The relevance and experience of education from the perspective of Croatian youth in-care

Branka Sladović Franz & Vanja Branica

To cite this article: Branka Sladović Franz & Vanja Branica (2013) The relevance and experience of education from the perspective of Croatian youth in-care, European Journal of Social Work, 16:1, 137-152, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2012.722979

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2012.722979

Published online: 13 Sep 2012.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 208

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
The relevance and experience of education from the perspective of Croatian youth in-care

Iskustva i značaj obrazovanja iz perspektive mladih u javnoj skrbi u Hrvatskoj

Branka Sladović Franz & Vanja Branica

Education can contribute to the well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care by increasing resilience, acting as a secure base and enhancing life chances and pathways. This paper presents results of a qualitative study which aimed to examine the educational opportunities of youth in public care in Croatia from the user’s perspective. A brief review of Croatian experience regarding in-care youth is presented and discussed. Six focus groups were conducted with 31 youth from children’s homes and foster families. Participants perceive education as important for all children and youth because it can enable better life conditions and improve employment possibilities but they consider it to be even more important for in-care children due to their lack of a stable family base, financial insecurity and pressure to be independent. Educational experiences reveal different educational choices, circumstances that promote and those that impede education, as well as a differentiated approach to in-care children. The young people pointed to several factors that facilitate positive educational outcome: personal strengths and self-efficacy, financial support and a good relationship with professionals.

Keywords: Child Welfare; Education; In-Care Youth; User’s Perspective; Care Leavers
Obrazovanje može pridonijeti dobrobiti djece i mladih u javnoj skrbi povećavajući njihovu otpornost, njihove životne mogućnosti te djelujući kao sigurno mjesto. U ovom su radu prikazani rezultati istraživanja provedenog s ciljem upoznavanja obrazovnih mogućnosti mladih u javnoj skrbi u Hrvatskoj iz korisničke perspektive. Kratko je prikazan pregled hrvatskih iskustava u svezi mladih u javnoj skrbi. Provedeno je šest fokus grupa u kojoj je sudjelovala 31 mlada osoba smještena u institucionalni ili udomiteljski smještaj. Sudionici su percipirali obrazovanje ili jednako važnim za svu djecu i mlade jer osigurava bolje životne uvjete i poboljšava mogućnosti zaposlenja ili ga smatraju čak i važnijim za djecu u javnoj skrbi s obzirom da njima nedostaje stabilno obiteljsko utočište, financijska sigurnost te osjećaju pritisak da moraju biti samostalni. Edukacijska iskustva otkrivaju i da su donijeli različite obrazovne izbore, no i da su bili suočeni s okolnostima koje unapređuju ali i onima koje otežavaju njihovo obrazovanje kao i da su doživjeli različito ponašanje prema njima koji dolaze iz javne skrbi u odnosu na ostale vrsnake. Mladi su ukazali na nekoliko čimbenika koji promoviraju bolji obrazovni ishod: osobne snage i učinkovitost, financijska podrška i odnos sa stručnjacima.

Ključne riječi: zaštita djece; obrazovanje; mladi u javnoj skrbi; korisnička perspektiva; mladi koji izlaze iz skrbi

Introduction

Child welfare in Croatia is grounded in legislation, which is in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the principle of the child’s best interest. The main shortcoming is the lack of early intervention and family support programmes in local communities, especially in rural areas (Ajduković, 2008). From the beginning of twentieth century two dominant types of out-of-home care developed: institutional and foster home placement. In the year 2010, children’s homes in Croatia provided placement for 1017 children without adequate parental care and there were 2001 children living in 1216 foster families. Most of the children are of compulsory school age (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare Croatia, 2010). In recent years, there has been a slow process of deinstitutionalisation with more emphasis on fostering and downsizing of children’s homes. There are also some small housing units where between three and five young people live together under the supervision of a care worker with the purpose of preparing them to leave the care system and live independently. This option is only available to older youth.

