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MASTER'S THESIS

FROM LIVING IN CARE TO INDEPENDENCE

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INTRODUCTION

For young people, the departure from the family setting to independent living is a significant challenge. This challenge is even bigger for youth who were living in alternative care settings due to the lack of family support as they transition to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). In the EU, approximately 1 million children live in alternative care and every year, a large number of them leave care and transition to adulthood (Eurochild, 2010). Though there is there is no data that approximates how many youths leave care annually in Europe (Eurochild, 2010), in Lithuania, an annual average of 370 young people leave alternative care to live on their own because they have attained the age of majority (Statistics Lithuania, 2020).

Leaving care is an important phase for young people and only a few remain in care beyond the age of 18 with a majority leaving care at 16 or 17 years of age (SOS Children's Villages, 2017). It is regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of alternative care as young people start living independently, earlier than their peers who grew up with their families (SOS Children's Villages, 2010). The transition to adulthood after leaving care is complicated for young people because due to living in institutional settings, they are less ready for independent living (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009). Despite not being ready for adulthood and independent living, care leavers have to take the responsibilities that come with adulthood in a short and accelerated time (Stein, 2005) unlike their peers who were not in care and assume adult responsibilities gradually according to the "emerging adulthood" theory (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014).

As a result, care leavers are particularly vulnerable and studies have shown them to have poorer outcomes: they are two and four times more likely to suffer from mental health disorders and substance abuse than non-placed young people respectively (Haggman-Laitila, Salokekkila, & Karki, 2018), they have the highest risk of social exclusion as adults (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) and have more chances of being recruited into criminal gangs where they may suffer abuse and exploitation (Sakaliene & Pleckeviciene, 2012). These risks can however be reduced through the development and provision of care leaver support which start while they are still in care and extends to when they leave care transition to adulthood (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009). Many studies have concluded that care leaver support needs to be holistic. This suggests a combination of different activities for physical and psychosocial health as well as in different life domains such as employment, education, economy and accommodations (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2019).

To the tune of this, The United Nations in its Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010) in their *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* make some recommendations that childcare

agencies and facilities should have a clear policy on the support for after care and follow-up in their conclusion of their work with children which, ranges from preparation for transition and aftercare support. With regards to the UN guidelines for the alternative care of children, rights of children and people living with disabilities, the government of Lithuania developed the Action Plan on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services for Disabled Persons and Children Without Parental Care 2014 – 2020 (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2014). This Action Plan highlights the necessary steps to be taken in Lithuania regarding the services provided to children without parental care and support to their guardians and carers (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2014).

It is important to note that the provision of all the above-mentioned transitional care leaver support is done by leaving care program staff and social workers. They are the moderators of these support services and responsible for the success of all leaving care support interventions. These human service professionals help care leavers understand what living independently truly is (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2019). They are also there every step of the way serving as independent living coaches encouraging young people to join the community – this is associated with positive outcomes for care leavers (Sinkkonen & Kyattala, 2015).

Problem: A report, suggested that the leaving care system for supporting care leavers in Lithuania is yet to be developed and recognized. In order to develop and recognize a system that works, research will need to be carried out to understand the issue. In leaving care, the role of staff is very crucial as they are the service providers and therefore have an impact on how successful the service provision will be (Opening Doors for Europe's Children, 2019). As a result, it is important to research their roles in supporting care leavers and what the needed competence and abilities are to build and maintain positive relationships with care leavers and involve them in programs (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2019). Additionally, on the topic of moving from institutionalization to community-based care in Lithuania, BGI Consulting (2020), assessed the competencies of social workers working with children in alternative care in Lithuania. It showed that social workers lacked the skills to work with specific clients and it highlighted improving the knowledge of these social workers on preparing children for independent life as important.

Novelty of Topic: Leaving care has been researched in many parts of the world, such as Asia: (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009), identified to what extent Israeli care leavers felt ready to manage the challenges of independent living, (Sulimani-Aidan , 2015), examined the future expectations of care leavers and its correlation to their housing, educational achievement and overall life satisfaction, (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020), explored the role of care leaver support during their transition to adulthood;

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Europe: (Häggman-Laitila, et al., 2019), discovered how the different factors documented at the beginning of care affected care leavers at the end of receiving their aftercare services in Finland, (Bengtsson, Sjöblom, & Öberg, 2020), aimed to understand the patterns of care leaver transitions to adulthood in Sweden and how their personal agency is reflected in those patterns.

and Africa: (Bond, 2018) established the services aimed at preparing young people in care for leaving the care system and the follow-up services available, and evaluated the services according to care leavers and their social workers in South Africa; Frimpong-Manso: (2012) explored the needs of care leavers as they were prepared to adulthood in an SOS Children's Village in Ghana, (2015) examined the sources and kind of support available to care leavers as they transitioned to independence and (2018) explored the experiences of care leavers in Ghana in relation to the challenges they faces and what helped them overcome those challenges.

Furthermore, several studies have been done on the subject of leaving care in Lithuania that have covered a number of themes: (Gudžinskienė, Raudeliūnaitė, & Uscila, 2017) revealed the methods used by social workers in developing independent living skills of care leavers and the skills care leavers found challenging to develop; (Gudžinskienė & Raudeliūnaitė, 2016) sought to find out the direction to be taken by social workers in improving how youth are taught independent living skills after implementing the transition to community based care as directed by the Action Plan; (Samašonok, 2013) assessed the educational significance of and how school students are prepared for independent living. BGI Consulting (2020), assessed the support provided by social workers to care leavers in Lithuania. It showed that there is a need to improve the care leaver support as social workers lacked the competencies to provide care leaver support but, did not point out what those competencies were. Consequently, this research on care leavers transition to adulthood will put a focus on the support given to care leavers as they transition to adulthood and what the specific competencies and roles of the social worker are.

Practical Relevance: The research will provide policy makers in Lithuania with up-to-date information on the support needs that care leavers have, and the competencies required by social workers who provide support to care leavers. This will aid in the development of the leaving care framework in Lithuania.

Object: Care leaver transition to adulthood.

Goal: To analyse the support given to care leavers as they transition to adulthood.

Objectives
1. To analyse the policies on leaving care in Lithuania, Europe and the United Nations.
2. To explore the needs of care leavers as they transition to adulthood.

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3. To research the competencies of social workers in care leavers transition to adulthood.
4. To research the role of social workers in care leavers transition to adulthood.

Research Methods

This research adopted the following research methods:

- Analysis of scientific literature: the works of various authors who have written on leaving care has been reviewed, summarized and analysed.

- Analysis of leaving care policies: United Nations, European Union and Lithuanian leaving care policies have been reviewed and analysed

- Qualitative research: semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis is used to collect and analyze the results of the study.

Research Question
1. How are care leavers supported as they transition to independence?

This thesis is made up of four chapters. The first two chapters lay an overview of the policies around leaving care and also areas where care leavers have needs as they transition to adulthood and the last two chapters contain the research methodology and results, where the findings are analysed leading to a theoretical and empirical conclusion and recommendations based on the findings are made. This study contains six tables, three figure and an annex which contain the research instrument and detailed tables containing the research results. This study has 60 pages, and 119 references were used.

Vocabulary of Main Concepts

- **Alternative Care/Care:** Formal care provided in a family environment by the order of an administrative or judicial authority and all care provided in a residential environment, including in private facilities whether as a result of judicial or administrative measures or not (United Nations, 2010).

- **After-care:** A period after a young person departs from a formal care setting during which they are eligible for and should be receiving ongoing guidance and support (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).

- **Age of Majority:** the age that children become adults and acquires full legal capacity. They can engage in legal activities and be liable for contractual obligations (European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights, 2020).

- **Youth in Care:** Young people who have been placed in an alternative care (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).

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- **Care Leaver:** Someone who is leaving alternative care after they reach legal age (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).
- **Leaving Care Support:** The process that begins when a young person in alternative care reaches an age where they have to leave and includes preparation for independent living, moving to independent living and the period after (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).
- **Transition:** A period of change where young people move from formal alternative care settings to being independent adults (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).
- **Key worker:** This is described as a system for providing individualized social care through specific persons (Cahill, Holt, & Kirwan, 2016).
- **Resilience:** The ability to recover from adversity and move forward in a positive manner (Rutter, 2012)
- **Social Worker:** Care professionals working with care leavers (used interchangeably with carer and case worker in this paper) (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).

1 THEORETICAL APPROACHES IN UNDERSTANDING CARE LEAVERS TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Stein (2006) highlighted three theories that could be used in leaving care research, attachment theory, focal theory and resiliency theory. Some other theories such the systems theory and ecological systems theory can be used in leaving care research especially for understanding the interactions of care leavers with their environment. Some research has also used the emerging adulthood theory in order to understand the peculiar stage care leavers find themselves. For the sake of this research, the resiliency and emerging adulthood theories will be used together with the 'use of self' concept. This is to be able to analyze the roles of social workers, their competencies and how they influence the way that they are able to support and meet the needs that care leavers have as they transition to independence.

1.1 Resiliency Theory

Resilience theory is rooted in the study of adversity and in an interest about how adverse life experiences impact harmfully on people. Researchers were looking to answer why some people bounced back after experiencing adversity while others are unable to. Resilience was borne as a result of trying to understand how people could have better outcomes than others. It has been theorized that resilience is process that leads to an outcome' (this process is also known as protective resources or protective factors) with the outcome being that people become 'resilient' after experiencing adversity and going through a mediation process (*Figure 1*). This process is made of many levels of the person-in-environment rather than just on an individual (Van Breda, 2018). It is also is known to involve an interaction between risk and protective factors (Frimpong-Manso K., 2020). This theory can be used across families, organizations and communities.

Resilience has also been defined as positive adaptation, healthy functioning and the presence or maintenance of competency in the face of and after experiencing adversity. In order to have resilience, there must first be an experience of adversity after which one demonstrates positive adaptation (Carroll, 2020). Resilience was earlier considered to be a trait possessed by certain individuals. However, research has now shown that resilience fluctuates over time as a result of developmental and environmental changes and only few people are resilient all of the time. People who have experienced situations of risk and distress are able to show resilence and the resources that promote their resilience are protective factors. These protective factors do not protect people from trauma or risks. Rather, they facilitate coping during or after the traumatic event (Refaeli, 2017).

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Figure 1: Resilience as A Process and Outcome
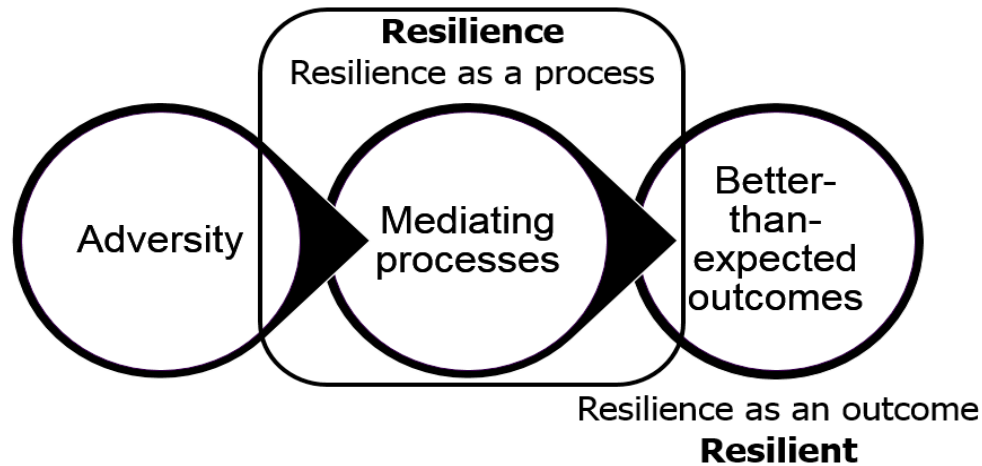
(Van Breda, 2018)

Therefore, it can be said that resilience reflects a developmental process where one is able to utilize resources in and outside the self to negotiate current challenges adaptively and, by extension, to develop a foundation on which to rely when future challenges occur (Yates & Grey, 2012). Resilience in young people has been found to be associated with a number of factors such as a warm relationship with at least one adult, along with positive peer influences and school experiences. Additionally, young people can develop qualities such as positive self-esteem and a belief in one's self efficacy; these qualities have been associated with resilience. Resilience allows them to respond effectively to crises, stress and distress in their lives and show effective coping strategies for dealing with such situations (Refaeli, 2017).

Care leavers are in a unique period known as emerging adulthood where they are neither teenagers nor adults and this period is a particularly difficult period for care leavers due to a lack of familial support (Arnett, 2007). For them, resilience as a quality that enables them to find fulfillment in their lives despite any adversities that they may have faced. It is about overcoming odds, coping and recovery (Stein, 2005). In order for care leavers to be regarded as resilient, they need to demonstrate sustained competency and success in spite of the traumas that they have experienced. This trauma includes the trauma as a result of the abuse in their families of origin, their removal from their original homes and communities, a pattern of multiple placements and the stressors related to exit from alternative care (Loring, 2012). Applying resilience theory to explore care leavers transition to adulthood has shown that those care leavers who are resilient use the resources (protective factors) available to them. These resources could be personal, relational or environmental (Frimpong-Manso, 2020).

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Additionally, Refaeli (2017) divided the protective factors into three categories: personal resources, support from family and support from significant others. Two domains were identified as components of resiliency for care leavers, "optimism about the future" and "preparedness for independent living". Optimism is a personal attribute of care leavers that is necessary for countering adversity. Preparation for independent living is fostered by their environment (Loring, 2012). Carroll (2020) also operationalized resilience in care leavers as (a) their ability to tap into the life and health sustaining resources available to them and (b) the provision of the necessary resources by care leavers social and environmental context. This can be presumed to include the service workers who work with them as they transition to adulthood such as, their social workers. The interaction of those two factors – the individual and the contextual should promote positive adaptation despite any adversities faced by them.

It is necessary to understand the adversities that care leavers face in their transition to adulthood and need to overcome in order to be considered as being resilient. They experience low levels of education which also will have a 'snowball effect' on their economic status – higher education is very important for achieving economic self-sufficiency. Not having education means that even when they find jobs, they will work as low-level staff – this type of employment pattern can result in a continuous job and income insecurity. Also, low leveled jobs will mean that they make low income, and this could result in them not being able to pay rent, resulting in their homelessness. Care leavers have had experiences of trauma. Psychological trauma has adverse effects on physical and mental health. This is made even more problematic because of their low income that may cause them to not be able to afford or have health insurance. Care leavers are also known to use hard drugs and engage in anti-social behavior and these may lead to their arrest (Loring, 2012).

