



Leaving a Pupil Referral Unit in Wales: Care Experienced Young People and their Post-16 Transitions

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COLLECTION:
TRANSITIONS TO
SCHOOL AND BEYOND

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Care experienced young people are more likely to leave compulsory schooling with fewer qualifications than their non-care experienced peers. They continue to be over-represented in school exclusion figures and are more likely to attend alternative provision such as pupil referral units (PRUs). Transitions at 16 can be difficult, particularly when support systems are lost. As such, these young people are at greater risk of homelessness, criminality and suicide, on leaving compulsory education. The risks associated with these transitions are heightened even more for those leaving alternative provision. Exploring what factors can support the transitions of PRU learners into post-16 destinations is an important line of enquiry. This article discusses qualitative findings from the first year of a three-year mixed methods study involving research with 14 PRU learners. It explores young people's reflections on their educational journeys so far and their expectations for life after the PRU. The findings highlight how experiences of school exclusion can impact negatively on future trajectories. Despite this, the participants were still able to foresee and describe ambitious plans, supported in part by caring PRU professionals and positive role models in their lives. The article concludes by considering the factors that may facilitate or create barriers to sustainable transitions for this cohort of young people, as they begin to leave the PRUs.

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KEYWORDS:

Care experienced young people; transitions; school exclusion; pupil referral unit; education other than at school; life course perspective; linked lives; Wales

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Smith, P. (2023). Leaving a Pupil Referral Unit in Wales: Care Experienced Young People and their Post-16 Transitions. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 14, pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.55>

Whilst research has consistently highlighted pupils' positive experiences of pupil referral units (PRUs) (Berridge et al., 2021; Malcolm, 2019), little is known about the experiences of these young people once they leave a PRU at 16 (Smith, 2019). This article begins that exploration by discussing the initial findings of a three-year study that will track the educational transitions of PRU leavers who are care experienced.

Young people who are excluded from mainstream school and placed in PRUs are more likely to drop out of education, employment or training at 16 (Wilcock, 2020). And for these young people there is an increased risk of loneliness, homelessness, engagement in criminal activity, and suicide (Gill et al., 2017; Maxwell et al., 2019; Samaritans Cymru, 2019). At the same time, young people with experience of the care system have historically been over-represented in PRUs (Munn & Lloyd, 2005). These young people can therefore be doubly disadvantaged when it comes to realising their future ambitions, due to the increased challenges that are faced educationally by those who are excluded from school or come from a care background (Mannay et al., 2015; Pirrie et al., 2011). It is for these reasons that research focusing on the lived experiences and trajectories of those who are excluded, and care experienced, is both timely and important (Berridge et al., 2021; Samaritans Cymru, 2019). Equally important is the need to recognise the strengths and positive characteristics of these learners, as part of any research or policy initiatives that takes place. A failure to do so risks further stigmatisation (Moensted et al., 2020) and the reinforcement of a 'failing subject position', which can be detrimental to the aspirations and achievements of those in care (McLeod, 2010). No matter what challenges are faced or experienced, these must not define who the young people are. It is with these factors in mind that the research discussed in this article takes place.

The term 'care experienced' is used throughout this article to represent all the young people who took part. Historically, research has used the term 'looked after children' or 'LAC'. This term is one such instance where negative connotations can inadvertently be attributed to those in the care system, as 'lacking' something in their lives. The 'LAC' acronym, which has now been replaced with 'children looked after' (CLA) in Wales, is also only attributable to those young people who have been removed from their homes and placed in the care of the state. It therefore fails to capture those who might have a social worker in their lives, but who still live at home (known as a child in receipt of care and support (CRCS) in Wales). For this study it was important to involve young people with different experiences of the care system, as they can all face significant challenges with their education (Berridge et al., 2021). The term 'care experienced' therefore looks to address this aim.

