

Pathway Plans – telling my story?

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Introduction

Pathway planning concerns the transition of young people leaving care to independent living and adulthood. This article is based on doctoral research (Stewart, 2009) into the pathway planning process introduced under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (OPSI, 2000). The research concentrated on the key components of education, training and employment. In particular, it investigated whether such planning could improve the life chances of female care leavers who are teenage parents. Central to the process are the young person's aspirations and sense of identity, both fundamental to career planning.

This article reflects on two key aspects that emerged from the investigations and are pertinent to the practice of career guidance: the value of adopting a narrative framework as developed by Leiblich *et al.* (1998) when conducting interviews with the young people; and how participation in the pathway planning process supported the young people in exploring, reflecting and re-defining their sense of self.

Background

Research into teenage pregnancy, educational attainment and youth transition has increasingly highlighted the plight of young people leaving care (Biehal *et al.*, 1995; Broad, 1998; Corlyon and McGuire, 1999; Stein and Wade, 2002; Chase, 2006), revealing low levels of educational achievement, greater likelihood of early pregnancy and parenthood, and long term dependence on State benefits. In response both to concerns regarding the transition to independent living and adulthood of young people leaving care, and to economic drivers underlying New Labour philosophy, new arrangements were introduced in 2001 under the CLCA 2000. The main purpose of the Act is to improve the life chances of young people living in and leaving local authority care, by placing new duties on local authorities to prepare young people in public care for the time when this care ceases. Those affected are defined as 'eligible', 'relevant' and 'former relevant' (DOH 2002, Chapter 2). Throughout this article these young people are referred to as 'care leavers'.

The CLCA 2000 requires local authorities to undertake a needs assessment for all care leavers aged 16-17 to determine what assistance they need up to the age of 21 (24 if they are still in education). A key component is the appointment of 'personal advisers' who have responsibility for agreeing with care leavers a transitional document called a 'pathway plan'. The plan is viewed by the government as fundamental to the process whereby care leavers map out their future and develop the knowledge

and skills they need to make successful transitions, and so improve their life chances. Although at the time of their introduction there was no national template, statutory guidance (DOH, 2002) sets out what each plan must cover and includes a detailed plan for the young person's education or training and how the responsible authority will assist in relation to employment or other purposeful activity or occupation. The plan must be reviewed every six months.

Research design and methodology

Traditionally research on career transitions has been founded in 'positivism' and so adopted paradigms based on the assumption that individuals possess relatively stable personality traits which provide consistency in human behaviour. As in applied science, such an approach uses rational decision-making to match individuals to occupations: individuals are expected to develop and refine their ambitions, attitudes and abilities until they make a 'realistic' choice of occupation in line with self-image and vocational maturity. This objective goal-oriented approach to career planning is direct, sensible and beneficial. However, it is also limiting because it neglects the subjective dimension, taking little account of how social and cultural experiences are internalised and influence what is believed and valued.

To understand human action requires an understanding of meaning: the beliefs and values that underlie social action and organisational processes. Similarly, to move beyond descriptive research and endeavour so as to understand the process encapsulated within pathway plans, the research design and method needed to accommodate the ambiguity, uncertainty and inconsistency in the nature of 'self' and seek to comprehend the individual's construct of self: the sense of self and agency which is inexplicably interwoven with career. Also, to evaluate the effectiveness of pathway plans as a transition tool for female care leavers who were also teenage parents, particularly with regard to education, training and employment, the research design needed to allow the young person's dual identity as both teenager and parent to be recognised and drawn upon.

A single embedded case study design (Yin, 1994) was adopted. This made possible the uncovering of context-dependent knowledge and experiences to reveal the complexities and contradictions of real life, which can frequently challenge pre-conceived notions of understanding and so inform professional practice. In addition, it supported the collection of data from various sources, enabled different levels of enquiry and could incorporate different methods of analysis – both a narrative approach and discourse analysis. With support and ethical clearance from a London inner city authority, semi-structured interviews were conducted

during 2005 with managers, independent reviewing officers, social workers, personal advisers and 12 care leavers aged between 16 and 20 years, of whom five had children under two and the remainder were soon to be parents. Records indicated that all had pathway plans. The interviews were held in addition to the collection and analysis of written documents. The selection and numbers interviewed were governed by procedural guidelines and who was available, combined with a judgement that sufficient data from a range of sources had been collected to answer the research questions. This judgment was supported by data findings being repeated with little or no new data being disclosed.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain respondents' own insights into the pathway planning process. They also provided clarification and corroborated evidence about the process established from the textual data. The structure of the interviews was guided by a list of pre-set questions, which did not include any specific questions about parenting. Field notes were made to record the setting and wider context within which the interviews took place.

The understanding of why and how the new arrangements were introduced, held by those involved on the pathway planning process, was evaluated in the light of legislation and national policy - that is, what was supposed to happen, not how it was perceived by the research subjects. The use of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) supported an investigation of meaning and social interaction contained in the interview transcripts. Weight was placed on the way in which the speakers used discourses as interpretive repertoires to establish accounts of the world as solid and objective, positioning themselves within the discourse and negotiating meaning. The form and content of each transcript was considered for style of speech, sequence of events, choice of words or metaphor, feelings evoked, complexity and coherence. In addition the care leavers' responses were looked at in the context of other parts of the narrative and life chapters. Also reflected on were the meanings of gaps, contradictions, silences and the unsaid. Only findings from the care leavers' interviews are discussed in this article.

Life chapters

In addition to accessing the care leavers' perception and understanding of pathway planning, interviews with the care leavers were structured around the narrative framework as used in the work of Leiblich *et al.* (1998) in the hope of gaining vital and unique insights into their lives, especially their construct of beliefs and values, and sense of identity. To achieve this, the care leavers were asked to break their lives into chapters, record the chapters on paper by noting how old they were at the beginning and end of each chapter, and give each chapter a title. This autobiographical record was used as a tool to support attempts to explore the young person's plans and aspirations for the future in a structured way. To

accommodate time constraints imposed to limit intrusion into the life of the care leavers, they were not asked to discuss each life chapter in detail. Drawing on the work of Thomson *et al.* (2003), they were asked instead to recount a significant memory and a significant event or 'turning point' from one of the chapters that related to education, training or employment. These were linked through conversation to the life chapters. Then, building on these disclosures, the conversation was steered towards a more general discussion around pathway plans. This approach gave the interview a structured and manageable format.

From these conversations it emerged that care leavers saw a clear connection between gaining qualifications and accessing meaningful employment:

'I was looking for a job but I realised they prefer you if you've got qualifications.'

Also, although care leavers recognise that parenthood can place full-time demands on their time and energy, many shared the belief that educational attainment is important in enabling them to become economically independent. For example:

'I don't want to be on the social all my life. [My child will] have better stuff 'cos I'll have more money. If I had an NVQ then it would be easier for me to get a job because I'd have the qualifications I need.'

Similarly, they revealed that they linked educational attainment not only to economic independence but also to self worth:

'I'd just feel proud of myself if I'd done it. Knowing that I could go into a job and say I've done my GCSEs. Just to hear myself say it would be good.'

Structuring the conversation around the life chapters supported the process of exploration and provided a rich set of data on which further careers counselling could be founded. For example, this included insight into an individual's personal preferences:

'I do show patience for children but deep down inside I can't sit in a classroom all day. It's exciting but I prefer something more challenging, more paperwork, more dealing with people instead of children.'

'I'm more of a practical person than I was sitting there taking notes. I'm more of a night person. I love doing different things.'

The narratives provided unique glimpses of positive experiences from the past which could be captured in constructing a more meaningful future. For example:

'They sent us on work placements. There was one more space and I remember getting it. I was ever so happy. Doing reception work; it was fun.'

Similarly, they provided opportunities to explore less positive experiences:

'If I look back at that period of time, it wasn't a very productive period, so I probably just look back on that as maybe gives me the enthusiasm not to go back there but to move forward.'

Importantly, the narratives revealed individuals' values and sources of motivation, which frequently related back to their role and responsibilities as a parent:

'I just want to be happy. Not extreme rich like a footballer but just so I have enough money coming in to look after [my child], to look after myself and pay the bills without struggling. I just want to go out there and earn some decent money from a decent job that I enjoy. To give her a stable life and myself a stable life as well.'

