

Leaving care

Thinking systemically, thinking globally

John Pinkerton

Thanks to the greatly increased interest in the experiences of young people leaving state care, there is now a much better understanding of how vulnerable this group is when making the transition to adulthood. It is also now clear that there must be interrelated formal and informal support provided to young people when leaving and after leaving care if their life chances are to be significantly improved. This article extends the logic of that systemic thinking to embrace the challenge of globalisation as a necessary aspect of contemporary thinking about care leaving. It recognises the difficulties in developing an international perspective but suggests a model for promoting cross national exchange. An agenda is suggested around which global networking could be built in order to ensure that advances being made for care leavers in any one country are both secured against the negative impact of globalisation and become part of a global resource.

There is a clearly emerging picture, from practice and research across a growing number of countries, of care leaving as a premature and accelerated youth transition. This results in a high probability of poor coping across all aspects of care leavers' lives (Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Kelleher, Kelleher & Corbett 2000; Mendes & Moslehuddin 2004; Nollan 2006; Pinkerton 2002; Wade 2006). Stein (2004), in his definitive overview of leaving care in the United Kingdom, draws attention to the vulnerability of these young people in key interrelated areas of their lives: accommodation, physical health, early parenthood, education, occupational training, life skills, social networks, relationships and identity. The challenge to those charged with ensuring the welfare of care leavers is to provide an interconnected, systemic response to that range of needs (Broad 1999; Pinkerton 2006).

Using the image of a leaving care coping wheel (see Figure 1), in which six key areas of need are presented as the spokes held in place by a rim of 'rights and responsibilities' and reinforced by an outer rim of 'expectations and choices', emphasises the interrelated nature of care leavers' needs. All the spokes need to be strong and secure if the wheel is to cope with the bumpy ride so often experienced when young people leave care. On their own, no agency can ensure that all the spokes are strong and secure. Linked support from a number of agencies is required to respond to the complex needs and vulnerability of these young people.

Whilst the vulnerability of care leavers is an expression of their particular experiences before, during and after leaving care, it also reflects more general challenges and changes in family life, education, training, employment, income support and housing which affect all young people. In making the transition to adulthood today, young people have to 'negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents' and contend with a pace of change that creates 'increased uncertainty (that) can be seen as a source of stress and vulnerability' (Furlong & Cartmel 1997, p.1). Care leavers experience that negotiation of risks and rate of change in a particularly challenging fashion. Both the care leaver and general youth experience of transition can be understood as a particular expression of more general processes of globalisation affecting people of all ages.

Traditional national boundaries and geographical barriers have decreased in significance while international trade,

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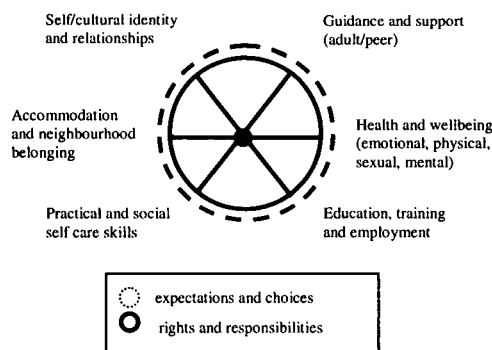
telecommunication and travel have blossomed like never before. In the global criss-crossing flows, at an alarming rate, not only information and capital, but also the sea of human traffic ... The process of globalisation has also transformed social relations and social transactions ... (it) involves the development of new networks of activity and power ... The socio-cultural impact of globalisation includes people dislocation, family disruption and community upheaval (Tan & Rowlands 2004, p.5).

Thus it is not too difficult to recognise globalisation as the general context of care leaving. However, understanding what that means in a sufficiently detailed and nuanced fashion to provide the basis for effectively engaging with globalisation's positive and negative aspects is difficult and will be addressed in the first section of this article. A means has to be found to tackle the difficulties and, in the second section of the article, a model will be presented to help with gathering and exchanging national and international information and experience as the basis for global dialogue. In the third section of the article, information on care leaving in Northern Ireland will be overviewed to illustrate the type of material the model would prompt as a basis for exchange with other national experiences. In the final section, an agenda will be suggested around which global networking could be built in order to ensure that advances being made for care leavers in any one country are both secured against the negative impact of globalisation and become part of a global resource.

