ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Work and resilience: Care leavers' experiences of navigating towards employment and independence

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Abstract

Poor education and employment outcomes have long been associated with care experienced young people transitioning into independence, even after adjusting for prior disadvantage. In the United Kingdom, such young people are generally referred to as care leavers. Policies that aim to reduce the gap between care leavers and non-care experienced young people's success transitioning to employment and independence have had limited success. This paper draws on a qualitative methodology that utilized theories of resilience, to glean a range of perspectives from both care leavers and their employers. All the participants were engaged in a U.K. local authority's initiative to support care leavers into employment. Drawing on resilience theory, resilience was found to be located in a complex interaction between a resilience enabling environment and, crucially, emotionally supportive networks. Uniquely, we argue that emotional support, drawn from such networks, is the key factor that facilitates young people navigating towards such resources, leading to successful outcomes. Previous studies have underplayed this aspect in favour of more tangible resources. Attention to strengthening emotional support networks is thus identified as a significant factor that supports transition to employment and successful independence for care leavers.

KEYWORDS
care leavers, employment, resilience, transition

1 | INTRODUCTION

Children and young people who do not live with their families and are looked after by the state are often referred to as living in 'Out of Home Care' and in the United Kingdom as 'looked after children' and as 'care leavers' when they move out of care (Stein, Ward, & Courtney, 2011). In England and Wales, these young people are legally entitled to support on their journey to independent adulthood (Leaving Care Act, 2000). In England, 78 150 children are looked after (1% of the child population), with some 4419 young people leaving care each year and moving into independent living (ONS, 2020). The

body which has legal responsibility for such children and young people is the local authority (LA).

However, despite recent research suggesting outcomes for looked after children who experience stable long-term placements are comparable with similarly disadvantaged young people (Sebba et al., 2015), poor outcomes remain of concern both for children who are looked after, and for young people leaving care. In England 2018, 38% of those who leave care aged 19 to 21 are not in education, training or employment (NEET), compared with 11.6% NEET for all young people (DFE, 2019; ONS, 2019), placing care leavers at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion (Powell, 2018).

The poor employment outcomes for care leavers compound the socio-economic inequalities that most care leavers are likely to have experienced prior to their care history, as well as reflecting the impact of both placement and education instabilities (Berridge, 2016; Children's Commissioner, 2019; Coy, 2009; Driscoll, 2013).

Transition into training and employment is widely recognized as an important step towards economic and social independence (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Bilson, Price, & Stanley, 2011). To address the disparity in outcomes between former looked after young people and others, English local authorities are required to promote internships to facilitate care leavers' access to employment (HMG, 2016).

This paper draws on an evaluation undertaken by the authors, of one such initiative. A further, complementary research aim was to identify factors that made young people's successful engagement with the internship programme more likely. The research focus was on the experiences of both young people engaged in the programme and of the staff supervising them in their workplace. Engagement with these programmes was conceptualized as a preliminary step towards employment and independence.

First, we outline the U.K. policy context before exploring Ungar's (2011) ecological model of resilience as a framework for understanding the experiences of care leavers entering the workplace. The research methodology section then details the research process which involved interviews and focus groups with care leavers and work-placed supervisors. There follows a discussion of the key findings, which stress the importance of both an emotionally supportive environment within the workplace, and a functioning external support network. We conclude that these factors are critical in supporting care leavers' successful transition to employment and independence.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Policy context

International interest in child outcomes may be traced to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child that signalled an attempt to elevate the status of childhood. More recently, UNICEF has produced an influential report on a range of child outcome measures including education and quality of life (UNICEF, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, policy developments favouring initiatives that were outcome focused include the Every Child Matters outcomes framework (DfES, 2003; Munro, 2019) and the more recent Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, aiming at delivering effective outcomes for vulnerable children (DFE, 2017). Historically, there has been less debate about outcomes for children who are cared for by the state (Stein, 2008), though the outcomes data for this group of children is attracting increasing national and international attention (Jackson, 2010; Mendes, Pinkerton, & Munro, 2014; Ofsted, 2012).