The most frequent reasons for out-of-home placement in Croatia are child abuse and neglect, disturbed family relations, abandonment and poverty (although the last is rarely the only reason) (Ajduković, 2004). This is in accordance with findings in other central and eastern European countries (Gudbrandsson, 2003). Longitudinal research on the psychosocial functioning of children in public care in Croatia (2000–2005) showed that children are entering public care when they are aged seven years on average, and typically stay in care for about four years (Ajduković & Sladović, 2008).

B. Sladović Franz & V. Branica
The academic achievement of children in care was found to be generally low. However, an important finding was that their behavioural and emotional problems were significantly more related to their current situation and circumstances and the general level of experienced everyday stress rather than unfavourable life circumstances prior to placement (Ajduković & Sladović Franz, 2005). Significant sources of stress were problems in adjustment to school, poor school performance and perception of less social support (Sladović Franz, 2004). Results showed that fostered children adjusted better to school, and had better school attainment than children in residential care (Kregar Orešković & Rajhvajn, 2007).

Education in Croatia is still dominantly state organised and officially available to everyone with good grades. Elementary school lasts for eight years and is obligatory, while secondary school, not compulsory, is for three or four years depending on programmes. Higher education is in accordance with the Bologna process in terms of mobility and course credits transferable to other European countries. Public higher education is free for students, who achieve a certain standard, while those who are less successful may be supported by their families. Higher education is hard to access for children in public care due to earlier lower academic achievement and lack of financial and other kinds of support, which are only available for a few of the very best students. At the moment there are 15 of them financed by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and 61 more received scholarships from donor organisations in 2008–2010. Some measures aiming to improve conditions for in-care students have emerged lately: for example, youth can stay longer at independent units or can get placement at student dormitories. Some non-profit humanitarian agencies are providing scholarships, publishing brochures, organising donor events or advocating for funds through public media, websites and social networks.

Research in other European countries shows that the majority of children in care have a much reduced chance of progressing to higher education (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). In Sweden, Vinnerljung et al. (2005) found that children growing up in public care have a three times higher risk of entering adulthood with only basic education. There is no comparable quantitative research in Croatia but the situation appears to be similar. Many children are coming into public care with educational shortcomings which often represent the basis for numerous further causes of lower educational attainment, such as school exclusion, low expectations on the part of children themselves, their care workers and teachers, inadequate planning and support and lack of attention by social workers to educational needs (cf. Francis, 2000). The contention of the present paper is that, in Croatia low attainment and marginalisation of education have been a normal part of growing up in public care for far too long.

Whatever the reasons for academic difficulties, more importance should be given to ways to overcome them. Good academic achievement should be aimed for because it supports personal resilience and social inclusion and acts as an important protective factor (Jackson, 2007). As Gilligan has argued, school provides opportunities for creating positive relations with peers and teachers, helps to develop better self-esteem
and can act as a complementary secure base (Gilligan, 1998 quoted by Dent & Cameron, 2003). In-care youth have a strong need for normalisation, to receive positive encouragement and to have a good relationship with a social worker, who should show genuine concern for their welfare, enhance their educational opportunities and must also serve as a liaison to out-of-care future life (Martin & Jackson, 2002). In Croatia, as in other countries (Dent & Cameron, 2003, Jackson, 2007), it seems that social work practice in general is focused on child and home issues and that there is a lack of concern for children’s perspectives and interdisciplinary cooperation in securing children’s rights and well-being.

Education has a significant role for all children and is always stressed as a very important factor by the adults. It has been pointed out as one of the priorities in numerous documents and social welfare development strategies as a way to overcome social exclusion of vulnerable groups, particularly children in public care—see for example, the Croatian national activity plan for children’s rights and interests 2006–2012 (Ministry of Family, Veteran’s Affairs and Intergenerational Solidarity, 2006). However, it seems that not enough research work has been conducted to find out how children and youth in the public care perceive education and whether education is really important to them. What are their motives for trying to do well at school and to have higher aspirations and ambitions? Research in other countries has shown that young people’s personal motivation and attitudes are a crucial element in raising educational achievement (Korintus et al., 2010). It is therefore, our goal in this paper to explore the young people’s own perception of the role, possibilities and relevance of education in their lives, to find out how they describe their educational experiences and what they think promotes a positive educational outcome, so that discussion and actions within the social work profession can move in a direction that supports resilience instead of reinforcing disadvantage and unequal opportunities.

