

# The educational experience of young people in residential care through the lens of learning careers

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## Abstract

To complement previous research investigating the educational attainment of young people in out-of-home care reporting lower educational outcomes and risk factors, a more comprehensive approach is necessary. Our objective with this article is to better understand the learning careers of young people in residential care. That includes documenting their experience and the meaning they attribute to learning in formal settings over time and identifying critical turning points in each young person's learning career. Based on an interpretative paradigm, we conducted a qualitative study using biographical interviews with young people aged 14–18 in residential care in Quebec, Canada. We first demonstrate that the learning careers of young people in residential care are unique and non-linear. Second, by studying turning points, we highlight the critical role that institutions, teachers and youth workers can play in fostering a positive or negative learning career. Finally, we noted learners' different responses to these circumstances and differences in learners' perception of their measured performance and their influence on their engagement with formal learning. We discuss why considering young people as the main actors and producers of meaning regarding their educational experience and learning careers appears necessary.

## KEYWORDS

educational experience, learning careers, out-of-home care, residential care

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

To complement previous research investigating the educational attainment of young people in out-of-home care reporting lower educational outcomes and risk factors, we present a more comprehensive approach. Our objective with this article is to better understand the learning careers of young people in residential care.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

We demonstrate learners' different responses to circumstances (including school, placement, family) and differences in learners' perception of their measured performance and their influence on their engagement with formal learning. We highlight the importance of considering young people as the main actors and producers of meaning regarding their educational experience.

## INTRODUCTION

To complement previous research investigating the educational attainment of young people in out-of-home care reporting lower educational outcomes and risk factors, a more comprehensive approach is necessary. The following sections show different questions and approaches used to study educational attainment and why a comprehensive approach can be complementary and appears essential.

## Documenting representative educational outcomes

Many studies from North America, Europe and Oceania have documented the educational outcomes of young people in out-of-home care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Montserrat & Casas, 2018; Romano et al., 2015; Stone, 2007; Trout et al., 2008; Vinnerljung et al., 2005). A longitudinal study in Australia showed that young people leaving care were less likely to have completed secondary school than youth in the general population (Cashmore et al., 2007). A study of student data from Michigan State University showed that former foster care youth were significantly more likely to drop out during the first year or before their degree completion than their non-foster care peers (Day et al., 2011). Another US study examined the path from high school to college of 500 youth in out-of-home care. It showed that even if young people in out-of-home care meet the expectations of secondary education, they may still have difficulty preparing for university (Sandh et al., 2020). Using prospective and longitudinal research design, a Swedish study showed that the out-of-home care group had lower school grades in sixth and ninth grades and lower educational attainment at 62 years old compared to their same-aged peers (Forsman, 2020). These studies provide an overview of the educational situation of young people in out-of-home care using a variety of quantitative measures of educational success (e.g. completion of year 12, dropping out before the end of the first year of university, on-time high school graduation, exam performance and grades, and diploma type), most of the time in comparison with general populations or sometimes with those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Overall, young people leaving out-of-home care have lower educational outcomes and persistence in post-secondary education than youth who did not experience this situation. By comparing the educational outcomes and highlighting the importance of considering this subgroup, these studies bring the question of equity, access and participation in higher education. They can help ensure that the issue becomes part of the political agenda. For example, in Quebec, Canada, this data was used in the Special Commission on the Rights of the Child and Youth Protection report to prompt government action to improve these young people's educational pathways and qualifications (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021). This data type can also help measure the broad impact of public policy decisions, such as extending care (Courtney & Hook, 2017). However, it leaves us with the question of how to reduce the gaps and inequity and improve these youths' educational outcomes and access to and participation in higher education.