Research has shown that care leavers who overcome adversities have: strong support networks; committed mentors and people from outside their families; extra curricular activities that help them learn competencies and emotional maturity; the ability to re-frame adversities to be able to recognize the beneficial and damaging effects; the ability to make a difference by helping people through volunteering or working; and exposure to challenging situations that provide opportunities to develop problem solving and emotional coping skills (Stein, 2006). Support that care leavers give themselves by being self reliant has also been shown as improving the resilience of care leavers (Carroll, 2020). Stein (2006) explains that helping care-leavers to develop a knowledge of themselves, self esteem and self efficacy may promote their resilience. The development of these traits will lead them having a positive sense of identity which is in turn connected to: feeling able to plan and being in control; lower rates of temperamental risk; and the the ability to re-frame

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adversities to be able to recognize the beneficial and damaging effects. Additionally, a safe and non-judgemental environment will contribute to the resilience of care leavers. In this environment, care leavers can reflect on potential opportunities for the future and dedicate time for exploring them. This can then serves as a powerful tool in their realization of future plans. Future oriented perspectives and the setting of goals for the future are regarded as key components of resilience among care leavers. Social workers can help care leavers to develop their resilience but they will need to have some competencies and the way that social workers are able to work with care leavers is described in the next sub-chapter.

1.2 Concept of 'Use of Self'

'Use of self' is defined as: "the combination of skills, knowledge and values learned in social work education with aspects of one's personal self, comprising of personality traits, belief systems, life experiences and cultural heritage" (Dewane, 2006). Thus, the use of self concept (use of self) implies that social workers are able to develop a professional self through training, that they use consciously and purposefully in practice. Successful social workers do not only have a mastery of the competencies they have learnt and developed in their social work education, but also integrate these competencies well with their true selves (Kaushik, 2017). These personal competencies are used purposefully and intentionally within the context of the helping relationships that social workers have with their clients, whether the practice is at a micro, mezzo or macrolevel (Heydt & Sherman, 2005) depict this description in *Figure 2* below:

Figure 2: Description Of Social Worker Competencies Influence On Practice
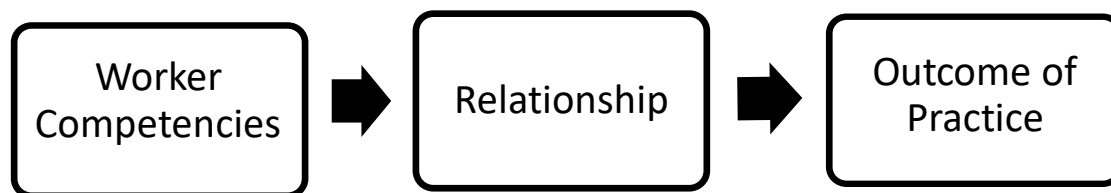
(Heydt & Sherman, 2005)

The use of self has been recognized by social workers as a part of relationship-based practice but, there is less clarity about what it consists of in practice or how it can be presented in different contexts with different service users such as youth in care. Research has attempted to clarify this notion by

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explaining that the personal values, attitudes, prejudices, and beliefs of social workers affect how helpful they can be to their clients. These values and beliefs are revealed by social workers to clients in professional relationships directly and indirectly. When social workers are more consciously aware of how their own beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors impact their professional relationship, the more consciously they can choose how to influence the helping relationships in which they are involved. Display of unexamined attitudes, either consciously or unconsciously, may be perceived as barriers by social workers' clients (Heydt & Sherman, 2005). Self-awareness for social workers is important and has been described as their ability to recognize and name the emotions and feelings that make up who they are, which in turn enables them to be aware of and to 'read' the emotional state of others. Said differently, if social workers have never themselves experienced empathy, and the feelings and sensations it embodies, they are less likely to know whether, when and how to offer it when needed. In addition to being aware of their emotions, we they need to give their clients words by developing an emotional vocabulary which has been considered to be a central feature of social workers using themselves in their practice (Trevithick, 2018).

Dewane (2006) has added to this by breaking the use of self into five operational applications; 'use of personality', 'use of relational dynamics', 'use of self-disclosure', 'use of anxiety and use of belief systems. Use of personality' is described as the development of awareness of the self by social workers that they consciously use in practice such as their use of humor, which supports building authentic relationships. 'Use of relational dynamics' is described as the interaction between the social worker and service user, in this case youth in care and care leavers, such as the use of empathy – the ability to sense the young person's world as if it were your own. 'Use of self-disclosure' is described as the level to which social workers disclose their personal lives within the relationship. These first three aspects of the use of self, describe the communication skills social workers use during their interactions with care leavers. 'Use of anxiety' is seen reflection, arguing that when social workers examine their anxiety, it can lead to change in their relationships with their clients. 'Use of belief system' is described as how the beliefs held by social workers are operationalized in their practice. It outlines how the ethics and values of social workers can impact on relationships.

Leichty (2018) states that the use of self is an essential factor in the social worker-client relationship. And this relationship holds an important role for social workers and is facilitated through the use of self to create a compassionate relationship that is led by the social worker. However, it is complex and multifaceted; identifying three facets: the ideal use of self, personal characteristics that underwrite the development of use of self, and the professional capacities that make up the use of self.

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The ability for social workers tap into their use of self to manage their feelings and respond to those of others, has been describes as necessary for the profession because a lot of work is done with people's emotions, traumas and testing life events. This ability positions social workers to be creative and flexible in taking out their tasks (Gordon & Dunworth, 2017).

Through the use of themselves in their work, social workers can act as a friend and an equal with care leavers. It is said to be not only possible, but consistent with the social work values. (McLeod, 2010) Other researchers have disagreed with this premise by explaining that even though through the use of self, social workers can create connections with care leavers, it is important to note that they are not friends or relatives. Social workers still have the professional roles and responsibilities to care leavers, their employers and regulatory bodies. A power imbalance still exists between social workers and care leavers and a confusion about what the professional boundaries are, and the extent of self-disclosure can open doors for exploitation and over identification with particular care leavers. This is especially possible when social workers have experienced similar or the same life traumas with care leavers and are unable to distinguish between what the social worker or care leaver needs are. Therefore, it is important for social workers to make conscious judgements about how much of their selves they are willing to disclose and which facets of their personalities, beliefs and values to use in their interactions with care leavers (Gordon & Dunworth, 2017).

1.3 Emerging Adulthood Theory

Emerging adulthood theory (emerging adulthood) proposed by Arnett (2007) describes the phase of the life span between adolescence and full adulthood. He described this period as not simply an extended adolescence but as a different period from adolescence, where young people are much freer from parental control and therefore, a period of independent exploration. It is also not young adulthood because, that would imply that an early stage of adulthood has been reached although most young people in their have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status namely marriage and parenthood. He put it simply as: *having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work and worldviews* (Arnett, 2007).

Characterized by periods of instability and self-focus, it is a distinct developmental stage where youth experience opportunities for identity development and transition toward adulthood because they are able to experience different roles as they navigate this transition (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014).

This period is from the ages of eighteen to twenty-five and it is a transitional period that has features different in important ways from the preceding period of adolescence. It is an age where young people feel in between and in transition, as they are neither an adolescent nor an adult. But at the same time, it is an age of endless possibilities where young people have an opportunity to transform their lives. A notable characteristic of this period is it offers the best opportunity for self-exploration and focus (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). A lot of their identity exploration allow them to gain a broad range of experiences before taking on the responsibilities of adult life. Focusing on themselves help emerging adults develop daily living skills, understand better who they are and what they want from life thereby building a foundation for their adult lives. This is to meet their goal of self-sufficiency. They also have space to make their own decisions.

The thing about emerging adulthood is that even though they leave their families of origin, their families still continue to act as a source of financial and practical support as well as being a source of guidance and wisdom. They then carry their family influences with them when they leave home, regardless of their family background and they have a huge extent to which they can change and improve themselves (Arnett, 2007).

For care leavers, the transition to adulthood is a period of anxiety and uncertainty due to them feeling unsettled. They have been reported as feeling in-between and wanting to be teenagers again and not adults and also experiencing some instability (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). Even though it is a period when they are freer than they have ever been since they were children, they still struggle with the uncertainty due to feeling like doors have closed on them and they have no more possibilities (Arnett, 2007). To many young adults, they consider themselves adults when they start making decisions and can support themselves financially. For them, these milestones are achieved gradually over time. However, care leavers must assume independence immediately they leave care, this is an abrupt and accelerated transition. They are often not ready for transition and lack the needed support (Stein, 2006). There is an assumption that care leavers have limited opportunities and do not experience the benefits of emerging adulthood. They have limited time and space for self-exploration because they have limited family support and have to support themselves financially. They also experience a lot of instability in employment and accommodation and mostly have only themselves to rely on unlike many young adults their age, who are able to lean on their parents when the need arises. As a result, they are considerably more disadvantaged and vulnerable because they have limited possibilities and opportunities and these are a constraint on their future plans and hopes (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018).

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However, because care leavers are often ill prepared to begin their transition to adulthood, this period of emerging adulthood may allow them more time to complete their education, become financially independent, develop adult relationships and acquire the necessary skills for adulthood (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). Although care leavers may face challenges as they emerge adulthood, this period also holds some potential strengths for them. This is because even though the end of state support ends rather abruptly sending them into harsh realities of adult life, they are at the same time in a situation where they have great potential for responsibility, skill development and self-understanding, more than they had as adolescents (Arnett, 2007). Care leavers in this period also experience identity exploration and self-focus, these are characteristic of the period of emerging adulthood. Identity exploration means that they are able to think about their personal selves and the roles they may hold in life as they transition to adulthood. They can make and choose career goals, and even build on their attitudes (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). Nevertheless, some care leavers have also indicated that this was not a time of exploration at all; exploration was for those that had the time and money to explore. They also stressed that these critical years are more of a time to prepare themselves for their responsibilities in life (Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelcu, 2013).

Self-focus to care leavers involves freeing themselves from their families of origin (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). Conversely, the experiences of care leavers in emerging adulthood may also be different from what the theory poses. For example, care leavers are shown to not be able to experience a period of self-focus. During this time, it is understood that they have 'no role' in order to fully focus on themselves. Research has shown the possibility of this being more of an 'ideal' than actual reality. Care leavers have reported having multiple roles that they have had to take on (e.g., caretaking, parenting) for many years. They did not have such an opportunity to be role less such as other young people or care leavers because of early parenting and taking care of some of their siblings. Therefore, this period of being role less may be ideal for self-growth and exploration, however, it may not be necessary for becoming an adult (Munson,et. al, 2013).

Summary of theoretical approaches

This section highlighted and explained two theories; resiliency and emerging adulthood and one concept: the use of self. Resiliency theory explains that care leavers who develop necessary skills and traits can become more resilient and therefore have a good transition to adulthood; emerging adulthood theory puts some perspective in understanding that care leavers are at a period oof exploration and endless possibilities, which is a good time for them to learn the necessary skills that will support them as they transition to adulthood; the use of self-concept gives an understanding of

the way that social workers can use aspects of themselves such as their personalities to create authentic relationships with care leavers. This use of self is a personal competency that social workers will find valuable in their work as it is believed to be more important than their knowledge of social work.

2 LEAVING CARE LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Leaving care standards have been set at the international level by the United Nations through their Conventions of the Rights of the Child (2010) which, includes the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010). Using the United Nations policies as a yardstick, the Council of Europe has made some further recommendations (2005) on the rights of children living in care to be implemented by the members of the European Union. In Lithuania, the Government through the Ministry of Social Security developed Action Plan (2014) on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services for Disabled Persons and Children Without Parental Care for 2014-2020. This Action Plan takes its bearings from the United Nations Convention and the Recommendations of the Council of Europe.

United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children

According to the European Commission (2013), because all the EU member states have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the standards and principles of the UNCRC must guide all the EU policies and actions that have an impact on the rights of the child. In article 20 of the UNCRC (2010), there is an acknowledgement on the entitlement held by children who have lost parental care which is, the support and assistance by states in ensuring that they have access to alternative care in accordance with the laws of the state (European Commission, 2013).

The UNCRC gives more detail to the expectations of the support of children in residential care by releasing *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* (Guidelines) (United Nations, 2010) that make recommendations for states' policy and practice regarding the promotion of the wellbeing of children who are deprived of parental care. In these guidelines, is the importance of creating individualized plans for children and youth in care while taking into consideration the circumstances of each child/youth, their participation in decision-making in the process of creating their plans for preparation for after care from early on in their care journey, support, counselling and monitoring even after care.

Additionally to children and youth being prepared for leaving care as early as possible, the guidelines bring in new suggestions for leaving care: the early preparation of children and youth for leaving care

should be through the acquisition of life skills which, are fostered by participation in the life of the local community; there should be a specialized person to help facilitate the independence of care leavers while leaving care; children and youth in care should have access to ongoing education and vocational training opportunities to gain life skills that will help them as they assume independence and finally, adequate access to social, legal and health services together with financial support even after they have left care (United Nations, 2010). The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of children is the key guiding document at the international level in alternative care for children and youth as it breaks down the provisions under the UNCRC into more concrete and operational messages on what constitutes quality care for children (Wenke, 2015).

Recommendation of European Council

There are recommendations made by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2005), to their Member States on the rights of children living in care. One recommendation was that children leaving care should be assessed and given the appropriate aftercare support so that they can reintegrate into the society (Recommendation 5) (Council of Europe, 2020). In its 2012-2015 Strategy for the Rights of the Child by the Council of Europe (Monaco's Strategy) (2012), is the Strategic Objective three – Guaranteeing the rights of children in vulnerable situations (Council of Europe, 2012). Children in alternative care is mentioned under this objective with regards to the need to provide and promote expertise to member states in the implementation of the UN Guidelines for the alternative care of children (2010) and the Council of Europe's recommendations on the rights of children living in residential institutions (2005).

This recognition by the Council of Europe on the necessity of giving children and youth the appropriate leaving and after care support that will allow them to re-integrate into the society led to the support of projects with civil organizations such as the creation of a Toolkit for practitioners (ToolKit for Practitioners: Leaving and aftercare, 2011) which, provides guidance for policy makers and practitioners on the most effective ways of working with children and youth to ensure a successful transition from care to adulthood. The Toolkit (2011) highlights that one of the main purposes of placement is to prepare young people for adulthood and the leaving care process should involve an assessment of care leavers needs, creation of a pathway plan, personal support and counselling and monitoring results and review. All of these elements together will greatly improve the chances of a seamless transition to adulthood.

In addition to the Toolkit, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) came up with guidelines for leaving care with the support of the EU. A notable example of such project is the Quality4Children

Standards for Out-of-Home Child Care in Europe, which was developed by FICE International, IFCO and SOS Children's Villages in cooperation with national governments and international organizations (International Foster Care Organization [IFCO]; SOS-KINDERDORF International [SOS] & Federation Internationale de Communaute Educatives, 2007). These guidelines provide standards for alternative care that are specific to the European contexts. It carries information relevant for all stakeholders in alternative care and also has comprehensive guidelines on leaving care and follow up services (Wenke, 2015). Standards 15-18 of the Quality4Children (2007) lays emphasis on the important aspects that care givers must consider when preparing children and youth for leaving alternative care settings which are: individualized care models based on their needs, clear communication in the leaving care process, support in decision making for the child/youth and the establishment of a personal social life and finally support and counselling during even after they have reached the age of majority. The Quality4Children (2007) was developed before the release of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010) in consultation with 32 European countries and using the experiences of the childcare organizations, the UNCRC and The European Council's Recommendations on the rights of children living in residential institutions as the framework on which to build upon.