**Procedure and Sample**

In-care youth can be seen as ‘experts by experience’; they have the potential to give professionals an insight into educational possibilities from the user’s perspective, which should be used for discussion and development of practice. In order to get an in-depth understanding of the perspective of youth in care on education, we have chosen the qualitative method as a way to obtain subjective viewpoints of participants and gain new information (Flick et al., 2004). This is a new approach to research on the issue in Croatia and the first attempt to look at the current situation from the viewpoint of those most closely concerned.

The study is based on focus groups, because we hoped to gain insight into commonalities and differences in viewpoints of youth and also to hear their experience and attitudes. The research participants consisted of 31 youths living in public care, 17 girls and 14 boys. The majority of youths (21/31), were aged 17 and 18 years old, mostly attending vocational secondary school, training for occupations such as cosmetics, plumbing, etc. (14). Only four attended grammar (academic
secondary) school; two were attending vocational retraining after three years of occupational secondary school and one had finished secondary education. The remaining 10 youths were aged 19–21 years old; 2 of them were in secondary school and 8 were university students studying economics (4), social work (1), construction engineering (1), transportation science (1) and kinesiology (1). One boy had finished secondary school.

All of the participants had been placed as the result of inadequate parental care and all were living in the City of Zagreb where educational opportunities are the best in Croatia and, at least theoretically, accessible to all. Two of the children had moved for vocational retraining from a small town on the coast to Zagreb. The length of stay in out-of-home placement was 10 years on average.

Youth were informed about the research and invited to participate in focus groups by their care workers. The target population was all those living in independence units of children’s homes and in the youth-community from an SOS children’s village. All young people in the final years of secondary school and students were invited. Foster children can only be reached and invited to participate in research through care workers. So social workers did, inevitably, participate in the selection process, and the potential influence on data is unavoidable because we can assume that they invited the most cooperative children with whom they have the best contact. The young people chose whether or not to participate and also suggested the time of the focus group meeting.

Six focus groups, facilitated by the present authors, were held in three different locations. These were: a children’s home independence unit (nine youth participated), the youth-community from SOS children’s village (nine youth participated) and in the Centre for Social Care with fostered children (13 youth participated). Issues raised in focus groups were: satisfaction with academic achievement and choice of school, experiences in school settings, support they have had or have at the moment and motivation for education. Discussions typically lasted for one hour, recorded on a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Limitations of the Sample

There are some methodological issues that must be acknowledged. Since youth from children’s homes were invited through their care workers and the focus group took place in the independence unit of the home where all the youth live together and see what is going on, it can be assumed that they participated because of social conformism. Their personal motivation might be weak but curiosity and the group setting influenced the decision to participate. Possibly as a result of this, in one focus group nine participants joined the session, which we experienced as a too large group for a fruitful discussion. Second, in that group several youth participated either passively or obstructed the discussion. That group was very challenging to moderate. Therefore, it might have been better to hold the focus group meeting in a neutral place outside the children’s home facility. Fostered participants were invited through
social workers and we can assume that they invited those youth with whom they had
the best contacts. The youth who chose actively to participate in the research were
interested in the topic, regularly attending school, so a question can be raised about
the absence of low achievers and drop outs. The other reservation relates to the fact
that, apart from one boy, all the foster youth were in kinship placements.

In the children’s home and SOS children’s village the young people knew one
another. At the beginning of the group meetings the confidentiality issue was
discussed and participants agreed not to talk about the content of discussion outside
the group setting. The same discussion took place in focus groups with foster care
youth who did not know one another. Two coders (both social workers and
researchers) each separately performed analysis using qualitative content analysis on
the same transcripts. After separate analysis results were considered jointly, some
categories emerged for both researchers, and the categories that differed were
discussed. The results have been summarised and will be presented in relation to
three dimensions: youth perception of educational relevance, their experience of the
educational process and factors that facilitate positive educational outcome.

Findings

Perception of Educational Relevance

All except two participants stated that education is important in the lives of children
and youth. They talked about its relevance from two points of view—general
relevance of education for children and youth, and personal educational relevance.
Half of them pointed out that education is equally important for all children,
no matter where or with whom they live, because education enables better life conditions
and can improve employment possibilities:

If you get a university degree people will look for you as a worker. You will have a
bigger salary, better life . . .

The other half stated that education is more important for children in public care
because they do not have a stable family base; they feel financial insecurity and
pressure to be independent early, regardless of the type of placement:

With whom and where are we going to live when we turn 18 years? We have to be
independent, rent an apartment, pay the bills. For us education is more important
so we can provide financial stability for ourselves.

It is important, since we have no advantage at the start as other children have; for
them it is not so important to get some kind of degree, but for us it will be easier if
we have it, and it will be easier for us to become independent . . .

Young people see education as a path that can help them get out of their present
situation, ensure future family life and normalisation. As one girl pointed out: 'school
means a lot; it is the only thing that can help us. With good education they can even help their biological family and avoid the possibility that their own children might get into the same situation as they have found themselves.

Two participants argued, on the contrary, that education is not that important because what matters is ‘to pass through the hard school of life’. They questioned the value of education, having in mind economic crises, unemployment and business success stories of local celebrities with no formal higher education. Some also suspect that there is no way out of their situation, that their future is not bright with or without education:

...We see that successful people are those who lie and steal, things like that, not those with higher education. There is no use of education if you do not lie, steal, or swindle...

Not all took such a cynical view. Personal differences are more visible in the results that follow. The majority of respondents, students, grammar school youth from children’s homes and most foster family youth have high personal educational aspirations. They have a clear area of interest, and had good grades in elementary and high school and plan to continue their education further:

...I was always a “nerd” interested in science, and I wanted to enrol in a good secondary school.

In contrast, more of the youth in residential care have low personal aspirations for education. They had low academic achievement in elementary school and are doing poorly now in secondary school, wishing to finish formal education as soon as possible. One boy said: ‘I wanted to be free after secondary school’.

**Experience in the Education Process**

Another theme that was discussed in the focus groups is their experience in the education process. The majority of youth stated that they were actually quite satisfied with their educational achievement. They had already made some educational choices after elementary school. In the decision-making process about secondary school several factors were interwoven: personal wishes and aspirations, grades and influence from peers and adults. Those who had good grades and clear personal aspirations enrolled in the desired school. But for many youth the scope for choice was very narrow, due to low grades in elementary school. So they enrolled at the school with lowest entrance criteria and in courses of short duration, mainly occupational three-year programmes. There were eight young people with no personal aspirations who simply went ‘with the flow’—followed their friends or accepted the advice of professionals from vocational guidance:

I have no wish to enter work yet. I wish to achieve a higher level of knowledge. Of course, I want to be able to compete better (for jobs).
I finished elementary school and I did not know where to go. I had no desire to enter grammar school as after it I would have had to attend university, instead I wanted to be free after school...

During the last year of my elementary school I was sent to vocational guidance where they told me to attend vocational school for cosmetics, hair-dressing or pedicure and I decided to go for cosmetics. I did not want that, but I did not have any other choice.

Youth with no clear interests and those with low grades stated more frequently that they were not satisfied with the school they were attending, but some of them adjusted over time. As one girl said: ‘Better anything than nothing’. Important were also some practical and organisational reasons, such as teaching available at different times of the day, the closeness of the school and employment possibilities promised by relatives. One boy explained: ‘At that time, I was training for swimming and water polo. Only this school had afternoon shifts so I could practice in the morning, and that was it’.

Differences that emerged in youth experiences due to type of placement were connected with the influence and help from adults in the decision-making process concerning secondary education. Foster care youth stressed their independence in choosing a school. Children from residential care were influenced by their care workers and were regularly sent to vocational guidance. It was usually assumed that because of low grades in elementary school they would enrol in lower level vocational courses for routine or manual occupations:

...You play with children in the children’s home and do not think about school. Each year some of the guys go to become plumbers so I went; but nobody asked me what I want to do and become in my life.

This boy pointed out that grades are very important, but personal aspirations should be taken much more seriously when deciding about secondary school. If the child in care has low grades they automatically go to vocational school, no matter what their personal interests or employment aspirations might be. If the child has good grades, he or she can try to enrol in grammar school, but that seems to be rare. An extreme example is the experience of one girl who was enrolled in secondary school by her care workers without her knowing anything about it at all. She stresses that she is very unhappy in her school: ‘I would not go to that school at all, it is something that I do not like’.

In accordance with their prevailing belief that education is important, most of the youth reported that they would like to continue education at university. But, for the majority this is not a realistic possibility due to their grades and type of secondary school attended.

They talked about circumstances that promote and those that impede their education. Facilitating circumstances are related to their schools, primarily with teachers who are willing to help and to be cooperative, with pupils, and with subjects that they like and can learn without too much effort. Relationships with friends and
care workers (for youth in residential care) also help them in their education. Living conditions are important for them as well, especially conditions conducive to study, such as having their own room. Youth from residential care pointed to the usefulness of extra-curricular activities that were organised by the home (sport activities) while youth in foster families perceive summer camps and other workshops that are organised for them as a good way to make friends and socialise. Scholarships are very important for students:

> It is much easier when you know you have some additional financial support (scholarship) which is more generous than pocket money from the children’s home.

Some youth perceived difficult school subjects, old-fashioned authoritarian teachers and poor relationships with peers as circumstances that impede their education. Besides school-oriented situations, youth mention personal factors, such as more interest in other things and lack of support as impeding circumstances. Also, they pointed to the current economic crisis and lower employment possibilities as discouraging factors. As shown earlier, they feel the pressure to become independent after secondary school or university education since they have to leave care without a secure family base. Therefore, they perceive employment possibilities as very important, but fear it will be hard for them to find jobs due to the economic climate and they would like more support in that regard:

> After secondary school we do not have secure employment which bothers me. Now we have to pass graduation exams. Learn different, sometimes unnecessary things to pass it and maybe enrol at university, but at the end I will finish at the unemployment office.

When asked about support in the educational process, the young people mainly mentioned friends or said they had nobody, saying that they could depend only on themselves. Only a few of them keep in contact with someone outside of their placements, like parents, siblings or other relatives. When we asked them about relationships with social workers only a few stated that they have contact with them. Some of them did not even know who their social worker was. Most of them lack close stable relationships, while the position of some can be regarded as highly isolated and lonely.

Some of the youth experienced a differentiated approach to in-care children in schools. They report that teachers have lower expectations of them and apply lower standards: ‘Teachers are complaisant, they understand our situation, they let us pass easily’. Residential care workers often beg teachers to give the child a good enough mark. Curiosity and sometimes pity from their peers as well as teachers are also part of the school experience of children in care.

In relation to the type of placement we found another difference in youth educational experience. Children in residential care experienced greater stigmatisation.
Their placement in a children’s home is often confused with placement in a correctional institution, so the initial reaction of peers and, even more often of teachers and other school employees, is negative: ‘...until they get to know us better’:

When you say you live in a children’s home, everybody is thinking of correctional institutions, they say-you make problems, stay away from me...

In the locker room two mobile phones went missing and immediately they assumed it was me because I am from a children’s home. It turned out that it was a girl from a rich family.

Foster youth often claimed that there were no differences in attitudes towards them and other children, but they often hide their life situation from school. They said that only class teachers and a few very best friends know their background and: ‘I do not talk about it, there is no need’. Students who lived in independence units of children’s homes also stressed that they do not talk about that because at university it is not relevant: ‘What matters is how you succeed in your studies’.

Facilitation of Positive Educational Outcomes

Insights on this dimension were provided by a group of higher achievers—college students and grammar school pupils regardless of type of placement. They highlighted their own personal strength and self-efficacy as important predictors of educational outcome. What they stressed as their advantages were individual commitment to school, faith in their personal capacities and a good image of themselves as being strong. They explained their academic successes by these characteristics, which differentiate them from their peers in public care:

I had the opportunity and I realised I have to finish school. I was always more diligent and learned more than my peers. In my opinion it has nothing to do either with placement or family, I simply wanted to be better.

I made myself learn. I do not know about the others. It depends on the person.