## Explaining educational attainment using risk and protective factors

Many studies have investigated the statistical impact of variables on the educational attainment of young people in out-of-home care and whether those variables can explain their educational outcomes (Goyette et al., 2021; Hunter et al., 2014; Kothari et al., 2021; McClung & Gayle, 2010; O'Higgins et al., 2017). Most identified risk factors lead to lower educational outcomes or protection factors that help young people to grow and succeed. Risk factors identified include individual characteristics (male gender, ethnic minority status, learning difficulties or emotional or behavioural issues); placement owing to sexual abuse, physical abuse or neglect (O'Higgins et al., 2017); the age of the youth, being older at the first placement (O'Higgins et al., 2017); unstable living conditions, such as a change of placement (Cashmore et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2021; O'Higgins et al., 2017) and moving schools (Clemens et al., 2016); and placement type (O'Higgins et al., 2017). One of the most common protection factors was the educational, academic and emotional support and encouragement received by young people in out-of-home care (Hunter et al., 2014; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Merdinger et al., 2005; O'Higgins et al., 2017). When youth received support and encouragement from families, teachers, youth workers, special education services, friends or siblings, they were likelier to progress and succeed in their school careers. The literature refers to other protection factors, including participating in extracurricular activities or independent living training (Pecora et al., 2006) and having high aspirations (O'Higgins et al., 2017).

These studies make us aware of the multiple factors associated with or related to the educational outcomes of young people in out-of-home care. They bring measures that can be used to reduce risk and increase protection or resilience. If resilience studies show that not all causes need to be considered to have results, not considering the causes and meaning attributed by young people is an important limitation to ensuring positive outcomes. Therefore, we considered that some critical questions remain unanswered. How, why and when do these factors influence educational outcomes? What has been done to improve the situation, and how does the context influence these situations? What factors are significant from young people's point of view? How do young people experience their educational paths?

## Understanding youth experience over time: A comprehensive approach

To answer these questions, a comprehensive approach appears necessary. Hunter et al. (2014) recommended that using a more qualitative research approach and richer

narratives can help better understand how young people in care experience their educational path. A recent systematic review by Townsend et al. (2020) analysed 11 qualitative or mixed-method studies that looked at the educational experiences of young people currently or formerly in out-of-home care from their perspectives. In these studies, 396 participants aged between 10 and 36 years, living mainly in the USA and England, could express themselves about what is significant in their experience. The thematic analysis revealed how living in an out-of-home care facility influences young people's emotional well-being, mental health, behaviour, and ultimately, their educational experience. Young people expressed that distress, stress, depression and frustration related to their situation had resulted in behavioural issues and difficulty concentrating in class (Townsend et al., 2020). A prominent theme of educational experience studies is 'school being a safe haven' (Harker et al., 2003; Hass et al., 2014; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018; Townsend et al., 2020). Young people emphasised the fact that their lives were sometimes chaotic and unpredictable. That is why they needed the counterbalance of a safe and stable school environment. A youth from one of the US studies said, 'School was the only place I felt at home' (Harker et al., 2003, p. 94).

Another theme highlighted is the influence of positive relationships with teachers and peers, which appears to facilitate the educational experience of young people. These relationships can represent a second chance or a turning point for them. From their perspective, support and encouragement from teachers influence their self-esteem and sense of belonging. A teacher's recognition of their unique situation is another element that can positively affect the educational experience of some youth. On the other hand, feeling unsafe at school, being treated differently (e.g. low expectations and being labelled a delinquent), changing schools and being judged by peers unaware of their reality negatively influence educational experiences (Townsend et al., 2020). Environments that value education, social networks and practical and financial resources also emerged from the narrative of the young women interviewed by Mendis et al. (2018). This concurs with the results of Hass et al. (2014), which suggest that a sense of autonomy and social and instrumental support interacted to facilitate turning-point events in young people's lives.

The results of these studies differ from those of risk and protective factors studies. They provide us with an understanding of how these young people experience their educational pathways that can inform teachers and youth workers so that they can better understand the reality of these young people and how their actions influence their educational experience.

From our literature review, we noted that outcomes studies can help us monitor changes in inequalities and inequities and the impacts of structural measures. Identifying risk and protective factors concerning educational outcomes can help highlight essential elements. However, it prevents us from understanding why and how these elements are critical since it provides little information on their interaction with context. Finally, we noted that a recent trend of studies of educational experience in the USA and England, while considering youth voice, produces different results and explanations that can raise awareness of the situations experienced by young people in care and identify actions to be taken. Our study, which takes place in a different context, Quebec, Canada, aligns with this trend and focuses more specifically on youth relationships with school as a formal learning setting.

