

EDUCATIONAL PERSISTENCE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION AMONG YOUTH LEAVING RESIDENTIAL CARE IN SOUTH AFRICA

PERSISTÊNCIA EDUCACIONAL E EXCLUSÃO SOCIAL ENTRE JOVENS QUE VIVEM EM MORADIA DE ACOLHIMENTO NA AFRICA DO SUL

PERSISTENCIA EN LA EDUCACIÓN Y SOCIAL EXCLUSIÓN DE LOS JÓVENES QUE VIVEN EN HOGARES DE ACOGIDA SOCIAIS EN SUDÁFRICA

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ABSTRACT: Education is regarded by many as the key to a successful adulthood. Research certainly confirms that higher levels of education, notably completing secondary education but particularly obtaining a tertiary qualification, significantly enhance employment and earning. In South Africa, more than most countries, educational persistence and employment are major challenges among youth. Within the context of universal youth vulnerability, this paper shows that young people leaving residential care are particularly vulnerable in relation to educational persistence and employment. Social exclusion theory is used to shed explanatory light on this vulnerability, and to assist in formulating recommendations for social welfare and educational practitioners to facilitate both educational persistence and social inclusion among youth leaving care.

KEYWORDS: Care-leaving. Educational persistence. Social exclusion. Youth; transition

RESUMO: Educação é reconhecida como a chave para o sucesso na vida adulta. As pesquisas confirmam que altos índices educacionais, notadamente ao completar a educação secundária e particularmente ao completar uma qualificação superior, aumenta, significativamente as possibilidades de emprego. Na África do Sul, mais do que na maioria dos países, a persistência educacional e o emprego são os maiores desafios dos jovens. Considerando o contexto de universal vulnerabilidade dos jovens, este texto mostra que jovens residindo em moradias de acolhimento são particularmente vulneráveis no que se refere a persistência educacional e emprego. Toma-se a teoria da exclusão social como referência para discutir essa vulnerabilidade e, desta forma, contribuir para um melhor encaminhamento educacional de jovens que vivem essa situação.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Cuidados assistenciais. Persistência educacional. Exclusão social do jovem

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RESUMEN: La educación es reconocida como la clave del éxito en la vida adulta. Las investigaciones confirman que los niveles educativos altos, sobre todo al completar la educación secundaria y en particular por completar un título terciario, aumenta las oportunidades de empleo. En Sudáfrica, más que en la mayoría de los países, la persistencia educativa y laboral son los mayores retos de los jóvenes. Teniendo en cuenta el contexto de vulnerabilidad universal de los jóvenes, este texto muestra que los jóvenes que viven en hogares de acogida son particularmente vulnerables a la persistencia educativa y laboral. Tomamos la teoría de la exclusión social como una referencia para discutir esta vulnerabilidad y contribuir así a una mejor juventud enrutamiento educativa vivir esta situación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cuidado de la asistencia. La persistencia educativa. La exclusión social de los jóvenes

INTRODUCTION

Children in care – that is, children living in residential facilities, children’s homes or child and youth care centres – can be regarded as among the most vulnerable and social excluded children in society (STEIN, 2006). However, when these children age out of care their vulnerability status escalates, resulting in some authors (MENDES; JOHNSON; MOSLEHUDDIN, 2011, introduction) referring to these care-leavers as ‘one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society’. Children’s residential care facilities aspire first to protect vulnerable children from the risks posed by their families and communities, but ultimately to prepare them for successful adult living. This includes completing an education, acquiring productive work, becoming financially independent, avoiding antisocial behaviours such as drugs and crime, establishing a healthy and well-functioning family and participating in society as active citizens. The residential facility with which we are associated, Girls and Boys Town South Africa (GBT), has similar aspirations, captured in the organisation’s mission statement (GBT, s.d.): ‘Creating opportunities for youth to grow and develop into responsible citizens, able to contribute to family and community life in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, equality and solidarity with others.’

Given GBT’s mission, it is alarming that only two out of 14 care-leavers who failed to complete their secondary education at GBT have since persisted with their education. This was one of the findings in a 12-month outcome study of 17 young people who left GBT’s care at the end of 2012. Ten of the 17 youth were neither studying nor working. Such outcomes are, in many ways, the antithesis of GBT’s mission and thus of considerable concern. These outcomes paint a picture of young people, who have been disengaged from a care environment into an unfamiliar social environment (the family and community from which they were removed),

descending into even greater levels of social exclusion.

This paper aims to explore the causes and implications of these low levels of educational persistence in relation to the social exclusion of children in care. This problem will be set against the rates of unemployment and educational persistence in the general South African population, as well as against international research on unemployment and educational persistence among youth who have left care. The ways in which social exclusion may cause and result from a lack of educational persistence will be explored. The article concludes with recommendations to strengthen the social inclusion and educational persistence of care-leavers.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Education is a basic human right and for that reason Goal 2 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to ‘achieve universal primary education’ (UNITED NATIONS, 2013, p. 14). Such emphasis has been placed on education because it is central to healthy development in children – physically, mentally and socially. It contributes not only to their ability to be employable, but also to their well-being (CASHMORE; PAXMAN, 2007). The knowledge they obtain from gaining an education prepares them for early adulthood, enabling informed decisions about their futures. It is one of the most fundamental forms of spreading knowledge and creating critical thinkers. On a macro level, it is also arguably the most powerful poverty-reduction strategy and a cornerstone of sustained economic growth (BRUNS, MINGART; RAKOTOMALALA, 2003).

The United Nations (2013, p. 14) reports that 57 million primary school aged children were out of school, more than half of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa, the 2011 Census (STATSSA, 2012, p. 33) reports that only 40.7% of the population aged 20 years and older had completed at least their secondary schooling. When focusing particularly on young adults in the 20-24 year age range (STATSSA, 2012, p. 34), 48.9% had completed their secondary schooling or higher. The improved profile among 20-24 year olds can be attributed to the improvements in education since the end of apartheid in 1994 (as the oldest of these would have turned 7 in 1994, which is the official school-starting age).

However, 42.1% of 20-24 year olds had started but not completed their secondary schooling and 8.9% had only a primary education or less (STATSSA, 2012, p. 34). Educational persistence thus remains a challenge, with just over half of young adults in South Africa not completing their secondary schooling. Sheppard (2009, p. 18) notes with concern the increasing rates of dropping out of secondary schooling, particularly in Grade 11. South African legislation (RSA 1996) requires children to attend school from age 7 until Grade 9 or age 15. After this

compulsory education threshold is reached, increasing numbers of youth drop out of school.

The 2011 South African General Households Survey reports that the biggest reason attributed by 7-24 year olds for not attending any type of education facility is 'no money for fees' (35.9%), followed by 'working at home' (16.9%) (STATSSA, 2011, p. 9). Having 'completed schooling' was cited by only 7.5% of participants. In the earlier 2006 survey, the second most common reason among 14-17 year olds for dropping out of school was 'education is useless or uninteresting' (SHEPPARD, 2009, p. 20). This has a significant societal impact, as many of these youth rely on government grants, and are more at risk of getting involved in criminal activity and substance abuse, especially if they are also not working.

However, despite the improved educational throughput, there continues to be serious questions raised about the quality of education provided in South Africa, even among those who do complete their secondary schooling. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013b, p. 56) has said, 'South Africa has reached high educational attainment relative to other emerging middle-income countries, but education quality has been low and very uneven.' The report continues to point out that on international tests of reading and mathematics, South Africa scores lowest globally, even lower than economically comparable countries like Indonesia and Egypt (p. 59), as well as many low-income African countries (SPAULL, 2013).

South African school test results also reveal the highest disparity between students with very low scores and students with high scores. This points towards continued inequality in the quality of educational outcomes in different communities. Spaul (2013) conducted an analysis of every dataset of educational achievement in South Africa. The results show two categories of public school systems: better quality schools serving small numbers (20-25%) of wealthier students and poorer quality schools serving large numbers (75-80%) of poorer students.

Spaul (2013, pp. 8-9) reflects on the nature of education in South Africa and the way in which the majority of young people are excluded, because of an unequal and substandard system that dooms them to the same disadvantages and outcomes as their parents:

After 19 years of democratic rule most black children continue to receive an education which condemns them to the underclass of South African society, where poverty and unemployment are the norm, not the exception. This substandard education does not develop their capabilities or expand their economic opportunities, but instead denies them dignified employment and undermines their own sense of selfworth. In short, poor school performance in South Africa reinforces social inequality and leads to a situation where children inherit the social station of their parents, irrespective of their motivation or ability. Until such a time as the DBE [Department of Basic Education] and the ruling administration are willing to seriously address the underlying issues in

South African education, at whatever political or economic cost, the existing patterns of underperformance and inequality will remain unabated.