Leaving Care Legislation in Lithuania

The Republic of Lithuania as a "corporate" parent is responsible for preparing children in its care. The legal and institutional framework of childcare in the Republic of Lithuania is in line with the UNCRC and its Guidelines since the Republic is a party to the convention (Sherwin, Lerch, & Dobson, 2012). In line with the UNCRC, Lithuania developed in its Action Plan (2014), on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services for Disabled Persons and Children Without Parental Care for 2014-2020 (Action Plan) which aims to reduce the number of children living in institutions by moving them to homes with family settings in the community (deinstitutionalization). This move is harmonious with the recommendation in the Guidelines (2010) which state that the early preparation of children and youth for leaving care should be through the acquisition of life skills which, are fostered by participation in the life of the local community.

Another notable task in the Action Plan (2014) is the improvement of services to the individuals leaving the care system through the provision of social housing system and social workers on individual basis in order to facilitate integration into the society – this is also in line with recommendations in the Guidelines (2010) about care leavers having access to social services and a specialized person to facilitate their independence while leaving care.

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Social Reports (2016) and (2017) both mention the Action Plan (2014) and primarily focus on the deinstitutionalization of care – moving to community-based care and do not provide any information on work that has been done on the preparation for leaving care. According to the Social Report (2017), the transition from institutional care is being implemented through pilot projects in separate regions in Lithuania with a gradual transition to the model of community-based services for children.

BGI consulting (2020) released an interim report on the implementation of the Action Plan. It revealed that the movement from institutional to community care has made it possible for the needs of youth in care to be met with respect to preparing them for independent living because, it has been designed to meet their individual needs and this is in their best interest. It also revealed that the changes made according to the recommendations of the Action Plan are sustainable because they provide better opportunities for the personal and social development of youth in care and encourages their integration into the community thereby leading to an increase in the availability of necessary services in those communities. Additionally, it gives care leavers an opportunity to form and foster close relationships with their social workers that is based on trust and confidence. The social workers also have encouraged youth in care to build relationships and communicate with others in their communities. However, there is still room for improvement, such services are more in the urban areas and not readily available in rural Lithuania. As a result, youth in care are not able to easily integrate into the communities there and have little access to places where they can participate in leisure activities. Also, for the social workers, even though they have the sufficient competencies for the provision of community services, they need to have some subject specific competencies so that youth in care can better achieve integration into the community especially upon leaving care. To this tune, it was recommended for the social workers to acquire more knowledge with working with specific clients such as care leavers so that they can know better what skills and knowledge care leavers need in order for them to be able to integrate into the community (BGI Consulting, 2020).

The Lithuanian Ministry of Social Services and Labor provide care leavers with support upon leaving care due to attaining the age of majority or marriage in the form of monthly payments and a one-time sum for youth who have left care but are still in full-time education and housing after leaving care respectively (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2020), these benefits can be gotten only if the youth are under the age of 25. This cash support is the only leaving care support given to youth in Lithuania by the state and NGO's that provide leaving care services do not receive additional state support (Sherwin, Lerch, & Dobson, 2012).

Although not a policy for care leavers, Lithuania has "The Youth Guarantee" project that aims to improve integration into employment and social life for youth (ages 14-29) Not in Education,

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Employment or Training (NEET) (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2016), since a lot of care leavers fall into this demographic, it is worth mentioning as they will most likely benefit from the youth guarantee. Of course, in an ideal situation, there would be such programs such as the Youth Guarantee developed specifically for care leavers in order to improve their chances of gaining from such programs.

In the Republic of Lithuania, there are legal provisions for outsourcing alternative care services to public institutions or organizations (Lithuania, Law on Social Services, 19 January 2006 No X-493, Article 2.4 and 2.9, 2020). SOS Children's Village is one of the organizations working to integrate care leavers into Lithuanian communities. In a document from their Prepare for Leaving Care (2017) project which, is active in some European countries including Lithuania, there are some specific recommendations made to the Lithuanian government that suggest there is still a way to go in the development and implementation of the leaving care policy and practice in Lithuania. The suggestions include the division and classification of the leaving care processes and approaches, legalization of the concept of leaving care and its adoption into the national legislation, training of leaving care service providers, having a body responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the leaving care system.

Conclusion

This section provided explanations on the policies of leaving care in Europe and Lithuania with the Guidelines (2010) as a yardstick. It highlighted the ways that youth in care should be prepared for leaving care and how the European and Lithuanian policies relate to the standards set by the United Nations. In the coming chapters, care leavers transition to adulthood will be defined and some needs that care leavers have as they prepare for leaving care and transition to adulthood will be defined and explored.

3 THE NEEDS OF CARE LEAVERS AS THEY TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Introduction

Care leavers like all young people who are transitioning to adulthood, have common needs of employment, financial independence, independent living skills, building and maintaining support systems and to become contributing members of the larger community (Loring, 2011). However, for care leavers, this transition is more complicated. Often, they do not receive extra support from their biological families which, are stressful as a result of past experiences. They do not have safe spaces to return to if necessary and as a result, need additional support as they transition to adulthood (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2019).

Defining Transition to Adulthood

Transition in this context is defined as the process of moving from a child focused system to an adult orientated system. Care leavers experience complex transitions that involve movements from social worker to personal advisor, from foster care (or children's home) to independent accommodation, from school to work, further or higher education or to none of these (Munro & Simkiss, 2020). Youth in care typically start their transition to adulthood once they turn 18, this has been regarded as being earlier than their peers who have never experienced the care system (Stein, 2006). The transition is also seen to be compressed. But not only is this process of transition compressed for care leavers, they also have to negotiate these transitions without the safety net of having financial, emotional and practical support of their families (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Munro and Simkiss (2020) explained that the transition is not just one transition but multiple and typically includes:

(1) Youth in care becoming care leavers after leaving foster care or residential care and moving to independent (or semi-independent) living arrangements; (2) Care leavers transitioning from education to employment, training (or to Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) status); and in some cases; (3) Care leavers being transferred from the looked after children team to the leaving care team; and changes in their allocated workers from a children's social worker to a leaving care personal advisor.

Many studies have looked at care leavers' adjustment to independent living in different areas and concluded that they are at high risk of experiencing difficulties during the transition from dependent youth in care to independent adults and that the initial transition experience can impact their ability to cope later on in their independent lives. It has also been indicated that immediately after the transition and even in subsequent years, they deal with accommodation problems, unemployment and financial deficiency and are involved in risky behaviors, such as crime and substance abuse and suffer

from more emotional difficulties (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). This sensitive time is particularly important to the care leavers, both because of this developmental stage in which they must take responsibility for their adult lives in a short and rapid period (Stein, 2006) and because this time in their lives presents many challenges and difficulties for them. Another significance of this period in their lives is its possible impact on their futures as adults. It has been found that how they navigate this period is of utmost importance in predicting their adjustment and success in their adult lives (Munro & Simkiss, 2020).

Therefore, in order to mitigate these risks, it is recommended that these transitions should not start without proper planning from a strength-based and person-centered perspective with the care leavers being involved in the process. It is also recommended for social workers to prepare ahead of time for the subsequent transitions that will follow (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Research asserts that social workers are expected to prepare, guide and support the young people's transition from collective to independent living (Anghel, 2011) which includes support and guidance services such as life skills in the main areas needed for independent living. Different studies found a link between the quality of preparation for leaving care and aftercare experience and achievements (Munro & Simkiss, 2020).

The success of transition depends on meeting needs specific to each stage supported by a skilled transition guide. Care leavers have realized themselves the importance of support and guidance at this critical stage of their lives. It is advisable that social workers find a way to teach them while in care how to leverage the skills they learned during that time for the transition period, because that period could contribute to strengthening their confidence in the future (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014).

In their transition to adulthood, the care leavers need to be first prepared for leaving care. This happens while they are still in care and as they leave care, they are meant to transition to adulthood, this transition involves a number of needs to be met, which are explained in the following sub-chapters.

3.1 Preparation for Leaving Care

Introduction

It is important that looked after children and youth are prepared for adulthood for several reasons ranging from their unique physical and psychological needs due to trauma and because they begin adulthood earlier than young people in care of their biological families (Frimpong-Manso, 2012). They need the adequate skills and competencies that will help in making them independent when they integrate into the society (Perera, 2018).

Relationships

Developing quality relationships is tantamount for effective interventions with youth in care. Research of successful transitions of care leavers to independence has consistently pointed to the importance of stability through the positive relationships with their 'carers' (Cahill, Holt, & Kirwan, 2016). For children and youth in care, the relationship between a young person in care and the key worker has long been considered to be the bedrock of social work with children and youth because they are there from the very start of the care journey. They provide individualized and practical care through assessment, counselling, and the coordination of care and also act as a secure base to support care leavers' transition to independent living. In summary, the key worker is the go-to for all the professionals involved in a cared for child's life and has the opportunity to influence the young peoples' experiences in care through these positive and stabilizing relationships (Swan, Holt, & Kirwan, 2018). These supportive relationships with formal figures such as the social worker is known for providing a safe, non-judgmental space that allowed for self-reflection and the exploration of current and future possibilities. These relationships also act as a place for the provision of counselling and guidance in a caring and accepting way which took into account the needs and strengths of care leavers. Care leavers could take a break from life and think about themselves when they were with their key workers. This is because they were accessible and addressed the needs of the care leavers in a non-judgemental manner and with acceptance (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020).

In a study carried out by Frimpong-Manso (2012) among care leavers in Ghana, there is an emphasis by the care leavers on the importance and benefits of their relationship with their SOS mother (key person). The mothers prepared them for independent living early during their time in care and they pointed out that the mothers did so through the informal ways of observation and practice. They learnt practical skills such as time-management, grocery shopping, cooking, healthy eating patterns, laundry, cleaning as they helped with domestic chores. Additionally for the females, they got information from the mothers on reproductive health issues at the onset of puberty (Frimpong-Manso, 2012).

In Morrison's (2016) case study on her journey as a care leaver, key working is described as being important in residential care with children and youth because through these relationships, the looked after children and youth feel safe, important and cared for. In Morrison's case, the positive influence as a result of the key working relationship led to increased motivation and the completion of her educational goals of completing A-levels and going to the university. The relationship between care leavers and their key workers encouraged them to adopt better coping skills and behaviors and promoted them to have higher aspirations and ambitions for the future (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020).

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Morrison's (2016) study references the need of a knowledge base for people working in residential care. Through professional training and lived experiences, carers can impart knowledge to looked after children with empathy. In addition to that, reflective supervision, peer support could help minimize burnout and compassion fatigue. In the same research in done in SOS village Ghana, care leavers indicated that their SOS mothers knew what they needed in relation to preparation for care because the mothers have lived with them and understand them as a result of this time spent with them (Frimpong-Manso, 2012). This is supported by Cahill, Holt, & Kirwan, (2016) who highlighted the importance of carers' personal characteristics as a positive element to the facilitation and maintenance of quality relationships with young people in care. Additionally, some more key 'ingredients' for the development and maintenance of these key working relationships included the amount of time devoted to building relationships, the skill base and knowledge of the professionals involved and their genuineness as experienced by young people in care (Cahill, Holt, & Kirwan, 2016). The role of the keyworker in the life of a looked after young person can provide them with the experience and skills needed through individualized care to transition into the world and is regarded as best practice (Swan, Holt, & Kirwan, 2018).

There is however another perspective with relation to the relationships formed by care leavers. There are also benefits when care leavers form relationships with other 'non-parental adults' who could act as mentors and also, relationships with their peers. Research suggests that the long-term presence of at least one caring, committed adult in the life of a care leaver may serve protectively to reduce many of these risks and there is wide agreement that the achievement of supportive, permanent adult relationships highly beneficial for a smooth transition to adulthood for care leavers (Greeson, 2013). Natural mentoring is one mechanism through which care leavers may experience this long-term relationship (relational permanence) and has been shown to be associated with improved behavioral health outcomes and asset acquisition for this population. A natural mentor is a nonparental, supportive adult whom a youth, in this case, care leaver self-selects from their existing social network (e.g., school personnel, coaches, neighbors, religious leaders, adult relatives). This relationship develops organically but, they may be fostered and supported by their social workers. Care leavers who reported an important, positive relationship with a nonparental adult were more likely to have completed high school or attended higher education, maintained employment, and experienced heightened self-esteem, life satisfaction, and better physical health; they were less likely to participate in gangs and other antisocial behavior and be physically aggressive (Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015), to have experienced suicidal ideation, to have received a sexually transmitted infection, and to have hurt someone in a fight; also they experienced fewer depressive symptoms, less

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stress, and greater life satisfaction (Greeson, 2013). Additionally, there is a relationship between natural mentoring and asset-related outcomes. Care leavers with natural mentors whose roles were described as "like a parent," "role model," and providing "guidance/advice" were more likely to have increased asset ownership and income expectations. The most important characteristics of natural mentoring relationships are trust, love and care, availability and support, genuineness, respect, and consistency and longevity (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010). Another research identified three primary mechanisms in mentoring relationships between care leavers and non-parental adults: improving their social and emotional development, refining their cognitive abilities, and advocating for personal growth and identity formation. Also, non-parental adults who offer social support care leavers can positively affect their academic functioning and self-esteem, as well as reduce social or emotional problems. Care leavers have reported that child-welfare based natural mentoring programs can contribute positively to their social and emotional well-being (Duke, Farruggia, & Germo, 2017). In addition to natural mentors, relationships among peers may be more significant for care leavers than youth who were never in care, given their potential as a source of consistency amid various deficiencies of social networks. Peer relationships have been found to play a substantial role in the identity development of youth in care and care leavers', their self-esteem, as well as internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Greeson, 2013).

Participation in Decision Making

Young people leaving care are required to make decisions as they transition to independent living earlier than their counterparts who live with their families of origin despite having little to no experience in decision making (Cashmore, 2002). Participation in decision making is defined as the opportunity for children and youth to express their opinions and wishes about their care and the ability to influence or make decisions (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Cashmore (2002), adds that participation in decision making with some support is vital in preparing children and youth for future independence and autonomous decision-making.

Research has shown that there is a relationship between participation in decision making and better outcomes for young care leavers, in fact, children and youth in care have brought up their need to participate in decisions affecting their lives. In a 2017 study carried out by Kriz & Roundtree-Swain amongst 8 young adults in care, they explained that children and youth can think for themselves and should therefore, paricipate in making rational and informed decisions about their lives in and addition to this, the participants linked their participation in decision-making to better outcomes such as the development of a positive sense of self because it reflected someone's respect for and recognition of

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them (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2014), learning how the child services works and maturing into independent adults with the full capacity to make decisions independently. Young people in care need to make decisions for the rest of their lives and they might as well start early (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). There is an indication that youth in care are often not satisfied with their level of participation in the important decisions that are relevant to them. For youth in care, it has been suggested that they usually experience only very limited opportunities to participate in decision-making for the decisions that affect them (Harder, Mann-Feder, Oterholm, & Rafaeli, 2020).

