped"* in at that stage and helped Gary to get his life *"back on track"*. With additional support from his aftercare worker, he completed an apprenticeship. At this time, he also began to develop a relationship with his child who was born several years previously. Gary also began working soon after this. During the economic recession of the late 2000s, Gary lost his job and began caring for the couple's child full-time while his partner worked. He *"took a massive interest in* [child's] *homework"* during this time and realised *"how much* [his] *education was hampered"*. After a considerable period out of education and some time spent working part-time, Gary made the decision to pursue an undergraduate degree: *"I was like I'm not doing this for the rest of my life so in* [year] *I went back to college."* Gary recalls his partner as being a critical source of support during this time, when many people were discouraging him from returning to education:

> *"She* [partner] *said 'look I'll support you like' now in fairness a lot of people doubted me, they said that I wasn't able, I didn't have the smarts to do it* […] *I didn't have the intelligence to go back, to go to college like, she supported me and she said look I'll support you whatever you want to do you go back, if you feel you need to do it."*

Gary's story demonstrates the interaction between individual actions (skipping school, completing an apprenticeship, becoming actively involved in his child's education), external forces (the economic recession), and the passage of time (returning to

education after a considerable period). His story also illustrates the critical role of key actors in our lives and the part they can play in encouraging, guiding, and supporting such decisions, for example Gary's aftercare worker, partner, and child.

The ubiquitous impact of context and structure over time

The impact of context and structure on individual agency is visible throughout the above themes. A number of these factors are discussed below, namely the role of social influences related to the context of being in care and some of the ways coming into care impacted on participant education. While these are not the only structural forces that were observed as constraining or supporting agency in participant narratives, we have focused on these as their role was particularly visible in the data.

Being in care as influencing participant motivation

When discussing their motivation to undertake various actions related to education, many participants noted that one of their primary motivations to succeed with their education was negative comments they received from others and their perception of the low expectations of people with care experience. Nadine (34) noted that *"it was like I want to prove other people wrong as well, if other people say I can't do it, I'm gonna show you that I actually, I can do it"*. Kate (24) who missed a lot of school over the course of her childhood due to a lack of focus on education in her birth family and multiple placement and school moves, notes that *"because I missed that much school and, and all that, most of my foster parents told me that I wouldn't even complete my Junior Cert.* […] *that I would probably drop out before I even completed my junior cert so I was like I'm so gonna prove you wrong.*" Kate went on to successfully complete her Junior Certificate before leaving school in her mid-teens and pursuing further education in another jurisdiction.

Perceptions of care and children in care also impacted participant experiences and progress when it came to education. Several participants discussed the impact of stigma they experienced in relation to being in care. This stigma often impacted on participants' ability to interact with peers in school leading to bullying in several cases while also impacting on how some felt they were treated by school staff. Jamie (31) recalls

struggling to interact with peers in school due to the stigma and embarrassment he felt at living in a care home:

> *"I really struggled, really, really struggled with social, socialising with peers like* […] *you had the stigma and the embarrassment of you were living in a residential home so it's not like you could go for a playdate."*

Participants noted the impact of low expectations of young people who have been in care. Nadine (34), who had completed a Master's degree, discussed how her awareness of these low expectations continues to impact her own sense of her abilities and potential: *"*[T]*here is always this kind of sense of… I'm a young person who lived in care, I don't deserve… to have good things happen like… somebody's gonna knock on my door and say oh there's been a mistake."*

Coming into care as constraining and supporting participant education

For many participants entering the care system was a positive turning point in their lives, particularly in relation to education. Eileen (36) who came into care for the final time aged eight moving to her final placement notes that *"we were fortunate that, you know, our whole world was shifted … and we have these incredible opportunities".* Coming into the care system was however, also experienced as limiting and at times led to considerable interruption and discontinuity when it came to participant education. For Kate who had over 21 placements and attended seven schools before leaving school early, repeated placement and school moves when she was in secondary school meant that she did the same curriculum in key subjects twice as the schools she attended had different plans in terms of when to cover various aspects of the curriculum:

> *"*[I]*t wasn't until I was in college that I ever done physics because I moved school that much I kept missing it, I done biology for years… because I had to move schools, because they don't all follow the same plan."*

When it came to leaving care, requirements in the Irish system for young people to leave their residential care home aged 18 had a negative impact on David (27) and Ava (27).

Both had to leave their residential care homes before they completed their Leaving Certificate as they had turned 18. This experience led to a challenging final year in school. While both completed and passed their final exams, David recalls the sudden loss of support and encouragement in relation to homework and study:

> *"*[T]*hat's the hard part* […] *sometimes it's nice to have someone nagging in your ear to do a bit of study or, get that assignment done or get out of that bed* […] *you don't like it when it's happening but* […] *when it's all done and you kind of do miss that."*

The above themes highlight the nuances of the role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of adults with care experience. By drawing on this conceptual tool, we see that agency is enacted to varying degrees and in varying ways at different points in time. While the effects of agency are often visible immediately, the longer-term impact of some actions became apparent with the passage of time. The role of contextual and structural factors in constraining and supporting how participants exercised their agency is also illustrated in the above themes.

Discussion

This article explores the role of agency in helping shape the educational pathways of adults with care experience. Study findings provide insight into the nuances of how agency operates over time suggesting that agency is a valuable conceptual tool for examining the complexity of how individual actions shape the education of care-experienced adults throughout the life course while also considering how these actions interact with external and structural factors over time.

Both intentional and reactive agentic actions were identified as key in the study findings highlighting the "temporal nature" of human activity across the life course (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b: 174). While consideration of intentional, positive agentic actions is beneficial and provides important insights into one aspect of individual agency in relation to education, these other more reactive actions that may not be focused on long-term plans or appear to be overly significant, can have lasting effects on

educational pathways. For example, Paula initially returned to education after leaving school early to ensure she would continue to receive financial support from aftercare services reflecting the intense focus on the present observed by Hitlin and Elder (2007b). This short-term action and subsequent actions led her to pursuing a Master's degree in spite of her self-identified difficulties with thinking in relation to long-term goals.

The 'negative' expressions of agency observed in the data are noteworthy in the context of some authors arguing that Western conceptualisation of agency focus excessively on positive agency thereby "obscuring distinctly anti-social agentic action" (Alexander, 1993; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). These 'negative' agentic actions point to an important aspect of agency that is visible in the data and arguably requires more attention in discussions regarding agency, education, and care. Mistakes and 'negative' decisions are often considered a part of the developmental process, particularly among young people in the throes of transitioning to adulthood and navigating multiple and complex life decisions. Allowing for, and being mindful of, the existence of such actions among people with care experience, and facilitating opportunities to redress these decisions at later stages, is arguably an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to supporting and promoting educational progress and attainment among people with care experience over the life course.

Various actors were often critical in facilitating and encouraging participants to take actions that positively shaped their educational journey echoing the views of Hitlin and Elder (2007b) that agency depends on relationships. Relationships between partners, children, extended birth family, and staff in residential homes, were primarily experienced as positive and supportive. For some participants however, the influence of felt stigma from others and awareness of low expectations of care leavers impacted their agency and educational experiences negatively. Negative comments from teachers and carers also served as a key motivator for some participants when it came to their education. Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson (2015) note that discussion regarding the role of expectations is largely absent from much empirical work on agency and argue for the importance of incorporating future expectations in theoretical and empirical considerations of agency. This paper provides support for this assertion while also

highlighting the importance of considering how individuals' expectations of themselves impact on expressions of agency.

Consistent with Berridge's (2017) research, many participants in the current study recalled their experience of coming into care as positive, particularly in relation to their education. There were however, several participants who did not experience their time in care as positive or helpful when it came to their education, often due to the impact of structural factors. This was particularly the case for participants who had had multiple placement moves and for participants who had to leave residential care before completing their final exams as they had turned 18. The age that young people leave care is one that is gathering increasing interest (Gilligan, 2018). Findings from the current study highlight some of the ways that a leaving care age of 18 intersects with a key transition in education while also pointing to the need to increase recognition of this as a structural factor that adversely affects young people leaving care. Considering this issue from a life course perspective highlights the need for increased flexibility when it comes to leaving care and the pursuit of education among people with care experience.

Finally, study findings highlight an important connection between age and agency (Crockett, 2002); agency in relation to education can be exercised across the life course from childhood to late adulthood. We are afforded a unique perspective on this through the lived experiences of an 'older' sample of care-experienced adults reported in this paper. Participant narratives highlighted the impact of stigma and bullying on participant attendance and experiences of school, along with instances of teenagers skipping school and leaving school early, while young adults pursued clear educational pathways and 'older' adults returned to education after extended periods out of education. A life course perspective on agency sheds light on the many opportunities for agentic actions in relation to education that are present over time.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the value of drawing on social theory when seeking to develop understanding of key issues in relation to education and life in care. We have

successfully applied the life course conceptualisation of agency to the analysis of data gathered as part of a life course study of the educational journeys of care-experienced adults and several key messages have been identified as a result. The life course conceptualisation of agency is distinctive in that it draws together psychological and sociological perspectives on this concept, integrating the two and thus providing a more complete picture of how agency helps to shape educational experiences. This perspective on agency has not previously been applied in existing research on this topic and as such we have extended theoretical knowledge in this area. Big and small agentic actions *and* positive and negative expressions of agency occur across the life course in relation to education and, importantly, can impact on educational pathways in the short, medium, and long-term. This paper highlights the importance of remaining aware of these various 'types' of expressions of agency along with the interconnectedness of life stages and choices and decisions made at various points in time. Applying the life course conceptualisation of agency to analysis of the current data set - educational life histories of 'older' care-experienced adults - has identified some of the ways in which agentic action can play out later in life. Traces of early choices, decisions, and actions may be visible at later stages in life reminding us of the interconnectedness of every life stage. In the context of this paper, the life course conceptualisation of agency facilitates a look back over time to identify how individual actions and external and structural forces have interacted and impacted individual expressions of agency in relation to education from early childhood into adulthood. The life course perspective on agency reminds us of the ongoing potential for new beginnings and new opportunities in educatio-n; while people may have rocky periods, educational journeys can be restarted at any point in the life course, given the right supports and circumstances.