In 2010, UNICEF incorporated the UN General Assembly's Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which asserts the responsibility of states to support such young people, including the successful transition to independent adulthood outside of state care. Employment and financial independence were acknowledged as key to achieving this goal (UN General Assembly, Res 64/142, n.d.).

There has been a growing recognition of the interplay of low income, poor educational attainment, insecure or unsuitable housing and relationship discontinuity as factors that hinder successful transition to adulthood for care leavers (Cromarty, 2019; HMG, 2016, Stein & Munro, 2008). In England, The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Children and Young Persons' Act 2008 introduced and extended a statutory framework to support care leavers' transition to independence and required the appointment of personal advisors to support and assist care leavers engaged in education or training from the age of 16 to the age of 25. Personal Advisors were conceived as adopting the role of a 'supportive presence', pro-actively supporting care leavers and ensuring that 'post care' accommodation is suitable to their needs. Local authorities are encouraged to contribute to maintaining care leavers in accommodation and to provide financial assistance in relation to expenses connected to education or employment, including Higher Education (Children and Young Persons' Act, 2008).

These developments have embedded the idea of the state as a 'corporate parent' with continuing responsibility for the young people in its care, as would be expected of any parent, so that the various agencies that make up the LA are expected to work together in the interest of children who are looked after by the state, including supporting their transition to independence (HM Child and Social Work Act, 2017).

Nonetheless, care leavers have reported that they do not feel sufficiently prepared for living independently and have experienced multiple problems in transitioning from care to independence including financial and accommodation insecurities (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Ofsted, 2012), with many young people feeling that they had left care too early (Coy, 2009; Ofsted, 2012). In contrast to the gradual transition to independence experienced by the majority of non-care experienced young people, leaving care is frequently experienced as an abrupt and sudden leap into an uncertain future (Munro & Stein, 2008; Stein, 2012), prompting calls for leaving care to be a more protracted and incremental process, that recognizes the needs of those who may lack any alternative support networks to assist them in their journey towards independence (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2014; Stein, 2012, 2019).

Additionally, support structures in the U.K. context have tended to fragment once young people leave care (Mendes et al., 2014), latterly within the context of an economic crisis seeing other young people delay independence, so that care leavers' accelerated transitions creates a further gulf between their experience and their non-looked after peers (Munro, 2019; Munro, Mølholt, & Hollingworth, 2016; Stein, 2012). A graduated approach to independence, that reflects maturity and skills development, rather than age, is therefore particularly important for care leavers, in the absence of the safety net provided by families for other young people (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Mendes & Rogers, 2020).

In recognition of these difficulties, the Children and Families Act 2014 introduced 'Staying Put' arrangements in England and Wales, whereby young people in foster care and their carers can elect to continue their existing living arrangements until the young person reaches 21, thereby avoiding the 'cliff-edge' of sudden independence on reaching 18 (Cocker & Allain, 2012; Stein, 2012). This acknowledges that transition should be based on need as opposed to age (Mendes & Rogers, 2020) as well as promoting 'rights based' care by respecting young people's views of whether they feel ready for independence (Munro, 2019; Stein, 2019).

Despite an initial steady 'take up' of Staying Put arrangements, this has recently declined (DFE, 2018), possibly due to variable implementation and problematic funding. This is of concern, as similar programmes in the United States have found a statistically significant relationship between extended care and improved outcomes (Courtney, 2019) and an increased likelihood of care leavers feeling that they knew where to turn for support (Courtney, Okpych, & Park, 2018).

That said, 'Staying Put' remains unavailable for those in residential care who are likely to have particularly high levels of need (Stein, 2012). Instead, 'Staying Close' arrangements enable some post care contact with residential carers. Despite these limitations, these arrangements signal the acceptance of continuing responsibility for those who are transitioning to independence, while managing the impact of compromised pre-care experiences and, for some, problematic care experiences.

2.2 | Factors that result in poor outcomes

Similarly, to other European and Western countries, most looked after children's pre-care experiences include inadequate parenting, abuse and neglect; in England, this equates to 78% of looked after children (DFE, 2019; Stein, 2019).