Youth perceive financial support as the most significant condition that can influence their educational possibilities. What they perceive as minimum requirements are scholarships for living expenses and fees, secure accommodation, free books and transportation.

Higher achievers from residential care pointed out the importance of relationship with the professionals. Particular professionals were described as very engaged, patient, warm, those who spotted their possibilities and provided them with support and motivation to learn and aspire for more. They stress that care workers in general should pay more attention to all children with good grades, who are not 'troublemakers', and who could achieve more with adequate support:
I was lucky to come to the best care worker in the children’s home. She worked equally with everybody and through discussion and encouragement urged us to fulfil our potential...the relationship with her was easy and friendly.

Some, although very few, told of good contact with social workers who were helpful, interested and reachable when needed:

My (social worker) really cares about me. For the last seven years, from the day I entered the children’s home, she has provided everything I need. She gives me within a single day [i.e. without delay] any approval or permission I ask for, e.g. for a school excursion.

Other youth who have had no contact or less helpful dealings with social workers have questioned that relationship and given us some insights in terms of practical advice. They state the importance of keeping promises, not lying about length of placement and recommend that social workers should keep in regular contact with the child. Furthermore, they suggest that social workers should pay more attention to individual cases, carefully assess the situation of the child, be better informed themselves and give more information about all the rights and options available to children in public care regarding education.

**Does Care Improve or Diminish Educational Opportunities?**

A new insight in this study relates to current educational possibilities as compared to those offered by their biological family. Despite the shortcomings identified earlier, most of our respondents considered that their opportunities would be far less if they had remained with their birth families. The majority of youth stated that they would have finished elementary school at best, or maybe some secondary school but few would even think about university. Students and some secondary school pupils pointed out that they are already more educated than their parents. It seems that these youth see placement in public care as offering some improvement to their life chances.

**Discussion**

The goal of this research has been to obtain a user’s perspective of educational relevance through the experiences of youth in public care in Croatia. The results showed that youth consider education as important, but their personal aspirations, strengths and potentials differ. Most youth perceive education as being of high importance because it improves employment possibilities and enhances overall life chances. Some of the youth think that education is even more important for those in public care, because they know that they have to become economically independent at an early age and they see education as a way to get qualifications that can ensure better employment opportunities. Leaving the care system, these young people have to deal with adult issues at once—leaving a familiar place, finding a new home,
finding a job, setting up a family, pursuing further educational opportunities, or coping with failure in all these areas without the possibility of going back into the care system in difficult times, such as becoming unemployed. We can say that the youth in our sample felt quite alone, with no financial support and pressured by the care system to be independent because they cannot stay in public care after turning 18, with the exception of continuing education. At the same time support by birth families is poor or absent, family connections are usually problematic so youth lack the financial, practical and emotional support needed through this life stage. As Mike Stein has pointed out that in relation to young people leaving care in the UK, their journey to adulthood is both accelerated and compressed (Stein, 2006, p. 274). It is a very different experience from that of the majority of their peers.

Although their school grades and the fact that most attend occupational secondary schools show that their educational attainment is below average, the young people themselves are generally satisfied with their performance and perceive that their educational possibilities are better than if they had stayed with their own parents. Therefore, it could be said that the purpose of child welfare intervention, at least in terms of education and assuring better life chances, has been fulfilled from the youths’ perspective. This is in contrast to findings from some other countries, such as Sweden and England (Jackson, 2000; Vinnerljung et al., 2005; Berridge, 2007), that compensatory effects of care on education are at best neutral. Similar to our findings, Gallagher et al. (2004) showed that residential care can be a positive environment for educational achievement, especially if children are given a sense of the value of education, clear expectations about it, and are provided with a learning culture and good support. Many of our respondents wish for better educational opportunities and obviously see the importance of education for social inclusion (in the form of good employment and normal living conditions), but it is out of reach for most of them due to low grades and inadequate secondary schools that are not preparing them sufficiently for higher levels of education.