This article provides further insights into the lived experiences of learners who are care experienced and excluded from mainstream schools across Wales. In doing so, the article highlights some of the key challenges and possible support mechanisms that are available to the young participants, to facilitate sustainable transitions into post-16 destinations.

SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS AND PRUs

Previous research has highlighted the detrimental effects of school exclusion on young people's lives (Pirrie et al., 2011; Samaritans Cymru, 2019; Sanders et al., 2020). The experience of being excluded can also lead some young people to develop a disconnect with education and an association with a negative 'learning identity' (Evans, 2021). Despite the encouraging commitment from Welsh Government for a more inclusive schooling system (Welsh Government, 2016), the rates of school exclusion have increased in recent years across Wales (Welsh Government, 2021). We must also be mindful of exclusion experiences that are not officially reported within mainstream schools, known as internal or 'hidden' exclusions (Power & Taylor, 2020). These episodes occur when young people are removed from mainstream classrooms but remain within the school, in isolation units or other settings. Whilst not official exclusions, these experiences are still likely to create a sense of otherness or stigma for a young person, and a limited learning experience compared to the one found in the mainstream classroom. As a result of the increased official exclusions in Wales, more young people than ever before are being taught in alternative provision, or education other than at school (EOTAS) as it is known in Wales. For the majority of these young people, their education takes place within PRUs (Welsh Government, 2022).

There have been negative perceptions of PRUs historically, with terms such as ‘dumping grounds’ and ‘last resort’ schools used to describe them (Solomon, 2011). Despite this view, research often highlights the positive experiences of young people in these settings, where supportive and caring relationships are formed between young people and staff (Berridge et al., 2021; Malcolm, 2019; Smith, 2019). These supportive relationships can help learners to grow in confidence as part of a positive turning point (Malcolm, 2019), improving both their social and academic skills (Smith, 2019). Tracking where these young people go after compulsory schooling ends can help develop understanding about the effectiveness of PRU provision (Mills & Thomson, 2018; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017). Also, learning more about the best ways to support this transition period can help to improve the longer-term outcomes of PRU learners (Malcolm, 2022; Michael & Frederickson, 2013).

TRANSITIONS AND THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

The educational transitions and outcomes of care experienced young people are said to vary due to a range of individual and contextual factors (Berridge et al., 2008). A useful conceptual framework that has been used to help make sense of these factors is the life course perspective (Elder, 1994). This perspective has been used effectively in research with those in care (Brady & Gilligan, 2018) as it offers a longitudinal approach to understanding how experiences are influenced over time through multiple contexts. The multiple contexts include chronological age, life transitions, relationships, and social change (Hutchison, 2011) and several themes underpin the life course perspective (see Elder, 1998 for a detailed account). For the purposes of this article, the themes of linked lives and human agency are considered (Elder, 1994).

Linked lives refer to the ways in which human lives are interdependent, where relationships between people can be supportive or act as a constraint (Hutchison, 2005). Whilst the family acts as a central source of support and influence in these interdependent relationships, for young people in care, relationships with those outside the immediate family must be considered. Interactions with friends, peers, key adults and professionals are all crucial to the formation of relationships that can help to stimulate ‘turning points’ in peoples’ lives. Such turning points can lead to changes in behaviour and actions (Elder et al., 2003) which might ultimately lead to new or different opportunities and experiences. It is through these interactions with other people across the lifespan that individuals are able to enact their human agency, through various choices and actions that are shaped by the people they connect with (Hardgrove et al., 2014). These choices and actions within a range of contexts including the social or relational context, can then lead to different educational transitions and outcomes for individuals.

Brady and Gilligan (2018) provide a useful overview of the central concepts within the life course perspective, which will inform understanding throughout this study. They include: 1) trajectories – the long-term patterns of stability and change across the lifespan; 2) pathways – interrelated trajectories (such as through work, education and family life); 3) transitions – changes in/or a departure from, a role or status; and 4) turning points – a life event that results in a permanent shift in the overall life course trajectory. It is these concepts that help us to organise and make sense of the key life experiences over the long-term, including the impact that they can have on future choices and outcomes (Brady & Gilligan, 2018).