GLOBALISATION AND CROSS NATIONAL COMPARISON

Despite globalisation having become a part of the everyday vocabulary of culture, politics and economics, there is considerable debate about what the term actually means and what implications it has (Clarke 2000; Khan & Dominneli 2000; Mann 2001; McCann & McCloskey 2003; Midgley 2000; Renton 2001; Rowe 2000; Yeates 2001). Is it a new phenomena or an age old one? Is it a set of social and

Figure 1. Leaving Care Coping Wheel



economic processes impacting in different ways on different societies or a stage in world history? Is it to be embraced as advancing human wellbeing or resisted as the new imperialism?

The concept of globalisation is difficult to grasp because it tries to provide a unifying perspective on a complex range of phenomena – economic, demographic, cultural, social, political and psychological phenomena. The data on these aspects of contemporary life are very often imprecise, contested and open to very different interpretations (Midgley 2004). There is also deep division over the normative assessment of globalisation.

Generally, unequivocal positions are adopted with advocates enthusiastically extolling globalisations's achievements and detractors utterly condemning its effects (Midgley 2004, p.17).

Globalisation has increasingly become the fault line of national and international politics both in the corridors of power and on the streets.

SOME PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES

In order to explore the relevance of globalisation to leaving care, it is important to marshall both general information that underpins the debate about globalisation and material specific to leaving care. This is no easy task. There is a wide range and considerable amount of material that can be sourced from a large number of potential sources – national laws, statutory guidance and regulations, government statistics, academic research, accounts of practice, government reports, books, journals, pamphlets, conference proceedings and web sites. The challenge is to find ways to access this material in a systematic fashion. A purposeful, well planned approach is required (Higgins & Pinkerton 1998). It is important to make use of specialist librarians and the variety of software now available for literature searching. The world wide web is central to helping in accessing relevant information. It can also be used to make contacts with academics, policy makers and practitioners in other countries who can advise about their national contexts. However, it can also unleash an overwhelming amount of information of very mixed quality.

Language can pose another major difficulty. The stunted language proficiency of many English speakers closes off potentially rich sources of information, leading to a very restricted, ethnocentric view of the international scene. Furthermore, even when countries share a language, or when material is reported in the same language, national differences in legal, professional and organisational jargon can still make accurate understanding difficult. Wardship, for example, when used in Australian child welfare has a very different meaning to that it would have in the UK context.

Another difficulty is finding data which is truly comparable. National information gathering systems are generally geared

to the needs of their own specific administrative structures. These will reflect varied national cultural norms, economic strengths and political choices. For example, in federal systems more detailed information is likely to be available at that unit of government than at the national level. Also it needs to be recognised that at this point in time leaving care is unlikely to be a high political or administrative priority in most countries and so it is not surprising that there appear to be few reliable data sets focusing on the area (Courtney 2005; Pinkerton 2002).

Given the difficulties involved in basic information gathering and the contested and complex nature of the phenomena that the concept of globalisation seeks to capture, it would seem prudent to adopt a cautious view of how useful the concept is for helping to understand the experience of care leaving.

Globalisation should be viewed in a more conditional way so that assessments of its impact take account of the divergent ways in which international changes have affected human well-being (Midgley 2004, p.24).

This is particularly important when thinking about comparisons between the so-called developed and developing countries.

The development experience has taught us that models and specific strategies and policies cannot be transplanted across cultures and environments. Thus replication and diffusion of good practice is not about replicating strategies and mechanics of policies, but about testing the ideas and approaches and modification and alternation, whatever their origin (Poudyal 2001, p.39).