## **OBJECTIVE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The main objective of our research project was to better understand the educational experience of young people in out-of-home care from their point of view and their interaction with others and their environments. We define educational experience as the product of a subject who builds unity from the different dimensions of their life and the systems in which they are engaged (Dubet, 1994). Based on the sociology of experience, we position young

people as reflective subjects and actors. As actors, they articulate different logic of action, and the dynamics generated by this activity constitute an actor's subjectivity and reflexivity (Dubet, 1994). From that posture, we assumed that the young people are competent actors with the skills and the ability to make choices, reflect and make sense of their histories. With this objective, we wanted to produce results that reflect the complexity of our context and can inform practice and policy in a complementary manner. We also want to contribute to the scientific literature to better understand care-experienced people's educational engagement and outcomes.

The research objective of this article is to better understand the learning careers of young people in out-of-home care, which is considered a part of the educational experience. Following the previous principles, we decided to use Bloomer & Hodkinson's (2000) concept of learning careers, which emerged from their research on the learning experiences of young people in their final years of English secondary education. Learning careers refer to the development of young people's dispositions to learning over time (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000). It enables us to question how and why their experience and the meaning they attribute to learning evolve while putting young people at the centre of the process since they are the main actors and producers of meaning regarding their educational experience.

To study learning careers, we considered three elements based on Bloomer & Hodkinson's (2000) research. Firstly, we considered the meanings that young people attribute to school as the primary context of their formal learning experiences and questioned how they act and their logic of action according to how they define the situations they encounter. We consider how these young people analyse their experiences and formulate meanings, including elements such as aims, values and interests regarding learning. This appears relevant, as Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p. 594) stated: 'Exposure of young people to more diverse forms of social interaction, and to new events and changing circumstances, such as occur during the adolescent years we have witnessed, expands opportunities for new constructions of meaning, and may make some established meanings hard to retain'. Secondly, as Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) stated, the set of dispositions of people are influenced by the identity and position of people in society. In our case, we considered how the context and position of young people in out-of-home care may or may not influence their learning career. Thirdly, we considered that 'learning careers are marked by both continuity and change' (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000, p. 591). Therefore, as suggested by these authors, we analysed the movements contributing to building each young person's unique learning career. Regarding this, we use the author's notion of 'critical turning points' to understand how the learning careers of young people in out-of-home care transform over time.

## Research questions

To understand the learning careers of young people in out-of-home care, we identified the following questions: (1) how do young people experience their learning careers and formulate meaning to learning in formal settings over time; (2) what are the critical turning points in young people learning careers; and (3) how do the context and the young people's position influence their learning careers?

## METHOD

Based on a qualitative interpretive study, we conducted biographical interviews with young people in out-of-home care (Bertaux, 1997). This interview is a particularly effective and valuable tool to explore in depth how people lived specific social experiences and interpret

them in a subjective way (Schwartz et al., 1999). It is an opportunity for them to (re)construct their experience based on their perspective, with little help from the interviewer. In 2021, we met 35 young people aged 14–18 in residential care in Quebec, Canada. In our jurisdiction, residential care includes group homes (living environments where services are offered by a youth worker who does not live there) and rehabilitation centres for young people with severe behavioural difficulties, social adaptation problems and mental health issues.

During the interview, we invited young people to reflect on their educational path since entering secondary school (year 7). We questioned them about their educational pathways and experiences. We asked them about the events that had influenced their experience and the meaning they attribute to learning and school engagement. Then, we made a summary diagram to represent on a timeline the different elements or events they felt had influenced their learning career positively or negatively. On average, the interviews lasted 1 h. They were recorded and transcribed. Participants' names were changed for pseudonyms. Those narrative data allowed us to analyse the experience of young people and how and why their meaning of learning evolved.