 Emphasis on the importance of full and meaningful participation in making decisions that affects care leavers was made in a scoping review by Cantwell, Gale, McGhee, & Skinner for the SOS chilldren's village (2017) that drew on the experiences of 68 care leavers in Croatia, Lithuania, Italy, Latvia, and Spain. Care leavers highlighted that they do not want to be talked at – they want to be engangesd in genuine dialogue and someone to listen to what they say. Particularly important to care leavers are the needs to express their views, influence decision making and map out the ways to achieve change in their lives. Finally, it is worthy of note that when young people participate in decision making processeses, they can help improve the provision of services, support and procedures that will enhance the participation in decision making of other young people leaving care. The participation in decision making of young people in care contributes significantly to care leavers empowerment and resilience which, are important factors in securing the best outcomes of the care leaving process (Cantwell, Gale, McGhee, & Skinner, 2017).

For youth in care, their participation in making decisions about their lives has encouraged increased investment in making them a part of the process of planning their leaving care; as planning is acknowledged to be key in the leaving care process and aftercare provision (Glynn & Mayock, 2019). Research shows that the aftercare planning is important and should always start with a comprehensive assessment carried out wel before youths leave care (Daly, 2012). In Daly's (2012) research, young people said they were involved in their aftercare planning and provided input together with their care workers and highlighted areas that needed to be modified. They went further to assert that because their care workers allowed them have a meaningful say during their aftercare planning process, they have vested interedt in the process and hold the belief that they will achieve their identified goals for this reason. Glynn and Mayock (2019) study strengthens this claim by showing that young people feel a greater sense of control and ownership of the planning process because they had an opportunity to have their opinions heard. According to the same study, the care workers recognition and response to the personal needs of the youth influenced the participation of young people in the planning process. A positive rapport and trust between children and their social workers and workers' respect

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of children have been demonstrated to be key to children's participation in decision making (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2014). Continuity, familiarity, and stability of social workers have also been noted as a participation in decision making channel (Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012) as well as social workers' ability to choose the appropriate type and level of participation in decision making (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). It is regarded as international best practice to increase the participationin decision making of children and young people in matters related to their care and aftercare (Glynn & Mayock, 2019). Through participation in decision making, the young person's needs are mapped and the right solutions to meet these needs are developed. Participation is self-empowering and aids in attaining interdependence (Storø, 2018).

Independent and Interdependent Living Skills

Shin (2009) suggested that an independent living skills training should be the main child welfare service for helping youth who are about to exit care. In the scoping review for SOS Children's village (2017), care leavers stressed the importance of being prepared for leaving care through the acquisition of practical skills they might need for independent life. Cooking and cleaning, budgeting and taking care of their own health were at the top of the list as well as advise about how to access entitlements, accommodation, educational opportunities and work (Cantwell, Gale, McGhee, & Skinner, 2017). Shin's (2009) study with 152 youth in care found that preparation of foster youth for independent living will take a significant amount of planning and effort.

While trying to answer what care leavers need, Daly (2012) interviewed 8 care workers and 65 care leavers. The care leavers and care workers mentioned the need to master practical everyday tasks such as making meals, laundry, and planning a journey and financial skills, particularly budgeting. Most participants in a study by Paulsen & Berg (2016) reported a necessity of economic guidance in their daily life (Paulsen & Berg, 2016).

Findings in research by Frimpong-Manso, (2020) adds another dimension to the preparation of care leavers through supporting them in the development of living skills by emphasizing that leaving care preparation should not only focus on helping young adults in care develop independent skills but also interdependent living skills including help-seeking attitudes in order to aid their ability in creating a social support network (Frimpong-Manso, 2020).

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010) states that workers should aim at preparing children to assume self-reliance and to integrate fully in the community…, this statement combines both philosophies of helping children in care develop both independent and interdependent living skills. The main idea is that even though care leaves need to have a certain level of

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independence, there is also a need for them to know how to ask for help. Paulsen & Berg (2016) refer to this as a "both-and" approach, where there is a recognition of this balance between "independency" and "dependency" amongst care leavers who are independent and dependent at the same time.

Storø (2018) describes interdependence as being a part of suportive networks where people exchange with each other reciprocally and having two levels: the first one being close relationships to friends and family the second being a citizen who is connected with other citizens by participating in the society. According to this concept, sharing, helping and receiving help and other forms of social exchange with other people are good values. Pryce, Napolitano, & Samuels (2017) in their findings concluded on a number of things about interdependence, that children are taught different types of help seeking behavior from their carers through explicit instruction or by modeling behavior; youth who have left care acknowledged that additional assistance is essential for their growth and success despite thinking seeking help is developmentally detrimental; there is a need to invest in children in alternative care to include their communities and networks in a fluid way so that the care system can promote a healthy reliance on a broader range of people, seeking and obtaining help while in care, and after leaving the care system and a way to do so is through the provision of opportunities for young people in care to practice seeking and securing the help they need by supporting relationships between young people in care and the adults that they are in close proximity to while in care (Pryce, Napolitano, & Samuels, 2017).

It is important to teach care leavers about interdependence because they seem to have a different understanding of what adulthood is. According to a research on emerging adulthood among care leavers, their definition of adulthood involved self sufficiency, personal responsibility, financial independence and not asking for support. This is because they believe that in order to be self-sufficient, one should not ask for help. There is an idea that being in care and receiving support prevents them from becoming adults (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014).

Conclusion

When preparing youth in care for leaving care, it is important for their carers to form relationships with them beecause through these relationships, they will teach them a lot of skills necessary for independent living. For care leavers, independent living skills include domestic skills and finance skills. However, not just independent skills are needed, it is equally important for them to live as full membes of the society. Finally, their participation in decision making before they transition to adulthood will help them as they become adults who need to make choices in life

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3.2 Transition From Leaving Care

Having access to resources as they transition from care is important as preventative intervention against future homelessness, unemployment, lack of educational attainment and involvement in criminal and other harmful activities (Lenz-Rashid, 2018). The support can start with an extension to adulthood that could offset their poor preparation for adulthood (Morton, 2017) This transitional period may impact how the care leavers cope later in their independent lives (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014)..

Transitional Home

Transitional houses (TH) are set up by governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide accommodation, life skills and educational/vocational support to youth who have left care before they are fully emancipated. These houses have been developed so that the support continues even in the early adulthood years of care leavers (Brown & Wilderson, 2010). Transitional houses are designed to increase positive outcomes for care leavers in the various aspects of life such as education, employment and housing (Liu, Vazquez, Jones, & Fong, 2019).

Studies have found that outcomes for care leavers have been shown to improve if they are able to stay in care until age 21. When youth in care remain in care until their 21st birthday, it was discovered that they were twice as likely to gain higher education and more than twice as likely to have completed at least one year of university or college by age 21 compared with care leavers who did not and also, youth in care who stayed in care until age 21 were less likely to become homeless as compared to those who left care before the age of 21 (Lenz-Rashid, 2018). Transitional houses are also intended to address various skill sets needed for youth in care to be successful upon becoming care leavers (Liu, Vazquez, Jones, & Fong, 2019). Frimpong-Manso (2012) asserts this idea in his study amongst former careleavers who lived in an SOS Children's Village transitional house in Ghana. The care leavers explained having the opportunity to practice and refine their basic living skills in the transitional house. Living with and sharing rooms with other care leavers while in the house helped them to develop interpersonal skills and how to be responsible for themselves, activities such as grocery shopping and cooking contributed to this learning. Studies have tied being in transitional houses before final emancipation to adulthood to better outcomes for care leavers.

Care leavers who went through transitional houses have been shown to have fewer unmet needs and better health status (Lim, Singh, & Gwynn, 2017). This is indicated in a longitudinal study by Katz & Courtney (2015) that followed 732 care leavers for four years after leaving care. Those who received housing support which came with educational, financial, employment and health services

were reported to have fewer unmet needs than those who did not receive these services. Additionally for the care leavers who did not have these services, the lack of these services was attributed to their development of mental health symptoms such as depression and post traumatic stress disorder.

Loring (2011) carried out a study among 129 careleavers and measured their outcomes six months, one year and two years after discharge from their transitional houses. The care leavers who lived in transitional homes had better outcomes than the ones who did not; they moved houses fewer times, they did not experience any homelessness and had stronger support systems. In a similar study with 55 care leavers, 96% of them had stable housing after being a part of a transitional hosuing program. They were provided with free apartments, case management services and taught independent living skills such as how to access public transportation, mental health services and educational and employment assistance. Additionally, 58% of the respondents were enrolled in colleges and universities and 86% of them had stable employment (Lenz-Rashid, 2018).

One of the outcomes addressed by independent living programs is improved educational outcomes, which research has shown is important to have in order to improve care leavers chances of having a successful life. Research has shown that compared to peers who have not obtained higher levels of education (past high school), care leavers who have attained higher levels of education are more likely to achieve economic success (Liu, Vazquez, Jones, & Fong, 2019).

However, the transitional houses can also be a barrier to achieving full independence. The results of Munson, Stanhope, Small, & Atterbury (2017) study that explored young adults' views on living in a supportive housing program specifically designed for care leavers put some light on this issue. The participants of the study believed they lacked independence due to the housing rules and procedures (Munson, Stanhope, Small, & Atterbury, 2017). They needed more than just housing and learning independent living skills, citing material, instrumental and emotional support as equally important. Additionally, Refaeli's (2017) study indicare that transitional houses that do not provide anything beyond the basic needs of care leavers, do not improve the capacity of care leavers to successfully handle the transition to independent life.

Education

Care leavers and their social workers believe that attaining higher education is the path that care leavers need to take in order to guarantee themselves a more stable future. Care leavers and their social workers had high perceptions on the value of higher education for care leavers. Care leavers viewed attaining college/university education as the main way for them to have better lives, create

and maintain stability for themselves. Their case workers also believed that care leavers attaining college/university education will lead to better outcomes in their lives as lack of higher education for their parents is tied to the reason for them ending up in care in the first place (Tobolowsky, Scannapieco, Aguiniga, & Madden, 2019).

Education was revealed as being an 'important enabler' in care leaver progression in the world of work. Not just formal education, but also informal learning is a valuable complement to formal learning. Research shows that education has a powerful influence on the progress of care leavers to more established positions in the labour market and also has a ripple effect to the development of their social networks (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015)

However, attending a post secondary institution is not easy. Research has shown that care leavers are at an educational disadvantage as they often start out in less favorable educational circumstances compared with the population; because of their history of youth welfare and social class background. Additionally, further education prospects for care leavers are limited to skilled trades. As a result of the idea that they cannot support themselves after leaving care, care leavers lean towards skilled trades in order to secure their livelihoods as part of preparation for independent living (Groinig & Sting, 2019). Despite higher education being a significant element of the potential for upward social mobility, improved earnings and economic status, only a small percentage of care leavers acquire higher education. Vocational training can provide an alternative especially in countries where this type of education is more developed, but care leavers still experience difficulties integrating into such programs and need substantial support in order to engage with their program of study. These difficulties experienced by care leavers in transitioning to higher education and vocational training have been linked with other problems they had even before leaving care and which already resulted in low educational achievements at earlier stages (Harder, Mann-Feder, Oterholm, & Rafaeli, 2020). Many care leavers leave care with significant educational gaps and without graduating secondary school. Their poor level of education might be the result of significant gaps in schooling even before they get into alternative care. However, while in care, little is actually done to improve their educational prospects. As a result, care leavers start early adulthood with poor levels of education, and this causes them to naturally behind that of the general population (Driscoll, 2011). Another difficulty for care leavers is they are under pressure to get jobs as soon as they leave care, as they cannot rely on support from their families and need to provide for themselves at an earlier age than other young people. Largely, care leavers have an intensely dire and significant need to improve their educational levels of achievement (Courtney, 2017).

Nevertheless, they are able to complete their education with the right support from peers and carers (Bluff & McMahon, 2012). Driscoll (2011) stated that supportive relationships are important for care leavers attainment of education. More recently, Groinig & Sting (2019) in their study with 148 care leavers reported that how care leavers experience social support and emotional belonging plays an influential role in which educational paths they choose and whether or not they can follow the path through to success. Also, it has been indicated that youth in care who continue to be in care after the age of 18 have a higher chance of completing secondary school and continue their studies afterwards (Courtney, 2017).

Social Support Networks

Social support is defined as an exchange of resources between two people that improves on the life of one of them (Refaeli, Benbenishty, & Zeira, 2019). It is especially significant for youth in transition as it can play a key protective factor as youth transition to adulthood. People rely on their social networks for social support. Social support is also understood to be the emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance that are provied by others to maintain one's well-being which promote adaptation to difficult life events (Rosenberg, 2017).

As care leavers go through this period of transition from care to independence, they deal with the emotional separation from their carers and friends while adjusting to the transition and tasks required of them. This makes the availability of their social support networks very important to help them get through the difficulty of the transition period emotionally and practically (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Their social networks are therefore essential to their well-being and social and professional integration (Blakeslee, 2015). Social support networks include the formal (eg., social workers and counsellors) and informal (eg., parents, family, friends) relational aspects and will play an important role in care leavers ability to gain access to their desired careers, housing and social life. They will also play an important role in care leavers' ability to get through the difficult transitional period to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020). Research on social support networks of care leavers have shown that its existence and an access to its associated resources especially among at risk populations like care leavers. To support this, studies have found that care leavers who had better outcomes during their transition to adulthood were those who were part of a social support network (Blakeslee, 2015). Other studies have also shown direct effects of social support of care leavers on their outcomes and have shown that higher levels of support were related to better housing, educational and financial outcomes (Daining & Depanfilis, 2007). In a study with 58 care leavers offers insight into the range of support needed by youth as they transition out of care. 80% of the care leavers still relied on their

caseworkers who connected the youth to the needed services, classes and even supervision for those in transitional houses (Rosenberg, 2017).

On the other hand, care leavers have the least support in housing, education and with their emotions. A research among 51 care leavers in Ghana has shown that care leavers need support during this transition. The 51 care leavers in the study cited finances, accommodation, healthcare and emotional support as highly important support received during their transition period. The care leavers also relied on their SOS mothers' and their families and friends, even after leaving care but this time, for emotional support. A notable source of support for these care leavers, was also themselves. Through a mutual assistance network created by them, they informed one another of job opportunities, and even employed fellow care leavers in their businesses and helped with loans and advice (Frimpong-Manso, 2015). Care leavers who have high levels of social support have been shown to have less needs for transitional care services. Haggman-Laitila, Salokekkila, & Karki (2018) study explain that this could be possibly as a result of the care leavers feeling more secure about their ability to navigate the transition to adulthood because of the support they believe they have, therefore leading to a reduced perception of the need for independent living services to assist them with the transition. Also, the relationship between social support and lower perceived unmet service need show that young people who are relatively more able to acquire social support are also better able to acquire the social services they desire. In another study, care leavers identified not having enough interdependent skills as a barier to making good use of their support network. Not only did they not want to be seen as failures by asking for assistance, they did not know how to ask for assistance. They had been trained to rely on themselves and as a result, refused to ask for help and even turned down support when offered to them (Frimpong-Manso, 2015).

In a research with care leavers and their social workers, it was revealed that the formal support networks of care leavers was more dominant than the informal one; participants had a more positive association with their formal social support networks and believed that it had a big contribution to their transition to adulthood. Their informal social support networks were described as complex and not very supportive. These formal figures were their social workers, psychologists/therapists and counsellors. They provided concrete needs and tangible resources in different life areas such as economic help, getting scholarship for higher education and assistance with the payment of rent (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020).

Conclusion

When care leavers are adequately prepared for leaving care and given the required transitional services, their aftercare will be successful. However, there is a need to review regularly, the extent to

which care leavers have settled in adulthood as needs and circumstances are always changing. Because independent living also involves a certain amount of interdependence, it is imperative that care leavers have easy access to aftercare services and support in order for them to continue making progress as adults. It is important for care leavers to be gradually affirmed in their transition to independent adulthood. A transitional period where they receive the right support such as living, education and being a part of social networks plays a vital role in improving the outcomes of these youth. They will add to their previous skills and learn new skills by living in transitional houses while having a roof over their heads; being on an educational pathway that leads to not just learning vocational skills but earning higher educational certificates will lead to a more stable future for them and finally, they can count on the support of their social networks where and when necessary during their transition.

4 ANALYSIS OF THE SUPPORT GIVEN TO CARE LEAVERS AS THEY TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

4.1 Research Methodology

Introduction

This section outlines the research methodology including the type of research, sampling procedure and data collection and analysis methods used to conduct the study. A number of study limitations and ethical issues are also addressed.

Type of Research

Qualitative research which, helps the researcher explore and understand the subject matter from the perspective of those who are being studied will be used in conducting this research. This type of research will be most beneficial as it involves purposeful processes that collect and evaluate information in order to gain knowledge and understanding (Carey,2012). The use of qualitative research will give a depth and richness to this research as it involves the personal experiences of the social workers who work with care leavers.

Sampling Procedure

For this research, Non-Probability sampling technique in which the sample is selected according to the researcher's personal judgement and the probability of selection of members of the population is not known (Adams, Khan, & Raeside, 2014), is used. The type of non-probability sampling technique used is the Judgement Sampling. This is the sampling plan used when the characteristics of the sample meets some criteria (Taherdoost, 2016), the criteria used in this study are social workers: 1) who work in institutions that provide leaving care services to adolescents who have lived in alternative care and who work with youth about to leave care or who have left care. This was in order to get first-hand information about their experiences as 'front line' workers in leaving care. By doing so, it is ensured that the data collected from the sample will give a good understanding to the research on the support given to care leavers that cannot be collected from any other sample frame (Taherdoost, 2016).

Description of Sample

Contact was made with social workers from two organizations in Lithuania that provide leaving care support services. They were written to via email about the study and asked if social workers from their organizations could participate to which they agreed. Following this, contact was made with five social workers who scheduled the Skype calls. Four of the participants were female and one male.

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The table 1 below, provides detailed information on the participants. This relatively small sample size was chosen in order to give the researcher an opportunity to be fully immersed in the study and to establish good relationships with the respondents in order to address the research problem in depth. This therefore enhances the validity of the research (McKenzie & Crouch, 2006). Additionally, in the first four interviews collected, the codes collected were very similar. Upon coding the fifth interview, still, no new themes emerged. Urquhart (2012), defines this as saturation, the point in coding where new codes is not found in the data. This saturation is used as a criterion for discontinuing the collection of data or analysis (Saunders, et al., 2018).

Table 1: Description of study participants

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Role	Years of Experience
EV	34	BA, Social Pedagogy	Social Worker	2
IG	33	Master of School Psychology	Case Manager	7.5
JT	29	BSW, MSW	Social Worker	3
KJ	----	BA, Social Pedagogy	Social worker	3
MS	30	BSW and MSW	Care giver in community care home	2
*BSW: Bachelor's in social work, *MSW: Master's in Social Work, BA: Bachelor of Arts				

Data Collection Methods

Data collection is an important part of any research. Using the proper data collection techniques ensures that the qualitative data are collected in a scientific and consistent manner. This research uses the semi-structured interview method of data collection. This allows the researcher to ask for emphasis on an issue thereby providing a depth of information that may be useful.

The semi-structured interview method is relevant to this research because it ensures for a detailed collection of the participants' point of view. By using the semi-structured interview, the researcher

has a list of fairly specific topics to be covered in the interview, but the interviewee has a lot of leeway in how to reply (Bryman, 2012).

All semi-structured interviews started with the social workers giving an overview of experiences while working with care leavers. Several key topics were prompted during the interview. Participants were asked to describe what a successful transition to adulthood was in their opinion. Some specific areas that were addressed were: forming relationships with care leavers, the roles of social workers and ways leaving care support services could be improved in Lithuania. The Interviews were via skype video and one was done via text messaging because the participant was not too confident in their spoken English. Each interview lasted thirty to sixty minutes. The interview questions can be found in the annex of this research.

Data Analysis Methods

All interview tapes were transcribed verbatim in order to analyze and interpret the data in a structured way. This is also meant to increase the validity of this qualitative research findings, as it enables a meticulous record keeping and consistent and transparent interpretation of data in order to produce a comprehensive set of findings (Noble & Smith, 2015).

The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is known as the process of identifying patterns or thematic areas within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The interview transcripts were read a couple of times in order to get familiar to the researcher. They were then coded according to what was relevant to the research questions. There were no pre-set codes, the codes were developed and modified as the coding process continued.

The codes collected were examined and some of them fit into sub-themes. A sub-theme has been defined as a pattern that captures something significant about the research question. All the codes were organized into broader thematic areas. After which the thematic areas were modified and developed into tables with quoted excerpts and a thematic map to give a better overview of the data collected and the relationships between thematic areas and sub-themes.

All the quoted excerpts from the transcripts represent as close as possible the participants spoken words. Each participants' assigned pseudonym is used consistently throughout the presentation of the study findings.

Research Limitations

As mentioned previously, the participants in the study could understand English. The research is carried out in a non-English speaking country and the researcher could not understand Lithuanian. It was revealed during the sample selection that a lot of social workers who could participate in this

study could only speak/understand Lithuanian. As a result, it took quite some time to find five English speaking participants to be a part of the study. Secondly, the study looked at the experiences of social workers only. Comparing the experiences of care leavers and social workers may provide a better understanding of the topic. Finally, the interviews were held in English, a language other than the local language of the participants. This difference in language may have affected how the participants expressed themselves because concepts in one language may be understood differently in another. As a result, some meanings may have gotten 'lost in translation' resulting in a threat to the research's validity (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010)

Ethical Issues

Qualitative research such as this can have some ethical issues arise. In this instance, these ethical issues have been identified: *Confidentiality*; it can be difficult to present a rich description of a study without the identification of the setting. Especially in this case where due to a limited number of institutions providing these support services, it may be easier for the setting to be identified. This research is carried out in two of those organizations. Participants of the study may be able to identify each other's responses even if outsiders may not (Engel & Schutt, 2009) . *Informed Consent:* It was specified to the participants in advance what they will be asked to do in the research. They were made aware well in advance what data will be collected and how the data will be used (Bahramnezhad, Sanjari, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014).

Conclusion

This section provided a detailed understanding of the research methodology. It highlighted why a qualitative research is appropriate for this study and the suitability of the semi-structures interviews for meeting the goals of the research. The participants and data analysis steps were described in detail. A number of limitations that arose in the research and some ethical issues were identified.

4.2 Analysis of Research Results

4.2.1 Interpretation of Results: The Support Given To Care Leavers As They Transition To Adulthood

Introduction

The chapter examines in detail the results of the study. The thematic areas developed are illustrated using tables and described. It provides an overview of key issues and thematic areas to arise from a detailed interpretation and discussion of the narratives of the participants, covering the competencies and roles of social workers, and what care leavers need as they transition to independence. The findings are then analysed with regards to past research and the following theories: Resiliency Theory and Emerging Adulthood and one concept: The Use of Self. The results seek to answer the research question: How are care leavers supported as they transition to independence? A detailed table of the results from this research can also be found in the annex.

Thematic Area 1: Care leavers at the forefront of their transition consists of these subthemes: relationships, attention, consulting care leavers and importance of care leaver happiness (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of Thematic Area 1: Care Leavers at The Forefront of Their Transition

Thematic Area	Subthemes
Care leavers at the forefront of their transition	Relationships
	Attention
	Consulting care leavers
	Importance of care leaver happiness

The social workers explained that in order to work with care leavers, it is important to form and maintain relationships with them. Without these relationships, it will be impossible for the social workers and care leavers to work together, the care leavers will not be responsive to the approaches of the social worker. Forming these relationships though not the easiest thing to achieve, when achieved, will lead to social workers understanding better what care leavers need, therefore enabling them to provide the right support to them. It was described it as the social worker becoming a "lighthouse"

These are illustrated in the sentence by below:

"...good relationship in this job is everything, by everything I mean that if there is no relation between you as a worker and the youngster, the youngster just won't come to you and won't answer to your messages. When you have

a relation, then you start to work with his needs, his dreams, his happy moments and bad moments (which he shares with you) and you become like a ''lighthouse'', which can show the right way (but maybe not the easiest way)" (JT).

Working with care leavers who have a relationship with social workers is described to be easier: *"I think that my work is easier because they are motivated to come to us"* (KJ).

Care leavers need attention –Social workers describe care leavers as feeling alone with no one by their side:

"*They feel like they are left alone, and we don't have anybody in this world to, you know, who would stand for them*" (EV).

And wanting to be listened to but acting otherwise but, when they know that they have somebody on their side, it allows them to understand that they have a safe space to express whatever their feeling at any particular moment. When they are able to express themselves, they will not have pent up emotions that may manifest in anti-social behavior:

"*the attention this is what they need, actually, they don't show it that they need. So, I think that if at least one person who believes in them shows attention and shows that, OK, you behave bad, but whatever ...It's better to come and to swear and to, I don't know, to be angry at home and then go out with a clearer situation inside and then to go out with this anger than they can. That's how it comes. Like committing those crimes or those things" (MS)*

There is an idea that the care leavers know best what makes sense for them and social workers should feel free to consult care leavers instead of assuming what their needs are. This is important for when social workers want to know the actual needs of the care leavers:

"Youngster knows best. So, if you doubt about something, feel free to ask youngster. ...We ask youngster how she or he feels, what he or she thinks or presumes that they want, or they need" (EV).

However, these consultations are not just to understand care leaver needs. The social workers consult with them on the most appropriate ways that they spend their monthly allowances and also, skills the care leavers would like to learn:

"We have individual consultation with our youngsters, we are planning the money, we are working on the skills they want to learn" (KJ).

Care leavers are individuals who have different measures of happiness. What a social worker sees as important may not be the same with care leaver views. Therefore, social workers need to pay attention to the care leavers and see the importance of care leavers' happiness. Some things that are seen as non-conventional may be what bring contentment to the life of a care leaver and it is important for social workers to pay attention to them. It is explained with some examples below:

"...But one consultation, I'm just sitting and listen to him. And he said, I'm happy. I live in shelter, I am safe, I had a job, I have friends, I am happy, I have my own hands'. And I just sitting and listening to him. And then I understand

that for him, this is success to him because he is healthy. He is not in the hospital. He is safe and he has money. And for him, it's enough" (IG).

"some of them like usually the girls, they. Already got married and of course, at the young age. Yeah, let me say, but still, well, if they are happy and this is what they want and they have a baby and they work still and they are happy, so why not?" (MS).

"I can call successful transition when the youngster can say that ''I'm happy at what I have now''. By saying this, I mean that some of the youngsters don't need a diploma, don't need the best job, don't need to get a lot of money, they are just happy at what they have" (JT).

The social workers have laid a lot of emphasis on the importance of putting care leavers at the forefront of their transition. Firstly, a relationship with them is of utmost importance and the best way to be able to work with them effectively and easily. Additionally, they have described care leavers as feeling alone and needing attention in order to know that they have somebody on their side, and it is also a way for them to have a place to express their emotions and not participate in anti-social behavior. While working with care leavers, social workers explained why care leavers should be consulted and also the importance of focusing on what makes them happy, rather than what the social workers want from them as they transition to adulthood.

Thematic Area 2: Life skills needed for transition consists of these subthemes: domestic skills, being a part of society, financial planning skills, confidence and decision-making (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of Thematic Area 2: Life skills Needed for Transition

Thematic Area	Subthemes
Life skills needed for transition	Domestic skills
	Being a part of society
	Financial planning skills
	Confidence
	Decision-making

The social workers in their work with care leavers identified domestic skills as necessary for care leaver transition to adulthood. Care leavers need to know how to live their regular day-to-day lives without their carers. The possession of these skills in a care leaver has been described as a major ingredient for a successful transition to adulthood. These include, cleaning, cooking laundry etc.:

"I need to mention that successful transition from care to independence is also when the youngster can take care of himself: when he can make some kind of dish, when he knows that he has to do a laundry, when he can go to the

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grocery shop and spend his money wisely, when he's not afraid to ask questions, when he can go to ATM and know how to use it" (JT).

Additionally, when describing a 'successfully transitioned' care leaver, a social worker added that when care leavers have used their learned life skills to secure a home and a job/education, then they will not need social workers anymore:

"When they have their own strong life, like they are still studying, they have work, they have where to live. We are saying that they are grown- up and they don't need us anymore" (KJ).

But not just domestic living skills are important. Care leavers need to know how to be a part of the wider society; for them to feel like any other person and not to be afraid to be in social situations. They explained it below:

"To take a full part in a society and not to feel different from others. So, I think that is success" (EV).

"...and they can learn also how to behave in the, you know, in the society with other people, because usually they are also afraid of people and they are always like trying not to communicate with the people" (MS).

Using the story of the fridge for sale, social workers described care leavers as not having any skills in financial planning and management:

"For example, one, my youngster from that money bought a fridge. And after that, he sells it for three euros. And he said, Oh, I look how a lot of money I go from the fridge. So, it was like, whoa! three euros for the new fridge" (EV).

According to them, care leavers need to know how to make good financial decisions that include planning so as not to run out of money for rent and food. When asked to describe a care leaver who has 'successfully' transitioned to independence, the response was about financial management:

"The youngster who can clearly plan their money that in the end of the month he can have money for the rent or food" (KJ).

Social workers have described care leavers as not having any confidence: **...***they don't trust themselves (IG)*

And constantly feeling guilty about things that are no fault of theirs:

"Let me say, they have this guilt ...they are connecting it, that it's their fault, like that something is wrong with them and no one can hear them, and no one is interested in them" (MS).