Several implications for practice, policy, and research were identified in light of the study findings. Interaction between individual *and* structural factors should be important for policy makers and practitioners when considering the educational progress and attainment of care-experienced children, young people, and adults. People shape and carve out their pathway within the confines of existing opportunities and constraints. As individuals developing over time, we often make choices and decisions that may not be in our best interest. For the general population this 'negative' agency is

often seen as part of the developmental process. For people with experience of being in care however, this is often not allowed for particularly when it comes to second chances when pursuing further and higher education linked to existing aftercare policies. Such developmental 'wobbles' and 'negative' expressions of agency should, arguably, be accommodated when experienced by people in the care system. The passage of time appears critical to considerations of how educational pathways are shaped and experienced. What happens at age 15 for example, may influence but does not necessarily predict what will happen at 25, 35 or beyond. There is arguably therefore, a need for the education and care systems to be flexible and support re-entry to the education system over the life course depending on the readiness of each individual.

Further research examining the value of the life course conceptualisation of agency for research related to education and care will be important in order to identify how this concept can further illuminate our understanding of this issue. As the education and care systems are inextricably linked to structures, their role in facilitating or constraining the agency of children, young people, and adults with care experience must be considered. This should be done while bearing in mind the potential for these structures and systems to have a positive or negative influence on educational pathways while also being mindful of the key role individuals play in shaping their own educational pathway over time.

Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This study has pioneered a new line of inquiry exploring the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives while also drawing on the life course perspective to provide new insights into *how* these educational pathways have been shaped and influenced over time. Through gathering participant educational life histories, I have captured both the pathway taken through education *and* shed light on those factors, events and experiences of participants' wider educational journeys that have influenced these pathways. To that end, the following five core arguments lie at the heart of this study:

1. Diversity in the educational pathways of people with care experience should be expected.
2. Connections with key actors play a central role in influencing these educational pathways and are visible across the life course.
3. Human agency, as conceptualised from a life course perspective, is pivotal to shaping these educational pathways; this is done over time and in the context of various external and structural influences which both constrain and support individual agency.
4. The life course perspective provides unique insights on the educational pathways of adults with care experience.
5. The life course principles of linked lives and agency are valuable conceptual tools for examining issues related to education and care and developing existing knowledge regarding *how* educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time.

In this chapter I will discuss the four peer-reviewed journal articles presented in this thesis. I will provide a summary of each paper before outlining key themes arising across the four papers which highlight the ways in which these papers connect with one another and contribute to both achieving the aims of this study and the core arguments of this study. I will then describe the original contribution to knowledge of this thesis

according to the substantive, methodological, and theoretical contributions made. The implications of this study in relation to our knowledge of the topic of education and care and with respect to research, policy, and practice will then be outlined. Next, I will reflect on the strengths and limitations of this study as well as on my experience of the research process. Finally, I will provide a concluding comment on this study.

Summary of peer-reviewed journal articles

As this PhD has been completed 'by publication' the four peer-reviewed journal articles presented in Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven form the basis of this thesis. There now follows a summary of each paper.

Paper One [Chapter Three]

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2018). The life course perspective: An integrative research paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers? *Children and Youth Services Review, 87*, 69-77. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.019

This paper outlined the life course perspective in general as well as its key themes and concepts. An overview of existing literature related to the educational experiences and attainment of children in care and care leavers was also presented. There followed a discussion of how using the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm may facilitate a deeper understanding of the educational progress and experiences of care-experienced adults. This paper included a composite case example informed by the educational experiences of participants in the current study to illustrate the value of applying a life course perspective to this issue.

Paper Two [Chapter Five]

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2019). Exploring diversity in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults: Findings from a life course study of education and care. *Children and Youth Services Review.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.06.014

This paper drew on the life course principle of 'diversity in life course trajectories' and answers the first research question outlined in Chapter One: *What are the educational pathways that care-experienced adults have taken over the course of their lives, and expect to take in future?* Interviews with the 18 care-experienced adults that participated in this study were analysed in order to ascertain the educational pathways participants had taken *and* to identify groups or 'types' of pathway taken. Four 'types' of pathways were identified: 1) The Typical Pathway; 2) The Typical Pathway 'Plus'; 3) The Short-term Disrupted Pathway; and 4) The Long-term Disrupted Pathway. This paper highlighted the diversity of educational pathways taken by study participants while also drawing our attention to some of the factors that influenced this diversity including the impact of multiple roles and transitions experienced by participants. The value of taking a longer-term view when examining the educational pathways of care-experienced adults was also discussed.

Paper Three [Chapter Six]

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (2019). Supporting care-experienced adults' educational journeys: 'Linked lives' over the life course. *Child & Family Social Work.* DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12677

This paper applied the life course principle of 'linked lives' to the analysis of interviews with study participants to answer the second research question outlined in chapter one: *How can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?* In seeking to add to knowledge on the role of key actors and relationships in supporting the educational attainment and progress of care-experienced adults *over time* this paper explored how the principle of linked lives could illuminate our understanding of this issue. Interviews with the 18 care-experienced adults that participated in this study were analysed using theoretical thematic analysis. Four key themes were identified: 1) Opportunities for educational support are present across the life course; 2) 'Family' is a central source of educational support; 3) There is intergenerational capacity for educational support; and 4) Relationships beyond the 'family' are supportive of education. This paper also

demonstrated the value of the principle of linked lives for providing new insights on the issue of education and care.

Paper Four [Chapter Seven]

Brady, E. & Gilligan, R. (Under Review). The role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Insights from a life course study of education and care. *Children & Society.*

This final paper applied the life course principle of 'agency' to the analysis of interviews with study participants to further answer the second research question outlined in Chapter One: *How can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?* Guided by the life course conceptualisation of agency, theoretical thematic analysis of data using this principle provided key insights into the nuances of how agency operates over time. Big and small acts of agency had the capacity to influence educational pathways; agentic actions had a positive and negative impact on educational pathways; agency was visible in intentional actions focused on long-term goals and reactive actions focused on short-term effects; agency and the passage of time were observed as inextricably linked; and the impact of context and structural forces on individual agency was ubiquitous over time. Agency, as conceptualised from a life course perspective, proved to be a valuable conceptual tool for examining the complexity of how individual actions shape the education of care-experienced adults throughout the life course while also considering how these actions interact with external and structural factors over time.

Key themes identified across peer-reviewed journal articles

Several core themes connect the four peer-reviewed publications presented in this thesis. These themes are as follows:

1. Applying social theory to studies on education and care can help to ground findings and focus analysis.
2. The life course perspective is a valuable guiding research paradigm and conceptual framework for examining issues related to education and care.

3. The lived experiences of older care-experienced adults provide important insights on pathways and factors that shape and influence education over time.
4. Disruption and developmental 'wobbles' in educational progress may be the norm for many people with care-experience.
5. Intergenerational ties influence education at various points over time.
6. There is ongoing potential for new beginnings and opportunities in education.

Applying social theory to studies on education and care can help to ground findings and focus analysis

Stein (2006b) highlighted the "poverty of theory" in relation to care leaving research in general. Berridge (2007) also pointed to the lack of use of social theory particularly when it comes to studies of the low educational attainment of children in care. This "absence of a broader sociological perspective has led to insufficient and simplistic explanations from researchers and policymakers of low achievement among looked-after pupils" (Berridge, 2007: 1). By drawing on the life course perspective, which was borne out of work across several disciplines including sociology, anthropology, and demography (Hutchison, 2011), as a conceptual framework and guiding research paradigm for this study I sought to apply social theory to the issue of education and care in order to contribute more discerning and grounded insights into this issue. In particular, drawing on two core principles of the life course perspective – linked lives and agency – at the point of *analysis* in order to carry out a theoretical thematic analysis, I have demonstrated the value of applying social theory to this issue. Not only does it provide a clear focus for analysis, it provides avenues to 'ground' findings in existing and established theoretical principles while also potentially expanding the application of those principles.

Three core principles of the life course were *discussed* in relation to the study data in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven: diversity in pathways, linked lives, and agency. These principles proved to be valuable conceptual tools for examining the data and provided key insights into the nature of diversity in educational pathways, the importance of interconnectedness with key actors over time, and the pivotal role that agency plays in the context of education and care. These lenses provide mechanisms for building

theoretically grounded knowledge in this area which has the potential to enhance our understanding of both the educational pathways taken by study participants and the *ways* in which they are influenced over time.

The life course perspective is a valuable guiding research paradigm and conceptual framework for examining issues related to education and care

The life course perspective was used as a guiding, integrative research paradigm and conceptual framework in this PhD study. The long-term perspective that is central to the life course perspective was invaluable in this study as it allowed me to capture educational pathways and experiences *over time.* The temporal dimension that the life course perspective brings to considerations of various aspects of development proved fundamental to this study as it facilitated observation of key changes over time and provided an opportunity to gain insight into the nuance and complexity of the educational pathways taken by participants.

Central to the life course perspective is the conviction that development takes place continually over time (Johnson et al., 2011). This was evidenced in the narratives of study participants and was clearly visible in the accompanying peer-reviewed publications. For example, Chapter Five presented the range of educational pathways followed by participants from childhood into adulthood with many disrupted and extended pathways evident. If these stories had not been gathered from a long-term perspective that is so central to the life course perspective, a potentially less complete picture of participant pathways would have resulted.

Similarly, the life course perspective allows us to consider the impact of early life experiences on later experiences emphasising the fact that "no life stage can be understood in isolation from others" (Johnson et al., 2011: 273). Critically however, from a life course perspective this is not considered from a deterministic standpoint. Rather, this position facilitates gathering a more complete picture of development over time, ultimately enabling us to develop understanding of what has shaped and influenced various life domains over time. With regard to the educational pathways of participants in this study, this feature of the life course perspective provided glimpses

into key actions, actors, or events that had a lasting impact on their education. For example, Louise (Paper Two; Chapter Five) returned to education aged 17 before her support would be 'cut off' and at the time of interview when she was in her mid-twenties Louise was pursuing higher education and working towards completing her Master's degree.

The life course perspective provides a framework for exploring the nuance and detail of individual experience in the context of structural and external factors, a critical component of research on this topic given the many intersecting factors that appear to play a role in influencing the education of people with care experience (O'Higgins et al., 2015; Pecora et al., 2006; Sebba et al., 2015; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). The key principles and concepts of this perspective also provide a multidimensional lens on the issue of education and care and remind us of the diversity of factors that influence pathways over time including individual and structural factors. By considering the role of two of these principles in particular (linked lives and agency) and applying them to the theoretical analysis of data gathered for this study, we gleaned new insights into some of the critical ways in which the educational pathways of study participants were shaped and influenced over time.

The lived experiences of 'older' care-experienced adults provide important insights on pathways and influencers of education

As the life course facilitates a 'look back' over time, hearing from 'older' adults (aged 24-36) with care experience was particularly useful in the context of this study. Not only did this older group provide qualitative accounts of their perspectives and experiences that are largely absent from the knowledge base on this topic (Murray & Goddard, 2014), they also afforded us insight into the many ways, and diverse points in time, through which education can be shaped and influenced.

While there were similarities with findings of previous studies, for example in relation to the role of key actors (Driscoll, 2013; Martin & Jackson, 2002) and agency when it comes to supporting education (Berridge, 2017), the stories of this older group told from earliest memory to present day added new dimensions to our understanding of these

issues. While the importance of key adults and supportive relationships to education is reasonably well-established in the literature, by hearing from older adults we gained new knowledge of *who* key actors may be and points in the life stage at which connections with key actors may be made. We also gained critical insights into the impact of becoming a parent on education. Importantly, many of these insights were shared with the benefit of hindsight, that is the influence of a key person in later life or the impact of becoming a parent had happened in the preceding years giving participants the space to 'look back' on the impact of the experience or relationships retrospectively.

There have been recent calls for the perspectives of older care leavers to be integrated into research on this, and other, issues related to care (Murray & Goddard, 2014). While the group that participated in this study were only slightly older than younger 'care leavers' that tend to be represented in the literature, I would argue that learning about events and experiences in the (additional) intervening years since participants had left care provided further important insights into the complexity, and impact, of experiences in the post-care years.

Disruption and developmental 'wobbles' in educational progress may be the norm for many people with care-experience

Across each 'findings' paper (i.e. Chapter Five, Six, and Seven) delays and disruptions in educational pathways and overall participant educational journeys were visible. While participants in this study could ultimately be considered 'successful' for the most part, their journeys through education were not without difficulty. More participants had 'disrupted' pathways than 'typical' pathways and a considerable number of participants accessed further education prior to their return to – or planned pursuit of – higher education. The potential role of further education for "older adolescents in care" has been highlighted by Herd and Legge (2017: 74); the current study also suggests there is a wider role for further education in providing pathways into and through post-compulsory and higher education for older adults with care experience.

Expressions of 'negative' agency and reactive actions were visible across many participant narratives in Chapter Seven. These experiences were often the result of a range of complex factors including individual actions and structural and external forces. Adolescence and early adulthood are generally understood as periods of continued development and a time when we learn key life lessons and perhaps experience 'developmental wobbles'. Based on the stories gathered for the current study, this was also often the case for participants but for some these experiences had significant consequences, often associated with their being in care. For example, David (Paper Four; Chapter Seven) dropped out of his PLC course due to personal difficulties and subsequently became homeless for a year as a result. This experience had a knock-on effect on his aftercare supports. For a young person who is not in care, dropping out of a college course would likely not have such serious consequences for a person's living situation and yet for David, a child of the State, this was his experience. Findings suggest that the experiences of delay and disruption observed in this study were in fact the *norm* for most participants and as such should arguably be considered a normative part of the developmental pathway of many people with care experience – as they so often also are for those in the general population.

Intergenerational ties influence education at various points over time

Within each paper (Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven) the influence of intergenerational ties over time was visible. In Chapter Three this was initially outlined when the core principle of 'linked lives' was introduced and through Ben's case study we learned of the influence of his aunt and sister on his education. When considering the diversity of educational pathways followed by study participants in Paper Two (Chapter Five) the impact of various roles - and transitions into and out of these roles – was a common thread across many participant stories. For example, we saw those who had caring responsibilities for their parents and those who had become parents themselves and how these experiences initially constrained, and often ultimately provided motivation for, participant education. In Chapters Six and Seven we also saw the influence of intergenerational ties in the form of birth families – and 'family' understood more broadly – playing a key role in supporting participant education, and the various ways in which individual agency was constrained and supported by family.

For example, Gary (Paper Four, Chapter Seven) realised how much his own education had been compromised when helping his own child with their homework. Gary subsequently returned to education after over 10 years out of the system.

Taking a life course perspective on this issue necessitates considering the impact of intergenerational ties due in part to its core principle of linked lives. However, the role of intergenerational influences was visible beyond Chapter Six (Paper Three) which specifically focused on this issue. This serves as an important reminder of the importance of intergenerational influences as well as the continuing possibility of 'new beginnings' across generations.

There is ongoing potential for new beginnings and opportunities in education

A key theme across Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven is the notion that for people with care experience there is ongoing potential for new beginnings and opportunities when it comes to education. This is clearly visible when we consider the diversity of educational pathways taken by study participants. Study findings also highlight the many routes into and through higher education while reminding us of the important role further education can play in the educational pathways of care-experienced people (Herd & Legge, 2017). Such diversity is an important reminder of the value of taking a life course perspective when considering this issue. A life course perspective allows us to take a long-term perspective, to consider the many and varied ways in which life course pathways and trajectories are influenced, and to reflect on the resultant ongoing potential for developmental change. The enduring presence of key actors over time – as well as the introduction of key actors later in life – were central to supporting and facilitating new beginnings for many participants.

This ongoing possibility of new beginnings and opportunities is a timely reminder of the importance of including '*narratives of potential'* (Gilligan, 2017) in discussions of education and care. The importance of introducing narratives of potential to counter the many narratives of failure in the discourse surrounding care leavers and children in care has been highlighted by Gilligan (2017). Findings of the current study suggest that not only are these narratives of potential present, but that they warrant a possible

reconceptualising and rethinking of how we research, discuss, and consider educational outcomes over time. Alternative ways of conceptualising the educational outcomes of people with care experience may be more helpful and accurate. Educational outcomes may be more helpfully conceptualised not as finite 'endpoints' (Boddy, 2018a), but as fluid, changing, dynamic, and 'lived'.

Summary

In this section I have outlined the key themes identified across the four peer-reviewed publications that form the basis of this PhD and are presented in Chapters Three, Five, Six, and Seven. These themes highlight the critical importance of drawing on theory in seeking to develop knowledge in this area while also pointing to the valuable role that the life course perspective can play in enhancing our knowledge and understanding of various aspects of education and care. The valuable perspective that the 'older' participants in this study provided was outlined along with the importance of being aware of the presence of disruption and difficulties in development over time, the role of intergenerational ties, and the ongoing potential for new beginnings and opportunities in education.

Contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge in several ways related to 1) Substantive knowledge of the subject area; 2) Methodological considerations in relation to researching education and care, and 3) Theoretical knowledge and understanding of the education of care-experienced adults. These are outlined in detail below.

Substantive contributions to knowledge

At the outset of this thesis I highlighted several gaps in knowledge related to the topic of education and care. Specifically, I noted that we had a limited understanding of the educational pathways of people with care experience – particularly those over the age of 25 – as well as the ways in which those pathways are shaped and influenced over time.

Findings of this study contribute to knowledge with regard to the educational pathways of care-experienced adults aged 24-36 and suggest that these pathways follow both normative timelines and disrupted, extended timelines. Knowledge borne from qualitative research on these pathways is in its infancy. Findings of the current study are supported by recent work by Hanrahan and colleagues (Under Review) which also shed light on this aspect of education and care.

Furthermore, this study provides unique insights into the ways these pathways have been shaped over time using the lens of core principles of the life course perspective. Findings highlight the critical role of key actors and the interconnectedness of relationships across generations and over time when it comes to education. The nuanced and complex ways in which individual agency shapes educational progress *and* interacts with structural and external forces were also highlighted thus contributing to substantive knowledge regarding *how* educational pathways are shaped over time.

In the Irish context, this study contributes to the national knowledge base regarding the educational pathways and journeys of adults who spent time in the care of the State as children. Given the considerable dearth of knowledge in this area in Ireland (Brady et al., 2019), particularly when compared with other Western countries, this contribution to knowledge is significant and, it is hoped, represents the first of many studies and efforts at data collection in this area in Ireland.

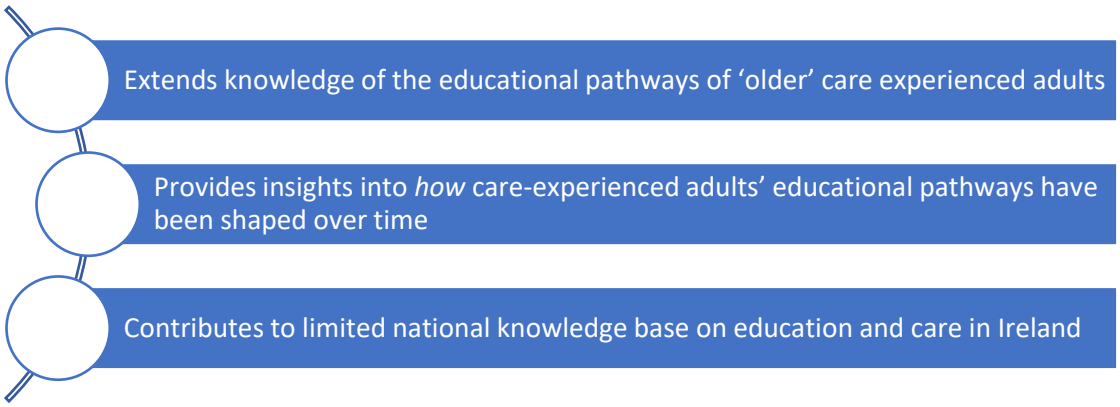

Figure 8.1: Summary of substantive contributions to knowledge

Methodological contributions to knowledge

This study provides three key methodological contributions to knowledge. Firstly, an 'older' sample of people with care experience was included in this qualitative research study than has tended to be included in earlier work on this issue. This sample was also slightly more varied than those included in previous research on this topic (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002) as it included people who had left school early, those with considerably disrupted educational experiences, and participants whose educational journey was ongoing. While study participants were, for the most part, *ultimately* successful, this slight move away from a focus on samples who displayed 'academic success' or 'educational promise' early in their education is an important methodological contribution as it highlights both the value of including more diverse experiences but also the challenges of recruiting a sample such as this (see Chapter Four).

