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Lived Experiences of Young People after They Leave Care Homes/ Centres to Live Independently in Vietnam

FINAL REPORT

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Executive Summary & Acknowledgement

This report presents some daily life experiences that our young people face after leaving their care centers in Vietnam. It also provides an overview of the context that young care leavers are in such as care models and supporting policies around leaving care. It is the result of an international partnership among Unitec Institute of Technology, Trinity College Dublin, and Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities. The project was funded by International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), Trinity College Dublin, and Unitec Institute of Technology.

For young people leaving care, the ability to adapt and adjust during the transition is crucial for their well-being as well as success later in life. The most well-known research in this area is largely confined to richer countries although some work is beginning to emerge in middle and low-income countries. This article provides an overview of experiences of young care leavers from different private and public care centers in Vietnam; looking at their progress in different areas such as education, accommodation and work, friendship, biological family connection, and adjustment to life after leaving the centers. These themes were extracted from 25 interviews with young care leavers living in the South of Vietnam. The findings revealed despite facing many significant challenges after leaving the care centers, they can still succeed with the right kind of support together with their resilience and determination.

I would like to acknowledge a number of individuals that have made valuable contributions to this project. First, Professor Robert Gilligan, who as the co-lead researcher in this project, has initiated the ideas and topics for this project and contributed invaluable insights with his years of experience in conducting research on this topic in many different countries. This project would have not been possible without him. Second, great thanks to Associate Professor Nga Hanh Do and Ms. Thao Phuong Nguyen for their ground work in Vietnam in recruiting, interviewing participants, and coordinating all the project-related work in Vietnam.

A particular acknowledgement is due to the Advisory Group:

- Mr. Trần Công Bình: Programme Partnership Specialist, UNICEF Vietnam

- Mr. Phan Trường Sơn, Director of Tinh Than Foundation

- Ms. Trần Nguyễn Đức Hạnh, REACH Vietnam

They have provided invaluable advice, input, and feedback throughout the project. Special thanks to the involved care centers for their support in recruiting participants. Without their support, we would have not had as many voices as presented here.

I also would like to acknowledge our two research assistants:

(1) PhD candidate Tran Thi Dan Huyen: School of Education, Victoria University of Wellington

(2) Dr. Le Cao Tinh, Senior ESOL Tutor, Wellington Institute of Technology & Whitireia Community Polytechnic

They have worked really hard to translate the research findings into best practices and built a beautiful website with interactive videos for our online learning module.

Sincerely,

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Background

In most countries, children who grow up in official care centers, or in official foster families, must leave the care setting when they reach 18 years of age. It is often very challenging for these young people to suddenly have to manage on their own with little or no support. Young people who grow up in their own families can normally count on their parents' support and advice as they begin to establish themselves in the world. But for the young people leaving official care setting, they may lack this support and may have never had the opportunity to learn skills to live independently. They will typically have little or no money or other resources and often don't reach out for support from social service agencies.

The increasing complexity of many societies means that pathways from the teenage years to early adulthood are more diverse and less 'programmed' than was often the case in the past. Young people must now negotiate this period of transitions across multiple pathways. Young people leaving care must manage on their own in so many ways: they have to find a way to make a living, to find somewhere safe to live, to find friends and contacts who will be supportive and not take advantage of them. Even basic skills like cooking may not be easy for them.

In a systematic review of 21 studies of care leavers' experiences of their transition from care (including some studies from the Global south), six major themes were identified as concerns in daily living. These were 'academic qualifications, housing problems, employment and financial instability, building relationships and assimilating to cultural norms, and access to health care.' Various sets of factors may thus influence outcomes for young people leaving care – linked to the reasons they had to enter care or other pre-admission experience; the quality of their experiences while they lived in the care setting(s); their experiences in the immediate period of transition; and the longer-term conditions – supportive or otherwise – in their early adult years (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, 2018, p.142).

The challenge of transition from care settings to life without support systems may be even sharper in countries without strong welfare state supports. In her study of 100 female care leavers in

India, Dutta (2017) reported that 70% of her sample said that they had no one with whom they could share their problems. Weak social support networks may be a legacy of placement in care settings due to resulting disruptions to family or wider connections. As they seek to make their way in the world with, possibly, few close ties or connections, care leavers may be forced to re-assess or re-negotiate family relationships and even to re-consider who counts as 'family' in their lives – an issue reported from different countries, for example, South Africa (Moodley, Raniga and Sewpaul, 2018), Zimbabwe (Gwenzi, 2019), Ireland (Parker and Mayock, 2018) and England (Boddy, 2018).