However, it became apparent that many based their decisions on inadequate information and had received little, if any, career guidance to enable them to make comparisons, appreciate alternative points of view and develop their own (Law 1996a). This is demonstrated by one care leaver who decided to remain in education simply because they met the course entry requirements:

'I found a course in a prospectus. I was able to do that course with the grades I had, so I tried for that course.'

Similarly, the need for guidance was demonstrated by a care leaver overwhelmed with the often conflicting advice they had received:

'I had to have lots of advice from people, from teachers and my carers and friends and so on. Which was good, but at the same time it's not good because it confuses. It did confuse me because everybody had different views.'

Pathway plans and self identity

The creation of action plans can evoke a variety of responses and is often perceived as a bureaucratic chore (Law 1996b). Similarly, for pathway plans to be understood as worthwhile they must convey some sense of intrinsic value. The research revealed that a strength of a pathway plan was that ownership resided with the care leaver:

'Who does it belong to? Me, because it's my information. I'm just letting people know that stuff.'

The process of completing the pathway plan provided a means of building relations with the personal adviser and,

importantly, the opportunity to develop a network of social connections that could offer ongoing support and encouragement. For pathway planning to be most effective, working in partnership needs to be embedded in a shared understanding of the pathway plan as a 'tool' to support the transition to independent living and adulthood, and not as a measure of service performance.

A significant, and perhaps somewhat unexpected, revelation was that participation in the process and completion of pathway plans on a regular basis supported the care leavers in reconstructing their sense of who they were – a central aspect of youth transition (Marcia 1980):

'Completing the plan has helped me learn more about myself.'

In terms of self awareness, care leavers discovered a new sense of confidence and motivation in their life as a parent combined with an acceptance of responsibility and independence:

'Since I've had the baby I've been confident in myself that I can do stuff and everything. And I feel happy as well now. Having a baby I've got a lot of responsibility.'

The structured approach of pathway planning combined with ownership of the pathway plan, had supported care leavers in taking control of their life and personal development. Using the pathway plan to break down the post-16 transition into a series of smaller tasks made it less threatening. Moreover, in contrast to the sense of chaos many had experienced, adopting a structured framework provided a sense of inner calm:

'It's good to plan because when you plan something then your mind is more organised. I believe planning is the right way because if you don't plan things everything is just going to be everywhere and your mind goes mad. Planning is much better because if somebody tells you in advance that's much better and something to look forward to. No-one knows how people feel inside when they don't plan. Plan it; make it positive. It gives you more control. If you don't plan it's a negative thing. Not knowing: it's so stressful.'

Over time, participation in the process enabled care leavers to envisage and construct a more meaningful future and increased their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy:

'The pathway plan's really helpful because when I look at it, I see my life as more organised and then I feel more worth. I feel a sense of worth and I've got something to look forward to. I could see where I am and what I'm looking forward to doing in the future.'

Summary

The career objectives of care leavers may not be the same as those of the aftercare services. Exploration is necessary to achieve a mutual understanding from what can be a very different perspective. Using the 'life chapters' allowed care leavers to communicate the complex relationship between events and the emotions that they engendered. Adopting a narrative approach recognised that how they respond to complex and difficult situations affects their commitment to action. It also can better accommodate changes in the belief system and decision-making process that arise from their cultural and social environment. In turn this can provide insight about how best to develop a future-orientated career focus and to support planning.

Children's Trusts are asked to ensure that all care leavers receive impartial information, advice and guidance in order to help them make informed choices about post-16 learning opportunities and careers options. The level of comment recorded in the interview transcripts indicated that the importance of education, training and employment in improving care leavers' life chances is recognised. In contrast, there was little evidence of this being reflected in the pathway plans. The analysis of data disclosed that the education, training and employment of care leavers who are also mothers are seldom considered. Importantly, the pathway planning process and the pathway plan are rarely used to support them in their return to learning or transition to employment.

The research suggests that participation in pathway planning can prove fundamental to the process whereby young people leaving care map out their future, develop the knowledge and skills they need to make a successful transition, and so improve their life chances. Moreover, greater involvement in pathway planning by guidance professionals could increase access to the careers information, advice and guidance needed to raise awareness of the options available. This could also better enable care leavers who are also teenage mothers to build on their aspirations as parents and their desire to become economically independent.

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