This typically results in long-term impaired psychological functioning including problematic stress management and relationship difficulties as well as difficulties in concentrating, affecting educational success (Cecil, Viding, Fearon, Glaser, & McCrory, 2017). Lack of stability in care may add to these pre-existing difficulties: In England, one in 10 looked after children will experience some instability in terms of change of placement, school or social worker over a 2-year period (OCC, 2018) undermining the possibility of psychological security that becomes more pronounced as young people transition from care and support networks weaken (Butterworth et al., 2016).

Care leavers are likely to have higher mental health problems and poor educational qualifications and are more likely to experience homelessness than their non-looked after peers (Munro & Stein, 2008; Stein, 2012). A prevailing discourse of low expectations and ambition for those leaving care compounds these disadvantages (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Many therefore leave care ill equipped and ill supported to navigate the transition to employment, training/education, associated with successful independence (Bilson et al., 2011; Cocker & Allain, 2018; Jackson, 2010).

In this context, some young people prioritize immediate housing needs over employment (Bilson et al., 2011; Wade & Dixon, 2006), and significant financial stress can make it problematic to sustain training/education (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2016). The sudden 'drawing back' of care agencies, alongside the difficulties of having to cope with both the emotional and practical upheavals of adapting to living alone, are major challenges (Rodgers, 2011; Stein, 2012; Sulimani-Aiden & Melman, 2018).

2.3 | Care leavers and employment

It is therefore particularly pressing to understand what specific factors support care leavers into employment and to sustain career pathways once they are engaged in employment education or training. Stein (2012) distils some of the background characteristics associated with improved transitions towards successful independence. These may be categorized as (a) existing within the external environment, such as placement continuity, housing security, career support and support from leaving care services, and (b) internal characteristics, such as strong life and social skills, that support relationships.

Gilligan and Arnau-Sabatés (2017) stress the role of carers in supporting young people to find and commit to employment including developing 'soft' skills that support employment, such as time keeping and managing everyday stressors. In this respect, structured work experience and training programmes have been identified as producing positive outcomes (Mendes, 2009). Bilson et al. (2011) similarly highlight work experience schemes, apprenticeships and mentoring as supporting young people into employment.

Supportive relationships also figure largely in discourses of successful transitions to independence (Gilligan, 2008) and indeed as underpinning positive outcomes among a range of care leavers (Munro et al., 2016).

Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan (2020) suggest work-based relationships may be a source of informal support for care leavers and have the advantage of extending support systems as well as nurturing talents and interests. Contributing and being valued in the workplace can promote self-confidence, and, importantly, enables 'a breaking from the master identity of young person in care' (Arnau-Sabates & Gilligan, 2015, p. 10).

Höjer and Sjöblom (2014) similarly note that success may be contingent on an adequate overall support network, including continuous care/caring from a single supportive adult, including work colleagues and supervisors (Brady & Gilligan, 2019).

These *emotional structures* could be characterized as *arising from relational work*; work with r*elational activity* is considered important in accessing appropriate resources.

This is particularly important in the context of care leavers whose care histories include relationship discontinuities that undermine the development of trusting relationships (Bellis et al., 2017) associated with successful transitions between life stages and the development of resilience (Cicchetti, 2013; Luckock, Stevens & Young, 2008; Luthar & Bidwell, 2003).

Lack of continuous support may have resulted in fractured support networks for young adults leaving care, limiting the possibilities of having trusted adults to call upon when needed (Marion, Paulsen, & Goyette, 2017). For some young people, these experiences may result in an unwillingness to commit to new relationships; this may have particular importance in the workplace (Skoog, Khoo, & Nygren, 2015).

Interventions that support building trust within caring relationships may offer the potential for emotional stability, thus offering a greater chance of developing resilience and successfully negotiating one's place in the world of work (Andrew, Williams, & Waters, 2014). The importance of proactively working to establish relationships of trust has been seen as crucial to successful transition to adulthood (Marion et al., 2017). Such work is, however, often under-recognized by care organizations (Leeson, 2010). This is despite the perceived importance of building and sustaining reliable relationships, as they are highly associated with resilient functioning and supporting successful independence (Cicchetti, 2013; Dinisman & Zeira, 2011).