In Vietnam, there is evidence from the Young Lives Study that 10% of young people generally are not in education, employment or training (Espinoza, Benny, Duc, & Hang, 2018). Based on studies from South Africa and other countries, there is evidence that such NEET rates are liable to be higher for care leavers than for youth generally. Given the disadvantages reported to be facing minority youth in Vietnam (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2018), it is reasonable to speculate that care experienced adults are among those disadvantaged groups and that they face a higher risk of NEET status based on indirect evidence from within Vietnam and on the likely relevance of the international trend for higher rates of NEET among care leavers.

Actions at a policy level and at the front line of social work practice can help strengthen the efforts of young care leavers to establish themselves as adults who are full members of society, with positive experiences over time as parents, workers, students and citizens. The right types of support can assist care-experienced young adults in leading satisfying and productive lives in their families, workplace and communities. Social research has an important role to play in shining light on what helps and hinders progress towards this full social inclusion of care experienced by young people. In their review of care leaving issues in Vietnam, Collins and Bui (2016) observe that little is known about how care leavers fare after leaving the care setting.

As a contribution to help in closing this important gap in knowledge, this research aims to explore the following issues: (a) What are the experiences that prove influential as barriers or supports in the parallel transitions of these young people from care to independence and from youth

to adulthood? (b) In what ways, does the young people's own agency (or lack of) prove influential in their progress after they leave care institutions? (c) What types of informal support (from family, friends, etc) seem most relevant based on the experience of the participants? We are hopeful that our findings can contribute to policy processes, future research and the training of social workers in relation to the needs of this special population of young adults who have a special claim on the interest and support of the people of each country.

Implementation Method

We undertook a qualitative study in which we interviewed 25 young people. Participants are alumni from a number of public and private funded care centers in Vietnam. Recruitment was conducted with the help of care centers' staff. At the beginning of the project, the four researchers met in Vietnam in early 2018 to discuss project details and develop interview questions. Then, an advisory group was formed, including one person from UNICEF Vietnam, one from Tinh Than foundation, and one from REACH. Both Tinh Than Foundation and REACH are non-profit organisations that provide support to young care leavers in Vietnam. People in the advisory group are experts and practitioners in the field of young care leavers in Vietnam. They provided advice on recruitment strategies; identified key stakeholders to inform about the study from the beginning and at the dissemination stage; reviewed and advised on topics for interviews; reviewed and provided feedback for the research report. The two researchers who locate in Vietnam had a first meeting with the advisory group in Vietnam in mid 2018 to get their feedback about interview questions; who and how to recruit interview participants.

A total of 25 participants were interviewed. They are from seven different care centers (three of them are non-governmental organisations, and four are public funded care centers). All are young adults from 21 to 34 years old, with 15 men and 10 women. The two researchers in Vietnam coordinated the transcribing and translation in Vietnam and then sent transcripts to researchers in New Zealand and Ireland for analysis. The analysis was primarily conducted by two researchers in Ireland and New Zealand. Since the researcher in New Zealand is bilingual, she double-checked the

quality of translation before and during analysis. Thematic and cross-case analysis were used to analyse data. NVivo 12 was used to assist with the analysis and management of data. Both researchers read and analysed the transcripts independently and then compared and discussed the themes that they individually extracted.

Findings

The findings describe experiences of young people in relation to progress in the arenas of work and education since leaving the centers, their experiences in managing accommodation in the same period, and key aspects of their relations with peers and family members since leaving care. This part also underlines the challenges that young people faced but also their determination to make positive progress in their chosen path in work or education, and the support that they were able to secure. The below will discuss some highlights from the findings in general. We are also writing a journal article discussing these findings in more details.

Education and Work Experiences After Leaving Care

Leaving care at the age of 18, for many of our care leavers, the next step is usually to further their education either by going to university or taking vocational training. A majority of our young care leavers chose vocational training as it was free and easier to be admitted. Some popular professions that they follow include: cooking, trade, fashion design, graphic design, room service, and sewing.