The scale of need and the capacity to respond in some countries compared to others may require a very different way of thinking about leaving care services. The massive economic and social dislocation that accompanied the political collapse of the Soviet Union and its allied states reportedly led to rapid and unplanned care leaving for thousands of young people (Bilson et al. 2001). It seems reasonable to assume that the challenge of meeting the needs of those young people is not immediately comparable to what needs to be done to support the couple of hundred young people who leave care each year in the tiny jurisdiction of Northern Ireland. However, that common sense view may prompt the view that countries' experiences are best treated as almost 'totally different' from each other. Such polarisation would not only deny the unifying processes of globalisation but also carry the risk that certain national experiences are privileged over others. They become 'the way it should be' with other national experiences being aberrations or underdeveloped versions of the superior systems. The connections between such negative cross national comparison and xenophobic nationalist or racist perspectives are easy to see.

USEFUL APPROACHES

In developing the necessarily tentative view on how globalisation impacts on care leaving, it is worth noting that the English social work theorist, Malcolm Payne, has suggested three approaches to building a global perspective (Payne 1996, pp.161-162). One of the approaches which he identifies fits well with the unifying ambitions of much globalisation theory. This 'holistic' approach requires an all encompassing framework of understanding which sets out to identify global phenomena and analyse what creates them. It assumes that there are global concepts applicable to any national context. These can capture cross national phenomena. They provide the conceptual currency for international exchange. In regard to care leaving, these could include such concepts as citizenship, youth transition, social exclusion and, of course, globalisation itself.

Less ambitious are what Payne (1996) terms 'comparative strategies'. These strategies identify, within different national contexts, apparently similar types of need and the associated services. From this perspective, a global understanding reveals both the commonalities and the differences in how the needs of care leavers are identified and met. It makes no assumptions about what will be found in any particular national context. The starting point from this comparative perspective is whether or not within particular countries there are young people making the transition to adulthood from state care. If there are, the law, policy and services that exist to prepare them for leaving care, and to support them once they have left, can be described, compared and contrasted. In this way it becomes possible to judge whether there are ways of doing things that could be transposed from one country to another to improve arrangements for care leavers. This is a two way process providing opportunities for the experiences of one country to inform developments in other countries as well as learn from them – 'the model is not one of enslavement, borrowing or copying but creative transformation' (Hetherington et al. 1997, p.187). Although the comparative strategy is less ambitious than the holistic, both approaches provide the basis for global dialogue and benchmarking.

A third approach that Payne (1996) identifies is the rather obtusely titled 'discursive formation strategies'. What makes this approach distinctive is that it does not have the instrumental drive of the other two. From a 'discursive formation' perspective, a much looser exploration of competing and interacting perspectives is pursued through dialogue aimed at mutually enriched understanding. Within this approach, leaving care as understood in one national context could be presented as the basis for a discussion which might prompt young people in another country to share similar experiences. It could also lead to an exchange in relation to user expectations of state services in different national contexts. Either result would be equally acceptable as long as both parties to the exchange took something

useful from it. The goal is meaningful exchange that promotes awareness of global phenomena in a way that broadens perspectives, encourages critical thinking and develops cultural competence.

FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING GLOBALLY

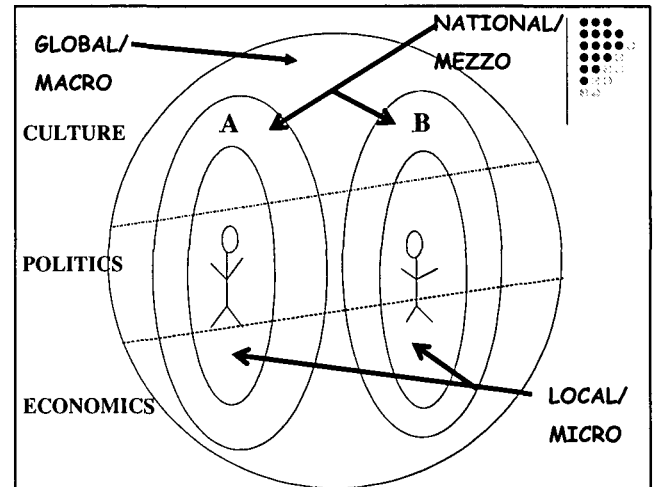
The three approaches identified by Payne (1996) are clearly not either/or choices. In undertaking work on globalisation and leaving care, it can be expected that something of all three approaches will be involved. However, the holistic approach that assumes an intermeshing global system is more in keeping with the ambitions of globalisation theorists. It also has an appeal as an extension of the holistic and systemic perspective so essential to understanding care leaving. It is now well established that care leaving requires thinking about interconnections and interdependence. So it seems obvious to move from applying this systemic way of thinking about individual young people and apply it beyond the national to the international level and thereby engage with the globalisation debate.

As noted above, adopting an holistic perspective requires some form of overarching framework. Ideally this should be soundly theorised and grounded in empirical detail. But as noted above, the study of globalisation is much less secure than that and within the leaving care literature to date there is an almost total absence of even national comparisons which could lay the ground work for a globalised understanding (Munro, Stein & Ward 2005; Pinkerton 2002). Accordingly, what is required is a more basic conceptual scaffolding to allow for the beginning work of description and theoretical exploration. Such a framework is provided by the work of two Northern Ireland social work academics, Stan Houston and Jim Campbell. They suggest basing international comparison on three levels or 'domains' – the macro, the mezzo and the micro.

The macro domain refers to large scale international social processes directly affecting nation states and indirectly affecting local ... practices within them ... The mezzo domain can be viewed as the site where relationships between the nation-state, welfare regimes and social professions are played out ... Whilst the macro and mezzo domains tend to focus more on the role of wider social structures and institutional prerogatives, the micro domain alludes to the specific activity of everyday ... practice (Houston & Campbell 2001, p.68).

Figure 2 sets out this framework in a way that helps to direct thinking about what information and key ideas are needed to describe and understand the different levels. The diagram presents two countries within a global context – two separate circles, A and B, within one larger circle. It both expresses an holistic perspective and encompasses a comparative perspective. It makes the service user in both countries (the stick figures in the diagram) the central focus. However, it also represents the experience of any particular service user

Figure 2. Conceptual framework for exploring globalisation and leaving care



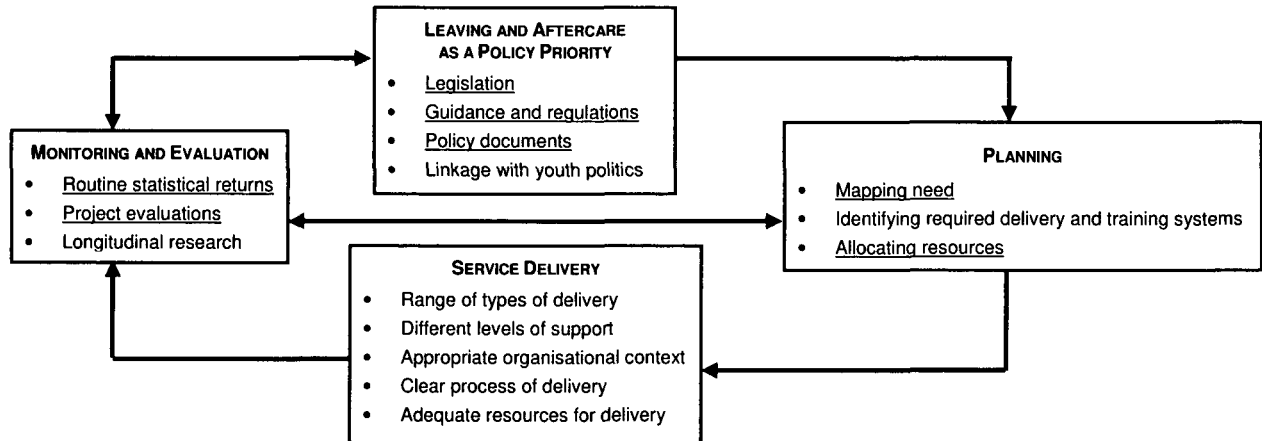
(for example, a young person leaving the care system) as located within a local/micro context of his/her relationship with particular workers and the practices and resources, formal and informal, specific to a locality. Drawing on the range of sources of information discussed earlier, it is possible to collect separate sets of descriptive material on the micro contexts in Country A and Country B. Information should be sought to cover each of the three dimensions identified in the figure – culture, politics and economics.

An adequate understanding of the micro space of direct practice requires that it is considered within its national/mezzo context. Again this can be achieved through collecting information separately by country, giving attention to the three dimensions. It should also be noted that for many countries the mezzo level is likely to have a number of layers to it – for example, both Australia and the UK represent the mezzo level but so, too, do the Australian states and the four UK national jurisdictions. Both the mezzo and the micro domains are presented in Figure 2 as contained within a global/macro domain. By definition that domain requires a single set of information addressing institutions and processes outside of national boundaries. Again these cover cultural, political and economic dimensions (Axford & Ross 2005).

NORTHERN IRELAND MATERIAL FOR EXCHANGE

The purpose of the framework is to generate comparative material within an holistic perspective. To illustrate this for leaving care, if country A was Northern Ireland, starting at the micro level it is possible to sketch out what could be expected in that inner space. In Northern Ireland, and indeed almost anywhere in the UK, the stick person is likely to be a young person who has entered care in his or her teenage years, has residential care as a last placement, will have

Figure 3. Strategic overview of the mezzo level of care leaving



received preparation for leaving care but very limited aftercare, and will initially return to family only for that to fail and be replaced by housing insecurity compounded by lack of training and education. This dismal picture reflects a set of underlying issues: instability within care and its negative impact on identity; lack of engagement by social workers and bureaucratic decision making; absent or ineffective preparation for coping with practicalities and relationships outside of care; insufficient attention to education, training and employment; and lack of recognition from the formal services of the role that family and friends can play.

It is of course important to stress that care leaving is not a uniform experience and that the situation for care leavers is improving. It needs to be recognised that within the Northern Ireland micro space there are, in addition to the dominant tendencies that paint such a dismal picture, many stories of remarkable achievement and resilience. Indeed, a major message to bring to a comparative discussion from within the Northern Ireland and UK micro space is that practice at local level shows how to best promote and support achievement and resilience: commitment, engagement, clear objectives, targeting core needs, open communication, explicit intervention methods, interagency working, strong management and policy frameworks, policy influenced from below and systemic thinking based on holistic models like the coping wheel.

Moving on to the mezzo level, a very patchy picture emerges of the advances being made in Northern Ireland. These (the underlined bullets points in Figure 3) can be considered across the four key components of any successful national leaving care system – law and policy, planning, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation. The strongest component is the legislative and policy context. Though, given the highly politicised nature of Northern Ireland society, it is interesting to note that care leaving is not part of any explicit youth politics. The Children (Leaving Care) Act

(NI) 2002 strengthens the existing duties of statutory authorities within the Children (NI) Order 1995, Northern Ireland’s central children’s law. The main aims of the new legislation are: to ensure that young people do not leave care until they are ready to do so; to improve the assessment, preparation and planning for young people leaving care; to provide better support for young people leaving care; and, to improve the financial support available to care leavers. In particular, the new legislation makes it a duty to keep in touch with young people leaving care and to assess and meet their care and support needs. Care leavers aged 16 to 17 years must be maintained and accommodated. Key to ensuring that the duties are met is the requirement that each young person must have a Pathway Plan and be appointed a Personal Adviser.

Planning is only now being seriously addressed, with attention being given to identifying need and trying to determine the resources required – despite having had three years to prepare and the leaving care population only amounting to a couple of hundred young people. In the discussion of need there has not been any explicit links made with the wider issues of change in family life, changing recreational expectations or youth unemployment. Services have been developed in anticipation of the Act but on a very ad hoc basis and with only limited success in terms of interrelating social services, health, housing, youth services, training and education. Similarly, monitoring and evaluation is on a very ad hoc basis.

As for the macro level in thinking about Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, there is largely an open space. Whilst it might be speculated that global processes, such as the dominance of neo-liberal politics reducing public spending and facilitating the movement of capital to low wage economies, have a direct impact on care leavers’ prospects in Northern Ireland, as yet leaving care has not really been recognised as an area requiring a global perspective. This both reflects, and is reflected by, the underdeveloped state of international

networks linking those responsible for providing leaving care services, the young people experiencing them and the researchers with an interest in the area.