Another skill required by care leavers as described by social workers is a need for making decisions independently. This was described as difficult but necessary for a successful care leaver transition to adulthood: *"I think that it's the youngster who can make decisions by him or herself" (KJ).* This decision making will lead care leavers to explicitly know what it is that they want in life, and the way to get there:

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"And if a person knows clearly what he or she wants to do in the life, I find that is a really tough position of about living independently and making decisions and knowing what you want, what you do and what for "(EV)

The social workers explained that in order for care leavers to transition to adulthood, they need to have skills that will help them have good outcomes. The care leavers have been described by social workers as needing domestic skills: cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes. These domestic skills will make them feel independent of the social workers with whom they work with. However, not just domestic living skills are needed, social workers explain that care leavers need to know how to be a part of the society without feeling like they do not belong. Care leavers have also been described as needing confidence, decision-making and financial planning skills. According to the social workers, all these skills together will make for a successful transition to adulthood for care leavers.

Thematic Area 3: Social Worker Competencies consists of subthemes: understanding, open minded/flexible, creativity and persistence (Table 4).

Table 4: Summary of Thematic Area 3: Social Worker Competencies

Thematic Area	Subthemes
Social Worker Competencies	Understanding
	Open minded/flexible
	Creativity
	Persistence

Social workers have described themselves as being 'a lighthouse' that guides the way for care leavers. They cannot achieve this without being understandin*g* of care leavers' difficult backgrounds and upbringing. Through this understanding, they are able to work with care leavers and guide them to learn the necessary skills and make right decisions as they transition to adulthood. This understanding comes with empathy as seen below:

"You, as a worker, need a lot of patience and a lot of understanding, what a youngster from childcare home is dealing with in his life. By saying 'make a contact' I mean that you need to be empathic, try not to push too much, try to be kind and understandable" (JT).

"what is important that we accept youngsters. It doesn't matter what that past he or she had and does matter. He had problem, not no emotional or behavioral problems" (IG).

Social workers add that understanding care leavers will social workers to be open-minded when working with them. This open-mindedness leads to a flexibility that allows social workers to use the preferred work/intervention technique of the care leavers:

"*We accept everybody, and we are looking how to work with the youngsters. The method that is okay for him. if it is better to have conversation when we cook than we cook together and then talk. If a youngster is better to have consultations when he goes for a walk, then we go for a walk and then talk...*" (IG).

"*youngsters got so much more from me because I didn't care about their environment, about their being from take care of living care. But they came from there. I just looked at them as just simple youngsters*" (IG).

Part of being open minded is also social workers showing care leavers they are on the same level – there is no social worker or child but rather, two individuals:

"*I always mention that in this house we all are the same level. Let me say, like, there's no like I'm a worker and you are a child, so it doesn't matter*" (MS).

When working with care leavers, the social workers highlighted creativity as a personal competency that helps them in communication and enabling positive behavior. Through board games and movie discussions for example, social workers can get to understand care leaver views on life:

"*...for me always helps, like a table games, board games, for example, through the games I can like, make it conversations like the get the information from the child, what I would like to or like, see how she or he reacts, for example, in losing or the winning situations and etc. ...we usually watch a movie and then we have small discussion. For example, what you liked in the movie, what was for you the best. Like, which character do you like and why*" (MS).

This creativity also helps them in forming relationships with youth in care who will later need leaving care services. They get attracted by some activities created by the social workers as explained below:

"*Then we create some camps or youth exchange, and we try and white youngsters from Foster House or Care House to come and participate in that*" (IG).

The social workers accepted that work with care leavers is not easy, but they have to be persistent and keep trying multiple ways in order to get the best outcome. Continuous efforts are made to support care leavers even when what they are trying do not seem to work. MS and IG give examples:

"*...You try you are saying that you are welcome. You have a good relationship. You see that they are open with you, they speak with you. But when it comes to this coming home, sleeping, for example, room or like going to the shower, this is the biggest issue. And they refuse. They don't want. But that's like I don't know how to make it so that it is what they want, and You try, you try, for example, you support them*" (MS).

"*...But I have tried and keep trying because you never know what could happen in the future. And we don't say "No. You are helpless, and we can't help you" No, we are not god, we don't know what could happen in the future*" (IG).

Social worker competencies contribute to the success of the care leavers they work with. The social workers explain that when working with care leavers, it is vital that for social workers to be understanding of care leavers and the difficult backgrounds they come from and also work with them from a place of openness and not authority. These will assist social workers in forming relationships with care leavers and also make room for good communication with them. Additionally, through the use of their creativity, social workers can find ways to communicate and make connections with care leavers. Finally, there is a need for persistence in working with care leavers, social workers will need to try and keep trying in their interventions and methods.

Thematic Area 4: Social workers' roles consists of subthemes: support, guidance, teaching social skills, teaching responsibility, planning leisure activities, collaboration with other service providers (Table 5).

Table 5: Summary of Thematic Area 4: Social Workers' Roles

Thematic Area	Subthemes
Social Worker Roles	Support
	Guidance
	Teaching social skills
	Teaching responsibility
	Planning leisure activities
	Collaboration with other service providers

Social workers support care leavers to get education or learn a skill, to start dreaming and aspire to achieve higher than they ever thought possible:

"And sometimes for youngsters need a lot of support and a lot of people who believes them, even when they didn't believe they self. ...we want to support them that they go to school, that they have higher aims than the social worker from your house or foster house gave them or themselves. So, when they start dreaming, when they start to plan, they start thinking about the future." (IG).

This support makes the care leavers feel secure because they have someone on their side. Thus, allowing them to dream and plan their lives. The social workers explained that without the ability to

dream, care leavers cannot make big goals or even achieve the small goals. The support acts as a form of 'empowerment' for care leavers:

"The most important is. I think to give to give them these like a feeling of security, that there is at least one person whom you can turn and come and speak about anything, you can commit whatever, but you will be still welcomed, and you will be like still like still someone who would listen to you. So, they gain like self-esteem and motivation" (MS).

"...And me, as a worker of Patria. I need to empower him, empower to not be afraid to ask, to not be afraid to make a mistake, to not be afraid to try" (JT).

On the topic of empowerment, the Social workers believe that they need to provide guidance to care leavers. They show them how to be better and approach things in a better way:

"I would say like this that my goal, I see it like this, that I should show them how it can be done better, like how it is the best way or better way and then they can choose because you can't choose, and you can't live a child's life" (MS).

And the importance of trying again and again in order to achieve their goals:

"she didn't pass international English five times, But I didn't let her to give up. No. Sometimes you just have to try to try to try to train and again, try to train again" (IG).

Sometimes, they provide incentives to encourage them:

"...So, we say, oh, you are good in it, so let's you do it. And then we can even I paid to you let me say 1 euro, if you cook one meal and then it gives motivation to cook for everyone" (MS)

The social workers also guide them to better social skills and conflict resolution:

"Then you understand that they didn't know ...how to solve conflicts. It was for me it was strange because they solve conflicts. They have two strategy, shout or beat each other or just quit. I don't talk anymore and just there's no problem because I don't. I ignore it. And then you start to learn how to change this behavior" (IG).

"*And it's really important for you to know how to solve the conflicts and the ways of how to do it, how I could come to person and to say that I didn't like what you did or what you said. And that's why. Not avoiding but trying to talk"* (EV).

And how to take responsibility for their actions. The social workers do this by encouraging care leavers to discuss problems and find the solutions to them for however long it takes. It is illustrated with a story of the broken fridge: *"It was very funny; we had a broken fridge and youngsters talked about it for one year before they changed it" (IG).*

Part of teaching responsibility is social workers showing them what options they have in life and the benefits/consequences that may follow the options which they choose:

 "But my goal, let me say is to show them that, look, you can do like this, this is better. And this is this is benefit. So, if you go in this way, it will be consequences" (MS)

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The Social workers have the responsibility of planning leisure activities with care leavers. These activities though sometimes simple in appearance, are special to the care leavers:

"And we have some activities together once a month so youngsters can decide where or what to do together with us or to go to cinema or to go to somewhere" (IG).

"you can do like I don't know, six months, one time, go with them, for example, to eat in the restaurant" (MS).

From time to time, the social workers collaborate with other service providers such as care homes and youth centers. This of course depends on the needs of the care leavers. The social workers in order to do so have to stay abreast with recent developments in the field of social work. They shed a little light:

"Let's say like this is why, like, for example, we also make relationships with the different organizations who give services like for children, for example, the youth centers or some kind of projects which are written for youth. ...we say, OK, we have a child. He or she has an issue, for example, of public speaking, and then they have like some services which they are gathering the children, which have the same issue and then working with them" (MS).

"We collaborate with care house and foster houses, and we always like they youngsters to come in our activities and go to care houses to present our activity" (IG).

According to the social workers in this research, working with care leavers as they transition to adulthood requires the social workers to have many roles. Social workers support care leavers as they make decisions life because they need to know that there is someone on their side. This support given to care leavers will motivate them to dream and aspire to achieve greater than what they could have imagined. Support sometimes can come in the form of incentivizing care leavers to do activities that they may be good at. Social workers also act as guides to show care leavers that things can be done better while also teaching them how to take responsibility for themselves, their surroundings and actions. Furthermore, social workers, teach them social skills such as conflict resolution, plan leisure activities for care leavers with their input and collaborate with other service providers where necessary.

Conclusion

The results that emerged from the study gave rise to four thematic areas. These thematic areas fully highlighted the perspectives of the social workers on what the needs of care leavers are, how to approach working with them, how the competencies of social workers have an effect on working with care leavers and what the social worker roles are.

4.2.2 Discussion of Results: The Support Given To Care Leavers As They Transition To Adulthood

Table 6: Summary of All Thematic Areas and Subthemes

Thematic Areas	Subthemes
Care leavers at the forefront of their transition	Relationships
	Attention
	Consulting care leavers
	Importance of care leaver happiness
Life skills needed for transition	Domestic skills
	Being a part of society
	Financial planning skills
	Confidence
	Decision-making
Social Worker Competencies	Understanding
	Open minded/flexible
	Creativity
	Persistence
Social Worker Roles	Support
	Guidance
	Teaching social skills
	Teaching responsibility
	Planning leisure activities
	Collaboration with other service providers

These thematic areas from the results and their corresponding subthemes make up the thematic map in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3: Map of Thematic Areas and Subthemes
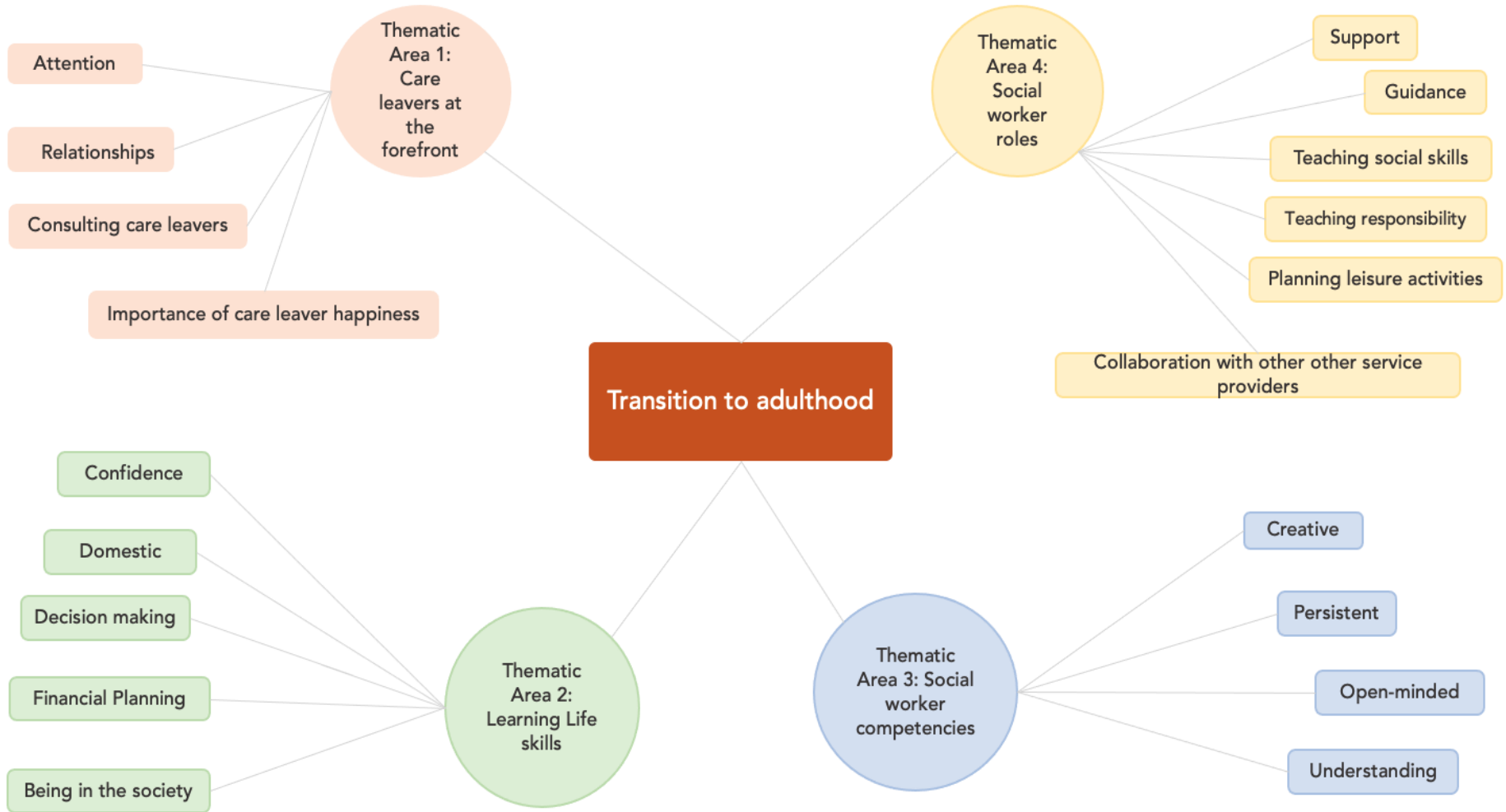
The relationship between social workers in leaving care and care leavers can be argued to be their most significant relationship in their professional work. This relationship is explained as being a therapeutic one within which social workers model an interaction that is supportive, companionable and constant to provide a safe environment for the young people (Kaushik, 2017). This is very evident in the findings of this research.

 The results show that the social workers have an awareness about how much impact the relationship they built with the care leavers could have on how well they worked together. McLeod (2010) stresses that this type of relationship is aligned with social work values and theories of empowerment, respect and empathy. The social worker–client relationship is the medium for engagement, the source of information and the means for offering help and thus the vehicle for the whole intervention. This is also harmonized with findings in this research where social workers have expressed that when there is a good relationship between social workers and care leavers, the social worker then becomes a "Lighthouse" that will show care leavers the right way. This "right way" according to this research's literature review part is the learning and acquisition of independent and interdependent skills, thereby building their confidence, (Morrison, 2016) through increased motivation as a result of the relationship.