We have decided to present the analysis of two in-depth interviews for the current article since we think we can learn from them and their intrinsic property. These interviews were selected because the two participants were particularly articulate in describing their experiences, providing richer accounts than others. Indeed, they provide us with a detailed version of their learning careers from which we can learn, including clear turning points regarding their experience and the meaning they attributed to learning at each period. These interviews are not special or atypical cases. They are like those of other young people, who all have turning points and periods in which we can identify different attributions to the meaning they give to learning. We also selected these interviews because of the differences between the socio-demographic characteristics and the care histories of the two young people, which shows the application of the framework to different profiles of young people and different contexts. In fact, the two young people are different regarding socio-demographic characteristics and care history, including age (Clara is 17 years old and Wilfried 15 years), gender (Clara identified as female and Wilfried as male), ethnicity (Clara is part of a minority and Wilfried is not), and the different reasons why they are taken into care by social services (for Clara compromised safety and for Wilfried non-attendance at school and serious behavioural problems). In conclusion, the analysis of these interviews shows the possible application of the chosen framework and the results that can emerge from using it and a comprehensive approach.

## **RESULTS**

### **Clara, 17 years old, learning career**

#### **Clara's feelings of inferiority and avoidance induce minimal care for school and formal learning**

Before being under child protection services, Clara attended the same high school from Grades 7 to 9. She attended an ordinary state secondary school. Clara mentioned that during this period, she experienced considerable stress, mainly owing to her difficult family situation, which included many conflicts. While in Grade 7, she described herself as a person who was always late and who felt judged by her teachers and peers, which prevented her from engaging in formal learning. She mentioned avoiding school and feeling inferior to others, influencing how she acted in class. She was discreet and felt late in learning compared with others, which she says was reflected in her marks. She passed some classes but not all.

## Clara's care about school and formal learning increased because of friendship

In Grades 8 and 9, she was in a special needs class for young people, 1 year behind the norm in their schooling. Clara received support from a friend in her class who encouraged her. The friend was exacting and had good grades. They started working together and comparing class notes. She was, therefore, a source of motivation for Clara to engage in formal learning.

## Multiple moves, anxiety and complicated relationships with teachers: Clara stopped caring about formal learning in school

One day, while in Grade 9, Clara returned home to find the police there and learned that she would have to move.

'It is like it happened overnight like I did not even know we would like. I came back from school, and you know I was home, and the police were there, and we had to leave. I thought I would see my friend the next day, and you know that was it, we just left ... to the shelter, they said we could not go back to the same school because it was dangerous. After all, our father could follow us to the shelter'.

She had to move to a shelter and switch to a new school.

She subsequently moved several times in succession. While she was in Grade 10, she had many panic attacks because each time she arrived in a new place to live, she found it difficult not having friends. She had stopped doing her homework and fell behind at school. During this period, she feared one of her teachers, whom she found very strict. She says she would get angry when she asked questions in class, commenting, 'We are already here. How could you not know that yet?' Clara felt judged and no longer dared ask questions for fear of being wrong. She found it very distressing. Clara said that she was distant from her teachers during this period. Despite knowing that they kept her from focusing on schoolwork, she did not talk to them about her problems. She preferred preserving her self-image rather than discussing that she was in out-of-home care. She began skipping classes, and her interest in school began to wane. 'I stopped going to school because I had stopped caring about school'. The absences began piling up, and the more school she missed, the more scared she was to return. It was like a vicious circle: 'After, I was scared to go to school because I had not been going. You know my maths teacher was very strict; she got angry if you missed a class—just one class. So after that, I missed her classes. I did not want to attend school anymore because I had missed so many classes.' Nevertheless, she said she had barely passed her courses in this period, explaining that she could pass from one grade to the next despite everything. The main reason Clara gave was luck.

## Clara's confidence in her ability and interest in school and formal learning increased because of the stabilisation of her living environment and special education programme

Clara's residential situation stabilised with a placement in a rehabilitation centre for young persons with adjustment problems. This centre is composed of 12 units in which 10–12

young people live under the supervision of youth workers. Most of the young people attend an on-site specialised school. The number of young people in class is between 6 and 12. The school offers mostly individualised learning since young people come and go depending on the length of their placement. She said that schoolwork and homework became a way to clear her head and create some breathing space, but also keep busy and stay distracted instead of being bored all day in her unit at the centre: 'It gave us something to do, you know ... so we weren't just in the unit all day doing transitions and eating, and that's all ... so school helps to clear our heads.' She considered that school became something positive in her situation, filling her need to stay busy. Therefore, at that time, the school fulfilled the function of a pastime and distraction for her. She was no longer afraid to go.