2.4 | Resilience

Resilience is defined as successful adaptation in the context of severe adversity (Bolger & Patterson, 2003; Rutter, 2012) and thus has application to care leavers, who are at increased risk of poor mental health and emotional/behavioural problems, compared with their non-looked after peers (Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman, & Ford, 2003; Simkiss, 2019).

A significant body of research points to the relevance of resilience as a theoretical framework for understanding factors that support the successful transition during key turning points across the life-course (Masten, 2011; Rutter, 2012; Schofield, Larsson, & Ward, 2017). However, rather than focusing exclusively on individual characteristics that promote resilient functioning, resilience research has turned to focus towards internal psychological processes as they interact and make sense of external resources within the environment (Cefai, 2007; Luthar & Bidwell, 2003).

Ungar (2011) elaborates an ecological understanding of resilience as located in the interplay of internal processes; that is, meaning making located in agency and the contribution of external assets utilized to support goal attainment. Drawing on Ungar, Bengtsson, Sjöblom, & Öberg (2018) aimed to identify the extent to which care leavers navigate towards external resources and were able to negotiate or make meaning of these resources within their environment. Accessing these resources is positioned as an individual accomplishment tied up with exercising agency, which is closely associated with resilient functioning. However, care leavers, who may have a personal biography of limited opportunities to exercise adaptive agency (Munford & Sanders, 2015), may be overwhelmed by the scale of the demands they face. For many leaving care, social, emotional and practical demands coalesce within an accelerated timescale that may destabilize and impede successful adaptation (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Stein, 2008, 2012). In addition, care leavers may have little social capital to draw on to support their endeavours to navigate towards such resources (Pinkerton, 2011); if indeed, relevant resources are available.

Agency and self-worth are frequently cited as predictive of resilient functioning (Cefai, 2007; Rutter, 2012; Schofield et al., 2017), with Bengtsson et al. (2018) suggesting that meaning making is located in individual agency. However, as care leavers are highly likely to have experienced traumatic life events, the development of agency may be compromised (Cicchetti, 2013).

Although understandings of resilience have identified that protective factors may enhance resilient functioning (Schofield et al., 2017), studies have more commonly focussed on individual attributes that may provide a buffer effect from adversity. In contrast, Gelkopf, Berger, Bleich, & Silver, (2011) examined community-related versus individual-level risk and protective factors following chronic exposure to potentially traumatic conditions. They identified that community-level protective factors were the more salient predictors of reduced traumatic symptomology. Protective factors were identified as feeling an integral part of the community, having strong social networks and being able to access emotional support.

Ungar (2011) highlights the significance of the environment as a buffer or stressor that interacts with an individual's resilience to adversity. Understanding resilience as facilitated by the environmental context highlights the potential importance of the working environment as an influence on the development of resilient functioning. In common with Rutter (2012), Ungar (2011) suggests the importance of the temporal and spatial aspect of an individual's response to stress, which may change and modify over time. Experiences during emerging adulthood, therefore, may be particularly important in countering previous adverse experiences and enhance resilience (Sulimani-Aiden & Melman, 2018). Employment is a key example (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015).

Paid employment provides opportunities for enhanced self-worth via meaningful accomplishment, further supporting successful transition to independence (Dinisman & Zeira, 2011). Resilience can therefore be understood as embedded in the interplay of risk and protective factors, derived from an environmental context that foregrounds resilience enabling factors located in the individual's social context. Ungar (2011) summarizes that individuals 'change not because of what they do, but as a consequence of what their environment provides' (Ungar, 2011, p. 5). In this conceptualization of resilience, the focus needs to be on the extent to which the environment is facilitative of resilience. Although there is an emergent body of work that examines environments that promote resilience (Coman & Devaney, 2011; Pinkerton, 2011; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019), this study uses an ecological approach to resilience that focuses on how care leavers may be supported to navigate, or make use of, resources within the environment.