Prior research has linked supportive relationships between social workers and youth in care as a way for care leavers to have better long-term outcomes upon their transition to adulthood. McLeod, (2010) argues that this is because having an adult mentor promotes resilience. The same research showed that youth in care had better progress at school where they reported consistent support from a social worker, since 'adults who believed in them were a critical factor in developing their positive outlook of life. However, these relationships will be more productive if they are long term. The process of understanding their wishes and feelings is difficult and time consuming. Brief interventions will, have limited impact on long-term outcomes. Therefore, social workers, need to have long-term relationships with care leavers in order to be able to respond to their needs, hear their voices and make a difference in their lives.

In order for social workers to build, maintain and sustain these possibly long-term relationships with care leavers, the social workers have to have not just knowledge of their work, but also the right competencies such as their personal characteristics and how they use them. Social worker personal characteristics are an element in the creation and maintenance of quality relationships with the care leavers. The is also highlighted in the literature review of this research that asserts the social worker personal competencies as an important 'ingredient 'in the facilitation and maintenance of quality relationships with young people in care (Cahill, Holt, & Kirwan, 2016).

The use of self-concept backs this by explaining that using the personality to create an authentic relationship is central to helping support service users (care leavers), to change and develop, as social workers themselves are the instruments of their profession (Kaushik, 2017). Kaushik (2017) further asserts that social worker personal competencies have far more power in impacting the satisfaction of their clients than their theoretical skills. When social workers show their 'real selves', they will release a very strong therapeutic tool.

Three social worker competencies have been recognized in this research as important for forming good quality relationships with care leavers they are the ability to be: understanding, open-minded, creative.

Care leavers were described as wanting to be accepted. When social workers understand their backgrounds and the difficulties that they have experienced, this acceptance will come naturally. Understanding care leavers also means that social workers will know what they need and why their needs are important to them. This will lead to social workers putting the care leavers at the forefront of their transition as identified by the research results. Social worker understanding care leavers will allow the social workers to be in a better suited position to support and guide the care leavers. Frimpong-Manso (2012) research as highlighted in this study's literature review backs this claim with care leavers explaining that their carers can support and guide them because they understand them.

The findings also suggest that keeping an open mind when working with care leavers will ensure that social workers can employ different methods while working with care leavers and not use a 'one size fits all' approach as different care leavers have different needs. Care leavers are not all the same. They have diverse strengths, coping strategies and profiles and these should be reflected in the services they receive (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2019).

Social worker creativity has been shown to be helpful in forming not just relationships with care leavers but also in communicating and understanding them better. Through this communication, the social workers can maintain and strengthen their relationships with care leavers. Open communication will also give the care leavers an opportunity to be heard and participate in decision-making on issues related to their transition to adulthood. Previous research as highlighted in the literature review shows that a positive rapport with social workers is key to care leavers participation in decision-making (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2014).

McLeod (2010) had youth in care define who their ideal social worker is and the competencies listed have some similarities with the findings of this study. The ideal social worker was listed as: being accessible, trustworthy and reliable; a sociable who listens; someone who can offer effective practical

and emotional support; and most crucially, good social workers are fair, respect children as autonomous individuals and do not abuse their position of power.

Previous research has shown that care leavers personal resources such as relationships with their carers serve as protective factors that enable them to successfully transition to adulthood. According to the resilience literature, protective factors including personal, relational and environmental resources facilitates coping during or after experiencing challenges (Frimpong-Manso, 2017). Past care leaver research (Anghel,2011; Frimpong-Manso,2017) indicated that the relationships that care leavers had with their carers was a significant protective factor as it was a source of advice, counsel and guidance.

How the social workers create and maintain relationships with care leavers appears to be underpinned by the personal competencies of the social workers, this in turn has an influence on the social workers carrying out their roles that ensures meeting the needs of the care leavers. For example, their ability to be understanding towards care leavers will help the social workers know the needs of the care leavers allowing them to guide, support and teach them the skills that are necessary for their transition to independence. Their ability to open-minded when working with care leavers will allow them to use the right methods with each care leaver thereby putting their needs and happiness first. Their ability to be creative and their use of creative tools to communicate with care leavers will solidify the relationships that they have created, and help the social workers listen to care leavers and allow them to participate in decision making about their transition to adulthood. Therefore, the coompetencies of the social workers influence their relationships with care leavers. This relationship between social workers and care leavers can be said to be the mechanism through which the social worker can carry out the tasks related to their roles.

The role of social workers in this research in supporting the transition of care leavers is defined as the responsibilities held by social workers in relation to the care leaver transition to independence. These roles have been highlighted in the findings as teaching them independent and interdependent skills such as laundry; cooking; supporting them; how to be members of the society; collaboration with other service providers; planning leisure activities; and also supporting and guiding them to make the right decisions. These roles will ensure that the care leavers transition to independence with the necessary life skills that they need. There are striking similarities between the roles as in these findings with another research on the roles of social workers who work with youth in care. Their roles were listed as: enabling youth to reach their potential; safeguarding and ensuring their well-being; working with them to overcome problems; helping to turn them away from delinquency and self-harm;

confronting them constructively with the consequences of their actions; helping them to change their behavior; and helping them to enjoy their rights as active members of the community.

Social workers have explained that they have the responsibility of making sure that the care leavers get to a point where they 'do not need them' anymore. This is through the acquisition of skills that will help them in their independence. The literature review highlighted a research in Ghana (Frimpong, 2017) where care leavers appreciated the independent living skills, they learned from their carers. The care leavers added that without these independent living skills, they would not have built the confidence, attitude and skills to manage their own lives. Daly (2012) supports this by further explaining that there is a need for social workers to help care leavers master practical everyday tasks. The findings of this study and the literature review have highlighted not only the importance of independent skills but also interdependent skills. The social workers have seen a need for care leavers to learn how to not be afraid to interact with other people. They also want to get the care leavers to a point where they can feel like a normal part of the society. Storø (2018), explains that to be interdependent is to be able to seek help, share, and receive from others and describes this form of social exchanges as good values to have. Learning interdependence will allow care leavers to be a part of a social support network (Pryce, Napolitano, & Samuels, 2017).

Apart from teaching them directly how to seek for help, social workers also teach this help seeking behavior through their actions. One of the roles of social workers in the findings is collaboration with other service providers. The social workers explained that when the care leavers need some skills development or any extra support that they may not be able to provide, they seek help from other service providers. This leads to a collaboration where the service providers will be able to equip the care leavers with the necessary services that they may need. As a result of collaborating with other service providers, care leavers will: develop a relationship with people other than their social workers and also recognize that it is ok to seek for help. This relationship with other service providers has also been regarded as a factor that will increase resilience in care leavers through helping them strenghten their beliefs in themselves and others (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018).

The abilitiy to be interdependent has been emphasized as the main ingredient for being a part of a social network, thereby receiving social support which, is an integrative part of care leaver resilience (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Care leavers can also learn to be interdependent by participating in leisure activities. They have a fear of socializing with people due to low confidence and have even been described as being scared of people. Social workers agree that in order for them to be able to participate fully in the society, they have to feel comfortable with people that they are unfamiliar with. This is also a way for them to improve on their interdependence. When in care, the youth take part in

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a lot of leisure activities. However, this involvement generally decreased after leaving care, due largely to financial constraints or because the new accommodation was located too far away from leisure facilities. Care leavers should be encouraged to develop interests and skills and build and maintain friendships as these are key means for them to experience enjoyment and a sense of achievement and to develop social skills (SOS Children's Villages, 2017).

Leisure, a sociocultural activity, focuses on the creation and harmonization of relationships between people and their communities (Šinkūnienė, 2020). Leisure can help care leavers attain the necessary abilities to make changes in their lives. Research has shown that more opportunities should be provided for young people to acquire and practice a range of abilities, including practical, self-care, and emotional and inter-personal skills. When care leavers participate in a range of leisure activities, it opens the door for making new friends, getting opportunities such as the learning of competencies, development of emotional maturity and the development and improvement of their resilience. Their resilience will enable them to change their negative experiences to positive with the help of others (Stein, 2005). This can also be beneficial because leisure activities not only provide opportunities to grow and change but also the opportunity to engage in familiar experiences that provide stability in an environment of continuous change. Thus, they are also provided with the opportunity to find the solace that comes from the need to surround or immerse oneself in an environment that promotes familiarity (Edginton, 2007). McLeod (2010) suggested that the arts and outdoor activities should be harnessed to assist the personal growth of youth in care.

All of the skills and abilities acquired by care leavers can be achieved through the support and guidance of their social workers. Frimpong (2018) revealed that care leavers received guidance and motivation from their social workers, and this was important not only to their education but to the development of life and social skills. According to the findings, this guidance is showing them how to do things better and supporting them to make the right decisions, realize the consequences of their decisions and to not let them give up. But at the same time, the social workers recognize that they do not tell the care leavers what to do, as their relationship is not based on hierarchy but from a levelled field. The social workers previously described themselves as being light houses that show care leavers the way.

This guidance according to the findings will help care leavers make better choices and not be afraid to try, to dream – to have big aspirations and strive for it. This ability to dream is achieved by social workers building on the confidence of care leavers. This confidence and belief in themselves and their abilities will lead them to become more resilient. The social workers have described care leavers as not having confidence, all the tasks and the roles of the social workers will inadvertently lead to the

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confidence building of the care leavers. Sulimani-Aidan (2018) connects this to improving their resilience; working with care leavers to build a positive perception of themselves by paying attention to their abilities and strengths will help in increasing care leaver resilience. Resilient care leavers have been described in previous research as having value for themselves and higher self-esteem, they are not afraid of obstacles and failing (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018).

The role of the social workers to teach valuable skills and guide the care leavers to reach and aspire for more will allow them to be a part of the society they are transitioning to. The care leavers will transition to adulthood as resilient individuals. The execution of these social worker responsibilities involves focusing on the needs of the care leavers and will lead to care leavers feeling confident. These roles are all underlined by the actual needs of the care leavers. The social workers when working with care leavers try to meet their needs for in order for them to successfully transition to adulthood.

In order for care leavers to successfully transition to independence, they have some needs that will have to be met. The social workers have described them as having insufficient decision making, and financial skills which, affect their confidence. This is understandable because as emerging adults, care leavers are going through a prolonged period of adolescence and will still need to depend on their carers to learn how to be responsible for their independent lives (Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017).

The findings suggest that when care leavers are able to make decisions, they can know where they want to go in life and how to get there. However, they need to learn to make decisions and they are able to do so through the guidance of social workers. When the social workers guide them, they are able to make the most favorable decisions for themselves. The findings also show that social workers have to be careful not to impose what they think is right to these care leavers. The social workers can also work with the care leavers to come up with the best ways for them to receive leaving care support from the social workers and also to know what their needs are. Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, (2017) back the findings by asserting that care leavers could benefit from interventions that give them practice at taking time to reason about decisions and generating possible alternatives.

Research about decision-making among care leavers has shown that they do not know how to make decisions because they had nobody to teach them. As a result, they learnt how to make decisions by making mistakes. Additionally, during their time in care, they were required to make quick decisions therefore didn't learn how to think before making a choice. It is important for care leaver's self-esteem and confidence to have their views respected and taken seriously. This is because it may give them some sense of being active agents in relation to their own care rather than the powerless victims. A

further reason why participation in decision making is important is that emerging adults learn by example and by practice (Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017). Participating in decision-making with support and guidance is a vital part of the socialization of children and young people to prepare them for future independence and autonomous decision-making. One of the problems facing care leavers is that they have often had little experience in decision-making but are generally required to make the transition to independent living years before their counterparts who live with their families of origin (Cashmore, 2002).Thomas & O'kane (1999) pointed out that the participation in decision making of youth in care is a difficult topic because unlike other youth not in care, decisions about youth in care are made by a lot of adults. Including some who have never met them or understand what is important to them.

Knowing how to make decisions is a skill that care leavers can use in different parts of their lives. In this study for example, the social workers described the care leavers as not knowing how to make good financial decisions, this lack leads to poor financial management. Past research has shown that finances are a source of problems for care leavers. Care leavers have financial issues because after they leave care, they no longer have access to grants from the government in South Africa (Shaw, Steyn, & Simeon, 2019). This is problematic because they face additional costs such as such as paying for health services and further education. As a result, they often find themselves on public assistance more often that youth who were never in care.

However, the findings of this study suggest that even when care leavers receive grants during their transition to adulthood, they can still have financial issues. This is because they do not have the skills to adequately manage finances so that they are not left homeless and hungry at the end of the month. It is therefore necessary that care leavers are fully imbibed with practical knowledge on how to use and manage their finances.

Research also revealed that care leavers experience financial security in their daily lives. Explaining that it is unsurprising because when they were in care, their needs were met by their carers. It was suggested that care leavers be prepared for good financial management both before and after leaving care (Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013). This can be done through the creation of bank accounts for youth in care so that they can learn to manage their financial situation. Then as they transition to independence, these skills can be reinforced and enhanced as care leavers begin to deal with income, maintaining a house, education costs, and social life (Benbenishty & Magnus, 2008).

Looking at this from the lens of emerging adulthood, care leavers even though they are past the age of 18, the transition to adulthood is a gradual one. Care leavers find themselves in the period emerging

adulthood which Arnett (2007) has emphasized as being "*perhaps the most heterogeneous period of the life course because it is the least structured*". According to Arnett (2007), in order for emerging adults to become independent, they need to acquire new skills and develop the existing ones.

When care leavers are able to gain skills, they can apply those skills in other areas of their lives. For example, their decision-making skills can influence how they manage their finances. The social workers have a responsibility to teach care leavers the necessary skills for their transition to adulthood. Equally important is the involvement of care leavers in learning these skills so that they can learn by doing. By doing this, not only are the social workers carrying out their roles as guiders, teachers and supporters, they are also putting care leavers at the forefront of their transitions.

Conclusion

The findings reveal the connections between the thematic areas as shown in the thematic map. The themes are connected in a way that they have an influence on each other and the transition to adulthood of care leavers. The personality of the social worker will influence the relationship formed with the care leavers. Without the development of this relationship, social workers cannot work with care leavers to better their leaving care outcomes. It is through this relationship that social workers carry out their roles. The roles of the social workers are for the sole reason of meeting the transition to independence needs of the care leavers. The findings also explain using the emerging adulthood theory that care leavers need to learn additional skills in order to increase their resilience.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to answer how care leavers are supported as they transition to adulthood in Lithuania. Based on the results and discussion the following conclusions have been made:

- International guidelines for leaving care have been set by the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010) (Guidelines). According to the Guidelines, youth in care should have the necessary assistance related to alternative care. It lists, participation in decision-making, having individualized plans and early preparation for their transition to independence and adulthood. The European Council made recommendations based on the guidelines of the United Nations. That is, care leavers should be afforded the appropriate leaving care support in order to fully integrate into the society. These previous guidelines and recommendations have influenced the tasks in Lithuania's Action Plan (2014) on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services for Disabled Persons and Children Without Parental Care for 2014-2020, such as the improvement of services to care leavers through the provision of social hosing in order to facilitate their integration into the society.