Our findings are supportive of so-called ‘resilience-led practice’ (Daniel, 2003). We have found from the testimony of young people in our study as well as our own practice experience that what favours resilience and better educational attainment is having a secure base, self-esteem and self-efficacy, and adults who have provided consistent support. Those youth with sufficient educational skills, grades and high aspirations emphasise their personal capacities and strengths that help them in the educational process. They have also had experience of good stable relationships with at least one professional who supported and motivated them to aspire for more and to study harder.

Many international authors stress the importance of encouragement and positive influences from carers and significant others outside their placement regarding higher educational outcomes for children in public care (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Harker et al., 2004). Our youth strongly rely only on themselves or keep in mind a good care worker from earlier years. In most cases they did not mention their parents, relatives, teachers or social workers as of any importance to their education. Contrary to
Dearden’s (2004) findings that support givers were teachers, social workers, family members and foster carers but that residential carers were unhelpful, in our research residential care workers were most likely to be supportive, at least to high achievers. But obviously, many Croatian youth in care are not living in an educationally rich environment, as defined by Connelly et al. (2003), and are missing a range of facilities and professional support that they require and wish for.

A differentiated approach towards youth in-care reported by participants is in agreement with many other studies. Negative stereotypes and labelling by teachers and others, including social workers, have been found to be major obstacles to success in school settings. Children and young people in public care are regarded as delinquents not interested in school or not having the potential for academic success (Francis, 2000; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001; Martin & Jackson, 2002). The fact that young people who are looked after have low attainments confirms the low expectations, which have typically been held by many professionals, without taking account of the conditions that depress their school performance (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008). Assumptions that they are in care because of their own fault and behavioural disorders and not as a result of family circumstances, further reduce their self-esteem, already low because of experiences of abuse, abandonment and rejection (Schofield et al., 2000).

In considering the future prospects for the youth who took part in our focus groups we found the threefold classification proposed by Stein was helpful (Stein, 2006). Our results showed that a majority of our participants are likely to be moving on—being the youth whose resilience has been improved by care experiences, who had stable placements and secure attachments, who achieved some educational success and are hoping to find a job they like and have a family like other ‘normal’ people. Other youth participating in the study could be classified as survivors—those who see themselves as self-reliant and more grown-up than their peers, valuing their unfavourable life experiences as important ‘school of life’. However, compared with the first group, they will leave care younger, with fewer qualifications and have lower paid jobs and more problems, though hopefully keeping a sense of independence. In our sample we had almost no youth in the third group, which Stein describes as victims—those who had the most damaging pre-care experiences and continued to suffer in care, often changing placements, having disrupted relationships and education. This is the group in greatest danger of social exclusion. After leaving care they are often unemployed, homeless, lonely, isolated, and have mental health problems with no aftercare support. The reason why this group did not appear in our research is probably explained by the way the participants were recruited, as explained earlier. It can be assumed that either they did not want to participate or we failed to reach them. It is very important for future research that this group of in-care youth should be approached also, since they have the greatest risk of future life failures.

Despite these methodological issues and some historical and professional differences from other countries, Croatian research on child welfare and the results
presented here on care leavers provide some indication of how educational and overall well-being of in-care children and youth could be enhanced.

To conclude, a comprehensive approach to educational issues is necessary, aiming to improve life opportunities of youth in public care and to provide a better and more gradual transition to an out-of-care future. It should contain a far stronger engagement of social – and care workers in finding ways to enhance young people’s personal strengths and objective opportunities. Every in-care child’s perspective and motives should be explored, and aspiration of any kind supported. We strongly agree with Pecora et al. (2006) on the importance of orientating teachers and schools to be aware of in-care issues, providing youth and their caregivers with detailed information on further educational possibilities, and raising awareness and outreach of these possibilities for them. Providing financial and other practical support and securing employment possibilities would give youth a sense of basic security. Our work has shown that detailed research on the attitudes and practice of social work professionals must be undertaken and new possibilities for those leaving care must be devised and implemented, following models from some other countries, such as needs assessment and pathway planning, integrated school and care plans, independent living programs, ongoing support for those in post-compulsory education and mentoring (Montgomery et al., 2006; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006). But it must not be forgotten that improving educational opportunities for children in care equally concerns their present developmental needs as well as their future opportunities.

References