This disparity is one of the Apartheid regime's enduring legacies of institutionalised inequality and has a considerable effect on the employment outcomes of youth in the country. The movement from education to employment is considered one of the biggest transitions facing all youth after leaving home (CASHMORE; PAXMAN, 2007). Successfully securing a job is becoming increasingly dependent on whether the young person has finished their secondary schooling and engaged in higher education. South African data reveal that the completion of secondary schooling significantly increases the chances of employment. A tertiary education makes it three times more likely to secure employment than not completing secondary schooling (SHEPPARD, 2009, p. 8). The importance of educational attainment is highlighted by Hook and Courtney (2011, p. 1857):

One of the most consistent predictors of employment and wages is an individual's human capital as measured by educational attainment. High school completion, college attendance, and a college degree are all associated with the likelihood of employment and higher wages ... Employment prospects are particularly dim for youth who do not attain a high school diploma or equivalency degree.

Lower levels of education have a knock-on effect to later employment, which in turn influences various other life outcomes, such as housing, domestic life and leisure (CIESLIK; SIMPSON, 2013, p. 104). Given that issues of class, ethnicity and gender continue to be highly influential in predicting the access to and quality of education, and thus the educational outcomes of youth internationally, those segments of society that are marginalised, vulnerable or socially excluded are at greater risk for negative long-term outcomes.

South Africa has one of the worst youth-unemployment problems globally. The national unemployment rate according to the Census 2011 is 30% using the official definition of unemployment (those who are not working, but available to work and have unsuccessfully looked for work) and 40% using the expanded definition (those who are not working, but are available to (or desire to) work, regardless of whether they have attempted to find work) (STATSSA, 2012, p. 49). Unemployment remains racially defined in South Africa, with 36% of Black Africans being officially unemployed, compared with 6% of Whites (STATSSA, 2012, p. 51). Similarly, women (35%) are more likely than men (26%) to be unemployed (STATSSA, 2012, p. 52).

The unemployment rate among South African youth between the ages of 15 and

24 years was 52% in 2012 (OECD, 2014, p. 271), double the national unemployment rate of 25% (ALTMAN; MOKOMANE; WIGHT; BOYCE, 2012, p. 16) and markedly higher than the second highest rate of 34% among 25-29 year olds. The South African youth unemployment rate is second only to Spain (53%) and Greece (55%) (OECD, 2014, p. 271). By comparison, unemployment rates in the same age group were 21% in the United Kingdom, 16% in the United States of America, 21% in Columbia and 15% in Brazil. Clearly, South African youth are severely vulnerable in comparison with both older South Africans and youth in other countries. Unemployment and low earnings drive inequality in South Africa and result in social exclusion (BRANSON; ZUZE, 2012).

The primary explanations for the high unemployment rate among South African youth are a skills shortage, failed educational and skills-training policies, and insufficient job supply. Job creation is slower than the rate youth are leaving school (BLUMENFELD, 2013) because of slow economic growth. Further, young people lack experience; especially those who are historically disadvantaged and without the required networks that can assist them in finding employment (ALTMAN et al., 2012). This means there are more South Africans needing social grants, evident by the 300% increase in beneficiaries over the past nine years (HOLBORN, 2011). It is clear that youth unemployment in South Africa has reached a crisis point.

People who are neither studying nor working nor training for a trade are referred to as NEET (not in employment, education or training). Data on NEETs is vital for gaining insight into the social dynamics of young people and the labour market of a country (DHET, 2013). In the UK in 2011, almost one in five 16-24 year olds were NEET (CIESLIK; SIMPSON, 2013, p. 104). In South Africa, NEETs are common in the general population, being seen as one of the most serious problems in South Africa (Creamer, 2013) and threatening social stability (DHET, 2013). Research (STATSSA, 2014, p. 15) shows that one in every three 15-24 year olds in South Africa is NEET (32%), with more women (1.8 million) than men (1.4 million) classified as NEET. The number of NEETs is rising: 30% of 18-24 year olds in 1995 were NEET, compared to 45% in 2011 (SPAULL, 2013, p. 8). Over the same period, there has been a decrease in enrolments rates in education from 50% to 36%. By comparison, the 2011 NEET rate among 15-29 year olds in Brazil was 19%, slightly above the OECD average of 16% (OECD, 2013a, p. 1).

Being NEET has a considerable impact on care-leavers and greatly affects their chances of future independence and successful outcomes. They have an increased chance of suffering from depression, which is most likely a result of being unproductive. They are also more likely to feel bored and isolated, and have a greater risk than the general population

for long-term unemployment, poor health and criminal involvement (NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE, 2010).

THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF CARE-LEAVERS

International studies suggest that young people leaving care have poorer educational outcomes than the general population (e.g. COURTNEY; TERAQ; BOST, 2004; MENDES et al., 2011). In Australia, for example, Cashmore, Paxman and Townsend (2007, p. 53) found that 12 months after leaving care, only one third (36%) had completed their secondary schooling and a fifth (19%) had not completed Grade 10. Four to five years later, only 42% had completed secondary schooling, compared with 80% of equivalent aged members of the population.

Youth who stay in care past the age of 18 are more likely to obtain higher levels of educational attainment (STEIN, 2012), which almost always means better job opportunities. However, this is rarely the case in South Africa, where most youth have no choice but to leave care at the end of the year of their 18th birthday (MAMELANI, 2013), unless under special circumstances. Furthermore, being employed significantly impacts and improves other areas of one's life – it gives one a sense of purpose and it is critical to increasing young people's independence, sense of dignity and self-esteem (BLUMENFELD, 2013). Having some success in the labour market is a crucial determinant of household income for care-leavers and impacts their ability to become independent.

When young people leave care, they are often preoccupied with finding suitable accommodation and resolving financial issues. Committing to a course of study after school is therefore not a priority when they are struggling to meet their basic needs (REED IN PARTNERSHIP, 2011). Care-leavers are less likely to complete their secondary schooling and far less likely to continue their education with college or higher education (KIRK; DAY, 2011). There are several reasons for this. First, youth who are placed in care generally come from disruptive and disadvantaged pasts. Second, their in-care experiences are at times marked by instability – moving several times between placements and thus schools. These disruptions impact their learning and ability to write exams at one school (CAMERON, 2007). Third, they are overrepresented in special needs programmes (KIRK; DAY, 2011). Youth in care risk falling behind their peers and are more likely to repeat grades, drop out of school (KIRK; DAY, 2011), be suspended or get expelled (COURTNEY et al., 2004).

It is estimated that three quarters of care-leavers do not have any formal educational qualifications past secondary school (WARD; HENDERSON; PEARSON, 2003, p. 1). Yet

research is also clear that positive outcomes for care-leavers are strongly associated with higher levels of education (JACKSON et al., 2002). It is possible that we are seeing here a chain of variables – young people with certain resiliencies (such as social capital, planning skills and a positive orientation to learning) may be more likely to persist in education, leading to positive life outcomes (such as employment and well-being).

For youth who have aged out of care, securing stable employment is a major challenge, and even when they do, they are likely to earn lower salaries (HOOK; COURTNEY, 2011). Studies in Australia and the UK show that half of youth who leave care become unemployed (WARD et al., 2003, p. 1) and without additional help, they struggle to maintain independent living (REED IN PARTNERSHIP, 2011). Hook and Courtney (2011) report that while many care-leavers are able to find at least some work after leaving care, it is commonplace for them to be unemployed or underemployed. In South Africa, where youth unemployment in the general population tops 50%, care-leavers face an extremely competitive labour market over and above the poor employment outcomes they tend to experience because of having been in care.

GIRLS & BOYS TOWN SOUTH AFRICA

The statistics regarding vulnerability, of youth globally and particularly of South African youth, provide a backdrop to the unique vulnerability of youth leaving care. This is seen especially in relation to persistence in education and the related findings regarding employment. In this section we present narrative data about South African youth leaving care to provide a more nuanced and embodied account of educational persistence and social exclusion among youth leaving residential care in South Africa.

These data emanate from a larger study called *Growth Beyond the Town*. This is a rolling cohort, longitudinal study that we are conducting with young people leaving GBT's care. Using a mixed methods design, combining unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews and standardised quantitative measures, participants are recruited and interviewed just before they are due to leave the care of GBT to return to their communities and families of origin. Thereafter, youth are interviewed every 12 months to track their journey towards independent, adult living. The data on educational persistence and NEET are drawn from three cohorts of care-leavers: the 17 youth who exited care at the end of 2012 and were followed up at the end of 2013, the five youth who exited care during 2013 and the 21 youth who exited care at the end of 2013. Quantitative data are drawn from the 17 youth only, while qualitative data are drawn from all 43 youth.