Some managed to go to universities and the majors listed are nursing, tourism, electrical engineering, and social work. This is a big achievement as university entrance exam is very competitive in Vietnam, especially for high demand and well-respected profession such as medical, electrical engineering often require a very high grade. High school students would have to prepare for this exam for several years with lots of extra tutorial classes. Some are even less lucky and faced more challenges furthering their education. They end up dropping out of schools due to being

overwhelmed with working and studying at the same time, plus with many personal family issues such as the need to work to support families or looking after family members.

The work that our young care leavers do often links to their education and the training they take during or after leaving the centers. People who graduate from universities often find professional jobs that fit with their majors and people who attend vocational training would find jobs that fit with their skills and people who do not have any qualifications often do labor jobs. People who have disability would face even more challenges when looking for jobs or finding a career for themselves. One person with visual disability find herself doing lots of different jobs just to survive such as selling lottery tickets, washing dishes for restaurants after leaving the care centers.

Accommodation Experiences After Leaving Care

The participants reported a wide range of accommodation options which often seem to link to their education or work circumstance. For people who study at vocational schools or doing apprenticeship such as electrician, plumber, silversmith, etc., they receive free accommodation and even free meals in some programs. For people who attend universities, they can choose to continue staying at the care centers. However, due to the distance, some end up flatting with friends to be close to their universities. For people who are working, they often rent a place with friends whom they know from the care centers or workmates. Some connect back with their biological family members and stay with aunties, biological grandmothers, mothers, or siblings.

Social relationship after leaving care centers

Most participants expressed that they would like to maintain close relationship with the caregivers and friends at their care centers and try to visit the centers as much as they can. Several of them maintain good relationship with their care centers and feel an obligation of giving back to support the center that cared for them. The giving back could be through bringing gifts when visiting the centers, buying school supplies, toys for children who are currently living there, giving money to 'foster mothers', etc.

With all of the challenges of adjusting to an independent life and the social stigma from the ex-care experience, making new friends can be a bit of a challenge for our care leavers. A couple of participants seem to be loners and did not have any close friends that they hang out regularly. More than half of the participants has three or four close friends whom they hang out often and can rely on when they have difficulties. These are often friends from secondary, high school, university friends, or friends from the vocational training centers, or friends who live in the same care center. A couple of people made some close friends at work. For people whose friends are far away, they seem to stay connected via social media and do regular calls at night.

Connection with biological family

A few participants in this study still have either biological mother or father, and biological sibling(s). For people whose biological parents passed away, they still have relatives such as grandparents, aunties or uncles and still keep in contact with them to varying extents. Despite the fact that our young care leavers did not grow up with their biological families, when they grow up and have income, they have a strong sense of responsibility to care for their biological family. This theme is shown especially strong in the cases where the biological parent or grandparent still alive and biological siblings are around.

Recommended Practice Strategies

Based on the research findings, the research team with the help of two research assistants have developed an online learning module that provides some best practices and strategies in working with young care leavers in Vietnam, in consultation with the advisory group. The target audience for this online learning module is social workers, staff working in care centers in Vietnam, NGO staff who work with young care leavers, program managers in Vietnam. All materials are in Vietnamese. Please find the link to the website here:

https://sites.google.com/view/tiengnoitreemcohoancanhkhokhan/gi%E1%BB%9Bi-thi%E1%BB%87u-chung

The online learning module includes 11 short videos to introduce the research, its key findings, and 7 best practices in working with young care leavers before and after they leave their care centers. The recommended practice strategies include:

(1) foster a trusting and loving relationship with the children when they first entered the care center

(2) Strengthen supporting network for care leavers through current friends or people who already left the care center

(3) Keep in contact with them after they leave care and help them build a network of connection

(4) Help them understand different education options and career pathways when they are in high school

(5) Have a good understanding about mental health and well-being issues and provide in-time support

(6) Help them connect/ reconnect with biological or extended families and unpack some family-related issues (if any)

(7) Help them build some life-skills to prepare for an independent life before leaving care

All videos have animated pictures with beautiful illustration to help learners easy to follow and understand. Once completing watching all the videos, learners will have a chance to take an online quiz and case scenario exercises to consolidate their learning and reflect on how to apply these best practices in their work. The website also has an evaluation survey, asking learners to evaluate the online course and provide some feedback or comments about their experience. It will take about 2 hours to complete the whole course.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Could you please tell me how long did you live in the care centre and the reason for living there?