POST-16 TRANSITIONS

In terms of supporting and sustaining post-16 transitions for EOTAS learners, previous research has highlighted the importance of developing clear transition pathways and support (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017). This requires good working relations between EOTAS and colleges or employers, and targeted careers advice to help young people adjust to their new environments (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014). Good cross-professional working can involve EOTAS staff staying in touch with learners when they first move into new destinations, or the establishment and provision of a support network throughout the first year of post-16 provision (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014). Having a support network or identified mentor during the transition is also viewed as important for learners with additional learning needs or challenges in their lives (Packer et al., 2022). In this way, the potential for a disrupted transition is minimised. Support during this period of time should therefore include the maintenance of positive relationships with others.

Supportive relationships as well as interdependence are acknowledged as important for supporting those in care during their life transitions (Driscoll, 2013; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Harrison et al., 2023). Transitions are filled with uncertainty and risk for care experienced young people (Roberts et al., 2021). Multiple transitions can take place simultaneously alongside their education transitions, such as placement moves, which makes coping with change more difficult. There is also often an accelerated transition to adulthood (Stein, 2006) and the 'typical' pathway through education becomes disrupted. Young people can drop out of education altogether to become a parent or carer, whilst others can experience homelessness. It is therefore important to have a long-term and flexible view of educational progress for care experienced young people (Brady & Gilligan, 2019a). Research has also shown the benefits of positive relationships (or linked lives) with others for care experienced young people's educational and life transitions. This includes factors such as having a secure and stable home environment (Miller et al., 2021) and a strong social network of support with key adults (Brady & Gilligan, 2019b). This support can be emotional, practical or financial (Driscoll, 2013; Ellis & Johnston, 2022) whilst creating a sense of belonging in a foster placement is also beneficial (Skilbred et al., 2017). If a strong network of relationships or linked lives is not available to a young person in care, this can create barriers to continuing in education beyond the age of 16 (Harrison et al., 2023; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Jackson and Cameron (2012) highlighted how young people struggle when they have few supportive adults in their lives who offer encouragement and guidance. This included social workers who showed a lack of interest in the young people's education. Harrison and others (2023) also describe how moving into semi-independent living for care-leavers can make it more difficult to sustain a placement in education, employment or training, without the right levels of support.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

To understand the lived experiences of transition through education over time, the study includes interviews with young people at three different time points: 1) during their final year of schooling in a PRU; 2) during the first six months in a new destination; 3) 12 months later. The findings discussed in this article are from time point (1). The overall study has been informed by the life course perspective (Elder, 1994) and previous research that has used this approach with care experienced young people (see Brady & Gilligan, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Due to the nature of the research and the involvement of young people over three years, the perspective was viewed as a useful framework for making sense of lived experiences over time.

For the first round of interviews creative methods were used to facilitate in-depth conversations with 14 young people aged 15–16, who all attended one of three PRUs in Wales. The young people were identified and invited to participate via PRU head teachers, and parents or guardians were given two weeks' notice in which to ask further questions or, where relevant, to opt out a young person from the study. None of the young people who wanted to take part in the research were opted out by an adult.

The participants included six females and eight males who had varied experiences of the care system. Some were children looked after (CLA), living in residential care settings, or with foster carers or extended family members. Others were children in receipt of care and support (CRCS) and some had experience of the care system, but no longer received support. Two participants had no experience of care but wanted to take part in the research, whilst one participant had recently been adopted. In order to be inclusive, young people without any care experience who wanted to take part in the research were invited to do so. Taking this inclusive approach was important in communicating to young people the value of their own lived experience of school exclusion. However, for the purposes of this article, only findings related to those with experience of care are included.

The researcher provided information sheets to the participants and following discussion and agreement, consent forms were signed. It was only at this point that participants shared their contact details, along with the contact details of a key adult in their lives. Several different contact details were requested to help with the arrangement of follow-up interviews. Ethical approval was gained from the ethics committee within the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff

University, and participants were invited to offer feedback on the creative methods and the research findings. It was highlighted to participants that they could stop the interview at any point, and that they could withdraw from the research up to two weeks after taking part.

The participants took part in a variation of the emotion sticker activity (Mannay et al., 2019). This involved sorting cards with different key people written on them into piles, related to their experiences of educational engagement and support. In total there were four options for the participants, in terms of where to place the sorting cards: 1) under a happy emotion sticker (for positive experiences); 2) under an indifferent emotion sticker (for neither good or bad experiences); 3) under a sad emotion sticker (for negative experiences that made them feel sad); and finally 4) under an angry emotion sticker (for negative experiences that made them feel angry). Blank cards were also provided to the participants so that they could include other key people in their lives within the activity. Once completed, the researcher asked the participants about the reasons why they had ordered the cards in such a way, enabling specific schooling experiences to be shared. The task also facilitated further conversations around future plans and aspirations. All of the interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour.

Visual research tasks such as these have been successfully used with young people previously (Lomax, 2015; Smith, 2019), as they reduce the need for eye contact and help to put participants at ease (Bagnoli, 2009). In this way the experience can lead to an in-depth conversation, where a more nuanced understanding of participants' lives can be achieved (Lomax, 2015). By focusing the task on the key people in the young people's lives and their relational experiences, the participants were able to reflect back over time, providing detailed examples of life events and their perceptions of these. This offered further insights through analysis, into how such interactions might frame or impact their decision-making and educational trajectories and transitions.

The conversations were audio recorded and transcribed, before being uploaded to a computer software package for analysis. Analysis was data driven with data organised into categories for further examination, following the six phases of the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research in time point (1) looked to understand more about the participants' experiences of school exclusion; their time spent in a PRU; and their plans and preparedness for post-16 destinations. Based on this focus, three main themes are discussed here: 1. School exclusions and referrals, 2. Relationships, 3. Preparing for post-16 destinations.

FINDINGS

SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS AND REFERRALS

Participants articulated various reasons for being excluded or referred out of a mainstream school. This included issues around bullying, non-attendance and threatening behaviour towards other pupils or staff members, which is the most cited reason given for exclusion within annual reports (Welsh Government, 2021). Understandably, the young people linked the difficulties they had been facing at home with their ensuing struggles in school:

'I had a lot of stuff going on personally and I also had school stuff going on, and I couldn't balance any of that because it was just constant. The teachers didn't focus on the bigger picture of my life.' (Student 1).

Through the narratives of the young people there was a perception that mainstream school staff lacked empathy, care, or an appreciation of the difficulties they had been facing. This stood in contrast to their experiences of PRU staff:

'There are less people [in the PRU] and so you get more support with stuff and you're not like, just left to fend for yourself.' (Student 6).

'You get more support, like one-to-one support [in the PRU]. Whereas in mainstream... you don't really get that...I'm not saying they don't care in mainstream, but here they actually know you.' (Student 4).

For this reason, some of the young people felt misunderstood, isolated or invisible in mainstream schooling, at least when it came to staff recognising the wider challenges in their lives. This emotional feeling of exclusion was often coupled with a physical experience of

internal or 'hidden exclusion' (Power & Taylor, 2020), prior to any formal exclusion or referral out of mainstream school.

'I had ADHD and that was obvious and instead of doing something about it they were just mean...I had detention every day...In primary school I had to sit on a chair on my own in the corner, without a desk and do my work on my lap, so I wouldn't interact with the other kids.' (Student 9).

These prolonged instances of 'hidden exclusion' (Power & Taylor, 2020), where young people are not officially removed from a school system but placed in isolation rooms or away from other pupils, were viewed as ineffective at supporting their re-engagement with learning. Such experiences meant that the young people were already falling behind with their education, before any formal exclusion took place. This problem was then exacerbated further, once removal from mainstream school happened. Many of the participants described long periods out of the schooling system, before they were placed in a PRU:

'I didn't go to school for about three years.' (Student 2).

'I left and had a year off school...and got referred to the [PRU]...the first time I got rejected...' (Student 10).

For the participants then, such an extended period out of schooling was not only detrimental to their academic learning, but it also meant that they were missing out on valuable time in a school environment, where social benefits are available (Samaritans Cymru, 2019). Becoming more isolated could also occur due to placement moves into other local authorities. For these young people, both school connections and wider social connections could be lost at the same time:

'I was moved to XXXXXX, I got put in care there, I stayed there a couple of months, seven or eight, and then I moved here...I don't really have any friends to be honest... not really close, close friends.' (Student 7).

'Helping with Brownies, setting up camp and I used to do that when I lived in England, but not anymore, since I moved to Wales.' [because of a placement move]. (Student 6).

Geographical transitions at the same time as a school referral could therefore sever many relationships all at once, increasing the risk of loneliness and isolation for these learners. This was at a time when supportive social networks could be most beneficial to them. When the research took place, two participants had experienced a placement move which required them to move out of a local authority area altogether. In addition, three participants had been moved out of their immediate communities to live with foster carers.

RELATIONSHIPS

It was perhaps due to this increased risk of experiencing fractured relationships for those excluded from school and/or experiencing the care system, that a central task of PRU staff was the development of close, caring relationships with their learners. All of the participants talked at length about the positive relationship they had with their PRU teachers:

'Yeah, so here [PRU] they understand you better...because there's not a lot of children here, they've got time to listen to you... They're not like teachers here, they are more like a friend.' (Student 5).

'You get to connect with the teachers on a better level.' (Student 2).

Being able to connect on a 'better level' allowed these relationships to grow and become less formal than those they had experienced with teachers in mainstream schools. The staff were regularly described as friends or extended family members by the young people, highlighting the close and less formal bond that had been made. As a result, many of the participants felt that both their academic and social skills had improved.

'I think my learning and education skills are better. I'm doing really well in like Maths and English. My self-esteem is not that great but I'm more confident, I'm able to get myself out of bed and get to school and stuff.' (Student 8).

By experiencing a positive educational environment that was built on supportive relationships with staff, these learners were beginning to articulate a positive 'learning identity' (Evans, 2021). It was through a real sense of belonging and care (Skilbred et al., 2017) that the young people felt able to grow and develop once more:

'This school has brought me laughter, life lessons and a whole lot of memories that I'll hold in my heart forever...when I didn't believe in myself, they all did...there's one important thing that I will take from this place. What love is...you could be having the hardest time at home but as soon as you enter here, you get a feeling of love and support.' (Student 10).

The support received was both emotional and practical (Driscoll, 2013), which created a safe space that the young people wanted to be in. It was felt that these positive experiences would have a long-lasting effect on them. Other important and supportive relationships in the young people's lives included their guardians and family members:

'My auntie is doing the most for me now, she's just amazing, I wouldn't be where I am without her.' (Student 12).

'Yeah, my family support me 100% and my friends obviously as well...my mums my best friend.' (Student 4).

Friends and key adults (Driscoll, 2013) such as sports coaches, youth workers and staff at voluntary groups were also mentioned as positive role models in the participants lives. All these experiences were encouraging to hear and highlighted the difference that strong social connections could make to the young people's self-belief and commitment to moving forward and doing well. However, one key relationship that was rarely discussed positively was with their social workers. These relationships were not viewed as strong or central to the young people:

'They help but sometimes it's hard to get hold of them. But I've had so many social workers in the past. So, I don't really rely on them...I see them, but I don't ask them stuff, because you don't know when you'll get a new one to be honest, and you have to repeat everything to them.' (Student 10).

'I didn't speak to the social worker at all. The first family worker I didn't speak to him. He came once and just left.' (Student 6).

The reasons why young people didn't see their relationships with social workers as meaningful were often due to the lack of time that they had spent with them. Many described difficulties in contacting their social workers, or not hearing from them for long periods of time. Others, as above, suggested a lack of consistency in their relationship with a social worker due to a high turnover of staff. Being mindful of this could prevent a young person from instigating a conversation with their social worker, because they would just have to repeat it all again at some point with a new one. Some relationships with family members were also described in negative terms:

'My dad is emotionally abusive, he is not the nicest...Once [I move out] I don't plan on having to listen to them [parents]. They don't believe in me at all...they don't think I'm capable of anything...' (Student 9).

This last quote once again highlights the negative impact that certain interactions with others could have on the young people's lives (Hutchison, 2005). This constraining relationship with their parents was felt to be holding Student 9 back from achieving their future ambitions. As such, the decision had been made to move out of the family home at 16, accelerating the transition to adulthood (Stein, 2006) and increasing the risk of a more unsettled period in education, employment or training (Harrison et al., 2023).

PREPARING FOR POST-16 DESTINATIONS

In terms of preparing for their post-16 transitions, many of the young people were feeling anxious about moving on:

'I'm ok but I need a lot of support getting used to the amount of people there will be, which is something I really struggle with, so...I need to have more visits to the college.' (Student 3).

Having to adapt to a new environment and particularly those with more people in them was regularly brought up by the participants. Even though college visits were arranged during quiet times, decisions about where to go next were often centred on this factor:

'I need to go to a small college not a massive one. I went to XXXXXXX to see what that was like, but it was massive, so I don't know if I could work there...I've chosen XXXXXXX which is much smaller.' (Student 6).

In addition to college visits, the PRU staff arranged for professionals such as careers advisors, transition officers and other training providers to visit the PRUs and speak with the young people. Group meetings were held between these professionals and the young people at regular intervals, to help put post-16 plans in place. Although most of the young people described anxieties about moving on and losing the PRU support, this was often coupled with an acknowledgement that they were ready and looking forward to it as well:

'I'm happy to leave but I'm also going to be sad because obviously I won't get as much support, but I think with the support I've had I'm ready to edge away and do it myself.' (Student 5).

'I'm looking forward to having more freedom...doing something I enjoy and not having to do all the different school subjects.' (Student 2).

The young people were looking forward to focusing on the things that they enjoyed in life and the opportunity of having more independence. With the support they had received in the PRUs they felt ready for this movement away from the PRUs. Their plans for post-16 pathways were varied and involved vocational training and further education courses in subjects including – Health and Social Care; Business Studies; Child Development; Fashion Business; Plastering; and Public Services. All of the young people had ambitions and aspirations for their futures, supporting the previous research in this area (Mannay et al., 2015). This included practical plans for securing work or housing and more recreational ones around leisure and travel:

'I want to go to university, to study to be a paediatric nurse.' (Student 4).

'I want to have a family and just be happy and travel, stuff like that.' (Student 2).

'I'd like to get even better at the piano. Horse riding...' (Student 3).

In terms of the kind of life they aspired to, this included financial stability and happiness. They were also keen to gain new skills and have a go at things like horse riding. For some participants, gaining greater independence in their life was more immediate:

'Move out. My main goal now...And own my own restaurant.' (Student 9).

Three of the participants described how they wanted to move out of their current living arrangements when they turned 16. This highlights how multiple transitions could be taking place in the lives of these young people at the same time, with accelerated transitions to adulthood (Roberts et al., 2021; Stein, 2006). Placement moves have the potential to disrupt the sustainability of transitions into further education, employment or training (Harrison et al., 2023). When they were asked specifically about possible barriers, the young people articulated both individualised and structural challenges:

'Me...I'm not cut out for college or having a dream job or anything.' (Student 8).

'Hard to get a license for driving...and a lot of money to qualify, say university, you've got to pay as well, nothings for free really.' (Student 7).

Therefore, although the young people described how positive their time in the PRUs had been, and the difference this had made in relation to their confidence with learning, many still identified a

negative 'learning identity' as one potential barrier (Evans, 2021). However, the need for financial security was also recognised by the young people as a central factor in being able to realise any future ambitions, supporting the findings from previous research (Ellis & Johnston, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Despite experiencing considerable disruptions to their education, the findings highlight the ambitious plans that young people had for their futures. This is in part a credit to the PRU staff and the post-16 support staff who had worked with the young people in recent years, but also to the dedication and determination of the learners themselves. The sense of belonging and safety that was created for the young people inside the PRUs helped them to re-engage with their education and prepare for post-16 destinations. Past research has shown the positive impact that feelings of belonging can have on the educational success of those in care (Skillbred et al., 2017). Within the PRUs this was achieved by staff who actively showed an interest in the participants' lives. The young people felt accepted and included once more, which enabled them to focus on their school work (Driscoll, 2013). In addition to the emotional support that was provided through the pastoral approach, the practical arrangements such as setting up college visits, or meetings with careers advisors, all helped the young people to think about, and prepare for, their futures. It is important to note that the quality of PRU provision can be highly varied (Smith, 2019). Whilst these positive experiences from PRUs are consistent with findings elsewhere (Berridge et al., 2021; Malcolm, 2019; Smith, 2019) there were still negative aspects of the provision. This included the limited amount of resources available for PRU staff, and the reduced curriculum offer, which limited the academic options available to the pupils.

Of course, the PRU settings as places of belonging were only temporary for the young people, who recognised this in their interviews. They articulated mixed emotions about moving on, describing concerns about losing the supportive relationships they had developed with staff. Within the follow up research it will become clearer whether a level of phased PRU support or targeted mentoring during the transition period occurred or not, as recommended elsewhere (Packer et al., 2022; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014). The next phase of the research will also explore if the young people have established or feel a new sense of belonging in their post-16 destinations. Without support and a new sense of belonging, losing the highly valued PRU relationships could be difficult to overcome. Indeed, if an over-reliance or dependency on PRUs exists, this can inadvertently lead to PRUs becoming institutionalising settings (Smith, 2019), making the sustainability of post-16 transitions more challenging.

The life course perspective also provides a useful lens through which to understand the young people's educational journeys and transitions so far. The theme of linked lives, where relationships can constrain or support behaviours related to transition (Hutchison, 2005) is particularly useful here. If we consider the young people's relationships with school staff, most perceived and described their relationships in mainstream schools negatively, whilst their relationships with PRU staff were viewed much more positively. This was because their interactions in PRUs involved encouragement, practical support and empathy from staff. It was these positive experiences with adults that had improved the young people's outlook on their educational trajectories and lives more generally. They variously described how they had become more confident and had chosen to re-engage with education and academic learning, acknowledging that they wouldn't be where they were, without the support of others.

We should not under-estimate the important role of social networks in young people's lives. These networks can be instrumental in shaping attitudes, motivation and future pathways and as suggested elsewhere, can improve confidence and agency (Harrison et al., 2023). The narratives in this article also highlight how social networks constrained or created barriers for the participant's engagement in future education, employment or training (Harrison et al., 2023; Hutchison, 2005). Choosing not to seek the support or professional knowledge of social workers due to the inconsistency of contact and therefore, a lack of any meaningful or trusting relationship, meant that for some young people, there was a risk of being disadvantaged further. For others it was not the lack of interaction with others which could hold them back, but the type of interaction. Experiencing little encouragement in the family home from parents had motivated one young person to seek alternative living arrangements at 16 and this was also the case for two other young people in the study. As we know, this decision and act of human

agency could have negative consequences for sustaining future education, employment, or training, without adequate levels of support (Harrison et al., 2023) and social networks (Brady & Gilligan, 2019b; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021).