Clara said that she was pleasantly surprised by how this new school on the rehabilitation site operated, which seemed much more suited to her pace of learning. She said, 'I am slow at doing my homework and finishing exams like it takes me much time. I have always been one of the last to finish homework, and here they give us the time we need, they adapt, they give us lots of time to finish, and so that helps me a lot'. She started enjoying it. She no longer felt like she was last in this new place because they adapted to each student's pace, and the instruction was individualised. In this environment, she did not feel intimidated by the teacher and was no longer afraid to ask questions when she did not understand:

No one will judge you if you ask a question that is a little stupid ... in the other schools, if I had a question, I thought it would be stupid and that the teacher would judge me or the other students would laugh at me. [Here] I do not feel intimidated by the teacher like in the other schools, and I am not afraid of asking questions, so yeah, I do not know, I like it. I have good grades in every subject. That is new for me, so it is great.

At that time, her perception of herself changed. For the first time, she felt able to succeed and regained her self-confidence. 'It is like the best school I have ever attended, well because it is where I succeeded the most, because in high school, all through high school, the only reason I ever passed was luck.' She, therefore, felt that this was the period when she started to succeed because she deserved to succeed, not because of 'luck' or coincidence. She took some pleasure in going to school, not only to stay busy but also to learn and progress in her education. To a certain extent, she reconnected with more formal learning. She enjoyed being with people who understood her. Aware of the situation of their students from the youth centre, the teachers in her current school were flexible. She could do something else if she was going through a difficult time or could not concentrate. As Clara said:

She [the teacher] sort of understands our lives, what we have gone through and all that. She understands that we do not just have school to worry about. She gives us time, and if ... if she sees that like we are not doing well, she will ask us, 'Do you want to take a break?' things like that, because when we are not doing well, we really cannot concentrate on schoolwork, so she gives us some time.

In this environment, she no longer needed to keep her situation secret to preserve her self-image. The fact that the professionals around her were aware of and accepted her situation allowed her to be understood and gave her flexibility as her availability fluctuated. She also found that the environment made it easier to concentrate. A more stable schedule and a healthier sleeping pattern meant that she was less tired at school. In hindsight, it seems clear that arriving at the centre and in the on-site school, which is a special education school, was a turning point in her life. Previously, she did not necessarily feel understood by the people around her. On the contrary, she felt that she was being judged negatively. Her current school



gave her a break from her problems. In this environment, her self-image improved because she was no longer systematically confronted with the image of being a person who was 'stupid', 'late' or 'failing'. Instead, she was someone who could experience success: 'When I saw that I had good marks, it helped me keep on getting good marks because I liked it'.

## School and formal learning gain a new meaning for Clara as she is now pregnant

Later that year, at the interview, Clara was pregnant. The school had become a more utilitarian way to get a diploma quickly in a trade that would give her and her family social, financial and personal stability. Thus, the school stopped solely being useful in the present. It became important for her life plan, family and child. It was the gateway to her envisioned future. This personal change became her most significant motivation to engage with formal learning and schoolwork at this stage. 'Especially because of my baby, because I want to have something that's at least stable, so that motivated me a lot this year'. Her guidance counsellor brought her to consider several vocational diplomas. 'She helps me to see ... well, to understand myself a little better to see what a good fit for me would be, what I could do. She explained the vocational programmes, so we looked at the programmes that interest me.' Clara opted for home care because she wanted a short programme and something she liked. 'I want to finish school—my studies—a little faster because that is what I need ... in my situation, that is what I need.' Therefore, at that time, Clara was motivated and able to complete her studies to live the life she wanted.

