

Executive Summary

Care to College

An Exploratory Study on Care-Experienced Students' Educational Journeys

Merike Darmody



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Empowering People in Care (EPIC) is a rights-based organisation advocating with and for children in care, young care leavers, and anyone with experience of the care system up to the age of 26. EPIC operates the only National Advocacy Service for care-experienced youth, which works to ensure that their voices are represented and considered in decisions that affect their lives.

Research and policy at EPIC are informed by the data generated by the Advocacy Service caseload and participative research projects - both of which provide an evidence base to support national decision making on alternative care. EPIC also delivers a programme of youth engagement and participation that provides spaces for connection, fun, and growth, as well as opportunities for action and learning by working on youth-led campaigns and projects.

Further information is available at www.epiconline.ie.

About TU Dublin and the PATH 3 Programme

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 3) is a partnership between TU Dublin and community organisations to support access to higher education for under-represented groups.

The partnership brings together different sectors, including statutory education providers and community organisations to share knowledge and devise strategies that support equity of access to higher education. It particularly focuses on strategies to support people from communities and groups where there has not been a strong tradition of participation in higher education.

PATH 3 is funded by the Higher Education Authority under the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The project forms part of TU Dublin's commitment to extending community partnerships, engagement activities and creating pathways for all.

The Author

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This report has been accepted for publication by the Institute, which does not itself take institutional policy positions. All ESRI Research Series reports are peer reviewed prior to publication. The author(s) are solely responsible for the content and the views expressed.

Foreword

This research was made possible by a grant from TU Dublin Access and Outreach under PATH 3 funding, which supports access to higher education for under-represented groups as part of the Programme for Access to Higher Education under the National Access Plan.

The ESRI and Dr Merike Darmody have produced an important study. In her exploration of the subject, we can see clearly the value of placing young people's experiences at the centre of research about them. The voices of the young people give us a rich and nuanced insight into both the academic and social challenges of navigating school, the transition to post-school education and beyond. It shows us that to address challenges in relation to post-school education, we need to understand how attitudes to education start in the early years and are influenced by care placement changes and school changes, learning difficulties, support needs around schoolwork, and mental health issues.

EPIC's commissioning of this study is a response to the direction of our Youth Council, to highlight barriers faced by care-experienced young people in the education system. A key recommendation emerging from our work is the need for greater awareness and understanding of the school lives and educational journeys of children in care and young adults with experience of the care system.

This is an important piece of research for deepening our understanding in this regard. Any impact that it will have will be due in no small part to the commitment of the author and the ESRI to excellence in the production of independent, high-quality research.

This research is relevant to schools, education stakeholders, foster carers, social workers, children's rights organisations and policymakers to enhance our understanding of school life and education through the lens of children in care.

EPIC sees this research as an important part of our broader programme of work in this area with the aim of creating educational environments where care-experienced children and young people can thrive.

We hope our ongoing work with others will create a synergy between the different sectors and stakeholders and ultimately lead to practical supports for children and young people as they move through care and education.

Wayne Stanley, CEO, EPIC Empowering People in Care



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Background to the Study

Some children and young people do not reside with their birth families but are, instead, being cared for by the state. Systematic reviews have indicated that while not a homogenous group regarding their personal circumstances, many care-experienced children and young people tend to face some similar challenges when growing up and moving through the education system (O'Higgins et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2017; Haddow et al., 2021; Townsend et al., 2020). On average, care-experienced young people tend to have lower levels of educational attainment in comparison to their peers who have not been in care (Cotton et al., 2014), although their attainment levels can increase later on (Harrison, 2017). The implications of their school and care experiences are likely to extend beyond second-level schooling since the educational outcomes of children and young people in care are strongly linked to their post-school outcomes across a number of fields, such as employment, entry into third-level education and training (Harrison, 2020; Herbers et al., 2013; McNamara et al., 2017). This makes exploring their experiences in the education system an important focus for research and policymaking.

The aim of this small-scale exploratory study is to gain a better understanding of the factors that may influence post-school decision-making of care-experienced young people regarding entry into third-level education. With this in mind, the study starts with exploring retrospective views of a small group of care-experienced young people about their school experiences, as such experiences are likely to influence young people's school engagement, aspirations and decision-making about their post-school pathways. The study also investigates their transition from school and the care system into post-school education and independent living, focusing on the challenges they encountered. It considers the experiences of students in third-level education, but also of those young people who had interrupted third-level education experience, i.e. who had dropped out. Drawing on the insights of a small group of care-experienced young people and a group of key stakeholders representing various organisations, this study seeks to inform policy development in supporting post-school transition of care-experienced students and identifies areas for future research. Reflections on young people's own perspectives highlight various challenges they face in the care system and at school, particularly valuable for policymaking in this area. Furthermore, the study will provide insights for school practice and support services for care-experienced young people.

Although small in scale, the study contributes to the international and national literature by highlighting the factors that shape the decision-making processes of care-experienced young people regarding their post-school pathways and their experiences in third-level education.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1. How does care experience impact on young people's experiences in school?**
- 2. How does care experience impact on young people's interaction with friends, teachers and other school staff?**
- 3. What are the main factors that shape the decision-making process of care-experienced young people regarding their post-school pathways?**
- 4. What are the main challenges care-experienced young people face after leaving school and entering third-level education?**



To answer these questions, the study draws on data from focus groups with care-experienced young people who have progressed to third-level education, and those whose participation in third-level education has been interrupted. The findings also incorporate insights from a group of key stakeholders who attended a consultation event.



School Experiences of Care-Experienced Children and their Post-School Transition to Third-Level Education - Results of the Study

International and Irish studies have shown that many care-experienced young people encounter multiple challenges when moving through the education system (O'Higgins et al., 2015; Bakketeig et al., 2020; Darmody et al., 2013; Brady and Gilligan, 2019). While some succeed, despite the adversity they have encountered in their lives and fare well in terms of their educational outcomes and accessing third-level education, others tend to be more affected by structural (e.g. education and care system) and personal factors (e.g. care experience, mental health issues, learning difficulties) and do less well at school and beyond (Haddow et al., 2021, Hammond et al., 2020).

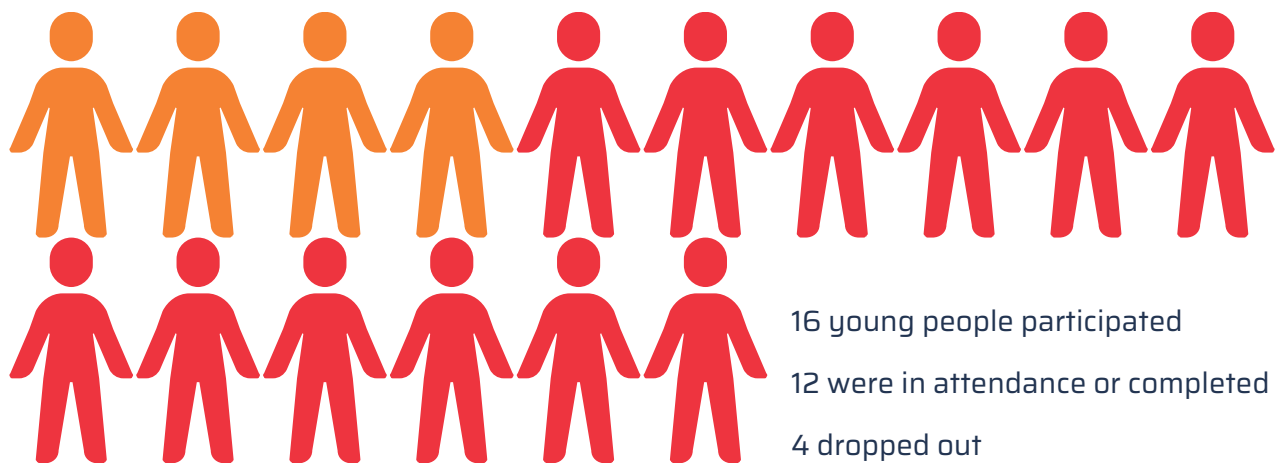
In line with previous studies from Ireland and elsewhere, the findings of this study indicate that young people with multiple care and school placements tend to be more likely to find their experiences at school more challenging compared to their peers who are in more stable and nurturing placements and have had fewer school changes. Young people's accounts have shown that high mobility in terms of care placements and school changes translates into interrupted learning and social ties, echoing findings of previous research from Ireland and abroad (Darmody et al., 2013; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). Furthermore, the findings of this study showed that frequent school changes can have a negative impact on young people's school attendance and school engagement. In line with international research (Hammond et al., 2020), those young people in the study who experienced mental health issues and learning difficulties tended to have additional challenges in academic and social spheres.

In line with broader research on children who have experienced adversities (Frederick et al., 2023), this study highlights the importance of having a positive and supportive relationship with at least one key adult, whether at school or in the care system. Teachers, foster families and social workers can play a key role in facilitating school engagement of care-experienced young people, support their learning and personal development, and help build up their aspirations. However, less supportive relationships at school and low expectations regarding educational progression of care-experienced young people and perceiving them as 'troublemakers' can have an adverse impact on these students. Early intervention that starts when the child enters the education system and support are key, as young people develop their attitudes, aspirations and dispositions towards education early on in their educational career (Greenaway and Treton, 2017; Gale et al., 2010). This study also

showed that foster parents and social workers can be an important support in supporting education of care-experienced young people and enhancing their aspirations.

Previous research from Ireland and elsewhere have highlighted the challenges associated with leaving secondary school and choosing a post-school pathway (McCoy et al., 2014; The Smith Family, 2022). This juncture may be particularly challenging for care-experienced young people as they lack supporting family structure (Storø, 2018). Many young people in this study struggled with the 'double transition' – leaving school and foster/residential care. Preparing for state exams while preparing to move into post-school education and independent living caused considerable stress for some young people, sometimes adversely affecting their wellbeing. Some young people were critical about the guidance they received at school regarding their post-school course options or had their third-level education options criticised by the guidance counsellor. Yet others did not want to enter third-level education straight after secondary school or wanted to do this later. Having their aftercare support tied to attending full-time accredited education or training course was criticised by several young people in this study. Overall, the results of the study show that care-experienced young people wish to exercise control over their post-school pathways; however, the current structure of support available is rather rigid and embedded in the assessment of need and direct link between support and post-school education/training. While for many young people, continuing their education at third level was seen as a natural step, others felt that they would have liked to choose this pathway on their own terms, rather than being directed to take this step in order to access aftercare allowance and supports.

Various studies have highlighted difficulties young people experience when moving into third-level education, largely centring around finances, accommodation, course regret and preparedness for study in post-school education (Hauschildt et al., 2024; Fenech, 2025; McCoy et al., 2014). The situation is likely to be more challenging for care-experienced young people who often lack the supportive family structure, as highlighted by international literature (Storø, 2018; Paulsen and Berg, 2016). While all care-experienced students in this study had accessed third-level education, many experienced various challenges. These ranged from practical arrangements involving moving to a new location on their own, difficulties around finances and accommodation, getting used to different teaching and learning approaches to not being certain about their interest in the course they had enrolled in. While some navigated these challenges with the help of their aftercare workers, others had limited support from their aftercare worker and felt that they had to 'figure things out the hard way', to quote one young person.



In total, 16 care-experienced young people participated in this study. Although 12 young people in this study were attending their course or had completed it, four young people had dropped out, highlighting factors such as not wanting to enter into third level straight after secondary school, having mental health challenges and learning difficulties as some of the challenges that contributed to their dropping out of college.



Directions for Policy Development and Further Research

This study demonstrates that the educational experiences of young people in care are often influenced by structural and personal factors. Of particular importance in this respect are care placement quality and consistency and school stability, in line with existing research (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Ellis and Johnston, 2022). Furthermore, support from a dedicated person emerged as an important factor in helping care-experienced young people to negotiate their care and school placements, helping to develop their aspirations and planning for their next steps after finishing school.

At school level, teachers in conjunction with social workers need to prioritise the needs of care-experienced young people to support their school engagement and ensure they have the best possible opportunity to continue their education after finishing school. Teachers and other staff members need to be sufficiently informed about the challenges faced by many care-experienced children and young people, something that could be addressed by initial teacher education and continuous professional development. Furthermore a whole school approach enables schools to create a supportive environment where these young people can thrive. The School Completion Programme (SCP) is one way to provide additional support for these students. However, SCP is only available in DEIS schools and thus not accessible to students attending non-DEIS schools. Closer collaboration is also needed between schools and social workers in supporting care-experienced children and young people. As social workers are sometimes the only constant in the lives of care-experienced children and young people when they are still at school, more attention should be directed to retention of the individuals and funding of the sector, to prevent a turnover of social workers. Future research could explore how different stakeholders (schools, social workers and other agencies) interact in providing a wrap-around support to young people as they move through the care and education system. Furthermore, early intervention is important. Targeted supports (including consistent key contact, access to mental health/trauma support) need to be available to young people early on and be provided consistently throughout their primary and secondary schooling.

The results of the study show that entry into third-level education is associated with a number of challenges for care-experienced young people. This suggests that care-experienced young people who have accessed third-level education may need additional support. The accounts of young people have revealed that more guidance is required at school level, as this group of young people are particularly dependent on this type of support. Care-experienced young people may also benefit from other types of tailored support prior to leaving school and entering third-level education,

something that could be explored in future research.

Financial support for young people, including care leavers, accessing third-level education has not kept pace with the cost of living in Ireland. There have been recent calls for such support to be increased for all students, to reflect the actual living needs. A Standardised National Aftercare Allowance was introduced by Tusla in 2015. [1] This allowance can be up to €300 per week. As this allowance has not been increased thereafter, it represents a cut in support to the care-experienced young people in real terms. Further research is needed to establish the financial needs of care-experienced young people attending full-time education and training. Considering the current housing crisis in Ireland, public debate has focused on lack of accommodation for students. In some cases, on-campus housing is only available during term time. This is likely to pose particular challenges to care-experienced young people who would need accommodation for the full calendar year and for the duration for their studies. With this in mind, care-experienced students should be prioritised in the allocation of on-campus accommodation. Where year-long accommodation is not possible, third-level education providers could consider linking the student with a local family who could host them during the holidays, an approach utilised by some of the higher education institutions in the United Kingdom.

If eligible, Irish young people in third-level education or training can avail of an aftercare service by Tusla up until the age of 21. This can be extended to the age of 23 if a young person is still in full-time accredited education or training. Some young people highlighted limited support received when in college, despite having been allocated an aftercare worker. At present, Tusla employs 71 aftercare workers; this suggests that these individuals may experience a notable workload, as they generally monitor the situation of several young people. Future research is needed to explore the workload of aftercare workers and associated challenges.

Limited support at third level could also be explained by the fact that some young people did not want to be identified as 'care-experienced', thus making it potentially more difficult for third-level institutions to put in place targeted supports. In order to provide maximum support for care-experienced students, including a question on care experience in the CAO form could be explored, while clearly outlining incentives associated with doing so. This would also enable linking up care leavers with a named contact at third-level institutions.

[1] This payment is available for young people who have been in care for 12 months on their 16th birthday or have been in care for 12 months in a row before their 18th birthday. Eligible young people may also be entitled to grants as a care leaver from Care Leavers Ireland.



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