This study focuses not only on factors in the social environment as resources that can support and sustain care leavers' transition into the world of work but suggests how care leavers can be supported to negotiate or gain access to such resources, thereby facilitating the opportunities for resilient functioning. While there is

a policy framework that allows for the provision of resources, accessing these remains the responsibility of care leavers. The assumption is that only limited support is needed to access such resources; the relational labour involved in accessing such resources is under-emphasized.

2.5 | Research design

The starting point for the research was a LA Children's Social Care Department's keenness to identify which aspects of a recently implemented internship programme could be further developed to improve their care leavers' pathways to sustainable employment. This study was jointly funded by the LA and a university, which allowed for a timescale of 20 days' research. The study took the form of a case study design, with clear inclusion criteria. The study served a dual purpose of meeting the needs of the LA to evaluate the programme; as well as providing empirical data, from which, utilizing Ungar's ecological model of resilience, key themes were drawn. These themes pointed towards a developing framework of resilience founded in emotionally supportive networks and relationships.

The internship programme was available to all care leavers not currently in paid employment who wanted to participate. A wide variety of LA departments designed and implemented internships that were seen as a 'stepping stone' to apprenticeships or other employment, with work-based supervisors responsible for the day to day management of each of the young people within the workplace. The overall responsibility for the programme was held by the senior management group (SMG), who had requested the evaluation.

This qualitative research was designed to explore the perspectives of the young people involved in the programme, as well as their work-based supervisors and the SMG. Young people who were undertaking an internship, or had been offered an internship but subsequently withdrew, were invited to take part, as well as their work-based supervisors. Young people who had withdrawn from the programme declined to take part in the study, other than one young person, who ultimately decided against participating. Those young people who agreed to take part were supported by their personal advisors to attend interviews with the researchers. Six young people participated, and seven supervisors, including the supervisor of a young person who had withdrawn from the programme and did not want to be part of the study. Most of the supervisors had supervised other care leavers as well as the ones participating in the study. All the young people who took part had been in some way successful within the programme. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the study as only those who were engaging in the internships took part; however, this does not limit the credibility of the conclusions as they relate to participants who were successful in engaging in the programme.

Young people were given information about the study and were asked by their social workers or personal advisers whether they would like to be involved. All those who agreed to be involved were included in the study.

Individual interviews with the young people and a focus group for the workplace supervisors were utilized as methods, given they were more likely to provide in-depth data. The interview questions were very loosely controlled by the researchers, so that the young people were able to discuss issues that were relevant to them. In contrast to focus groups, this allowed the young people to retain a degree of control over the direction of the interview. Focus groups were felt to be useful to use with the work-based supervisors and the SMG, as they allow in-depth discussion around a phenomenon they held in common.

The interviews with the care leavers lasted between 45 and 90 min. A focus group of 2 h was held with the work-based supervisors, and two focus groups were also held with the 14 senior managers from across the LA. There was also a one-to-one interview with a supervisor who could not attend the focus group sessions. Our aim was to generate a purposeful sample that generated rich, in depth data.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee and through the LA's Research Governance. All participants were informed verbally, and in writing about the content and scope of the study, informed consent was gained before starting the interviews and focus groups. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and pseudonyms used for the participants. Additionally, the research followed research standards set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011).

Although there was no immediate direct benefit to the participants from taking part, other than the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, the young people involved provided valuable contributions to a feedback seminar attended by themselves, supervisors and managers from workplaces and social services. This conferred an indirect benefit to the participants by recognizing their agency (Wilson, Mendes, & Golding, 2018). The latter event also supported our claims to trustworthiness, as we carried out participative member checking, by asking for feedback from all participants at the seminar, where we presented our findings and analysis as part of the evaluation study.

2.6 | Analysis

Thematic analysis was selected as it allowed for an exploration of the perspectives of different participants, identified common themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Howitt, 2016; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017) and supported the parallel purpose of evaluating the programme.

Initially, the data were analysed separately by the researchers. This was followed by discussion and reflection on the initial themes, ensuring that the ideas represented by the initial themes had some explanatory power and were reflective of meaning across the data set (Clarke & Braun, 2015). These initial themes were subsequently grouped to form loosely connected themes, which resulted in condensing the data to form 17 organizing themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001;

Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). These were further reviewed to identify key overarching themes, with a final return to the data for referential accuracy (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The key findings from the analysis clustered around salient factors associated with supporting care experienced young people into work, seen as a key ingredient for successful transition to independent young adulthood. Some of these factors were located externally from the workplace, with some factors being embedded in it. One key issue for the young people was housing and financial security; however, to do this justice, a further paper will address this aspect. Here, we wish to focus on the two key themes that are most pertinent to the focus on resilience:

1. Emotionally supportive working environments.
2. Functioning external support networks.

3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 | Emotionally supportive working environments

The working environment experienced by the young people was critical to sustaining their employment success. Being seen by colleagues as contributing to the workplace prompted commitment to the internship and conferred a sense of accomplishment that supported their successful transition to the world of work (Schofield et al., 2017). However, it was the importance of an emotionally supportive environment that was frequently returned to by all of the care leavers.

The internships were managed in the workplace by a supervisor, like any other employee. The supervisors who formed the focus groups were aware that, compared with other young adults, some of the care leavers needed additional emotional support. Although most felt that they were able to provide this, others were not confident that they could provide meaningful support and that they lacked specialist knowledge.

> We were not at all prepared for it. None of us were prepared. But we were trying to help, but it was beyond our capabilities (Workplace Supervisor)

At the same time, workplace supervisors prioritized the needs of the young people, and many of the supervisors provided extensive daily emotional support:

> (The young person) needed reassurance, and basically in a nutshell for six months I babysat (the young person) every day and did not get hardly any work done ... it became (apparent) that she needed that support. It was draining. We did not anticipate because that is how their lives are, they are more disrupted than regular... There is all other issues going on (Workplace supervisor).

Nonetheless, this perceived gap was not referred to explicitly by the care leavers who spoke of supervisors as supportive:

> They're really helpful. She always gives me support and if I'm struggling with something I can always go and talk to her (Anne)

> The support has been really good. It's been brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I am also aware that she is running a thousand miles an hour to keep me going (Lisa)

> She always says that her door's always open, that if I need anything or if something's not going right just to go and ask (Sophie)

The young people also spoke of other workplace colleagues supporting them on an emotional level, not just the supervisors and were appreciative of staff who were available and made time for them to talk to about difficulties they were experiencing. This helped to create a safe, predictable space for care leavers within the work environment.

> They're all really understanding, and everyone knows that personal situations can also interrupt work life and they are all about making sure that work is okay, but also that you kind of help progress through if anything's happening at home. (Sophie)

Additionally, supervisors who saw the young person as competent and trustworthy supported their self-belief and motivation, which enabled the formulation and pursuit of ambitions (Adley & Kina, 2017). Thus, care leavers spoke of extending their goals to include higher level training including further (Level 3) apprenticeships and enhancing professional skills, including pursuing higher education.

> You cannot have anything else without trust. You cannot have respect without trust, you cannot have loyalty without trust, you cannot depend on each other without trust (Aran)

This points to the relationship with the workplace supervisor as including aspects of a mentor-like relationship, in contrast to a managerial relationship, within which the young person feels cared for. The importance of trust is an important aspect of mentor-like relationships, which include feeling that someone believed in them (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). The workplace supervisors in this study included those who adopted a mentor-like role with the young people within their workplace.

This demonstrates a strongly supportive emotional environment that concurs with Ungar's conceptualization of resilience enhancing environments (Ungar, 2011) so that 'relationships of care' within the supervisory relationship may be formulated as important drivers for the success of care leavers undertaking internships and apprenticeships. These relationships were particularly important for

care leavers who lacked stability in other aspects of their lives. However, the capacity to provide high levels of support was differently available in different working contexts, so that immediate business demands could act as a constraint on support. Thus, some supervisors were 'young person focused' whereas others were mostly 'business focused'. Ungar (2013) suggests whether an individual is able to access the resources needed for work success depends on the extent to which the environment provides a context where this is readily achievable, in this case, emotional support. This points to the need for internships and similar developments aimed at supporting care leavers in the workplace to include planning to meet the needs of supervisors, as well as the young people themselves.