## Conclusion

In Clara's case, she experienced and attributed different meanings to learning over time and circumstances. Her learning career evolved with her experiences and the people she met, and the meaning she attributed to learning evolved. We identified four turning points in her learning career, each covered in one of the preceding sections. Her experience with formal learning and the meaning that she attributes to it evolved as she went through these different phases in her life. Initially, in Grade 7, when she had a negative and anxiety-provoking relationship with the school, she increasingly missed classes and lost her motivation to attend. Her participation was, therefore, minimal, and she tended not to care much about formal learning and schoolwork.

Consequently, she fell behind and developed a fear that kept her from asking for help to overcome her challenges. During Grade 8, her engagement in formal learning increased since she made a friend who cared a lot about it and her marks. Then, when she was in the regular school system, thoughts about being in care and her problems made it difficult to concentrate, but she had no desire to discuss it with her teachers. She stopped caring about school for a time. Once she started attending school at the rehabilitation centre, she returned to being present at school because it allowed her to think about other things. Learning then represented a source of distraction for Clara. However, Clara became more engaged in learning and once again felt comfortable asking teachers for help. She found delight in her successes in this more secure and compassionate environment. The transformation in her self-image over her learning career was a significant factor in giving her direction in her school and professional careers. She progressively evolved from being the student 'who was always late' to the student who 'could succeed' to the 'future mother' who wanted to finish school and provide for her family's needs. Indeed, when she became pregnant, she engaged more in formal learning. Learning about potential careers in line with her interests helped her visualise her future and because her impending motherhood lent urgency to her

situation. As she engaged more with formal learning, it became a utilitarian way. In conclusion, we can see that Clara's overall experience with formal learning progressively evolved from avoidance to acceptance to full participation, which she leveraged to achieve her personal and professional life plans.

## **Wilfried, 15 years old, learning career**

Driven by anxiety, Wilfried stopped going to school toward the end of primary and the start of secondary school (Grade 7). He was then transferred to a rehabilitation centre because he was not attending school.

### **Maintaining family relationships and the fear of consequences as influences on Wilfried school frequentation but not as much on his engagement with formal learning**

Once at the centre, he resumed school despite the anxiety that had driven his refusal to attend previously. When asked what had helped him or why he could attend school, he responded, 'It was more the fear of the consequences. Because, if I did not go to school, well, like they would cut my weekend privileges [...] it is no fun not being able to go home for the weekend.' He added, 'When in residential care, you go to school. You will never miss school when you are there because you are so afraid of the consequences. Because, like they can, they give you consequences that you do not expect, you know? They can cut your privileges'. During that period, Wilfried had permission to visit his parents on the weekend, which seemed very important. At the time, one factor that kept him in school was the fear of losing that privilege. As he told us, 'My fear [of no longer seeing my parents] was stronger than the fear of being in school'. To Wilfried, attending school became an essential condition for retaining that right. It was, therefore, not the learning that held meaning for him at that time in his life, but rather school as a requirement to being granted a privilege: remaining in contact with his family.

### **Rehabilitation centre climate and Wilfried's little engagement with formal learning**

While he did all he could to retain his privileges, Wilfried said this period was difficult. He spoke about how the impersonal nature of the centre, its impact on his mood and the lack of comfort and quiet in his bedroom demoralised and exhausted him. This affected his interest in engaging with learning at school:

It is demotivating. Like, you wake up in a centre. You feel down. You are like ... it's so awful. You know, you ask yourself questions. Every morning, it becomes hard to bear. It is a heavy atmosphere [...] you just do not feel at home. Let us say you wake up at home on a rainy day, like a stormy day, you know, you tell yourself you do not feel like going to work. ... if you wake up in a rehabilitation centre on a sunny day, it becomes like a stormy day.

He also spoke about constantly not feeling understood. He felt that the structure was too strict and that his challenges were not considered. Wilfried explained that he and his parents fought during this period to have his anxiety disorder recognised by youth protection services.

## Receiving an anxiety disorder diagnosis and changing school: A mixed experience with formal learning and schoolwork

Wilfried was hospitalised for a month and was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. He was at home for a short period before returning to the centre. Wilfried was relieved to have his condition officially recognised. He mentioned that with his diagnosis, things had changed, even if his symptoms had not. He told us that, for the first time, he felt 'structured' at the centre and 'understood' after he and his family had fought to have what was considered an oppositional disorder recognised as an anxiety disorder. After his hospitalisation and return to the centre, Wilfried switched to a specialised school outside the site.

Initially, he was on the defensive, telling himself that it would be the same and that this school would adopt a 'structured' approach. 'Well, initially, I was a little closed-minded because I did not know ... I thought they would be all about structure, too.' In the end, he realised that they had a different approach. He said, 'It is an excellent school. Like, they consider the young people's issues and work with that. Because it was like the first time for me because all I had seen up until that point was structure, structure, structure.'

However, feeling 'labelled' as a 'young delinquent' when he left the centre every morning made him agitated when he got to school. As he explained:

Outside the rehabilitation centre, they have banners that say 'RC' [for rehabilitation centre]. So, when you leave the centre to take the metro, everyone looks at you weirdly, imagining you were some horrible young offender when all I did was skip school. I never did drugs. I never had any issues. And I never assaulted anyone, either. And, like ... I feel like everyone looks down on us. Well, you already feel bad about going to school [because of life in the centre], [and so you are] more agitated at school. So you blow up at school. Then, if you blow up at school, there will be consequences at the centre. So, it gets even worse. It is like a vicious circle.

Most of his school teachers knew he was in residential care during this period. Indeed, he appreciated their discretion for not sharing that information with everyone, particularly his peers, who he believed would have tended to judge him had they known. That helped him feel more comfortable at school.

The teachers were pretty discrete about that [...] They know what peer pressure can do. Like, say certain people [...] don't want people to know they are in a group home or youth centre like they want to keep it to themselves because it is rare to be proud about being there. So, yeah. When they want to talk to you about it, they will ask you to leave the classroom for five minutes and quietly talk to you, so if anyone passes by in the hallway, they will not hear anything. I mean, they handle that well. At school X, I was lucky. I had teachers who were aware of all that. But I know it is not always like that. Some teachers say, 'Will you be at the group home tonight? I want to know who to call.' And so, forty students turn to look at you and laugh at you.

## Wilfried's attendance of an ordinary school and very partial commitment to formal learning

While still in residential care, now in a group home, Wilfried started attending an ordinary school, and when asked, he told us, 'It was so incredibly boring. The courses, like, they were

boring.' He started to listen to music by hiding his earphones to deal with the tedium. He would fall asleep during class at other times until the teacher woke him. Wilfried nonetheless enjoyed two courses, science and history. Both met his criteria for learning: stimulation, action and enjoyment related to gaming.

Science because you know science courses are rarely boring. Because we often went to the lab, so we had fun often. And in history, it's because the first game I played when I was 11 was Assassin's Creed Unity. So, like it's a game that includes a lot of history [...] So, I automatically found it more interesting since I associate video games with pleasure.

That drove him to surpass the requirements for the history course. He took the initiative to do additional readings on subjects not covered in class.

To the point where I went to learn about history outside the class. Like we were not learning about Aristotle, and like I read up on him. After I was ... I spoke about it with my mother, and she told me about him.

His statements show that when the format of a class met his expectations, he even went beyond class requirements to feed his interest. This was particularly the case with the history course, a subject connected to his mother and her profession.

## Pandemic-related confinements and Wilfried little care about formal learning

After a short time in that school, an event occurred that was beyond Wilfried control: the global COVID-19 pandemic. Wilfried's mother petitioned to have him return to live with his family so that he would not be infected at the centre. The court granted the request. Wilfried had to continue attending school online from his family home. However, he explained that peer pressure prevented him from attending online classes. 'Since no one [in my class] was doing schoolwork during that period, well, I didn't do any either online. And, since I had a history, I paid for it afterwards. So even though I went to school the week before my court appearance because that's when school started back up, it wasn't enough for them. They decided to return me to residential care.'

Wilfried once again went into the rehabilitation centre. He thought the decision was unfair and that he had been treated differently from young people not in care, who also failed to attend their online courses during the pandemic. As he explained, 'In my class, none of the students were doing schoolwork, and like, I thought that sucked because I was the one who was returned to the rehabilitation centre when like I had just got out and anyway, I was just doing what everyone else was doing, but I was the only one penalised'.