- Care leavers go through a difficult period during their transition to adulthood, but the difficulties can be reduced or eliminated when their needs for preparation for leaving care and transition from care are met. Emerging adulthood theory explains that emerging adults need to learn some skills in order to be independent (Arnett, 2007) and the acquisition of these skills will be through their carers and it is important for them to learn by practice. During the preparation for leaving care, they need to form relationships with their social workers, mentors and also their peers, these relationships can be a form of support for them. They also need to participate in decision-making in order to boost their confidence for making decisions in the future. Finally, they will need to have some independent living skills and also know how to be a part of the society. And as they transition from care, transitional homes can provide them with such skills. Education is also necessary for them to be able to have well-paying jobs and, being a part of a support network will help care leavers to cope with the separation from care.

- The use of self-concept explains that social workers can support care leavers to change and develop by being instruments of their profession and using their personalities to create authentic relationships with them. Social worker competencies are more important than their knowledge of social work (Kaushik, 2017). This research shows the social worker

competencies as the 'bedrock' of their work with care leavers. Social workers need to be understanding in order to accept care leavers and create a relationship with them, while in the relationship, social workers keeping an open mind will ensure that they use the right techniques and methods to meet the needs of the care leavers and their creativity will improve their communication and understanding of the care leavers. The social worker competencies will help create a therapeutic environment for the care leavers and ensure that the social workers understand the actual needs of the care leavers in order to support, guide and teach them the specific skills that they require to successfully transition to adulthood.

- When social workers develop quality relationships with care leavers, they can act as mentors and provide a therapeutic environment for care leavers where they feel comfortable to express themselves. Social workers act as a source of support, guidance and motivation for care leavers. This is the primary way that they can help them acquire the necessary skills and competencies needed for their transition to adulthood. They help care leavers learn how to take care of themselves, how to be a part of the society and how to be confident. Having these skills will allow care leavers to feel good about themselves and also be a part of a support network. These are all shown to be protective factors that will increase care leaver resilience.

<center>**RECOMMENDATIONS**</center>

Based on the results of this study, a number of key recommendations have been made with regards to care leaver transition to independence:

Delayed Transitions to Adulthood: This study has shown that youth who have reached the age of majority are not ready to exit alternative care at the age of 18. It is recommended that the transition from care should be delayed for those who require additional support to successfully transition to adulthood. Their transition to adulthood should mirror the relationships that 'natural parents' have with their children. The Lithuanian Ministry of Social Services and Labor needs to put measures in place to support youth in care even after they leave care so that they do not transition to adulthood without the adequate preparation they need. This will ensure that young care leavers have the necessary supports required to transition to independent living.

Meeting Diverse Needs of Care Leavers: It has been shown that a 'one size fits all' approach cannot meet all the needs of care leavers. Rather, care leavers need a range of diverse responses that aim to promote bigger opportunities for their interventions. The transition to adulthood of care leavers should be done in a way that shows acknowledgement of the different circumstances of youth who leave alternative care. Therefore, a national framework that details how care leavers should be supported should be provided through a legislative reform led by the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Services and Labor. This will lead to a diverse and responsive care system that will support them and their transitions to adulthood.

Researching Care Leaver Perspectives: As this research focused on the perspectives of social workers in leaving care, it would be good to have some further research done by social work universities and the Lithuanian Association of Social Workers to understand the perspectives of care leavers on the support given to them as they transition to adulthood in Lithuania. Researching the perspectives of care leavers would increase the understanding of their transition to adulthood.

Learning by Doing: This research laid emphasis on social workers allowing care leavers to participate in decision-making as a way for them to really learn how to do it. This study recommends that social workers in Lithuania who work with youth in care and care leavers not just allow them to participate not just in decision-making but also in doing other activities. They will learn by doing things, from cooking and cleaning to visiting the hospital and also putting together the required documents in order to get their leaving care allowances. In so doing, social workers will guide care leavers to be able to take responsibility for their lives and also, give care leavers ownership of these aspects of their lives.

SUMMARY

The aim of this thesis *From Living in Care to Independence* is to analyse the support given to care leavers as they transition to adulthood. Social workers are the main leaving care support service providers, and it is important to research their roles and competencies relevant for supporting care leavers. The thesis also explores what the needs of care leavers are and the existing policies that guide the provision of support to care leavers. This study was carried out in Lithuania with the interviews conducted between April-November 2020. Data for this thesis was obtained from social workers who provide support to youth in care transitioning to adulthood and care leavers. The subjects were selected using judgmental sampling and the criteria was social workers: 1) Who work in institutions that provide leaving care services to youth who have lived in alternative care and 2) Who work with youth about to leave care or who have left care. Using semi-structured interviews, the data was collected from the participants via Skype and text messaging. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed then analysed using the thematic analysis. The results show that social workers use their personal competencies of creativity, understanding and being open-minded to create relationships with care leavers to understand better their needs and teach them the necessary life skills. The roles of the social workers are however, not just to teach care leavers skills, they also act as a source of support and guidance for the care leavers. Finally, the results showed that care leavers need independent and interdependent needs in order to transition to adulthood successfully. The study recommends delaying care leaver transition to independence until they have the necessary skills, changes in legislation to develop a care leaver framework that will suit their diverse needs, further research on the perspectives of care leavers and for social workers to guide care leavers to learn by doing.

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Annex 1: Interview Questions:

Hi, thank you for being a part of this research on Leaving Care in Lithuania.

My name is Hajara Tafida-Isa, I am from Nigeria and I am a student of Mykolas Romeris University doing a master's in social work with Children and Youth. The purpose for our meeting is I am doing a Research on Leaving Care in Lithuania for my Thesis.

The goal of the thesis is to analyze services to care leavers that support them for leaving care.
I just want to discuss with you and to let you know about the confidentiality of the research and also. We will not put anything in the report that would be used to identify you. And also, to let you know that you have free will. If you feel like any question is too much for you to answer, it is ok.
I think I had sent you the questions already that you will be answering.

Question 1: Could you please introduce yourself

Question 2: As a social worker working with people leaving care, can you tell me about your experiences working with these youth, as they transition from care to independence

Question 3: Who would you describe as a youngster who has successfully transitioned from care to independence

Question 4: What is the most important thing in your opinion about the preparation for leaving care, transition from care and aftercare while working with youngsters?

Question 5: If you could change something about leaving care in Lithuania, what would it be?

Annex 2: Results of Research

Table 1: Care leavers at the forefront of their transition

Theme and Subtheme	Illustrative Quotations
Thematic Area 1: Care Leavers at the forefront of their transition	
1a. Relationships	**JT** - …good relationship in this job is everything, by everything I mean that if there is no relation between you as a worker and the youngster, the youngster just won't come to you and won't answer to your messages…when you have a relation, then you start to work with his needs, his dreams, his happy moments and bad moments (which he shares with you) and you become like a ''lighthouse'', which can show the right way (but maybe not the easiest way)… **KJ-** …I think that my work is easier because they are motivated to come to us
1b. Attention	**MS -** the attention this is what they need, actually, they don't show it that they need. So, I think that if at least one person who believes in them shows attention and shows that, OK, you behave bad, but whatever. …It's better to come and to swear and to, I don't know, to be angry at home and then go out with a clearer situation inside and then to go out with this anger than they can. That's how it comes. Like committing those crimes or those things **EV-** They feel like they are left alone, and we don't have anybody in this world to, you know, who would stand for them.
1c. Consulting care leavers	**EV-** youngster knows best. So, if you doubt about something, feel free to ask youngster …We ask youngster how she or he feels, what he or she thinks or presumes that they want or they need. **KJ -** We have individual consultation with our youngsters, we are planning the money, we are working on the skills they want to learn
1d. Importance of care leaver happiness	**IG - …**But one consultation, I'm just sitting and listen to him. And he said, I'm happy, I live in shelter, I am safe, I had a job, I have friends, I am happy. I have my own hands'. And I just sitting and listening to him. And then I understand that for him, this is success to him because he is healthy. He is not in the hospital. He is safe and he has money. And for him, it's enough. **MS -** some of them like usually the girls, they. Already got married and of course, at the young age. Yeah, let me say, but still, well, if they are happy and this is what they want and they have a baby and they work still and they are happy, so why not? **JT-** I can call successful transition when the youngster can say that ''I'm happy at what I have now''. By saying this, I mean that some of the youngsters don't need a diploma,

	don't need the best job, don't need to get a lot of money, they are just happy at what they have.

Table 2: Life Skills needed for transition

Theme and Subtheme	Illustrative Quotations
Thematic Area 2: Life skills needed for transition	
2a. Domestic skills	**JT -** I need to mention that successful transition from care to independence is also when the youngster can take care of himself: when he can make some kind of dish, when he knows that he has to do a laundry, when he can go to the grocery shop and spend his money wisely, when he's not afraid to ask questions, when he can go to ATM and know how to use it. **KJ-** When they have their own strong life, like they are still studying, they have work, they have where to live. We are saying that they are grown- up and they don't need us any more
2b. Being part of society	**EV-** To take a full part in a society and not to feel different from others. **MS -** …they can learn also how to behave in the, you know, in the society with other people, because usually they are also afraid of people and they are always like trying not to communicate with the people. **KJ**: and some of them just are not very strong in social life.
2c. Financial planning skills	**EV**- For example, one, my youngster from that money bought a fridge. And after that, he sells it for three euros. And he said, Oh, I look how a lot of money I go from the fridge. So, it was like, whoa! three euros for the new fridge. **KJ-** The youngster who can clearly plan their money that in the end of the month he can have money for the rent or food
2d. Decision Making	**KJ-** I think that it's the youngster who can make decisions by him or herself **EV** - And if a person knows clearly what he or she wants to do in the life, I find that is a really tough position of about living independently and making decisions and knowing what you want, what you do and what for
2e. Confidence	**MS -** Let me say, they have this guilt. Maybe they will not say it. But while working with them and in my experience, at least, I can see that somehow, they are connecting it, that it's their fault, like that something is wrong with them and no one can hear them, and no one is interested in them **IG- …**they don't trust themselves. They don't have dreams about anything. And this is the worst situation. …they are very disappointed, and they didn't think about a future or what they could do or didn't trust themselves or that even other people didn't trust them.

Table 3: Social worker Competencies

Theme and Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotations
Thematic Area 4: Social worker competencies	
4a. Understanding	**JT -** You, as a worker, need a lot of patience and a lot of understanding, what a youngster from childcare home is dealing with in his life. By saying 'make a contact' I mean that you need to be empathic, try not to push too much, try to be kind and understandable **IG -** what is important that we accept youngsters. It doesn't matter what that past he or she had and does matter. He had problem, not no emotional or behavioural problems.
4b. Open-minded	**IG -** We accept everybody, and we are looking how to work with the youngsters. The method that is okay for him. if it is better to have conversation when we cook than we cook together and then talk. If a youngster is better to have consultations when he goes for a walk, then we go for a walk and then talk…" **EV -** youngsters got so much more from me because I didn't care about their environment, about their being from take care of living care. But they came from there. I just looked at them as just simple youngsters. **MS**- I always mention that in this house we all are the same level. Let me say, like, there's no like I'm a worker and you are a child, so it doesn't matter.
4c. Creative	**MS -**…for me always helps, like a table games, board games, for example, through the games I can like, make it conversations like the get the information from the child, what I would like to or like, see how she or he reacts, for example, in losing or the winning situations and etc. …we usually watch a movie and then we have small discussion. For example, what you liked in the movie, what was for you the best. Like, which character do you like and why IG - Then we create some camps or youth exchange, and we try and write youngsters from Foster House or Care House to come and participate in that
4d. Persistent	**MS -** You try you are saying that you are welcome. You have a good relationship. You see that they are open with you, they speak with you. But when it comes to this coming home, sleeping, for example, room or like going to the shower, this is the biggest issue. And they refuse. They don't want. But that's like I don't know how to make it so that it is what they want, and You try, you try, for example, you support them. **IG -** But I have tried and keep trying because you never know what could happen in

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	the future. And we don't say "No. You are helpless, and we can't help you" No, we are not god, we don't know what could happen in the future.

Table 4: Social workers' roles

Theme and Subthemes	Illustrative Quotations
Thematic Area 5: The Social worker roles	
5a. Support	**IG-**And sometimes for youngsters need a lot of support and a lot of people who believes them, even when they didn't believe they self. …we want to support them that they go to school, that they have higher aims than the social worker from your house or foster house gave them or themselves. So, when they start dreaming, when they start to plan, they start thinking about the future. **MS -** The most important is. I think to to give to give them these like a feeling of security, that there is at least one person whom you can turn and come and speak about anything. …So we say, oh, you are good in it, so let's you do it. And then we can even I paid to you let me say 1 euro, if you cook one meal and then it gives motivation to cook for everyone. **JT -** ...And me, as a worker of Patria. I need to empower him, empower to not be afraid to ask, to not be afraid to make a mistake, to not be afraid to try.."
5b. Guidance	**MS-** I would say like this that my goal, I see it like this, that I should show them how it can be done better, like how it is the best way or better way and then they can choose because you can't choose, and you can't live a child's life **IG -** she didn't pass international English five times But I didn't let her to give up. No. Sometimes you just have to try to try to try to train and again, try to train again **MS-** But then there is something. What, for example, we see that the child is good, for example, in cooking, just like he or she cooks very well. So we say, oh, you are good in it, so let's you do it. And then we can even I paid to you let me say 1 euro, if you cook one meal and then it gives motivation to cook for everyone
5c. Teaching social skills	**IG -** Then you understand that they didn't know …how to solve conflicts. It was for me it was strange because they solve conflicts. They have two strategy, shout or beat each other or just quit. I don't talk anymore and just there's no problem because I don't. I ignore it. And then you start to learn how to change this behavior **EV-** And it's really important for you to know how to solve the conflicts and the ways of how to do it, how I could come to person and to say that I didn't like what you did or what you said. And that's why. Not avoiding, but trying to talk

5d. Teaching Responsibility	**MS-** But my goal, let me say is to show them that, look, you can do like this, this is better. And this is this is benefit. So, if you go in this way, it will be consequences **IG -** It was very funny, we had a broken fridge and youngsters talked about it for one year before they changed it.
5e. Planning leisure activities	**IG -** And we have some activities together once a month so youngsters can decide to wear what to do together with us or to go to cinema or to go to somewhere. **MS** - you can do like I don't know, six months, one time, go with them, for example, to eat in the restaurant
5f. Collaborating with other service providers	MS –Let's say like this is why, like, for example, we also make relationships with the different organizations who give services like for children, for example, the youth centers or some kind of projects which are written for youth. …we say, OK, we have a child. He or she has an issue, for example, of public speaking, and then they have like some services which they are gathering the children, which have the same issue and then working with them. IG- We collaborate with care house and foster houses, and we always like they youngsters to come in our activities and go to care houses to present our activity