Using the life course perspective as a guiding framework for this research project as it moves forward will also enable further insights to be made with regards to how interrelated trajectories occur simultaneously and shape each other (Brady & Gilligan, 2019b). The findings described so far provide a glimpse of the intersection between post-16 transitions and leaving care transitions. How these two trajectories shape one another over time, informed by and through the relational networks which the participants encounter, will become more evident in years two and three of the project.

CONCLUSION

The young people in this research had faced considerable disruption in their personal lives, including their education. As a result, they were further behind with their academic learning upon arrival in a PRU. Experiencing numerous instances of internal exclusion in mainstream school meant that the young people had not received the same level of education as their non-excluded peers. Although they described personal struggles during these times, they never suggested that they didn't want to be in school learning. What they were eager for were acts of empathy from mainstream school staff and other adults in their lives, to help them manage the challenges they were facing. The long periods of time that some young people spent out of education before being placed in a PRU were also hugely detrimental to their learner identities as well as their social needs.

The findings discussed in this article only include those from the first phase of a three-year research study. Despite this, they have already begun to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of young people who have been excluded from school and are care experienced. Specifically, certain barriers were highlighted which could make preparing for post-16 transitions more challenging. These included:

1. The extended amount of time that was lost to academic learning during the school exclusion period coupled with the loss of a positive 'learning identity'
2. The loss of social networks or linked lives as a result of school exclusion and/or a young person's current care situation
3. Experiencing interrelated trajectories and turning points simultaneously, which risk an accelerated transition to adulthood
4. A fractured relationship with social workers

As the research moves forward these key points will be explored further with the young people and the professionals who support them, so that greater understanding can be developed about the impact these factors are having in the lives of the participants. Spending time in PRUs had enabled the young people to develop socially and academically, in an environment where a sense of belonging had grown. On the whole, these experiences had helped them to view the transition and departure from their current learner role in a positive way. They felt ready to move on and away from the 'cared-for learner', whilst also recognising the value of continued supportive relationships. What will be crucial as they move forward, is to ensure that this same level of belonging and support remains available to them through different key adults in their lives.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This study provides a detailed and nuanced account of the educational experiences and perceptions of an under-researched group – those who are care experienced and excluded from school. The work will therefore help to broaden our understandings of the educational and post-16 trajectories and transitions of a marginalised and often unheard group of young people. The study design has enabled the collection of 14 detailed accounts of educational experiences, whilst follow-up interviews will provide further insights into the experience of educational transition. Alongside these strengths there are also limitations. As an ethical and practical requirement, it was necessary that gatekeepers from the PRUs initially identified

suitable participants for the study. Through a sensitive and ethically informed way, guidance was given about who to approach (those with care experience who were in their final year of compulsory schooling at a PRU). Whilst it was encouraging that the participants came from a wide range of care backgrounds, this sensitive approach to participant recruitment also meant that certain young people were not involved. This included those who were currently struggling the most with their education or specific life events. The sample recruited was therefore not as diverse as it could have been.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available as that could compromise the privacy of research participants and due to the sensitive nature of the issues being discussed.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This study was approved by Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to thank all of the participants who have taken part in the research to date.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This article is based on the Health and Care Research Wales (HCRW) funded project SCF-20-1790. The CASCADE partnership receives infrastructure funding from Health and Care Research Wales (517199).

COMPETING INTERESTS


The author has no competing interests to declare.

EDITORIAL AND PEER REVIEW INFORMATION

Editor(s): Dr Amanda Thomas

Reviewer(s): Dr Elizabeth Gregory and Dr Elizabeth F.S. Hannah

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Smith, P. (2023). Leaving a Pupil Referral Unit in Wales: Care Experienced Young People and their Post-16 Transitions. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 14, pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.55>

Submitted: 21 December 2022

Accepted: 20 April 2023

Published: 03 May 2023

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International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.