The care leavers differed in the extent to which they negotiated and required support, so that whilst some required little support after the first weeks, others needed sustaining on a frequent basis. The type of support needed also differed, though almost all of the care leavers responded to being trusted with work-related responsibilities. Following from Ungar's conceptualization of resilience facilitating environments (Ungar, 2013), the behaviours of the individual workplace supervisors are therefore recognized as resilience enabling actions. In this study, although all of the young people reported high levels of emotional support within the workplace, this seemed to be particularly important to those who had experienced less overall placement stability. Within this small case study, a tentative link is made between placement stability and emotional readiness giving way to agency, expressed as managing the demands of the working environment. For some young people, workplace supervisors were seen as offering extensive emotional support and of being significant to them.

> (My supervisor) has very understood of …. sometimes when things went off and sometimes, I came to work and I was down because of what's happened and she was understanding. She is very much …. very flexible I think sometimes, in some ways that would come up … Another thing they are very nice about; they let me put my headphones in all the time (Luca).

Placement instability is highly associated with impaired mental health (Wynton, 2015), confirming the importance of emotional support for some care leavers in this study, some of whom had experienced extensive instability in care and education placements. Care leavers who had experienced placement stability settled into the internships relatively quickly, though an emotionally supportive workplace, and the social connectedness offered by working with others were valued by all of the young people in this study. *I like …my workplace, because it's quite banterish, you know* (Luca).

Further, being able to change between different council departments to ensure a good fit with their skills and/or interests was a successful element of the internship programme. Employment that had meaning to the young people within an emotionally supportive environment is suggested as supporting their current and future resilience (Schofield et al., 2017) and supported the success of the scheme for the young people in this study.

3.2 | Functioning external support networks

The environment in which the internship programme was located included a formal network of professional support, envisaged as working together in a type of network or team around the young adult. In addition to the workplace supervisor, this included a specific education support worker whose brief was to support the young person into education, training and employment, as well as a dedicated worker to support them once in work. These roles were in addition to the statutory personal advisor. However, there was room for role confusion, in that the young people were not always sure of the function of the separate roles, and staff could interpret their brief differently from others in the same role. This meant that the level of support experienced by the young person (and support that could be called upon by the work-based supervisors) differed. Some young people resolved this by contacting the worker they felt more comfortable relating to. This reflects other studies that suggest that the person rather than the role is seen as important to young people leaving care and that a reliable presence is particularly valued (Bengtsson et al., 2018). This may be especially important for young people who have experienced previous instability.

In this study, Luca spoke extensively about workers in his support team as providing a meaningful relationship that included practical support, but also emotional care: *Even just an ear to listen to or a problem to solve, they have always been there to help out.* Ungar (2013) also suggests that it is the quality of the relationship rather than the service provided, that mediates the success of interventions to support transition to independence. In practice, young adults tended to identify who they preferred to fill these functions. These tended to be workers who were perceived as caring and available, as well as being able to offer practical support.

However, where individuals did not fulfil expectations, this could result in young people feeling unimportant to the corporate parent. Although some support workers were viewed by both workplace supervisors and young people as proactive, others were perceived as content only to fulfil minimum functions, or to assume others would step in to offer support. This led one young person to comment that once in work, support workers 'all backed off at once' (Lisa). In this case, the young person was well supported by the work-based supervisor but had this not been the case it is questionable whether the young person would have successfully managed the transition to work, despite the aims of the programme being to do just that.

Where support systems worked well, this was a result of workers prioritizing the needs of the care leavers they worked with, and going beyond staff functional roles and acting 'like a parent', conceived of as demonstrating care, availability and continuous positive regard (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017).

Being available and in contact was valued by all the young people regardless of housing stability: *If anything goes wrong, I like to know I've got a friend I can call* (Luca). Schofield et al. (2017) and Sulimani-

Aidan (2017) highlight the importance of connectedness—having meaningful relationships that are conceived of as replicating family type relationships, where support is readily available.