2. Tell me about your thoughts at point of leaving the centre finally

    Prompts: when you were about to leave the centre, how did you feel? What were your thoughts at that time?

3. Could you please tell me about your educational attainment at point of leaving centre, and currently?

    Prompts: What did you study or do for education when you left center and currently? Do you have any future education plan?

4. Could you please tell me about your current occupation, and any other occupations since leaving care setting, or while in care setting?

    Prompts: What have you been doing for living since you left the center? Do you like your job? Any challenges? Any future plan?

5. Tell me about your accommodation arrangements since leaving care setting

    Prompts: Where have you lived since leaving the center? Any challenges? Advantages? Where do you seek help if you have difficulties in accommodation?

6. Could you please tell me about your contact with family members (parents / grandparents / siblings etc) since leaving care setting

    Prompts: Do you have any family members that you keep in touch with? How often do you see or talk with them? How is your relationship with them?

7. Tell me about your friendships with young people of own age since leaving care setting (friends from centre, others)?

    Prompts: Who are your friends since leaving the center? How often do you see your friends? How is your relationships? What are you guys do together when you meet? What support that you provide for each other? Do you have any challenges if terms of making and maintaining friendship?

8. What are the best aspects of your life since leaving care setting?

9. What are the most challenging aspects of life since leaving care setting?

10. What advices do you have to a young person soon to leave a care centre – on the basis of the young person's own experience?

Appendix B: Project Photos

- Advisory Group Meeting in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam

(From left: Thao (Researcher), Binh from UNICEF, Hanh (REACH), Nga (Researcher), and Son (LIN))
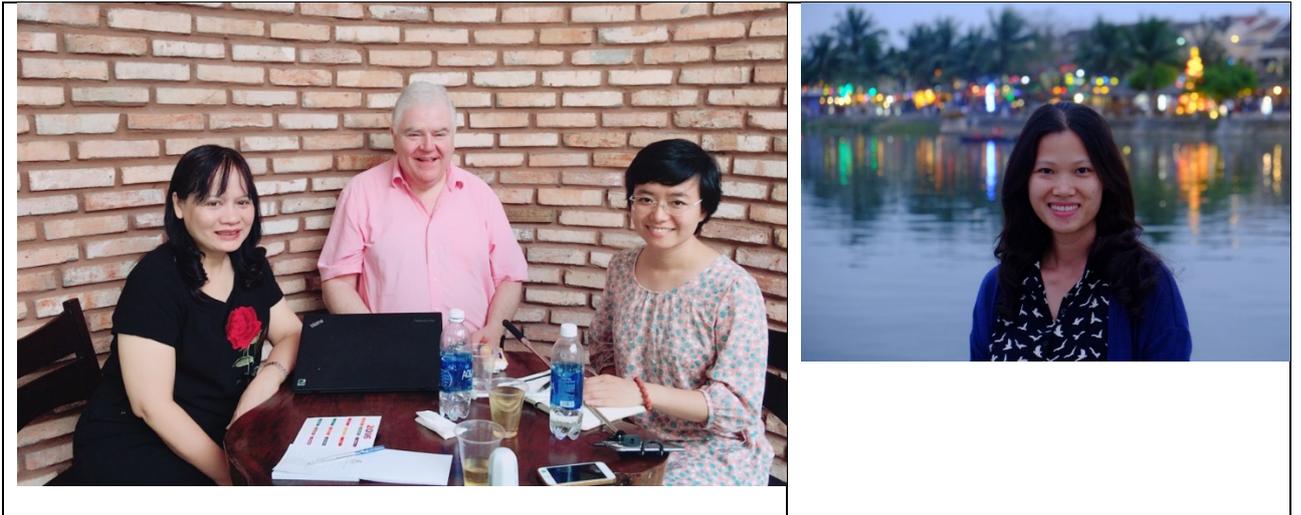
(From left: Nga (USSH Researcher), Robert (Trinity Researcher), and Thao (USSH Researcher), Hoa was via skype)

- Picture of Care Centers in Vietnam: