

**Spanish national report summary:**

**Education and young people from a public care background**

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**Spanish team:**

**Ferran Casas  
Carme Montserrat  
Sara Malo**

## 1. Purpose of the study

The overall aim of the YIPPEE project is **to investigate the educational pathways of young men and women from a public care background in five EU countries** – Denmark, Hungary, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom – and **to examine how more of these young people can be retained in education after the end of compulsory studies**. The project has been funded by the European Commission as part of its Seventh Framework Programme. The research has been developed according to the standards of national professional and academic ethical guidelines.

The research – conducted between 2008 and 2010 – has involved collaboration between country partners in three major stages. At the end of each stage a national and an overall consolidated report has been produced, named as follows: (1) state of the art literature review (usually referred to as Work Package 2 Report – henceforth WP2); (2) a secondary analysis of national statistics on children in care and their educational attainment and a survey of local authorities (WP3-4); and (3) case studies in each country. The Spanish case study (WP8) includes the results of interviewing (i) thirty five young people from a care background, (ii) social services managers and (iii) adults nominated by these young people. The area selected in Spain for the fieldwork was the Autonomous Region of Catalonia. All complete reports are available at <http://tcr.uioe.ac.uk/yippee/>.

The present paper summarises the findings of the YIPPEE project in Spain, more details of which are found in the 3 national reports, and includes some conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. The national policy context and brief outline of care and education systems

### *Education*

In Spain, education is **compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16**. Education is planned according to a **decentralised model** which distributes responsibilities among the central government, the Autonomous Regions, local authorities and schools (EURYDICE, 2009) (for more details, see WP2 report).

The 2006 Education Act provides basic regulations for the **general structuring** of the Spanish non-university education system. This covers pre-primary education (3-5); compulsory education - divided into two levels: primary education for ages 6 to 12, lower secondary education for ages 12-16, and for ages 16-18 either *Bachillerato* (upper secondary education) or Intermediate Vocational Training (CFGM). Students who complete lower secondary education passing all subjects at this level are awarded the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO), which gives them access to *Bachillerato* or CFGM (both are considered post-compulsory secondary education). Students who are not awarded this certificate receive a Certificate of School Attendance. To gain admission to university education, candidates must pass an entrance exam after doing *Bachillerato* or Advanced Specific Vocational Training (CFGS).

As regards **academic achievement** in Spain, more women completed their studies at all levels of education than their male counterparts. The comparative results are 77.5% and 63.7% for the first stage of secondary education, 52.5% and 36.7% for the second stage of secondary

education, 21% and 11.9% for 3-year university degrees, and 22% and 14.9% for 5-year university degrees (NAPin, 2008-10).

In the 08-09 school year, 13.5% of students in post-compulsory education were **not born in Spain**, almost the same as in compulsory education.

In Spain, 71% of the **Roma population** aged 16 and over does not complete compulsory education and only 1.3% of the Roma population goes into further education. There are significant difficulties in getting the young Roma population to enrol and remain in secondary and further education (NAPin 2008-10).

The **net rate of the overall population obtaining the ESO certificate (compulsory secondary education)** in Spain in 2007 was 69.1%, this figure being a little higher in Catalonia (72.8). The net schooling rate at age 17 was around 75%, with 11.7% still in compulsory education and 63.2% in post compulsory education. More students were on the academic track than the vocational one. Over 40% of the population finished upper secondary education (academic, not compulsory) ([www.educacion.es](http://www.educacion.es)).

In 2007, the average **early school leaver** rate (the percentage of the population aged between 18 and 24 who had not completed upper secondary education and were not in any type of education or training) was 14.8% for the EU-27. Spain shows one of the **highest rates**: 31% in 2007 ([www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat](http://www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat)).

As in other countries, **unemployment rates among people with any level of educational achievement up to lower secondary education** are higher than the mean unemployment rate. According to Labour Force Survey ([www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat](http://www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat)) data for the first quarter of 2008, unemployment among the illiterate economically-active population stood at 24.5%, compared with 5.8% among people with post-secondary education.

A 2004 international comparison of public expenditure on education as a percentage of **GDP** highlighted that Spain invested less than any other of the 27 countries of the European Union, with a difference of 0.8 percent in relation to the EU mean (4.29% and 5.09% respectively). This is also true for expenditure on social protection and family policies, which is among the lowest in Europe: this figure was 20.8% in 2005, compared with 27.4% for the EU-25) (NAPin, 2008-10).

### ***Children in care***

On a national level in Spain we currently have the Ministry of Health and Social Policies. However, the decentralisation of the Spanish child protection system in 1987 meant that this Ministry now has almost no competences with regard to children in care other than producing statistics (for more details, see Casas, 1994a). Each Autonomous Government is required to have an appropriate administrative body responsible for the protection of all children in the region. In Catalonia, the legal framework is based on a new law, the **Children and Adolescents' Rights and Opportunities Act**, adopted by the Catalan Parliament on **12th May 2010**. This new law introduces a proactive approach towards the child and adolescent population as a whole, and is not focused only on those at high social risk. It also provides new mechanisms for children and adolescents to become involved in decision-making that affects them.

Over the last 25 years, Spanish and Catalan services for children living away from their families have evolved from a 'charity' model characterised by large institutions, long-term placements and uncoordinated services, to a Social Services system and the promotion of family foster care as a desirable placement within the child protection system. Changes to the protection system were initially based on the **normalisation principle** (Casas, 1994b; 1996; 1998), which means keeping children in their family environment, or when this is not possible, providing an alternative family setting. However, the fact that 48% of children in care are currently in residential homes reflects the lack of success this system has had in complying with the principle of normalisation and guaranteeing children care in family settings.

Over recent years, the **Spanish protection system** has experienced a rise in the number of children in care. According to official statistics ([www.msps.es](http://www.msps.es)), in 2006 there were **37,161 children under legal custody**; 74.2% were in guardianship and 25.8% were accommodated children. Disaggregated figures by type of placement showed 48% of children in residential care and 52% in family foster care. However, of those in family foster care, 15% were with non-related families and 85% were with relatives. Official statistics for 2007 reveal there were **7,289 children in care in Catalonia**.

As far as the characteristics of children in **residential care** are concerned, there is a significant presence of foreign children. They are also predominantly male and older, with most over 12. Furthermore, 6.1% of children in the Catalan child protection system are **unaccompanied** foreign minors, most of whom are in residential care.

Although the Catalan Government has attempted to meet the needs of the increasing number of children in care, this effort has so far failed to prevent the progressive saturation of the system, with some homes now over-occupied. One of the reasons for this is the scarce offer of other alternative resources, such as foster families.

Most residential homes have a **ratio** of between 3 and 4 children per professional. Figures confirm an increasing trend in the number of residential homes with capacities for over 20 children. This means that the need for more places in the system is met by increasing the size of the residential homes. It should also be noted that larger residential homes have higher children-professional ratios, higher employee turnover, etc.

Despite recent growth in the number of foster families in Spain, the figure does not match the rise in the number of children in residential care and there is therefore an insufficient number to cover real demand. **Kinship care** has also increased in absolute terms and constitutes one of the pillars of the Spanish child protection system (Montserrat, 2007), with recent research suggesting better outcomes in comparison to other types of placement (Del Valle et al, 2008). Nevertheless, the latest recommendations of the Catalan Ombudsman (Sindic de Greuges, 2009) included the need to address the absence of a comprehensive database for children in care, including data on processes and results.

Furthermore, a great heterogeneity is found in working conditions and criteria for making proposals regarding child protection measures among the 47 **interdisciplinary child protection teams** working in the different regions of Catalonia in terms of children at risk of intervention (Casas & Montserrat, 2002).

An analysis of the **budgets** assigned to services responsible for child protection show that for every euro spent on care for the child's own immediate family in 2006, two were spent on care

for the extended family, two and a half on foster family and pre-adoptive care, 24 on residential homes and 30 on emergency centres (Sindic de Greuges, 2009).

Data on **transition to adulthood** in Catalonia provided by the Youth Secretariat (2008) show that only 15.8% of young people in the 20-24 age group no longer live in the family household (84.2% do still live at their parents' home) and that 54.6% of those aged 25-29 still live at their parents' home. In Spain, young people leave the family household later than in other European countries. With regard to the care system, although children should legally leave care at 18, if they live in either family foster care or kinship foster care they usually continue to stay if both parties (the young person and the foster family) agree, though usually without any financial or other support (Del Valle et al. 2008).

The Spanish welfare model does not include any benefits or financial support for continuing studying or becoming independent when young people reach adult age, with the exception of universal study grants, which are scarce. Catalonia is one of the few Autonomous Regions that provides a support service for care leavers when they leave the protection system, comprising of housing benefits, labour market integration and economic help, among other things (ASJTET). This service was first introduced 15 years ago and developed agreements with various foundations and NGOs to provide support programmes for young care leavers aged between 16 and 21, especially from residential homes.

### **3. What did we know at the start of the study?**

The statistical invisibility of children in public care and more specifically the invisibility of their education in Spain go hand-in-hand with a lack of research into their inclusion at different stages of education (see WP3-4 Spanish national report for further details).

One of the goals of the YIPPEE project was initially defined as *establishing a baseline of post-compulsory educational participation among young people who have been in care*. No national or regional systematic statistical data has been found for Spain or Catalonia with regard to participation in either further or higher education by young people from a public care background, or participation in secondary education by children in care. Such a gap in the available statistics made it impossible for the Spanish research team to develop a secondary analysis of official data. The Spanish research project therefore began with no information regarding the rate of participation of young people in post-compulsory education. The review of the scientific literature (WP2 Spanish report) included a summary of the relatively few studies available on young people in residential, foster and kinship care, but very few data were found concerning their education. It seems therefore that this research is **the first study conducted on this issue in Spain**.

The second project report (WP3-4) proposed a system for routinely collecting relevant data to monitor the situation of both the in-care and post care populations in relation to their educational pathways. The aim here was to provide a basis for future progress and incentive for action. In other words, we proposed the establishing of **a system of indicators comparable across European countries**, something we regard as essential for providing the required baseline.

In an attempt to demonstrate that action is possible on a national level, the Spanish team entered an agreement with the Catalan Government to collect data over two academic years (2008-2010) in order to **start producing systematic data on the educational pathways and**

**outcomes of 16-year-old students in care.** Analysis of the data thus obtained showed that only 20% of the in-care population obtains the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) at the expected age compared to 60% of adolescents of the same age.

This initiative, not foreseen in the initial research project, has symbolised a first step along the path towards positive action. It is essential that data collection now be continued in order to analyse the real delays and obstacles in the educational pathways of the in-care population, and in order to address inequality in their educational opportunities.

School teachers providing information about the educational pathways of in-care 16-year-olds in their classroom were asked to answer an open question reflecting their opinion of how the young person was doing at school. Their responses were used in the Spanish case study report (WP8), thus furnishing us with a broader range of perspectives from different social agents involved in the care of young people.

#### **4. How the research was carried out**

Following completion of the literature review for Spain (see WP2 report), the second stage of the research consisted in administering a set of interviews to key informants: managers of post care services, child protection teams and local social services. The aim here was threefold: (i) to determine what information was available for rates of participation in further and higher education by young people in care and young people leaving care (see WP3-4 report); (ii) to explore key informants' views on leaving care and the educational options for young people leaving care, and to facilitate access to a sample of young people aged 19-21 who met the inclusion criteria for the study. The criteria for this were that the young person was in care at the age of 16, had been looked after for at least a year and had shown some sign of educational promise (i.e.: obtaining the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education and showing motivation to continue in post compulsory education). A larger sample of 132 young people was selected by the services according to these criteria.

In the third stage of the research project, an in-depth face-to-face interview was administered to 35 young people at the end of 2008, and 28 of them were interviewed again one year later. They were asked to nominate an adult who had been supportive in their education and 20 of the nominated people were also interviewed, either face-to-face or by telephone. In the Spanish case study, those nominated for interview were mainly social educators. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the NVIVO qualitative data analysis package. This comprised the material for the third stage: the case study (see WP8 report).

The first interview with young people took a life story approach following the interviewees' lead, but with a list of areas to be covered and including a 'lifeline', which helped the researchers to map the young person's care and educational career. The second interview was more structured, although using open-ended questions.

By comparing the characteristics displayed by the 35 young people interviewed and the overall in-care population in Catalonia, we could observe that in our sample there were:

- No differences regarding type of problems with birth family, type of abuse, average number of years in care, year of entry, or number of placements they have had.
- A higher % of young women, possibly explained by the selection criterion of showing educational promise.

- An over-representation of young people who have been in a residential home, possibly due to more contact facilities obtained from post care services.
- A higher % of unaccompanied foreign minors and of foreigners in general.
- A much lower % returning to their birth family upon reaching adult age. In fact, none of the young people in our sample lived with their parents (Del Valle *et al.*, 2008; García Barriocanal *et al.*, 2007).
- A lower % of early school leavers, due to the criterion of showing educational promise. Furthermore, many of them are able to study because they are in the post care service.

## **5. The views of service managers in contact with young people leaving care**

We collected the views of key informants from the following services: the post care service for young people leaving care, the local Social Services and the child protection teams. We also had the views of some social educators from residential homes, as they were the adults nominated by the young people.

With regard to the responsibilities, plans of action, duties and support provided by the services, the professionals interviewed agreed that those young people leaving residential care who cannot return to their birth family or stay longer with foster parents are usually referred to the post care service (ASJTET). They tend to be directed to said service by the residential home they were staying at or by their child protection team, with a written proposal and plan for work and review, which must be agreed between the young person and the post care service.

Key informants also agreed that young care leavers are not usually referred to the local Social Services and that if they do go, it is of their own accord and in the capacity of a regular citizen. In these cases, intervention is not systematic and there is no protocol for action; young people are assessed on an individual case basis.

With regard to the educational options available to young people in and from public care, all of the social agents interviewed agreed that the in-care population suffer from a significant disadvantage and usually start working as soon as they are legally allowed to. The services consulted also stated that it is easier to offer young people with difficulties non-formal training resources (without continuity in the formal education system) as they are more likely to assimilate them. They further point out that it is difficult to keep them in education, partly due to the rigidity of the system, which affects not only young people in care, but also children with social and family difficulties in general.

They suggested that difficulties already exist for these young people in the compulsory education system, particularly at secondary school: problems they have experienced with their families, instability and changes of school, accumulated deficit, and labelling are all factors associated with failure. They agreed that no problem exists in theory, but that in practice only very few continue studying after 16, and if they do, it is in short-term occupational training, mainly for jobs related to construction, the hotel and restaurant trade, or hairdressing.

The key informants also agreed that education is not clearly prioritised within the protection system, but it should be. The expectations of the child protection services with regard to education are usually too low. Social educators discussed whether the guidance they give young people away from the academic pathway is related to economic circumstances or the lack of skills and abilities that adolescents in care seem to show with regard to studying. They

believe that the time young people spend in the child protection system improves their educational possibilities in comparison with the time they spent with their birth family. They were also aware of the admirable resilience of some of these young people and believe that more transitional and ongoing support services are required.

It is worth highlighting the growing will and conviction to offer better educational opportunities to young people attended to by the post care services. Proof of this can be found in Catalonia in the recent increase in the number of study grants for care leavers or in the recent inauguration of a students' residence for care leavers.

## **6. The experiences of the young people themselves**

### ***Present lives***

Generally speaking, the young people interviewed stated that they were satisfied with how their life was going and believed that they were doing better than most people who have been in care. Their concerns focused mainly on economic and work considerations, the lack of time to study and family responsibilities.

With regard to the highest level of education attained, 5 were at university, 12 had started or completed advanced vocational training, 5 had started or completed upper secondary education, 10 had started or completed intermediate vocational training, 1 had obtained the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education and 2 the Certificate of School Attendance. There was a predominance of those who had opted for fields dedicated to helping others (i.e: social, health or education). There were generally more girls than boys at the higher levels of education.

One-fifth of the sample had left education and were working or looking for work. Half were working full-time and some managed to combine work with study. The type of work they were doing was mostly still basically unqualified. For some, work represented personal success in their lives, and for others education.

At the first interview (ages 18-21), almost half of them lived in accommodation for care leavers. Those who had been in family foster care continued to and 37% were living by their own means. They generally reported good health, although three of them were undergoing psychiatric treatment.

For more than half of the young people, one or both of their parents had died or disappeared. In cases where they could be located, the relationships were generally not very fluid, the young person visited them and looked after them but their parents did not represent any type of support for them. All but four of them had siblings. One-third assumed some type of responsibility towards their younger siblings. Some of the young people had a partner, but none had children. They all felt that they had been well-accepted by their partner's family.

They spent their leisure time with friends and did the same activities as any other young person of the same age. The responsibility of having household duties, looking after their birth family and combining work and studies made them feel different from other young people of their age. On the other hand, they did not feel different when it comes to friends, partners or the use of their leisure time, except for the fact that they had very little of it.

### ***Family and care lives***

30 out of 35 suffered some type of neglect or abuse when living with their parents. The remaining 5 were unaccompanied foreign minors whose motivation to come to Spain was to work. The situations of abuse coincided with their parents' alcoholism or drug addiction, mental illness, being sent to prison, death or disappearance. When they talked about the time with their parents they mentioned great instability and changes of residence, and this affecting their health. With regard to upbringing, the foreigners particularly highlighted cultural differences and those who had lived with their grandparents, generational differences.

With regard to visits to their parents after going into care, many of them remembered the fact that visits were compulsory and did not view them in a positive light. In other cases, their parents abandoned them when they went into foster care and very few had positive memories of the visits. They generally had positive relationships with their siblings, with the additional load of responsibility, particularly before going into care. They had negative feelings if they had been separated from them. Those with extended family also had good relationships with them, and they represented a source of support.

For a few of them their birth family had expressed positive values with regard to education, transmitting the message to their children that they should study because they themselves had not been able to. The general attitude among parents, however, was to award little importance to school or marks, giving them little support in their studies and showing little concern about their attendance.

Most of the young people interviewed recalled a traumatic experience from the first time they were placed in care: it happened suddenly, with no clear information, without asking their opinion. They particularly recall the negative experiences associated with emergency centres: enclosed, mixed centres with very problematic children. Others complained about the delay in the services intervening in their family problems. Most of them had been in residential homes. Of the six who had lived mainly in family foster care, most of them were with extended family and viewed it as a positive experience.

There was a mixed evaluation of the residential homes and family foster care they had experienced, ranging from optimum situations to even some cases of abuse. They generally highlighted the importance of having a key, stable and involved relationship with a social educator or carer. Homes with a lot of places, many different carers and shifts made it difficult to establish a trusting relationship, as did changes of residential home and type of foster care. They also highlighted the importance of having good conditions for studying: extra classes when necessary, sufficient space and peace and quiet, motivation to continue in education.

They agreed on the importance of making friends outside the residential home, with school friends who study and are not conflictive. They valued the support and acceptance they had received from friends' parents and the importance of continuing to study with the same group of friends. Some said they made friends at the residential home; others talked about the conflictive nature of the children at the residential home. Leaving the residential home was stressful and having accommodation for care leavers was viewed very positively.

Their general evaluations of being in care were usually positive compared to the conditions they experienced with their birth family, but when compared to the general population, they feel their pathways were full of difficulties. According to them, many improvements should be

required in the relationships between young people in care and child protection teams and psychologists.

### ***Educational lives***

Although 90% of the young people in our sample who obtained the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education did so at the usual age (16 years old), their post-compulsory studies took longer, usually with an increasing and ultimately lengthy delay, to the extent that 78% of those who did advanced vocational training (post-compulsory) did so later than usual.

We observed four post-compulsory educational pathways:

- 1- Those that began the formal academic or vocational track, sometimes repeating a year and therefore accumulating a delay, but without giving up on obtaining the qualification. Some of these were in higher education at the time of the second interview. Others were working towards a qualification. In general, this group had experienced few changes in family life and/or within the child protection system, the value of education had been transmitted and they had received support in their education. Having had key mentors also appeared as a factor contributing to their success in education.
- 2- Those that began the academic pathway but could not complete it, having left it and adopted the vocational pathway. They had interruptions and repetitions. None of these had yet reached higher education. Some of them had finally completed intermediate vocational training and started work.
- 3- Those that started an academic or vocational pathway and abandoned it without finishing. They were working or looking for a job at the time of the second interview.
- 4- Those that did not follow any formal pathway after compulsory secondary education, but did an occupational course.

The last three groups had suffered more instability in their lives and less support to continue formal studying.

Therefore, despite having the ability and motivation to study when they were 16, these young people had found themselves at an educational standstill (*moratoria*) due to difficulties related with supporting themselves economically, becoming independent and family problems affecting their lives before and after the age of 16. Living with their parents had mainly had a negative effect on their education: lack of attendance, changes of school, lack of support with homework. However, some of the young people interviewed developed coping strategies to continue studying despite the adverse conditions.

The time they were in care had a positive impact with regard to regular attendance and more support with their studies, although there were differences between residential homes in terms of the support given. On the negative side we find their carers' low expectations of them with regard to post-compulsory education and the guidance they received towards short-term occupational courses in order to become economically independent at the age of 18. In some cases this made them reject the academic pathway.

In general, they had a positive view of their relationships with teachers; they appreciated having been given special help, but they did not like to be labelled. Relationships with schoolmates were also generally good, and this was where they made their group of friends, although there were a few accounts of bullying due to their skin colour or physical characteristics. They had good memories of being accepted by friends' families. At school they

wanted to be just another student, trying to hide the fact that they were in care. Some highlight the compensatory role the school had as a refuge for them, whereas others refer to the little attention they received given their situation.

They valued education very highly, seeing it as a means of improving themselves, being better than their parents and other children at the residential home, and being able to get a qualified job, more income and a better life. Generally speaking, their attitude towards school was one of self-sufficiency, self-confidence and being able to do things themselves without asking for help. They had a sense of being competent, although they admit that things went better for them in compulsory education and that everything was more difficult thereafter. The nominated adults interviewed agreed that the sample of young people interviewed were an exception in terms of education.

### ***Informal learning and leisure time***

School friends were an aspect that facilitated social integration for the young people interviewed, as were some of their friends' families when it came to free-time activities. Having friends from the residential home was experienced as more stigmatising and most of them said that social educators encouraged friendships with people from outside the home. Friends have been and continue to be the main source of emotional support for these young people. Changes of school meant a loss of friends and this was viewed very negatively by the young people.

They did the same leisure-time activities as those done by the rest of the population. They particularly took part in more formal activities during their time in foster care, and some of them associated entering the residential home with the beginning of organised leisure-time activities: sport, dance, after school club, etc. Some of them also did other extracurricular activities such as English or music, though not all of them were able to due to the economic cost. They highlighted the compensatory protective role of some youth centres, such as after school clubs and in some cases sports clubs.

While they were living with their birth family the support they received for organised leisure activities was provided by professionals, although they said they used to play in the street a lot and did not do formal activities. When they were in foster care, this support was provided by the social educators or carers. Friends and their own abilities also influenced the choice of activity.

Difficulties in continuing to do leisure activities were due mainly to the problem of combining them with studies and work, particularly when they were older, as well as economic problems.

Their friends and leisure activities gave them an opportunity to experience normality like other children of their age. They were also a form of liberation from the situation they were experiencing at home, and a source of fun, support and learning. At some youth centres they could also do their homework. Furthermore, studies were highly valued in most after school clubs.

### ***Looking ahead: hopes and dreams for the future***

The young people said that their aspiration after compulsory secondary education was to do post-compulsory education in order to get into higher education. Once they reached adult age,

obtaining a university qualification remained a short to medium-term reality for those who had followed the academic pathway. By contrast, those who followed the vocational pathway or stopped studying now saw the possibility of higher education as either very distant or unlikely.

They generally aspired to have a more qualified job, economic independence and their own place to live, enjoying their friends and the leisure time they have. They also wanted their younger siblings to have a life with fewer difficulties than the life they have led. In the event that they should have children, there was a very strong desire not to repeat what was done to them and to become protective parents. They felt the need to demonstrate that they will not be like their parents.

They reflected a perception of internal control when asked about their future plans, although they were aware that economic difficulties and the lack of family support were against them. They said they believed in themselves and most of them stated that if they had achieved what they had up to this point, then they could continue to make progress with effort and motivation. Furthermore, they also expected future results from the effort that they had invested and were investing.

Most of them valued the year between the two interviews positively: some had continued studying, others had kept working and some had become independent. We could generally state that these were young people with a high degree of optimism, capable of adapting to situations even when they were not initially desired. Above all, they thought that in the future, once they have cut their links with the protection system, they will be able to live without the label of “care child” or “person with social or family difficulties.”

### ***Looking inside: their inner worlds***

Their life has generally been filled with feelings of insecurity and fear, which they still had, due to having been forced to make decisions on their own and resolve dilemmas related to the family, studies, friends, work, and housing. This is something many children and young people in the general population have not had to do by their age.

Their feelings towards their birth family were ones of suffering when they remembered their childhood or adolescence, and relocation when they were in care. Once they became adults, some of them opted to break from their birth family and others felt a moral responsibility towards their parents and helped them. None of them had a sense of their parents being a source of support, or felt that they had a family to turn to when in need, such feelings being associated with a perception of loneliness. Within their family they have developed, out of necessity, a role of self-responsibility, and in some cases particularly responsibility towards their younger siblings. The dilemma for them when they reached adulthood was how far they should continue to exercise this responsibility towards some members of the family. In fact, most of them felt they could only trust themselves.

Their time in the protection system was the beginning or worsening of a process of being socially labelled as a “worthless” or “conflictive” child, to the extent that they referred to the population who were not in care as being “normal”. On the other hand, this also served as a life lesson, leading them to fight against the label and to demonstrate that they were neither pitiful nor drug addicts or delinquents. All too often they felt that this is what is expected of children from care backgrounds.

On the other hand, they agreed that being in foster care provided a feeling of relief, as they think that if they had continued with their birth family they would have failed. They therefore had a feeling of gratitude towards the carers and social educators that helped to raise them and thought they had provided them with an opportunity to get ahead in life. A further point worth highlighting is the fact that they remembered their entry into the system as traumatic and had a strong feeling of insecurity and fear when leaving the system as an adult.

With regard to their time in the education system, they recalled great instability when they lived with their family and more support when they were in care. For many, the school was a place where they could live normally and participate in leisure activities, and in the case of the young people in our sample it was evident that it represented personal success in their lives, because they had achieved good academic results. It was also the place where they made most of their friends and therefore found an important source of support in their lives. Some of them had a bittersweet memory of education due to not having been able to get into higher education as they wanted, but they felt satisfied and proud of where they were and what they were doing.

They demonstrated self-confidence, a highly developed sense of responsibility for their age and tried not to ask for help; they were aware of all of this and in this respect felt different from young people in the general population, but also from many young people who have been in care. By contrast, they felt like other young people of the same age with regard to the youth cultures they participate in.

## **7. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice**

The aim of the present project was to explore the educational pathways of young people in and leaving care and identify factors that facilitated or caused an obstacle for them to continue studying. The 35 young people interviewed had been in care for part of their childhood and adolescence and were selected because at the age of 16, while they were still in residential of family foster care, they showed a capacity and motivation to continue into post-compulsory education: this fact was confirmed by the young people themselves and the adults they nominated. After this point in time, **what made them continue studying? Or what led them to abandon education?** Above all, what is the reason of their gradually falling behind in the education system in comparison with the average population, despite the fact that their potential at the age of 16 was at least at the same level as the average population? However, there is the prior question of **what facilitating factors made these young people show educational promise when others in their situation tended to fail at school?** These are questions we have attempted to resolve in order to provide recommendations at different levels.

### **The following facilitating factors were identified for the time they were in care:**

- Stability of placement
- Staying at the same school
- Having a stable key adult in their lives
- The prioritising of education in their foster care
- The carer's high level of involvement in the issue of education
- The carer's high expectations with regard to education
- Carers and teachers transmitting the value of education: education is the key to leaving their situation of great social difficulty behind them

- Inclusion in a group of friends outside the protection system and very much integrated in the education system; they act as a reference group and also as a group to which the young person belongs, fostering a positive social identity and therefore to some extent neutralising their being labelled
- The involvement of the school, a friendly attitude adopted to children in care
- Participation in “normal” leisure-time activities
- Maintaining relationships with siblings if desired
- Their opinion being listened to and taken into account, particularly in relation to:
  - their preference regarding where to continue studying, especially when coinciding with their admittance into the protection system,
  - when they are unhappy with the conditions of his or her placement, and
  - relationships with the child protection team professionals and psychologists attending to them

All of the above conditions are easier to achieve in a residential setting with only a few places or in a foster family, although the type of placement in itself is not sufficient condition to achieve these objectives.

**The following facilitating factors were identified for when they had left care:**

- Having a stable key adult to turn to
- The service that provides support making education a priority issue
- Receiving educational guidance that promotes post-compulsory education in accordance with their future preferences and aspirations
- The carer’s high level of involvement and high expectations in the issue of education
- Carers and teachers transmitting the value of education: education is the key to leaving their situation of great social difficulty behind them
- Maintaining a group of friends outside the protection system who are very much integrated into the education system
- The involvement of the school in preventing the young person from abandoning education, taking into consideration their difficult circumstances
- The existence of housing support services, grants for continuing studying and personalised ongoing support for those who require it, in order to reduce the fear and insecurity they feel when they reach adult age without family support

Each of these factors point to recommendations and actions that can be addressed to the following parties on different levels: the young people that have been in care, professionals in the education and protection systems, politicians, the media, other citizens, and researchers.

**8. Recommendations and final considerations**

Three outstanding preliminary reflections arise from the results obtained from the YIPPEE project in Spain:

- **The child protection system** needs to reposition education, awarding it a more central and prioritised status with regard to its intervention for both the young people in its care and transition processes for leaving care.
- **The education system** must recognise these young people as a group with special educational needs, particularly due to their family circumstances and to other traumatic life experiences they have suffered. This means providing support beyond the compulsory education stage.

- **The two systems** need to improve their coordination in order to address a serious situation of inequality in educational opportunities which may lead to difficulties to reach qualified jobs and even a high risk of social exclusion for young people in and leaving care.

In fact, this population group has been identified as the one with the highest risk of social exclusion and this risk starts during the period of compulsory education. Using these general ideas as a foundation, the starting points should be as follows:

1. Prioritise education.
2. Accept this group as one with specific needs when it comes to educational support.
3. Avoid changes of residential home and school, and work intensively and in a coordinated way towards providing stability in their lives.
4. Increase close collaboration between departments and their respective services to address such challenges.
5. Improve expectations of young people in care among all social agents involved.
6. Develop innovative actions on all levels to meet the current challenges posed by the child protection population.
7. Delaying their economic autonomy.

### **Final considerations**

- It is an urgent priority that the **inequality of educational opportunities** suffered by this population gain **statistical and social visibility**.
- Comparable information and **indicators** are required from European countries, allowing comparative **monitoring** of current status and improvements achieved through any actions implemented in each country.
- It is essential to use the knowledge of professionals, the young people themselves, researchers and the other social agents involved to **reduce barriers and maximise opportunities** for extending educational pathways that improve labour market access.
- This is a population that has more potential for **resilience** and to achieve success than is generally believed.
- Young people that have been in care usually require more than average support over more time because **their pathways to education are delayed** in comparison with other young people of the same age. They often set themselves ambitious aims, but they can only achieve them much later than the general population (such as reaching higher education). This is a population whose educational pathways hit a standstill due to multiple incidents and traumatic experiences at different times of their lives.
- They require generalised **support to compensate** for this falling behind.
- It is essential to change our **expectations** of this population, which are generally low and stereotyped.
- It is essential to delay labour market integration processes and provide the support necessary to **extend the period of education** to equal that of the general population of their age.
- Significant **political will** is required for change: urgent coordination is required between the social protection system and the education system in order to guarantee actions to ensure greater equality of educational opportunities.

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