Support to address work-based problems was similarly important; for example, Lisa described a previous experience of feeling bullied in the workplace and the importance of being able to call on one of the support workers to help sort it out, 'so he was like a dad, really'. Feelings of being cared about, implicated with trust are prominent, and indicative of relationships that fulfil the need to belong (van Breda and Hlungwani (2019). Such relationships may be viewed as a springboard that supports readiness to leave care (Dinisman, 2016; Schofield et al., 2017). This suggests that young people were actively deploying skills in negotiating their preferred support networks, thereby demonstrating some resilience competence (Ungar, 2013). However, this also meant that the more proactive staff were likely to be drawn in to offering more extensive support and risked being overwhelmed if they were not provided with manageable workloads and supportive working environments. Thus, Lisa commented, *I think there should be support for (staff) in the same respect.*

The support network around the young person was mainly viewed positively by the young people, though some staff tended to be more proactively involved than others. The young people were able to access this network of support and demonstrated both navigational skills in terms of internal motivation, as well as negotiating meaningful support within relationships. These relationships were flexible and moved towards the young person, so that negotiation took place within a relational encounter that provided some emotional security for the young adult.

The working environment and the professional network are thus positioned as constituent of emotional environments that may facilitate resilience in the context of transition to independence for care leavers.

4 | ENHANCING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND IMPROVING SUPPORT NETWORKS— IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The development of the internships that this research is based on arose out of a commitment to improve the life chances and outcomes for looked after children. Life after care is seen as a continuing responsibility of the LA and its partner agencies (DFE, 2018).

The care leavers in this study were all successful, in that they remained in the programme and expressed a desire to continue in education or training once the programme had completed, so that the focus has been on what has supported successful transition to employment and independence. This has been conceptualized as dependent on the extent to which the social environment facilitates resilience. There are limited studies that focus on emotional support as a key factor that helps care leavers access and make meaning of environmental resources. Within this study, emotional support has been identified as the key factor that supported transition to

employment success; this may otherwise be underplayed, in favour of the more tangible resources that are traditionally given prominence.

In order to provide an environment that maximizes the possibilities of care leavers' successful transition to employment, this study proposes that the focus needs to include not only ensuring environmental resources to support resilience, but that care leavers are actively helped to navigate towards, and make meaning, of such resources. This extends the idea of environments that facilitate resilience, to include relational activity to support young people to navigate towards environmental resources.

This study illustrates that, by enhancing support networks within their environment to provide an enabling emotional context, care leavers can be more effectively supported into the world of work and be successful in it.

Internships and apprenticeships within the LA have been shown to be successful for the young people in this study. To build on this success, staff supervising internees need to be allowed the time to provide support, which may be more extensive in the early months of the programme depending on the needs of different care leavers, ensuring a flexible service response. This role is similar to mentoring which Sulimani-Aidan (2017) describes as fulfilling the role of a supportive adult that contributes to an emotional environment that promotes resilience.

The mentor-like support provided by their workplace supervisors could be seen as morally justified in that the care system is responsible for the well-being of those in its care. As one of the young adults stated:

> You should not just disown me, you should not say now you are signed off. I will say, "Hello! My journey's just started, what are you playing at?" (Lisa).

5 | CONCLUSION

This study took place in the context of a U.K. local authority that wanted to enhance its offer to care leavers. It wanted to ensure successful engagement in an internship programme that would lead to further employment/training, thus supporting the young people's transition to independence. The research found that while having resources such as the internship programme for the care leavers to access was of course important, resources themselves were not enough.

This research has not been able to access the young people who did not take part in the internship or who did not continue the programme. Further research is needed to establish why these young people did not participate, including whether there may have been a gap in the context of emotional support within the working environment and/or professional support network. An additional issue that needs further exploration is that of housing and financial security—the young people in this research highlighted this as another key aspect of their experience.

This study has highlighted features that support care leavers to sustain employment and has utilized resilience theory to explicate the interplay of internal agency and environmental assets and draws attention to the importance of emotional support as a key enabler to help care leavers to navigate towards support. The study confirms the arguments that supporting resilience requires a focus on the environment and posits emotional support as a key environmental consideration. This is not currently given sufficient consideration in the literature.

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