Application of the life course perspective as a guiding research paradigm in this area represents a second core methodological contribution to knowledge. The value of this perspective was discussed in Chapter Three, particularly in relation to research related to the complex topic of the educational progress and attainment of adults with care experience. The longer-term viewpoint that is implicit within the life course perspective as well as its accompanying principles and concepts have facilitated a nuanced and detailed exploration of this topic.

Finally, this study used educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) to explore the education of adults with care experience. To the best of my knowledge this method of data collection has not previously been applied to studies on this topic though the value of life history and biographical methods to studies of learning and education have previously been discussed (Gouthro, 2014). This method, with its central focus on the educational journey taken by participants facilitated an in-depth exploration of pathways followed while also allowing for a deeper exploration of issues and experiences that influenced these journeys and pathways such as aspects of the care experience and key relationships. This method of data collection, though not without its limitations (discussed below), was invaluable to the successful execution of this study.

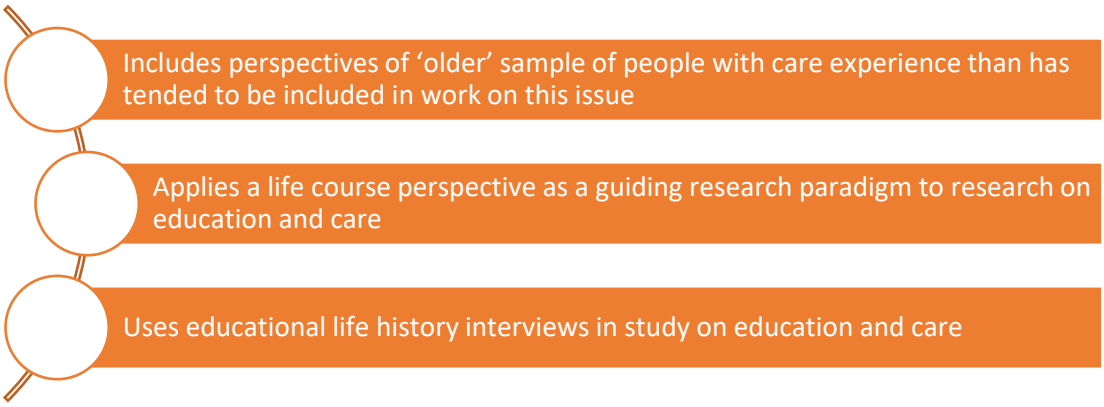

Figure 8.2: Summary of methodological contributions to knowledge

Theoretical contributions to knowledge

This study has demonstrated the value of drawing on social theory when examining issues related to education and care (Berridge, 2007) and in particular has highlighted the value of using core principles of the life course perspective as conceptual tools when carrying out research on this topic. Diversity of pathways, linked lives, and agency – core principles of the life course perspective – were invaluable lenses through which study data were analysed. While a deductive approach to analysis has its limits (discussed below), framing analysis in the context of these principles provided mechanisms for focusing and grounding the data while also extending their application to analysis of data related to the topic of education and care.

The life course principle of 'diversity of pathways' facilitated examination of the many educational pathways followed by participants and served as a reminder of the benefits of starting from a point of *expecting* such diversity when it comes to education, particularly for people who have spent time in care. The life course principle of 'linked lives' illuminated understanding of how key actors shape and influence educational pathways over time providing long-term perspective on this issue and highlighting the ongoing potential for support from many and varied actors. Finally, the life course principle of human agency provided unique insights into the role of individual agency and how this interacts with structural and external forces *over time* reminding us of the importance of considering temporal dimensions of human agency.

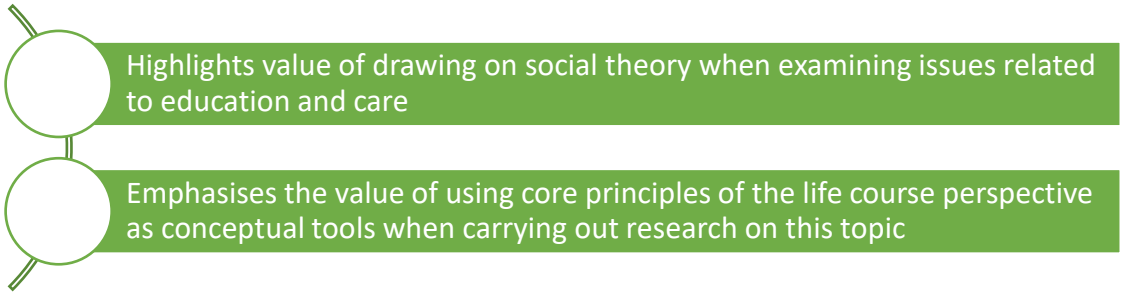

Figure 8.3: Summary of theoretical contributions to knowledge

Implications of study findings

The findings of this study have several implications for policy, practice, research and the wider community beyond people with care experience. These are outlined below.

Implications for policy

Findings indicate that, at least in the case of those interviewed for this study, the educational pathways of people with care experience do not always follow normative pathways and are influenced by many factors. Participants in this study had often experienced 'disrupted' educational pathways; this is particularly important given that most participants in this study could ultimately be considered 'successful' given the number that had pursued, or were planning to pursue, further and higher education. While some participants had followed a normative or 'typical' pathway, similar to that of many people in the general population, this was not the norm in the sample. This suggests that it may be helpful to develop policies in relation to the education of people with care experience that allow for and e*xpect* diversity in educational pathways while supporting those with disrupted and diverse routes into and through higher education. Related to this is the key role that further education played in participants' educational pathways, a point that has been identified in recent literature (Herd & Legge, 2017) and one that should arguably be considered in relation to access and support of the educational progress of people with care experience.

In Ireland, as in many other jurisdictions (Gilligan, 2018), extensions in aftercare support are contingent on the pursuit of full-time education (up to age 23 in the Irish case). Findings from this study suggest that this policy may be problematic given the various

disruptions experienced and pathways taken through education by participants in this study. In light of the discussion in Chapter Five related to the impact of transitions and roles on educational pursuits, arguably delayed entry into education (beyond age 23) is *likely* for many people with care experience. Aftercare policies that seek to support and nurture this pursuit of education in a more flexible way have the potential to positively influence the educational pathways and pursuits of people with care experience. This is particularly important in the context of increased discourses surrounding the importance of lifelong learning (Gilligan, 2019).

Developmental 'wobbles' as exemplified in Chapter Seven, are expected in the general population and findings from this study suggest that expecting and allowing for such 'wobbles' in educational progress would be beneficial in terms of supporting the education of adults with care experience. For example, in the case of those participants who left school early and returned a little later in life once they felt ready, opportunities, information, and support to return to education were critical to their ultimate success. Policies that not only allow for such events, but anticipate and consider these events as developmental opportunities, would arguably be beneficial in terms of supporting the educational pathways of care-experienced adults.

Finally, the stories gathered for this PhD study point to an incomplete picture of outcomes if they are gathered at only one point in time, for example, in the years immediately after leaving compulsory education. Given the disrupted and diverse pathways followed by participants – and the fact that for many participants their education was ongoing – the findings of this study suggest that we may benefit from reconsidering how we conceptualise outcomes. From a policy perspective language matters and perhaps considering outcomes as *ongoing*, *evolving*, and *lived* could facilitate a more optimistic perception of the educational 'outcomes' of this group while also having a knock-on effect in terms of the above-mentioned flexibility when it comes to aftercare policies. When outcomes are considered at only one point in time this can potentially lead to an unduly fixed understanding of a person's achievements and, in the case of people with care experience, contribute to narratives of low expectations and poor achievement when it comes to education for this group. Considering – and building

on – the findings of this study is critical if a more complete picture of the educational attainment of people with care experience is to be obtained and ultimately used to inform and guide policy developments.

Implications for practice

Several core implications for practice result from this study. The importance of professionals being aware of the continued capacity for new beginnings and change is critical. While this message is vital for those working with children and young people currently in care (for example teachers, social workers), it is also important for those working in areas related to the fields of adult education and advocacy. Opportunities to support, nurture, and encourage the pursuit of – or return to – education were visible in this study across the life course and across multiple domains. As a result, this message of the continued capacity for new beginnings and change is key, particularly for those adults who may have had challenging, negative, or disrupted educational experiences in their earlier years. Professionals working across these areas are encouraged to appreciate the importance of taking a long-term perspective on issues related to education paying due consideration to the impact of any early adverse experiences while simultaneously not compromising educational expectations.

Professionals could also benefit from remaining attuned to the impact of both individual actions and decisions *as well as* the constraining and supportive nature of structural factors on the educational pathways of people with care experience. This is arguably true for children and young people *and* adults who were in care as children.

Finally, professionals engaged in practice across the areas of education and child welfare could benefit from remaining aware of the role of key actors in influencing educational pathways and the importance of opening up spaces to *engage* people with care experience with potential key actors in order to cultivate the development of supportive relationships and connections. Family group conferences for example, may be one such way of identifying informal and formal networks which may assist young people in maximising and sustaining their educational potential.

Implications for future research

The current study shed light on several important aspects of the educational pathways and experiences of care-experienced adults. In light of this, several implications for future research have been identified.

While the current study sought to hear from care-experienced adults – including those who had left education early and not returned, this was not achieved despite recruitment efforts. In light of this, future research that includes the perspectives of a truly diverse sample could potentially contribute important new information on this issue regarding those factors that inhibited some people from returning to education at all.

Further research, guided by the life course perspective, taking a more longitudinal approach to this issue would also provide key insights on educational experiences over time. Narratives gathered for the current study were all told retrospectively. Studies gathering data at three to five-year intervals from childhood into early adulthood and beyond, similar to the work of Andersson (2009; 2018), could potentially provide 'real-time' information on the educational pathways of people with care experience and further detail regarding factors influencing these pathways. Studies similar to this but carried out in other jurisdictions could also provide important international comparisons in terms of educational pathways of care-experienced adults. It would be particularly useful to see how the experiences of this Irish sample compare with those in other countries which are further along the road in terms of policy initiatives related to education, for example England (Berridge, 2012).

Further work examining the potential value of the life course principles of diversity in pathways, linked lives, and agency as conceptual tools in this area would also be helpful. So too would research examining the value of the other principles and concepts of the life course.

Finally, the need for a longitudinal study following young people leaving care in Ireland in order to "map their transition to adulthood" was one of 69 key actions recommended

by the *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (commonly known as the Ryan Report)[40] (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009). The current study points to the need for an Irish longitudinal study that captures the educational progress and attainment at various points in time of people in and leaving care into adulthood in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the educational pathways of people with care experience.

Relevance of study beyond the care-experienced community

While the focus of this study was on people with care experience, findings may resonate with and be relevant to people who have experienced disrupted educational pathways and/or educational disadvantage but who have not been in care. The diversity of pathways observed in this study is unlikely to be unique to people with care experience. Evidence suggests that varied routes into and through education occur in the wider population for various reasons including the impact of socioeconomic factors (Bozick & DeLuca 2005; Roksa & Velez, 2012). This suggests that efforts to support and promote awareness of alternative pathways in education are critical to providing practical information to individuals wishing to pursue education, but also to normalising these pathways and raising their profile as viable options for the pursuit of further and higher education. Such efforts are part of the existing 'widening participation' agenda more generally which aims to increase participation of minority ethnic, low-income, and other groups that are underrepresented in higher education (Younger, Gascoine, Menzies, & Torgerson, 2019).

Reflections on the strengths and limitations of the study

While a critique of the study methodology was provided in Chapter Four, here I will provide a final reflection on the key strengths and limitations of this study.

When recruiting for this study, I was successful in recruiting 18 'older' care-experienced adults. While the recruitment process was challenging and lengthy (see Chapter Four),

[40] The *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (2009) is the public report of work completed by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. This Commission was established in 2000 to investigate abuse of children in institutions of the State in Ireland (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009).

the experiences of this 'older' group – taken from a long-term perspective – provide greater insights into this issue than have previously been available. While participants had mixed experiences of education with some leaving school early, many having multiple placement and school moves, and others having more 'normative' or typical educational experiences, for the most part this older sample could still have been considered 'successful' at the time of interview. This is a critical strength of this study and highlights the value of taking a life course perspective on this issue and hearing from older care-experienced adults. Participants were recruited across Ireland and were from, and currently living in, both urban and rural areas. I successfully applied two core theoretical principles of the life course perspective in my analysis of the data gathered for this study – linked lives and human agency. I drew on an additional third principle when considering the diversity of educational pathways observed thus contributing to the application of social theory to the issue of education and care. This study makes an original contribution to the national and international knowledge base on the topic of education and care and has clear relevance and implications for policy, practice, and research in relation to people with care experience and the wider community.

Despite the above strengths, several limitations to this study warrant discussion. As mentioned in earlier chapters, despite efforts to recruit a diverse sample in terms of educational experience, ethnicity, and race, the achieved sample were all White Irish and did not include anyone who had left school early and not returned to education. This limited diversity should be borne in mind when considering the study findings and implications.

Fourteen of the 18 people that participated in the study were engaged in higher education – just over three quarters of the study sample. In England this rate is 12% nationally at age 23 (Harrison, 2017). This considerably higher level of engagement in higher education among study participants may have impacted the findings of this study. For example, this figure may paint an overly optimistic picture of the progress, pathways, and experiences of care-experienced adults pursuing higher education in the Irish context. Furthermore, only three participants in this study entered care over the age of 11. In existing studies, including Sebba and colleagues' (2015) work, many young

people have been found to enter care as teenagers and early entry to care has been found to positively impact educational outcomes. The high proportion of participants in this study who entered care at a young age and as a result spent longer in care, may therefore have contributed to their ultimately successful outcomes given the potential for carers and other professionals and informal supporters to have had a positive impact on their educational journey (Fernandez, 2008; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

When using educational life history interviews to gather data the primary focus was, as one would expect, on gathering participant educational histories. Arguably general life history interviews (and multiple interviews) or biographical narrative interview methods (Gouthro, 2014) would have generated additional general information related to participant life experiences beyond those directly related to their education. This would potentially have provided a more comprehensive insight into participant lives and overall experiences. Using educational life history interviews however, allowed the interview to remain focused on the topic at the heart of this study: participant education. Furthermore, seeking information on experiences that were not necessarily important for participants to divulge in the context of a study of this nature would arguably have been unethical (Berridge, 2017).

Data analysis for this study drew on three core principles of the life course with the remaining principles and core concepts featuring in only a limited way in Chapter Three and Chapter Five (for example, transitions). While these additional principles and concepts have the potential to shed additional light on various aspects of the educational pathways of care-experienced adults, the chosen principles helped to answer the core research questions guiding this study and provided key insights into *how* educational pathways are shaped. In future work with this data set I plan to analyse the data using these additional principles, in particular the 'timing of lives' principle and the concept of 'turning points'. These appear to be particularly relevant to this issue given the apparent impact of the timing of entry to care when it comes to educational outcomes (Pecora et al., 2006) and existing evidence of the role of turning points in

education generally and in relation to people with care experience (Refaeli & Strahl, 2014; Yair, 2009).

As I drew on deductive approaches to data analysis in seeking to answer the second research question (How can the life course perspective enhance understanding of the ways that educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time?) I did not examine the data gathered using more inductive approaches for example drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) *thematic analysis.* I plan to analyse the full data set using this inductive approach in the future as I am confident that there are important lessons to be learnt from such an exercise in terms of patterns of experiences that influenced education over time. On a related note, data were not analysed or discussed in relation to length of time spent in care, type of care placement and so forth. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on the application of the life course perspective this was considered outside of the scope of the study. Arguably there are important insights to be gained from considering the role of these, and other key factors, in the educational pathways of study participants.

Reflections on the research process

I first began this PhD in October 2014 and over the past five years have experienced the many and varied challenges and high points that occur over the course of completing a PhD. I was continually challenged during various aspects of the research process and gained key learning from each of these experiences.

The recruitment process presented several challenges and required both persistence and creative thinking. While interest in participating in the study was strong at the beginning of this process, this tapered off and settled into a slower, steadier stream of interest over time. As I realised that more people were coming forward whose educational experience would ultimately be considered 'successful' by the time of their interviews – or who had very positive experiences of education, I made efforts to share study information more widely in order to recruit people with more varied experiences, yet ultimately this did not prove successful. This was a point of frustration but was also an important lesson about the recruitment and research processes. Accepting that I

would need to draw a line in the sand and end active recruitment (while remaining open to possible future interviews) was bitter-sweet as it meant that I was finished the complex and uncertain (though enjoyable) data collection stage but also that I had not achieved a diverse sample in terms of education experience. The parameters of the PhD, the limited timeframe I was working with, and discussions with my supervisor were a helpful guide in my planning and decision-making during this process.

Identifying and applying appropriate methods of data analysis was also a challenging exercise and a steep learning curve. While getting to grips with the data was an exciting prospect, it was also daunting as I had not previously analysed data on this scale, nor had I drawn on case study methods or theoretical thematic analysis in previous research projects. The challenge of "learning on the job" during the high stakes exercise of completing my PhD was daunting but ultimately proved to be hugely rewarding and an excellent way to develop and refine my skills in relation to data analysis.

During the process of data collection and analysis I gained profound insight into the stories of the 18 participants I spoke to, the various challenges and opportunities they had experienced, and the reality of life spent growing up in care. This experience constantly reminded me that while there are of course many commonalities to the experience of being in and leaving care, there is also considerable diversity and variation in these experiences. Even with this relatively small sample of 18 adults who had been in care in Ireland there was incredible similarity *and* contrast in their experiences. In the context of considerable stigma often associated with being in care, narratives of failure and low expectations, and the limited number of 'success' stories that are shared in the media, this experience reminded me of the 'danger' of only hearing a single story or narrative when it comes to the experiences of groups of people (Ngozi Adichie, 2009).

Figuring out *how* I was going to apply the life course perspective to this study was also challenging and something that I only feel I grasped and understood fully as time went on and I got deeper into the research process. I was drawn to the life course perspective because of its multidimensional lens and the integrative framework it provides for examining this issue (Brady & Gilligan, 2018a) but it is an approach to research that is

written about widely and applied in multiple ways across the literature. It required developing a sense of myself as a researcher to have the confidence to assert that I would be applying it in two ways: as a guiding research paradigm and as conceptual framework through which I would examine study data. My sense of certainty on this developed gradually, as I suspect is often the case with PhD research, and required an acknowledgement of the limitations of these applications but also grounding these decisions in existing literature on the life course perspective and on the topic of education and care.

Finally, competing this PhD by publication was both a rewarding and challenging experience. This route to achieving a PhD had not previously been taken by a student in the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin. As a result, in both making the decision to pursue my PhD by this route and planning for how to complete it, I drew on the experiences of students and staff in other Schools and Institutions for guidance. I spoke with colleagues who had completed their PhD by publication and also reviewed guidelines on this approach from various institutions. As this is an emerging approach in the School of Social Work and Social Policy I had a certain level of freedom in terms of putting boundaries on the thesis, for example with regard to how to structure the final document. This also led to moments of doubt and fear as to whether or not this PhD would be 'good enough'. My supervisor was an invaluable source of encouragement and guidance when it came to managing these uncertainties and as I come to the end of the process I can look back on my decision to switch to the 'by publication' route (which I did in early 2018) and see it as an entirely positive one and no less challenging than I imagine the 'traditional' route is for students.

Navigating the peer-review process and the accompanying timelines for review, revision, and publication required a certain 'leap of faith' and some strategic thinking. I aimed to identify journals that were suitably well-regarded, were the right 'fit' with my study, but that would also – I hoped – lead me to having some sense of whether articles would be accepted – or not – prior to submission of my thesis (see Appendix 14 for timeline of publication of articles). While this route to PhD completion may not be for everyone, it was the right fit for me and has enabled me to publish and begin

disseminating study findings early in the process of PhD completion. I have also gained invaluable commentary and feedback on my work from the many peer reviewers who have now read my work.

These are just some of the key areas I have reflected on as I come to the end of my PhD journey. Over the past five years there have been many more experiences that I have learned from and have developed various skills as a result of, both personally and professionally as a researcher. Not least the invaluable experiences I have had of presenting my research at various stages at international conferences (see Appendix 15 for list of conference presentations related to the current PhD study). These opportunities enabled me to meet and engage with international colleagues with a shared interest in the topic of education and care. The resultant stimulating and challenging conversations about my study no doubt enhanced my research project considerably.

Concluding comment

Five core arguments lie at the heart of this PhD research study. These core arguments were presented at the beginning of this chapter and they are presented again below:

1. Diversity in the educational pathways of people with care experience should be expected.
2. Connections with key actors play a central role in influencing these educational pathways and are visible across the life course.
3. Human agency, as conceptualised from a life course perspective, is pivotal to shaping these educational pathways; this is done over time and in the context of various external and structural influences which both constrain and support individual agency.
4. The life course perspective provides unique insights on the educational pathways of adults with care experience.
5. The life course principles of linked lives and agency are valuable conceptual tools for examining issues related to education and care and developing

existing knowledge regarding *how* educational pathways are shaped and influenced over time.

This PhD study has made a "significant contribution [to knowledge] through original research" (School of Social Work and Social Policy, 2018: 15), the details of which have been outlined in this final chapter. Various elements of this study have also been published or are 'under review' in four international, peer-reviewed journals demonstrating the relevance of this study to scholarly knowledge and my ability to carry out and disseminate research to the standard required for peer-review publication.

This study has highlighted the importance of including the lived experiences of 'older' care-experienced adults when seeking to gain insight into the educational pathways of this group and *how* these pathways have been shaped and influenced. The current study has also shed light on various aspects of the "complex combination of individual characteristics and pre-care and potentially in-care experiences" (O'Higgins et al., 2015: 13), as well as the role of events and experiences in the years after leaving care and beyond, that shape and influence the educational progress and pathways of care-experienced adults. Finally, this study has highlighted the value of drawing on social theory when examining this issue (and issues related to care leaving more generally) responding to calls from previous authors (Berridge, 2007; Stein, 2006b).

Study findings suggest a need for flexibility in terms of policies and conceptualisations of educational outcomes when considering the educational progress and attainment of people with care experience. In an era when lifelong learning is heralded as a positive endeavour and something we should strive for (Volles, 2016), findings from this study suggest that we would do well to consider the education of people with care experience from a lifelong and ongoing perspective.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Confirmation of ethical approval from School of Social Work & Social Policy Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin

To: Eavan Brady Cc: Robert Gilligan

Dear Eavan,

The amendments to your Research Ethics Application have been noted. The outcome is as follows:

Applicant	Ref No	Category	Title	Supervisor	Meeting	Outcome	To Note
Brady, Eavan	600	PhD	A life course study of the educational pathways of adults who were in care as children	Robert Gilligan	Outside Meetings on 2/01/17	Approved	

Kind regards

Noreen

Appendix 2: Confirmation from Tusla - Child and Family Agency that their ethical approval was not required

To: Eavan Brady Cc: Robert Gilligan

Dear Ms. Brady

The Tusla research agreement you submitted for your study: **A Life Course Study of the educational pathways of adults (now aged 25-35) who were in State care as children**, received January 11th 2017 has been reviewed.

Decision: This age group would no longer be receiving a service from Tusla. The age of aftercare support for those in full time education is 23 years. Tusla therefore cannot recruit participants for the study and research ethics approval is not required from Tusla.

Yours sincerely,

Marian Brattman
Interim National Manager for Research
National Research Office

An Ghníomhaireacht um Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Tusla Child and Family Agency
Brunel Buidling
4th Floor
Military Road
Kilmainham
Dublin 8

Appendix 3: Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY!

Were you in care for 5 years or more?

Are you aged 25-35?

If so, would you like to take part in a study about what influences the education of people with care experience?

If you take part in this study, I will interview you for 90 minutes in a place that suits you. The interview will start by me asking you to tell me your 'educational story' from your earliest memory to present day.

For more information, please contact me:

Eavan Brady
Phone: 085-2022811 (text/call)
Email:
educationalpathwaysstudy@gmail.com
Twitter: @eavanrb

Thank you!

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED ADULTS

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Eavan Brady. I am a PhD student researcher at Trinity College Dublin. I am doing a research study of the educational journeys and experiences of adults who were in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, residential care, kin care) as children.

By hearing from adults with care experience, I hope to learn about the different life experiences that influence the education of children in care and people who have left care. I hope that this information will help to improve the education of children in care and those leaving care in the future.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

If you decide that you would like to take part in this study, I will interview you for about 90 minutes. During the interview, we will spend some time together noting important things that have happened in your life, especially those events to do with your education.

When the interview starts, I will ask you to tell me your educational 'story' and experiences from your earliest memory to the present day. When you have finished telling your story, I will ask you some follow-up questions about some of the things that you mentioned in your story. In a small number of cases, for example if someone has a lot to say and/or time runs out in the initial 90-minute interview, I will invite you to complete a second follow-up interview. This second interview is completely voluntary and you do not have to participate in it if you do not want to.

With your permission, your interview will be audio recorded to keep track of what we both say. After the interview, I will type up what we have both said and then destroy the recording. The written version of the interview will be stored safely on a password-protected computer.

WILL I BE ASKED TO DO ANYTHING ELSE IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART?

There are two more steps to the research study that you can take part in. **You do not have to take part in either of these if you do not want to.**

1. Follow-up Contact

If you agree at the end of the interview, I will contact you a few months later in order to share some of the findings from my analysis of all of the interviews I will have done. **All of the information I share with you will be completely anonymous.** You will have a chance to let me know what you think of these findings and I will consider your feedback when writing up this research study.

2. Contact Information

Sometime in the future (5-10 years), I may wish to invite you to do a follow-up interview. The purpose of this interview would be to see how things have been for you in the years since this first set of interviews and to learn about things that have changed or remained the same.

If you agree and I contact you again, you will have plenty of time to think about doing another interview and you can refuse to participate. If you think that you would like to be interviewed again, I will ask you to provide contact details at the end of the second interview.

WHERE WILL MY INTERVIEWS TAKE PLACE?

Interviews will take place in a quiet, private location where you feel comfortable. We will take time to discuss this together and ensure that you are at ease with the

location. Possible locations include your home, a meeting room in Trinity College, or a meeting room in a support/advocacy organisation, for example EPIC (Empowering People in Care).

ARE THERE ANY RISKS INVOLVED IN PARTICIPATING?

There are no known physical risks linked to being involved in this research. However, because interviews will involve you thinking about and talking about memories that might be upsetting, there is a risk that some participants may become upset and/or distressed during interviews. Because of this:

- I will do my best to make sure interviews take place in locations that are quiet and private, and in which you feel comfortable.
- If you show signs of being upset or distressed during an interview, I will offer you a break from the interview. If you continue to appear upset or distressed, I will terminate the interview.
- I will give you written information on relevant support services that you can contact after the interview if you found the experience upsetting.

IS WHAT I SAY PRIVATE?

Yes. What you say to me in the interview is **completely confidential**. Whatever we talk about in the interview will not be said to other people unless you tell me that there is a risk of harm to you or another person in which case I will be required to report it to the relevant authority. If this happens, I will talk to you about it before telling anyone else.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED?

- Everything that we say during interviews will be typed out and all participants will be given a fictional name to ensure anonymity. The names of any places/people mentioned during the interviews will also be changed.
- I will store hard copies of anonymised transcripts of interviews in a locked cabinet in the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College Dublin; soft copies will be stored on a password-protected computer.

- I will store audio recordings of interviews on a password-protected computer
- Signed consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College Dublin.
- All data (audio recordings, hard/soft copies of anonymised transcripts) and consent forms will be destroyed four years after I complete my PhD.
- The information gathered through these interviews will be analysed and used in my doctoral thesis and future publications.
- The information will also be presented at national and international conferences.
- All information will be treated in the strictest confidence.
- In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1997, you may access data collected for this study that relates to you at any time.

CAN I CHANGE MY MIND ABOUT PARTICIPATING?

Yes. If you decide to take part and then change your mind (even during the interview) that is no problem. You also have the right to stop the interview at any time without giving a reason. You can withdraw permission to use your interview in the study within two weeks of the interview taking place.

IF I THINK I WANT TO PARTICIPATE, WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

If you would like to participate in this study, or if you have any questions that you would like to ask before deciding, please contact me by phone on 085-2022811. You can also contact my supervisor, Prof. Robbie Gilligan, by phone on 01-8961331.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND INTEREST!

Appendix 5: Participant Consent Form

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED ADULTS

Please tick the boxes as appropriate and sign below to consent to participate in this study.

I have read and understood the attached Information Sheet ☐

I have been able to ask questions and discuss the study with Eavan and I am happy with the answers I was given ☐

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study before and during interviews, without giving a reason ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. ☐

I am happy to be interviewed by Eavan ☐

I am happy for the interview to be audio recorded ☐

I understand that the recorded interview will be stored as an encrypted file on a password-protected computer until Eavan has been awarded her PhD. ☐

I understand that the anonymised transcript and my signed consent form will be kept in a locked cabinet for four years from the time of completion of the study ☐

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your time and participation!

For office use only
Participant number:
Data number:
Date of Interview:

Appendix 6: Gatekeeper Information Sheet

GATEKEEPER INFORMATION SHEET

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ADULT CARE LEAVERS

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Eavan Brady. I am a PhD student researcher at Trinity College Dublin. I am doing a research study of the educational journeys and experiences of adults who were in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, residential care, kin care) as children.

By hearing from adults with care experience, I hope to learn about the different life experiences that influence the education of children in care and people who have left care. I hope that this information will help to improve the education of children in care and those leaving care in the future.

HOW CAN I/MY ORGANISATION HELP?

As I hope to hear from a diverse group of care leavers for this research study, I plan to recruit participants in a number of ways including via advocacy, support, aftercare, and homeless/housing services.

If you/your organisation consent, I will ask you to share information on this research study (e.g. by posting a flyer on internal noticeboards, posting a 'News' item on your agency website, telling individuals about the study by word of mouth) in order to support recruitment of 25-30 research participants.

WHO DO YOU WANT TO SPEAK TO?

I aim to speak to 25-30 adults who spent time in State care (i.e. foster care, residential care, kin care) as children. Specifically, I want to talk to those who meet the following criteria:

1) Spent a minimum of five years in care from age 10+.
2) Are now aged 25-35.
3) Had one of the following educational experiences:
    - Left education/school aged 15
    - Left education after completing secondary school
    - Pursued post-secondary education upon completion of secondary education.

WHAT WILL AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE INVOLVE FOR CARE LEAVERS?

Taking part in this study will involve a 90-minute interview with me about each participant's educational life story. The purpose of this interview is to learn about participants' personal educational story and the events, relationships, and experiences that influenced your educational story.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED FROM INTERVIEWS?

The information will be used in my doctoral thesis and future publications and will also be presented at national and international conferences. All information will be treated in the strictest confidence. Every participant and the organisation they work for will be given a fictional name in order to ensure anonymity. In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1997, participants may access data collected for this study that relates to them at any time.

IF I/MY ORGANISATION WANT TO HELP WITH RECRUITMENT, WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

If you would like to help with recruitment for this study, or if you have any further questions that you would like to ask before deciding, please contact me by email at eabrady@tcd.ie or by mobile phone on 086-6036568. You can also contact my

supervisor, Prof. Robbie Gilligan by email at robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie or by phone on 01-8961331.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND INTEREST!

Appendix 7: Gatekeeper Consent Form

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

GATE KEEPER CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ADULT CARE LEAVERS

Please tick the boxes as appropriate and sign below to consent to supporting participant recruitment for this study.

I have read and understood the attached Information Sheet ☐

I have been able to ask questions and discuss the study with the researcher and I am happy with the answers I was given ☐

I am happy to support recruitment for this study via my organisation/my contacts with care-experienced, adults as outlined in the Information Sheet ☐

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your time and participation!

For office use only
Gatekeeper number:
Data number:

Appendix 8: Letter of Invitation

LETTER OF INVITATION

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED ADULTS

Dear _____,

I am conducting interviews as part of a research study of the educational journeys and experiences of adults (now aged 25-35) who were in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, residential care, kin care, secure care) as children. By hearing about the educational experiences of adults with care experience, I hope to learn about the different life experiences that influence the education of children in care and people who have left care.

I hope that this information will help to improve the education of children in care and those leaving care in the future. I am hoping to hear from people with a wide range of educational experiences - positive, challenging, interrupted, ongoing and more.

If you take part in this study, I will interview you for 90 minutes in a place that suits you. The interview will start by me asking you to tell me your 'educational story' from your earliest memory to present day.

If you would like more information on this study, or are interested in taking part, please contact me on 085-2022811. I am happy to answer all questions!

Thank you for your time,

Eavan Brady
PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin

Appendix 9: Participant contact details for future interview

PARTICIPANT CONTACT DETAILS FOR FUTURE INTERVIEW

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED ADULTS

If you feel comfortable doing so, please provide contact information that you think will help me to contact you for a third interview in 5-10 years. *You do not have to complete this form* if you do not wish to be contacted in the future. You do not have to provide information on all of the areas listed.

CURRENT ADDRESS:

_____

_____

_____

HOME PHONE NUMBER: _____

MOBILE PHONE NUMBER: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

ANY OTHER INFORMATION THAT YOU THINK MIGHT HELP ME TO CONTACT YOU IN FUTURE?

_____

_____

Thank you for your time and participation!

Eavan

Appendix 10: Support Services Information Sheet

SUPPORT SERVICES INFORMATION

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED ADULTS

Dear Participant,

If you have found today's interview upsetting or distressing and would like to talk to someone about how you are feeling, the below organisations provide telephone and/or online support services that you may find helpful.

- **EPIC (Empowering People in Care)**	**01-8727661 or** www.epiconline.ie
- **Samaritans (General Emotional Difficulties)**	**116 123 or** www.samaratins.org
- **Aware (Mental Health/Depression)**	**1890 303 302 or** www.aware.ie
- **Drug & Alcohol Helpline**	**1800 459 459 or** www.drugs.ie
- **One in Four (Sexual Abuse)**	**01-6624070 or** www.oneinfour.ie
- **Rape Crisis Centre**	**1800 77 88 88 or** www.drcc.ie
- **HSE National Counselling Service**	**Numbers Vary by Location.**
	Visit: www.hse.ie **for details**

Thank you again for your time and input.

Eavan

Appendix 11: Interview Topic Guide

INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

RESEARCH STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED ADULTS

Introduction to Participant

The purpose of this interview is to learn about the story of your education, learning, and school experiences from your earliest memory to present day. To begin with I will ask you about your most recent educational experiences. Then I will ask you to tell me the story of your earlier experiences right up to present day. Once you have told your story, I will ask some additional questions around your experiences of education and learning and those events, relationships, and other things that you feel helped to shape and influence it.

There are no right or wrong answers to this – it is your individual story that has led you to where you are today that I am interested in hearing about.

Beginning of Interview

Can you tell me a little about your recent educational experiences?

Now that we have heard where you are now, could you tell me about your earlier experiences, perhaps starting with your first day at school up to the present day?
[Let the person tell his/her story without questioning or probing].

Middle of Interview: Additional Questions

Thanks so much for sharing your story; I am now going to ask you some questions about some of the things you mentioned so far and some questions about other areas related to learning and education [not all questions asked as some may have already been addressed during participant telling their story].

1. Family & Relationships

I would like to talk to you a little bit more now about your time in care and your carers/your birth family, if that's ok…

[Family questions need to be handled carefully and may be deemed inappropriate by the interviewer in some circumstances]

- Can you tell me a bit more about your birth family?
    - Question about parents' views of education? Sense of how they felt about education?
- Can you tell me a bit more about your carers?
- Do you still have contact with your birth family (parents/siblings) and/or carers?
- Could you say a little about what your time in care was like?
    - Were your siblings placed with you?
- What role did your foster parents/residential staff/birth parents play in your education?
- Can you tell me about any important people who stand out in your memory as being influential in the course of your education – in either a positive or negative way?

Now I would like to ask you a few more questions about your time in school [and further education], if that's ok…

2. School Experience

- Can you tell me some more about what school was like when you were younger?
- Can you say a bit about what school was like around the time you came into care?
- What is your earliest memory of learning/education?
- [If moved school] Can you tell me about the times you moved school and what that was like for you?
- What kind of things did you like/dislike about school (subjects/activities etc.)?
- Were you involved in any extracurricular activities at school or in the community? If so, tell me about this.
- How would you describe your experience of your teachers?

3. Leaving School

- What age were you when you left school?
- [If left early] Can you tell me a little bit about why you left school when you did?
- When you left school, what did you do next? And then?
- How do you feel about how/when/why you left school now when you look back on it?

4. Further Education

- Since leaving school have you done any further study?
    - If so, what type of study? What motivated you to do this?
- [If went to university/further education] What were your expectations of what it would be like to study at college/university?
- How did you find the experience of studying in university/college? Was it what you expected? Different?
- How did you find the transition to studying? Was it challenging or straight forward for you?

5. Perceptions of Education

- What does the word ‘education’ mean to you?
- What does the word ‘learning’ mean to you?
- Two positive things about your time in school/education
- Two negative things about your time in school/education?
- How would they describe their feelings about education at 12/13 or 15/16?

6. Work experiences

- What has your experience of working been like to date

<u>Closing Interview</u>

We’re coming to the end of the interview, I’d like to finish by asking you some questions about the future, if that’s ok…

7. The Future

- When you think about the future, what would you like to happen for you? Generally and in terms of your education.
- [If has children] what are your hopes for your children/grandchildren’s futures with regard to their education?

8. Final Clarification

- Age:
- Gender:
- Nationality:
- Years spent living in care:
- Type of care placement(s):
- Number of placements:
- Number of schools:
- Age when left school:

9. Closing the Interview

Looking back over your life so far, what three key things (events, people, experiences etc.) stand out as being critical in shaping and influencing your education?

- Is there anything else you would like to add or comment on before we finish the interview?
- A question about what advice would give 15 year old self regarding education?

9. What made you decide to participate in this study?

10. Is there anything else that you would have liked to have known before coming to interview?

Thank participant for their time and for sharing their personal experiences.

Appendix 12: Extract from transcript of interview

Participant: Female

Interview date: 18th April 2018

Interview length: 1 hour 15 minutes

Interview location: Meeting room in Trinity College Dublin

I = Interviewer

P = Participant

***

I: So… I'll let you kick off then [participant name] [P: Ok] if you talk us through your earliest memory [P: Yea] in terms of education up to present day…

P: So yea em… I went to school obviously at the age of 4 em went through primary school… no difficulties in primary school em at that stage I was in, I was in foster care from the age of 4 so it was… em… went through primary school with my siblings, no issues there… em repeated 6th class em… went on then to secondary school em wasn't a great student in secondary school was a bit of a divil em… didn't really enjoy school got in with a messing bunch I suppose em… done my junior cert, I then went and done LCA so its Leaving Cert Applied, so at that stage it was kind of new enough it was em a different route I suppose into the leaving cert, done LCA for the two years em… again a bit of a messer… not really concentrating, didn't really do great, wasn't suspended, expelled or anything like that [I: Yea] just no interest in school, ended up pregnant… in… [final year]… so I was pregnant doing my leaving cert em… I did my leaving cert while I was pregnant, again just doing my leaving cert because it was something that had to be done [I: Yea] but not really focusing on college, I'd never even thought of college it just didn't even come into my head em… done my leaving cert., had my first baby then… em… and I suppose took time out and, well I didn't really take time out I was just with [baby], went on social welfare, got rent allowance, the usual kind of set up in terms of em… having babies, I'd moved out of my placement when I was 18 when I got pregnant

with [baby] in with my boyfriend em… so… I… I suppose having been at home with the baby em my partner was working… em… and I can't really remember what triggered my mind in terms of looking at courses, I suppose the incentive around then was, you got a lot more money when you went into education… there was grants [I: Yea], you got em a payment for going to college so it was a case of do I go to work and lose payments, do I look at maybe doing a course for a year, getting a payment for it, there was em… you know there was options in terms of childcare so I just set out to try it, I had a look online at that time kind of computers were new enough stuff online was new enough, came across a course in em… [name of town] which was a further education course em [course subject] at the time, that interested me, some of the modules, I kind of liked that [course area] side […] so I… applied for that, I - sorry prior to that I'd actually done em like a [subject area] course in a local em… like a [subject area] course in a local college [I: Oh yea] in and around that time my own [parent] had died, my [parent] had died so I dropped out of that course em… then kind of after a while… realised that I needed to do something else, applied for [course] em… got it, em… kind of was like oh what do I do now kind of thing, decided that I would take it, it was five, it was five days a week, it was full-time em and there was a number of different modules, organised for childcare, went and started that course, I was driving which was such a bonus [I: Yea] I could actually get from where I was to the college but really liked it you know, kind of met people, met other people that kind of had babies as well… em, similar to myself, people that had gone through the education system and kind of didn't really know what they were doing but they were doing the year and then, so during, I suppose during that I kind of, like it was a struggle in terms of assignments were new, having to actually do the work and not just kind of sail through school was a challenge for me… I also had a baby as well so I was trying to manage that [I: Yea], I was with me partner so I had support thank god… so… done the year and passed it and at that stage people were like… applying for colleges and it was kind of something that everybody was doing so I did it…

I: Yea

P: Em I applied for [name of Institute of Technology], [university name], didn't have a clue really about it, just knew I was applying for a degree in [subject area], something that had that background, didn't really know a whole lot about it but just knew that this was how we were kind of showed this is how you apply for college so I was really, really lucky that everything I had put down, I had got offered…

I: Oh wow

P: So, it kind of came back and I went oh my god, what do I do here like?

I: Yea [soft laughter]

P: You know… do I really want to do this, how am I going to do it, how am I gonna manage it, so… em… my foster dad, obviously you know, I had a great relationship with him em you know he was kind of saying to me well you know go with a Level 8 because it's better than a Level 7 whereas I was kind of thinking oh well I'm gonna go with the one that's kind of closest to my home not really thinking which career path to go down [I: Ok] because I didn't' really know enough about it, you know that kind of way [I: Yea] so em… in the end I decided ok well maybe I should go with a Level 8 cause it is a higher course em… and it might open more doors, at that point I was just doing it, I wasn't really focused on going down the [subject area] road, would have loven to be a [name of job] but wasn't something I was going out - I didn't really know what I was doing

I: Yea

P: Kind of was winging it a bit…

I: Yea

P: So I went in… finished [location of course studied], got em accepted a place in [university name] to do a [subject area] degree em… and started [university name] and absolutely loved it [I: Really…], like a lot of mature students in it, it wasn't just very

academic, it was academic but in terms of, there was a nice social end of it you know, and there was good banter with the girls and em, kind of gave me a new lease of life you know, that there was more out there than just being at home with a baby you know, there was… possibilities [I: Yea] in terms of education em… so I suppose I kind of got competitive you know I was hanging around with some girls that were kind of didn't really care what they got, other girls that were really eager to kind of do well [I: Yea] and there was a bit of competition there you know there was a lot of pressure… at different points… em… so… I kind of just got through each year, not easily but with a struggle, there was grants in place so when I went to [university name] like you were given a grant to go to college like I had extra money every month to study…

I: Wow, yea

P: You know em… there was options, there was money towards childcare [I: Brilliant], you know, there was loads of options now, so there was nothing that made it any more difficult for me apart from doing my assignments [I: Yea] and finding time to do them [I: Yea], the incentive was there you know I didn't lose out on money, I actually benefit from it em… made loads of friends in college you know, some were kind of happy enough doing the Level 8 and get their [name of degree], and were kind of going down different routes that wouldn't require anything a little bit further [I: Yea], others were talking about you know, doing Masters', doing whatever it was, PhDs that they wanted to do so… I started to think about well what next could I do em… and decided to apply for the Masters em… you know got through the three years, done my thesis em, got the points that I needed to get, for doing the Masters, applied to [university 1], applied to [university 2], didn't get [university 1], em… didn't even get an interview for [university 1], got an interview for [university 2], went for the interview and… managed to secure, so it really fell into place for me… [I: Yea] … luckily like I was really, really lucky you know that I kind of, I kind of muddled, well at one stage I kind of did say to my partner like that I kind of… feel like I was winging it… getting through every year d'you know [I: Yea] like… that when I started I didn't see the end path I didn't see that this was what I need to do to get to this, or this is what I'm going to do [I: Yea] … I was just kind of getting through every year [I: Yea] and listening to people and they were applying for it and

ended up doing it you know em… so I got the Masters then em… the Masters was obviously really, really, really hard you know, it was a lot of work I didn't just you know, I didn't, I got the places out of chance I think but it took a lot of work to get the Masters…

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End of extract

Appendix 13: Research update sent to participants

Research Update: Study on the Educational Journeys of Adults with Care Experience

I am writing to update you on the progress of my PhD research study on the educational journeys of adults with care experience that you took part in.

I have nearly finished reviewing all of the interviews that I did for this study and am writing my final PhD dissertation. I am also writing three articles for research journals about what I have found during my study and I will send you copies of these articles when they are available.

For now, I wanted to share some of the key things that I have found during this study so far. This is not a complete picture of everything that the people I spoke to said, but it is a summary of what I have figured out so far and what I am writing about in the three journal articles.

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Eighteen people shared their stories for this study between April 2017 and August 2018. The people I spoke to were between the ages of 24 and 36 and from various parts of Ireland. I interviewed 11 women and seven men.

1) Pathways through education are diverse[41]

Everyone who I spoke to for this study had their own personal story about their pathway through education. When I looked at all 18 stories there were broadly four educational pathways. I gave these pathways their own names.

[41] Note: This update was sent to participants while I was writing the paper on pathways. I ultimately changed the names of these pathways to 'Typical' and 'Disrupted' however, the essence of the pathways and the key messages of this paper remained the same.

1. I called the first pathway the “Expected Pathway”. People who followed this pathway completed their secondary education at the same time as their peers and went on to pursue undergraduate degrees straight after completing secondary school.

2. The second pathway was the “Expected Pathway Plus”. People on this pathway did not go straight to university after leaving school. They all completed a one-year PLC course prior to entering higher education.

3. The third pathway was the “Early Extended Pathway”. People who had followed this pathway had taken some time out of education in their teens before returning to further and/or higher education in their late teens or early 20s. Some of the people in this group had left school early.

4. The fourth and final pathway was called the “Late Extended Pathway”. People who had taken this pathway had an ‘extended’ break from education before returning, or planning to return, to further or higher education in their late twenties or early thirties.

People in both of the “Extended Pathways” had spent time out of education for various reasons including having children, working, and experiencing homelessness.

One of the key messages that I have taken from looking at these four pathways is that the journey of education happens in different ways, and at different times.

2) Other people are key in supporting education

When I started to look at the interviews one of the things I noticed was how important other people had been in supporting the education of everyone I spoke to. There were many examples of other people that helped with education at lots of different points in people’s lives for example, in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and adulthood. “Family” was also a very important source of educational support – this includes birth family, foster families, and in some cases residential care home staff. Another important

influence was people becoming parents themselves. Finally, there were stories where people outside the 'family' were supportive of education for example relationships with teachers and aftercare workers.

3) People did lots of things to progress their education but sometimes other things got in the way

I am still examining this issue in the stories I heard but what I am seeing is that while people were often very proactive and engaged in their education, they were also often limited by their circumstances. For example, by having limited/no access to funding for further education or by having to move schools or placements a lot.

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Thank you so much for sharing your story and being a part of this study. I will send you the articles when they are published and when I have completed my PhD I will also send you a summary of the final dissertation.

If you have any questions, thoughts or ideas about any of this please do get in touch. I would love to hear from you!

With thanks,

Eavan

Appendix 14: Timeline of publication process for peer-reviewed journal articles

Paper 1: The life course perspective: An integrative research paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers?

Submitted to *Children and Youth Services Review:* November 2017

Accepted: February 2018

Published: February 2018

Paper 2: Exploring diversity in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults: Findings from a life course study of education and care

Submitted to *Children and Youth Services Review*: March 2019

Accepted: June 2019

Published: June 2019

Paper 3: Supporting care-experienced adults' educational journeys: 'Linked lives' over the life course

Submitted to *Child and Family Social Work*: January 2019

Accepted: June 2019

Published: July 2019

Paper 4: The role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Insights from a life course study of education and care

Submitted to *Children and Society*: May 2019

Resubmitted with recommended revisions following peer review: June 2019

Appendix 15: List of conference presentations related to PhD research

Oral Presentations

1. Brady, E. (October, 2018). *What is placement success? Reflections on the educational outcomes of care-experienced adults* (Symposium). XV European Scientific Association on Residential & Family Care for Children and Adolescents (EUSARF) Conference, Porto, Portugal

2. Brady, E. (October, 2018). *Positive turning points in the educational journeys of care-experienced adults: Preliminary findings of a life course study.* XV European Scientific Association on Residential & Family Care for Children and Adolescents (EUSARF) Conference, Porto, Portugal

3. Brady, E. (July, 2018). *The life course perspective: A guiding paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers*. Social Work, Education and Social Development Conference, Dublin, Ireland.

4. Brady, E. (September, 2017). *A life course approach to studying the experiences of foster care alumni: A case study exploring the educational experiences of care-experienced adults*. 9th International Foster Care Research Network Conference, Université de Nanterre, Paris, France.

5. Brady, E. (September, 2016). *Using a life course approach to explore the educational pathways of care leavers: New dimensions in understanding*. 14th European Scientific Association on Residential & Family Care for Children and Adolescents International Conference: Oviedo, Spain.

Poster Presentations

1. Brady, E. (September, 2015). *Exploring the Educational Pathways & Transitions of Adult Care Leavers: Developing a PhD Research Project*. 3rd International Congress of the Swiss Association of Social Work: Zurich, Switzerland.