At the time of disengagement in 2012, only three of the 17 participants were undertaking their final year of secondary schooling (Grade 12). Of the remaining 14 participants, one was in Grade 11, one in Grade 10, eight in Grade 9 and four in Grade 8. Therefore, at the time of their disengagement, nearly 60% of participants had completed only Grade 9 or lower. Youth leaving GBT with this level of educational attainment have extremely limited chances of post-care success if they do not continue with their education. The South African Schools Act (RSA 1996) requires all children to persist in education until the age of 15 or Grade 9. The youngest participants in this cohort were 16 years old and all but four had completed Grade 9 – they were thus were not legally required to continue with their education after leaving care. However, the objectives of GBT's programme include preparing young people for adult living, which includes acquiring an education or trade sufficient to secure productive work. GBT thus desires that its care-leavers complete their secondary schooling and/or acquire a recognised trade.

However, at the time of conducting the follow-up interviews at the end of 2013, 12 months after the young people had left care, 10 of the 17 participants were NEET (neither working nor studying, even part-time). Three participants were working full-time, two were working part-time and two were studying full-time while working part-time. Of the two youth who were studying, one was doing a panel-beating course at a Grade 9 level and the other was doing Grade 11 at secondary school. GBT's position is that unless a youth reaches a significant milestone in his or her education, i.e. Grade 12, diploma or practical course certificate, they should be involved in some form of further education. Clearly, this is not being achieved after youth leave care.

The qualitative interviews, some conducted as youth were about to leave care and some 12 months later, paint a picture of highly ambivalent feelings about persisting in education. Youth relate numerous personal and environmental obstacles that make continuing with their education difficult. Many youth express a positive, idealistic attitude towards school, but show little behavioural or motivational commitment to pursuing their studies.

Andile explains how, a year after leaving GBT, he did not have money to further his education:

Well I wrote my [Grade 12] exam and I did quite well. I got the university entrances and all that stuff but unfortunately I could not go study because financial issues with my foster parents.

Unathi, like several of the youth, speaks in his interview, a year after leaving care, about his dream of going to school, but his plans are vague and there appear to be too many

obstacles in securing this for himself:

I do not care about anything else. If only I get my education and my food and a little bit of clothes. I will leave the rest behind and if I do not have a phone for five years, six years, then when I finish school I can get a better phone. I am based on my education but I cannot see my education going upwards if I am having all these struggles at home. That is why I called my mom to make arrangements for me and my social worker. I do not want to live where I am living now, but I know if I stay in one place, I know in the morning I will wake up and get on the bus, go to school, and come back.

Kyle, a 19 year-old male, was completing Grade 12 in 2013 and due to disengage from GBT at the end of the year. He was the mayor of the campus at the time, which is the highest rank for a youth in GBT's peer governance system. In the middle of 2013, he absconded and refused to return to the campus. During his interview a few months later, he spoke openly about his plan to abscond to live with his girlfriend and her family in a disadvantaged community. His social worker reported that although he did not want to openly talk about it, he seemed to struggle with coping with his academic and mayoral responsibilities. Although he passed the first two terms of Grade 12, his academic performance was not satisfactory and he showed signs of being 'lazy' and not taking his work 'seriously'. Kyle reflects on this during the interview:

My challenge at school was to study. I used to fail and my education was bad, and I never used to focus in school. That was one of the main reasons, because I was trying to impress my friends and trying to be popular. I wanted to be popular. I did not really feel like going to school, because I did not really like it.

He then reflects on the experience of dropping out of school six months into his final year. The narrative reflects the chaotic nature of his plans and his psychological disengagement from his schooling:

I was planning to run away and then carry on with [Grade 12]. But I just came here and I started looking for a job. I went to visit him my brother and he said he was going to organise for me to pass [Grade 12]. They are going to get the money together so I can finish my [Grade 12]. You know that is not a top priority for me. My girlfriend's father and mother are helpful and they are really trying to help me with a job. The job I was supposed to go for teaches you and gives you [work] experience... It is like a mechanic. If I carry on in the same company for three or four years I can study in the company. But for me, I would like to become a DJ and I really enjoy music. My brother told me that I must follow what I want. Even though if there is not enough money or there are not enough things or experience in the field that I want to do, it does not matter, as long as I want to do it and I am happy with it. There is a lot of... well, when you came here what did you think of the place? It looks very dangerous, it looks like full of poverty... but it is not. You know how many people like famous DJs and soccer players come from here and places like

this; there are a lot of people with a lot of potential here that stay here.

Kyle then speaks about the fact that, despite not having any work at the time or doing anything to get work, he knows that he has to work:

You know, I am not stupid. I might not have the paperwork for it, but I know what I am doing. I could go into a job and say, 'I have got half my [Grade 12] and I do not know if that is going to count but it is worth a try.' I want to work and study. But you know, I am lazy. It is time for me to enjoy my life and to work. I chose to run away and that is why everybody says I had to work. I have chosen this life because I was running away and leaving school. It is my choice now.

Robert, who was completing Grade 9 in 2013, speaks quite optimistically about his (arguably unrealistic) plans for his future at the time of his disengagement from care:

Yes I am in Grade 9 now and after that hopefully and I am very optimistic about going to university and studying further to get a law degree so maybe become a politician or something. You know I feel very determined about my school work. I want to break the chain of poverty in my family and yeah, and that is what drives me really: breaking the chain of poverty. I do not want to be one that really brings my family name down.

Dale speaks about his anxiety regarding about his immanent disengagement from GBT and studying further and the responsibility he feels, even though he has sufficient support systems in place:

It is scary, you know. The whole responsibility and being on my own. Well, not really on my own – I have got a lot of people to support me, but everything that I do now it is on me. It is quite scary... I think, because I understand what I have to do now. A lot of the time I used to think, you know, go to school, after school go and study, and then after studying get a job. But now it is a bit more complicated. But I know exactly what I have to do. It is not as easy as I thought it would be. I thought it would be very simple; you know, the usual way of leaving school, of what you hear about from adults and how they left school and how they made it. To get your [Grade 12], enter into a college, you can in your field of work and then study, get some form of qualification and after that you go and look for a job, you find a job... that kind of thing.

Anton, interviewed a couple of months after leaving care, speaks about his experience of feeling unprepared to leave GBT and the circumstances which led him to leave school.

Anton: The last month when I was a Boys Town was not feeling prepared and things was not put in place for me, things like my school, things like the house where I am going to go after I get disengaged and in that sense I was

not prepared to disengage.

Interviewer: And did you go to school this year?

Anton: I went to school until June

Interviewer: Until June. What grade were you in?

Anton: I was in grade 9

Interviewer: And why did you decide to leave school?

Anton: I actually I did not leave school. They suspended me from school. The reason for that is my own decision that I made and my own things that I made at school. Not my behaviour, but things that I have done in the sense of the choices that I made. Bad friends, and coming late at school. So all that counted up against me.

Interviewer: So do you see a time where you would like to carry on your schooling?

Anton: Ja, I would like to carry on my schooling. I do not want to have a job that you as my friend or my family member or someone else give me. I want to choose where I want to work and that is a decision in the sense of finishing my school. My goal for this year is to get in a college, and study for a welding course.

These narratives from the young men in our study paint a complex and less than satisfying picture of educational persistence among young people leaving care. The limited quantitative data available so far indicates high levels of youth prematurely dropping out of education. This is combined with the care-leavers not moving into employment – thus they become NEET. While they generally recognise the importance of and need for completing their education, most participants show little, if any, concerted plan to reengage in education. Consequently, they spiral in a sense of helplessness of being anything other than NEET.

CARE-LEAVING, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND EDUCATIONAL PERSISTENCE

Social exclusion and inclusion have become, over the past couple of decades, important organising concepts in social work and social policy. Sheppard (2006) argues that social work has historically been concerned for those who are most poor, marginalised, oppressed or vulnerable, i.e. who are socially excluded. Indeed, he argues that if social work were to stop addressing issues of social exclusion it would no longer be social work (p. 236).

Social exclusion can be defined as ‘the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society’ (CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP, as cited in SHEPPARD, 2006, p. 7). Central to this definition is the notion of being shut out or ‘othered’, and thus not a recognised and valued part of a social environment. A person who is socially excluded may, therefore, be shunned, actively or passively, from a community, leaving him or her isolated and marginalised. Or a person may be socially excluded through stigma or

discrimination, leaving her or him with a sense of shame and inferiority.

Another definition of social exclusion emphasises the social vulnerabilities of people: ‘social exclusion is a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown’ (SOCIAL EXCLUSION UNIT, AS CITED IN JONES, 2002, p. 1). Here the focus is less on being excluded and more on the variety of social ills that result in exclusion.

The United Kingdom’s Social Exclusion Unit is a key example of the utilisation of a social exclusion framework to formulate social policy responses to unemployment (BURCHARDT; LE GRAND; PIACHAUD, 2002). Unemployed people, particularly those who have been long unemployed, are recognised as becoming socially excluded. They are separated out from the community of ‘the employed’ and as a result of this estrangement find it increasingly hard to engage in employment. In this way, social exclusion is a vicious circle leading to ever-increasing exclusion.

Social exclusion thus relates to human rights (SHEPPARD, 2006, p. 8) – those who are socially excluded have less access to human rights than those who are included. Human rights are, at least in part, related to one’s belonging to a social community. African cultures have an expression which is translated as ‘a person is a person through relationships with other persons’ or ‘*ubuntu*’ for short (METZ, 2014). This central African value or philosophy highlights the importance of human solidarity, human rights and human dignity. It is because of the long history of apartheid, with its exclusion of all who were not white, that South Africa has placed human rights central in its Constitution (RSA, 1996) and its approach to social welfare (RSA, 1997). Human rights and *ubuntu* are rooted in solidarity both within social groups and between social groups (SHEPPARD, 2006), which leads to high levels of social cohesion and tolerance.

The term social exclusion has also been used to refer to structural, rather than interpersonal, social or cultural, forms of social exclusion. ‘Le exclus’ (i.e. ‘the excluded’) were those who slipped through the social security net in France in the 1970s (BURCHARDT et al., 2002, p. 2). In this, the ‘social’ from which people are ‘excluded’ refers to the State, with all of its apparatus for caring for those who are vulnerable. When a segment of society is unable to access the resources to which the rest has access, they are regarded as socially excluded. This returns us to the notion of human rights – the rights of all human beings to a collection of ‘civil and social rights’ (BURCHARDT et al., 2002, p. 3).

In short, Sheppard (2006, p. 10) describes those who are socially excluded as those who are ‘suffering poverty, unemployment and associated multiple disadvantage; who are

deprived of their full rights as citizens; or whose social ties are damaged or broken.’

The notions of social exclusion have particular relevance for young people leaving care. Stein (2006, p. 423) associates this vulnerability to a number of social factors including care-leavers’ ‘poorer educational qualifications [and] lower levels of participation in post-16 education.’ He also points out that these challenges start while still in care, related to frequent changes of placement, challenges at school, and their racial and socioeconomic profile. As a result of this social exclusion, care-leavers have less access to the social capital that other children have. Broad (1999, p. 91) identifies three primary sources of social exclusion for care-leavers: ‘social justice (structural exclusions and inequalities, including poverty, racism), social welfare (poor and/or inadequate parenting) and technical difficulties (skill deficiencies and shortcomings)’.

Obtaining a good education is regarded as a key factor in obtaining social inclusion. ‘The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience’ (Social Exclusion Unit, as cited in Jones, 2002, p. 6). The challenge for those in and leaving care, however, particularly among South African youth in general and specifically among GBT care-leavers, is that they did not obtain a ‘good’ and complete education. Only a limited number of the poorer youth are able to get the type of education they need to enter high-income jobs (BRANSON; ZUZE, 2012). Therefore, inequality and social exclusion are reinforced and the gap continues to grow between the rich and the poor. Care-leavers leave residential care already social excluded.

In light of this, we have constructed the following theory-based narrative of social exclusion and educational persistence among GBT care-leavers in South Africa.

- South Africa’s developmental approach to welfare champions community and family-based care, rather than residential child care. Residential care is regarded as a ‘last resort’, reserved for those cases where all other options have been attempted and found wanting. Therefore, children who enter residential care, via the formal and rigorous processes of the Children’s Court, are among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable children in the child welfare system. The social exclusion of those leaving care thus begins long before entering care.
- Residential care almost always involves removing children from their family and community of origin, and frequently involves placing the children far from their home community. The networks of relationships – the social capital – that young people had built up in their families and communities, notwithstanding the problems in those social environments, are abandoned and potentially destroyed. Young

people are placed into an unfamiliar environment, often with a high turnover of youth as well as child and youth care workers, a change of school, and a change of culture and social mores. This radical family, cultural and geographical relocation results in a social dislocation that fosters social exclusion.

- Frequently, young people experience multiple placements, often moving from a place of safety to one or more foster homes to one or more residential facilities. Among the 17 GBT participants who left care in 2012, for example, eight had had no previous placements, five had had one, and one each had two, three and four previous placements. There is ample research to show that multiple placements during care increases social exclusion.
- When young people are disengaged from care, typically at the age of 18, as was the case with eight of the 17 GBT participants, they are returned to their family and community of origin. They may have been in care for several years – among the GBT participants, the average length of stay at GBT was a little over three years, with stays of up to six years. While the youth has received numerous therapeutic inputs during this time, the family has often not had much attention. The youth is frequently reinserted into the same social context that resulted in her/his removal some years previously. In addition, the dislocation experienced previously is now experienced in reverse, with the sudden loss of friends, care workers and structure provided in the residential facility.
- Many young people leave care before completing their secondary schooling or a trade qualification. This was the case for the vast majority of the GBT participants (14 of the 17 had not completed their schooling). The vast majority of these (12 of the 14) had not continued with their schooling 12 months after leaving care. This is a further social exclusion. Their lack of schooling sets in motion a pathway that leads towards unemployment or low-level employment. In addition, not attending school (and in most cases not working either) results in a lack of insertion into prosocial, structured and developmental social environments that can continue the formation of the young person during the transition towards adulthood. As Cieslik and Simpson (2013, p. 104) say, ‘After leaving compulsory schooling, being NEET has become synonymous with later failure and social exclusion’.

We argue, therefore, that in the context of numerous factors that facilitate social exclusion, care-leavers who do not persist in education set in motion a further chain of factors

that increases social exclusion, resulting in high levels of vulnerability and undermining their chances of becoming responsible citizens.

Notwithstanding these challenges and vulnerabilities, Stein (2006) points out that not all care-leaving pathways lead inevitably to social exclusion and negative outcomes. Educational persistence may be a key factor that can foster social inclusion and facilitate positive outcomes for care-leavers. It is for this reason that we are conducting an ongoing longitudinal study with these care-leavers, from a resilience theory perspective. The fact of their vulnerability to social exclusion is clear; however what is less clear are the resiliencies that facilitate positive adaption after leaving care.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD AND YOUTH CARE PRACTICE

Young people who move around less during their placement in care are likely to achieve higher educational outcomes (CASHMORE et al., 2007). Instability in care disrupts youth education as they have to move between schools and this impacts their ability to keep up with their peers. Findings from past research consistently show that youth who are able to finish their schooling are up to three times more likely to find work or continue with higher education (CASHMORE et al., 2007). It is therefore essential that youth be encouraged to complete their Grade 12.

GBT youth are leaving with very low levels of education and few are continuing with their education, i.e. only two of the 14 who left GBT in 2012 without completing their Grade 12 were studying. GBT youth should not be considered for disengagement unless they have reached, or are continuing to study in order to reach, a significant milestone in education. Completion of Grade 12, tertiary education, or an alternative education certificate, could be considered significant milestones. Reaching these milestones enhances employability and should thus be an essential requirement for disengagement. In practice, however, it is likely to be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce remaining in care until the completion of secondary education.

When youth are disengaged from care, therefore, greater efforts should be made by child and youth care practitioners to engage the care-leavers in education in their home communities. This could entail taking the young person to the community where they live, helping them with the enrolment procedure, visiting the school or training institution where they will continue with their education, introducing them to key members of staff, facilitating the establishment of a mentoring relationship with one member of staff and contracting the school

to take ownership for helping to embed the care-leaver in the educational system post-care. Such activities serve to build social capital for the youth and in so doing to foster social inclusion. By continuing in education or training, the young person transfers the social inclusion established in the children's home to the educational institution in their home community, enabling the reestablishment of networks of social capital among peers and educators, which research has shown is likely to facilitate successful transitioning towards adulthood.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have shown the vulnerability of young people in South Africa to poor education – roughly half of young South Africans do not complete their secondary schooling. Persistence in secondary schooling is undermined by the poor quality of education received. Nevertheless, education remains a key success factor for employment and well-being in adulthood. This is particularly so in South Africa, with its high unemployment rates. Youth in residential care are particularly vulnerable, as evidenced by the poorer educational and employment outcomes compared to youth in the general population.

The lack of educational persistence has been shown to be a result of social exclusion in the young person's family and community of origin, in the removal of that person from her or his social environment and into residential care, and the subsequent return of the young person back into the (typically unchanged) social environment from which s/he was removed. Such a legacy invites social exclusion, and active steps have to be taken by both social welfare and education practitioners to reduce social exclusion and promote social inclusion.

In line with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, there is a need for social welfare and education practitioners to work hand-in-hand to recognise and address the unique vulnerabilities of certain groups of young people, such as those leaving care. In so doing, these practitioners take on parental responsibilities. They serve as nodal points in a safety net for care-leavers, enabling them to transition less disruptively between social institutions and communities, and to remain included within the larger social environment, particularly the prosocial environments of welfare, education and employment.

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