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Employment, Education and Housing Outcomes for Care Leavers from a Children's Village in Ghana

Abstract

Each year several young people in Ghana make a transition from residential care to adulthood. However, little is known about the adult lives of care leavers in Ghana. Using a qualitative research design, the study explored the effect of care and leaving care support on the adult outcomes for care leavers from a private residential home in Ghana. The findings show that while aspects of the support provided in care and leaving care positively impact the outcomes of young adults, there are areas where support is needed. Recommendations are made in the study for improving support for young people leaving care.

Introduction

Within the Ghanaian society, the extended family system has customarily provided care for minors without parents (Apt et al. 1998). However, societal change (e.g., HIV and AIDS) and economic pressure have gradually weakened the capacity of the extended family to undertake this welfare role (Nukunya 2003). As a result, there has been a significant increase in the number of children who are staying in residential homes, from 289 in 1998 to 4500 in 2008 (Csáky 2009). Research evidence suggests that many children who enter these residential homes stay until they leave for independent adulthood (Manful/Badu-Nyarko 2014).

International studies (Courtney/Dworsky 2006; Stein/Murno 2008) undertaken in countries such as the U.K. and the U.S. paint a bleak picture about the outcomes of young people who transition from out-of-home care into independent living. These surveys show that while professional support has made an impact on outcomes of care leavers, significantly more are homeless, unemployed, lonely, isolated, drug users and involved in crime. Also in a study of residential homes for children in Ghana, Apt and colleagues (1998) inferred that older children would not

cope with independent adulthood since there were no programmes in the homes to prepare them for transition out of care.

Ghana introduced a Care Reform Initiative (CRI) in 2006 to improve the conditions for children and young people in residential care. Outlined within the CRI were statutory leaving and aftercare procedures which previously did not exist. Nonetheless, the procedures were not informed by research findings on what works for young people leaving care in Ghana. Hardly any research exists on what helps or hinders care leavers in coping with integration into their communities. This study explores the effect of care and leaving care support on the adult lives of care leavers from a private residential home in Ghana.

Methods

Residential care in Ghana is classified into state-owned and private. Currently, five state-owned and four private (SOS Children's Villages) residential homes are legally registered by the Department of Social Welfare to accept children. Also, almost 130 unregistered orphanages are operating illegally. It was not possible to access the state-owned children's homes or unregistered orphanages at the time of the research, due to an ongoing investigation into alleged malpractices.

The study was based upon the SOS Children's Village in Tema, an international non-governmental organisation providing care for abandoned and destitute children since 1974. Fifteen family houses constitute the children's village. Between eight and 10 children of varying ages live together in a family house under the permanent care of a professionally trained, locally recruited and remunerated carer or SOS mother, who is supported by another non-professional woman called the "auntie" (SOS International 2004). The children's village runs its own schools (kindergarten, primary and junior secondary, vocational institute and international college) and a clinic which serves the local communities.

A child is eligible for state care up until the age of 18 years. Once young people in SOS reach the age of majority, they can choose to move into semi-independent accommodation for three years (up to 21 years) or up to 26 years if they are in school (SOS International 2004). Whilst in semi-independence, the youth receives support, including food, clothing and an allowance for transport.

Sampling and recruitment

One hundred and fifty-seven SOS adults had left SOS when the fieldwork started in February 2011. The target sample was limited to former residents who were 18 years and above, transitioned into independent living from SOS, and had been living independently for at least one year (n=51). The organisation had few records on care leavers, so the assistance of carers and other staff was requested in accessing the SOS adults who met the study's criteria.

These efforts resulted in 29 care leavers (17 female, 12 male) agreeing to be interviewed. The participants were aged between 18 and 40 years (average age 29 years). The participants are hereinafter referred to as SOS adults. Fourteen interviewees (48%) entered care because of poverty, 9 (31%) were orphaned and 6 (21%) abandoned. The majority had been out of care for 1–5 years (76%). All the participants lived in semi-independent accommodation (86% left care at 26 years).

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and June 2011. Individual participants decided where their interviews should be held, which included their workplace, the children's village and homes. The interview lasted an average of one hour, was conducted in English and tape-recorded. Member checks were used to increase the rigour and validity of the data that were collected (Lincoln/Guba 1985). Qualitative content analysis was used to search for information to answer the research questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for their accuracy. Transcripts were cleaned and coded by highlighting words in the text that captured key concepts. The codes were sorted into categories based on how the different codes were related. Similar categories were then defined as themes.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Research Committee at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University, Belfast¹ and the Department of Social Welfare in Ghana. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Findings

Housing

None of the young participants was homeless; all had one form of accommodation or the other at the time of the study. Twenty participants were living in rented flats. Of these, 11 lived alone and 9 shared a flat with someone else. The other places where the care leavers lived comprised their own house, with a relative and in an employer's accommodation (see Table 1). Sixteen SOS adults had been living in the same place since their discharge; eight had moved once and 5 twice or more.

All the participants stated that they were provided with leaving care support by the children's village. They were permitted to live in semi-independent accommodation while they completed their education or secured employment. Before leaving care, each participant received financial support from the children's village to rent a room, with tenant's rights to tenure². The young adults in this study did not experience the financial burden that most young people go through to come up with rent "advance" (most landlords collect the full rent for not less than two years). Living rent-free for a number of years also enabled the participants to save for their future rent. Upon reflection the participants were grateful for the support given by SOS:

When I came to live outside the village I began to realise that most young people don't get half of what we get in SOS. For some even where to put their head is difficult so if we are lucky for someone to rent a place for us for three years then we are very lucky. (Mark, late 20s)

Part of the participants' preparation for independent living was to search for and negotiate the rent for their semi-independent accommodation, albeit under the guidance of the staff. The young adults' accounts suggested this experience helped them prepare for the realities of the housing market. For example, Gloria shared how she learnt from negative experiences dealing with housing agents during her preparation:

They [SOS] told us to look for our own semi-independent accommodation. I really found it difficult looking for a place to rent. The agents really spent my money. So now I am careful. I know the good ones and the ones who are bad. (Gloria, mid 30s)

Table 1 Current accommodation status

Status	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Living alone in rented accommodation	11	38
Sharing rented accommodation	9	32
Living in own house	2	7
Living in employer's accommodation	1	3
Living in students' hostel	5	17
Living with Extended Family	1	3
Total	29	100

None of the participants was homeless at the time the study was carried out. However, some of them, especially those unemployed, had problems coming up with their rent when the tenancy that SOS paid for expired. To avoid homelessness, they moved to poor neighbourhoods where accommodation was inexpensive. However, these neighbourhoods were filthy, dangerous, and far away from their workplaces. These conditions affected the young adults' social relationships, health and employment:

The living conditions in [name of neighbourhood] are very bad. I won't advice any of my younger ones to ever live in a place like this. I had a problem that's why I ended up in such an environment. Most of my brothers and sisters do not come and visit me because of where I live. (Enoch, late 20s)

The care leavers in the study reported problems adjusting to share housing. They were not used to sharing amenities with "other people". Therefore, several of them experienced conflicts with other tenants and landlords, sometimes resulting in their eviction:

There are constant fights about sharing utility bills in the house. Some of the fights have to do with sharing of the household chores, like cleaning the bath-house. It's barely five months but I have already reported the landlord to the rent control office because of the problems in the house. (Lily, late 20s)

Education

The educational attainments of the participants in this study ranged from the junior secondary school certificate to the Master's degree. All the participants left care with a junior high school certificate³ and 21 (72%) had completed senior high school or international college. At the time the young adults were leaving care, nine (28%) had completed post-secondary

education (High National Diploma [HND] or obtained a teacher training certificate) whilst another 4 had bachelor's degrees. Since leaving care, two young adults had obtained HNDs and another two Master's degrees. Overall, ten of them (34%) had or were working to obtain a tertiary level qualification (Figure 1).

According to the participants, one advantage of being in a children's village was the educational opportunities it provided. Several older children arrived at SOS with little or no schooling. Coming into care afforded them access to school and educational materials such as books and uniforms. Also, their stay in SOS's transitional housing enabled several to complete post-secondary education, because they did not have to worry about where to live or tuition fees whilst pursuing their studies:

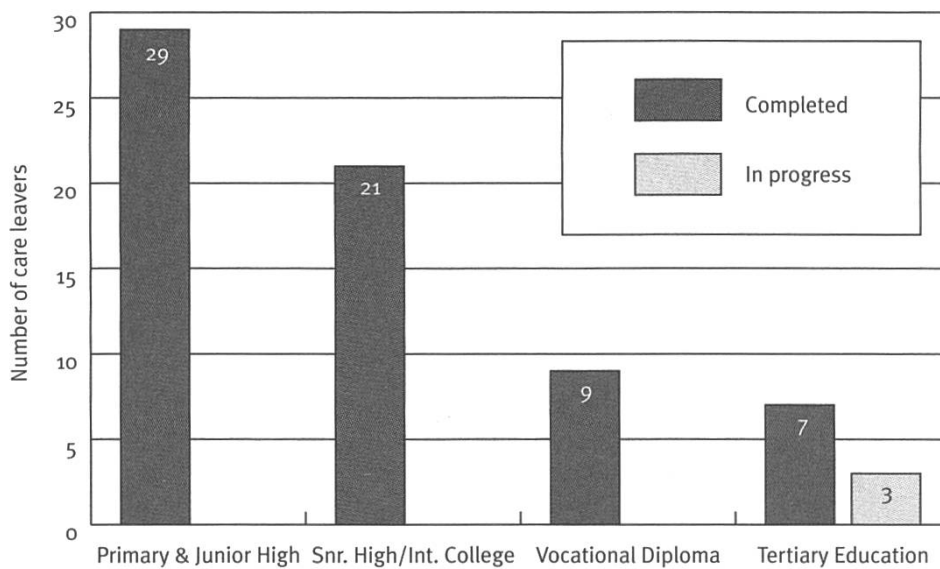
Because I was still in school they [SOS] dragged their feet in resettling me to enable me complete my studies. (Frank, early 30s)

The importance of encouragement and advice from adults, particularly SOS mothers, to educational attainment was palpable from accounts of those who excelled in school. This was evident from the narrative of Edward, a 28 year old man who had been in care since he was 5 years old. He noted that he excelled in school because the village director (father) ensured he attended school regularly, contacted his teachers about his progress and performance, and goaded him to continue his education beyond secondary school:

Father was really helping me. He was encouraging me. He told me that I should just go to school and that whatever I needed would be given to me. That was the advice that I got from him. He told me everything was there and that if I understood the opportunities I could make use of them.

Even after leaving care, some of the young adults in this study stated that they received support to go back to school. The support came either from SOS or some local organisations and universities:

I had even a chance to do it [go continue school]. Some scholarship came and they said we could go to Methodist University. I got picked because I had one of the good grades. (Mark, late 20s)

Figure 1 Educational qualifications

The participants mentioned that they lacked the support (e.g., after school classes) they required to overcome their educational challenges. In addition, their carers were often unable to guide or assist with school work, especially high grade maths and science, because they lacked the educational skills and qualification. Some participants claimed they became frustrated because they could not compete with their mates in school and some eventually dropped out or started skipping school:

Some of us needed more help to catch up with school work... but we didn't have a teacher in the village that helped us after school, those of us who needed special help with our homework. The mothers too didn't really know much to help with our school work. (Yvonne, mid 30s)

Beyond the lack of support, there was a low expectation for those who were not academically gifted. These participants felt that no one motivated and encouraged them to take advantage of the educational opportunities during placement. Decisions regarding their education and career were made without consultation with them or consideration for their wishes. However, they claimed that these decisions were not always in their best interest. For instance, some who encountered difficulties with their education were advised to put aside formal education and learn a trade:

They [staff] insisted I undertake vocational training but I was not interested in a vocational school or a secretarial course. They [staff] kept insisting that

but I said I wouldn't attend. They [staff] gave me the pressure that if I didn't go they would stop taking care of me. (April, late 20s)

Another participant also had this to say:

If I was given a little bit encouragement maybe I would have excelled in school. (Richmond, mid 20s)

Others too claimed that the expectations of the adults in the Village were sometimes too high. Several of them recounted how many of their siblings who did not have the necessary qualifications to enter the SOS College were given exemptions because the authorities felt it would open opportunities for them. However, many were unable to cope with the academic standards there and were eventually expelled for non-performance, ending their formal education:

Individual choices were trampled upon and I think it had an effect on some of us. So even up to today some of us have not been able to recover and they have been paralysed educationally. Some were forced to go to the college and when they couldn't make it they didn't know what to do with their lives. (Rose, mid 30s)

Employment and finance

With the exception of five participants, the rest secured employment before leaving care. At the time of the interviews, twenty-three participants were in full- or part-time employment. The children's village had arrangements with some public and private organisations to employ qualified SOS youth or provide technical and professional experience through internships. A number of participants were self-employed. Many participants set up their businesses using funds from their monetary donations (money gifts) that had been saved up for them:

I wanted to set-up a fast food joint when I left care. I had some money gift which they had saved up. So they gave me my money gift which I used to buy the industrial oven I needed. (Harriet, mid 30s)

Many young adults, especially those who had undergone vocational training, mentioned that they needed money to start their own business. They had financial challenges because they were either not working or were

receiving low salaries from their jobs. They suggested that they should be supported to start their own business:

There were just some little things that they needed to do for me to push me up like opening a shop for me. That was what made everything go down for me because if they had opened the shop for me and they had not even given me any extra money I would have survived. (Leonard, mid 30s)

The participants with basic education had difficulties finding jobs. Jobs requiring such low qualifications were not available. They were forced to settle for work that paid little. Even those who found work either struggled to cope or lost their jobs because they lacked the requisite skills or experience. Brian, who secured his job through a middle man, explained how he was struggling at work:

Before this job I knew nothing about computers. It was at this work place that I learned how to use a computer. I struggle with my work. I am not good with the computers so my employers are always threatening to sack me. (Brian, early 30s)

Seven participants described their financial situation as excellent, whilst nine said their income was okay. The statements of 13 SOS adults signalled dire financial circumstances. One young man who was working in a low paying job and living with his partner and their baby had this to say about his finances:

Things are really difficult... in most instances we go hungry for a long while before my next pay cheque. My pay lasts only two weeks and it is difficult to pay my child's crèche fees. I am sad because I don't want to play with my child's education the way I played with my education. But if I don't have any means what can I do... (Edmond, mid 30s)

For all participants, their main source of income was their jobs. They received no monetary support from another source. To deal with financial difficulties, they resorted to eating once a day or borrowing from their friends and SOS siblings. A number of them also took on a second job to supplement their incomes. The narrative of Vivian highlights this coping strategy:

... I decided to do something small, a small business. I sell jewelleries. I buy some then I take it to the class, girls they would buy it and I get something small. (Vivian, mid 20s)

Discussion

This is an exploratory study with a small sample, so the results do not reflect the experiences of all care leavers in Ghana. In this study, the care leavers did not lag behind their non-care counterparts in educational attainment. Thirty-four percent of participants had a higher education compared with 14% for those 15 years and older in Ghana (GLSS 2008). The finding is also in contrast with the international literature which shows poor educational results for care leavers (Jackson et al. 2005; Ajayi/Quigley 2006). A possible explanation for the high educational attainments of the SOS adults could be the strong emphasis that the children's village placed on education. In the developing world, residential homes view the provision of education as their central role (Islam 2013). Most children in residential care come from poor families and enter care to access education. SOS children's villages fulfil this core role by providing educational facilities and opportunities for the young people in their care so that they can have a good formal education.

On the whole, the SOS adults valued the educational support they got from the children's village, especially the opportunity to stay in care beyond the legal leaving care age. In Ghana and most parts of Africa, young people are staying at home longer to complete school (Calves et al. 2007). Having an extended stay in the semi-independent housing ensured that the SOS adults' transition out of care did not coincide with the crucial transition into higher education. It also provided them with the social support needed for formal education. Their education did not end at 18 years because of a lack of support.

The findings from this study suggest a clear link between the young adults' educational attainments and the support, guidance and motivation provided by the carers and adults in the institution. Those who did well in school had an adult or more who showed interest and concern in their education. However, like findings from other studies (Francis 2008; Zetlin et al. 2010), there was a low expectation for some participants, especially those who had academic challenges. Aside from this, the study has also highlighted the negative impact that an unduly high expectation can have on the educational attainments of young people in care.

Whilst a good formal education places an individual in a competitive position, it is not always enough for securing a job in Ghana. Unemployment is one of the biggest challenges for young people (Poku-Boansi/Afrane 2011). According to Chant and Jones (2005), looking for employment is therefore “frequently a matter of ‘know who’ not ‘know how’, with the ‘knowing who’ involving a complex array of familial, ethnic and religious contacts” (p. 194). The literature indicates that young people from institutions in Africa find it difficult to compete for the limited jobs because of the stigma and lack of social connections to link them to jobs (Dziro/Rufurwokuda 2014). Thus, the institution’s strategy to link the young adults to jobs before they left care was crucial to ensuring their economic independence. It was important for their survival because there are no benefits from the state for those who are unemployed in Ghana.

An effect of the lack of available jobs in the formal sector is that many Ghanaians are turning to economic activities in the informal sectors of economy, mostly starting their own businesses (Gough et al. 2003). Many young people expect that their parents and other older family members will set them up in business through financial assistance (Langevang 2008). It is therefore not surprising that the young adults in the study, especially those with vocational training, had similar expectations of their “SOS parents”.

The findings of this study show the potential benefit of leaving care support concerning the access to housing of care leavers. Research findings suggest that around a quarter of young people who leave care experience periods of homelessness (Daining/DePanfilis 2007; Pecora et al. 2006; Natalier/Johnson 2011). However, none of the care leavers in this study experienced homelessness. Without financial support from the institution, finding accommodation would have been challenging for the care leavers in the study, given the housing shortage in Ghana. In addition, participation in the transitional living gave them vital life skills and the ability to plan their transition to independent living. However, the SOS adults had difficulties maintaining their housing. The housing in SOS children’s villages is often far superior to that in their local community (Powell 1999). This makes it difficult for the SOS adults to adjust to the conditions of local housing after their transition.

In the light of the findings, the leaving care age in Ghana should be increased from 18 to 21 years. This would ensure that young people in care have adequate time to complete their education or to find employment before leaving care. The conditions in the children’s village and transitional housing should reflect the realities of the local communities

to reduce the adjustment problems encountered by care leavers. Also, the leaving care support articulated in this study should be replicated in all residential homes in Ghana. For instance, every young person should have assistance to secure accommodation before leaving care, and those who learnt a trade should be given minimal financial support to start a business if needed (Tanur 2012). Preparation in SOS's transitional living accommodation should focus on equipping young people with skills that will help them maintain housing. Residential children homes should have a professional who can assess the educational needs of the children and help them choose careers that match their capabilities and interests. Children who are academically weak because of pre-care disadvantages should be encouraged and given additional support, through extra tuition, to help them succeed in school.

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Annotations

- 1 The study is based on a PhD undertaken at Queen's University Belfast.
- 2 Having tenant's rights of tenure means that the young person has the right to live permanently in the premises (with rent paid for a specified period), and nobody can take this right away from him or her.
- 3 Compulsory basic education in Ghana comprises 6 years primary school (students aged 6–12) and 3 years junior high school (students aged 12–15). After the age of 16, students enter senior high school and tertiary education at the polytechnic or university (18 years).