TAKING THE DIALOGUE FORWARD

From the illustrative Northern Ireland material, it is clear that there is much to bring from even this small system to an international dialogue. This was not always the case. Real strides have been made in the last ten to fifteen years in Northern Ireland and the UK generally on the leaving care issue. A sense of historical development is an important part of any discussion of globalisation. However, the Northern Ireland material also makes it clear that at the macro level there is a long way to go before there is anything close to an adequately informed and coherent view of the international context. Just as it has now been recognised, at least within the UK, that it is networks of support which are required to deliver the necessary interrelated solutions required by care leavers (Broad 1999), so too making progress on global understanding and global action will depend on effective networking. In this context, network can be usefully defined as 'an international association, union, federation or grouping of organisations, experts or individuals to share information and (devise) a common course of action on a problem or issue' (Harvey, quoted in Lyons 1999, p.46).

A research seminar held in Belfast in 2005 resulted in the setting up of an international network of researchers interested in youth transition from state care. There is a need for more such initiatives to link not just researchers but policy makers, managers, practitioners and young people themselves. There are already a number of existing networks that could share information and agree upon a common course of action on issues of leaving care. For example, Childwatch International aims to initiate and coordinate research and information projects on children's living conditions and the implementation of children's rights as expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Notably, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child chose for its 'day of general discussion' in 2005 the topic of children without parental care and recommended that 'States parties and other stakeholders facilitate and enhance the child's transition from institutional care to independent living' (<http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/discussion.htm>).

Other networks based on more specific areas of child care, such as the International Foster Care Organisation and the European Association for Residential and Youth Care, would also clearly have an interest in promoting exchange around issues of care leaving. Of particular importance is the forging of relations between the various national organisations of young people in care, such as VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care) in Northern Ireland (www.voypic.org) and CREATE in Australia (www.create.org.au).

If such networks are to go beyond undertaking purely comparative, descriptive work to promote a more holistic perspective, they will need to identify the global concepts that are worth exploring for their potential to ask useful questions about leaving care as a global issue in any country. At the level of the macro domain, more work is required to assess whether, and in what ways, the concept of globalisation helps in characterising and explaining the large scale international social processes underpinning the social exclusion experienced by so many young people leaving care. At the mezzo level, citizenship linked with the idea of youth transition would help to identify the similarities and differences in the way in which welfare regimes respond to care leavers. The concept of welfare regime is a useful way of thinking about the mezzo/national level; particularly as literature on comparative typologies already exists (Pinkerton 2005).

At the micro level, the idea of a care career, with its focus on the components of time periods and key decisions (Pinkerton & McCrea 1999, pp.18-22), could provide structure to help in the production of comparable, detailed descriptions of practice. Such descriptions could be usefully considered against criteria based on principles of global best practice. A list of such principles might include the following:

- leaving care should be a managed process of assessment, planning, implementation and review;
- throughout the process engagement should be sought from the relevant informal and formal support networks;
- a full range of material and psycho-social needs to be addressed; and,
- the young person must be actively involved and consulted throughout.

Achieving any of this first requires acceptance of a global responsibility to make the effort to engage in cross national exchange. Achieving effective engagement is not easy and there is a serious calculation to be made around opportunity costs. Being involved in work on international issues does take time away from other important work at the local and national levels, but the potential benefits for everyone involved in care leaving, especially the young people themselves, should justify the effort. Recognising and understanding the characteristics and processes of change associated with globalisation is necessary if they are to be managed in a way that maximises the positive features and minimises the negative. In the context of globalisation, making sustainable advances to address the risk and vulnerability of care leaving has to be linked to world wide social, economic and political developments. There is a need to build up the commitment, understanding and networks of support to achieve that goal. This work is only starting, but it is crucial to ensuring that national advances being achieved for care leavers are secured and become part of an international resource. ■

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