## A new school programme and a regain of interest in school and formal learning

Wilfried calculated that taken together, his placement prior to his anxiety disorder diagnosis, his hospitalisation, COVID and the transition time between different placements had made him 'lose' one and half years of school: 'Because of the hospitalisation and placement and everything, I completely stopped school for about a year and a half. So, I failed Grade 8 twice. Well, not failed because I don't count it as a failure if I didn't even start.' Despite not viewing it as a failure, Wilfried was unmotivated to repeat Grade 8. To help motivate him, his

youth care workers suggested a training programme for semi-specialised trades (FMS): 'I'll learn the same concepts, but two out of five days—well, I do something new, and that's cool.'

He appreciated that there were fewer courses in the programme and that it included work placements. Furthermore, his current work placement would hire him for the coming summer. That motivated him. Even if he said that he continued to dislike school, he found it less tedious than before. He told us he needed to move and learn through trial and error rather than sitting still and thinking. He seemed to better appreciate learning while doing. As Wilfried told us,

I get bored when it is not all fireworks. That is an expression, but because I play many video games [...] It is just that at six years old, I was already on a computer. So, I started young. My brain developed that way. So, in my head, it's like there always needs to be some action; otherwise, it's boring. Let's just say that is how I interpret life. So, like when I go to school, a maths course has absolutely no fireworks for me. It's just 'practice, practice, practice'.

Wilfried viewed learning as something that should be more vivid and stimulate his brain while requiring action. He compared formal learning with the video games he has played since childhood. During that time, he was also part of a programme, an e-sport team coached by a mentor. Requirements such as healthy eating, exercising and having good grades were parts of the deal. As he said, that helps Wilfried engage in formal learning and schoolwork.

## Conclusion

In Wilfried's case, we see that his experience with formal learning evolved. However, the meaning that he attributed to formal learning remained somehow similar. We identified five turning points in his learning career, each covered in one of the preceding sections. Wilfried initially had periods of absenteeism owing to his anxiety about school. During his placement in a rehabilitation centre, his school attendance improved because of his fear of negative consequences. However, his attitude about school did not seem to change. During that year, Wilfried was hospitalised and diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. From that moment on, he felt better understood by the centre's youth care workers and staff at his new specialised school. His relationship with school improved. It was short-lived. In the same timeframe, he felt agitated on his way to school owing to the negative perceptions he felt that were associated with his out-of-home care situation. He felt judged and seen as a delinquent each time he left the centre. Later, while still under care, he attended a school in the ordinary system. During that period, he struggled to understand most of his courses. He thought they were insufficiently dynamic and were boring. He then adopted behaviours such as listening to music or sleeping in class. Owing to COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, Wilfried returned to his family home to continue his studies online. From his perspective, Wilfried acted the same way as his classmates. In other words, he was not completing his assignments. He was again remanded to the centre until the end of the school year. Feeling the decision was unjust, his relationship with school took a turn for the worse. He did not complete the school year. At the start of the following school year, given his age and the grade level he had to repeat, Wilfried was advised to enrol in a training programme for semi-specialised trades. The programme suited him, and his relationship with school changed. A job placement for two days a week left him less bored. Although he was taking some Grade 8 courses for the third time, Wilfried neither considered that he had failed nor saw himself as an exceptional student. He associated his academic delay with moving, changing schools and his hospitalisation.

## DISCUSSION

The concept of learning careers enabled us to better understand the educational experience of young people in residential care and to demonstrate that they are unique and non-linear. Our demonstration provides a detailed understanding of how transformations in learning careers can occur. Indeed, the meanings the young people assign to their respective educational and learning experiences vary and change over time. For example, in the narratives presented in the Results section, young people attribute different meanings to school and learning at different times: (1) as a mandatory and inescapable step as required by law or as a condition to retain certain rights, such as the right to visit or return to live with their family; (2) as a utilitarian process to achieve a goal or obtain something they want for their future; (3) as a breathing space where thinking about other things allows them to take their minds off their placement or personal problems and feel a little more normal and like other young people; (4) as intellectual nourishment that feeds their curiosity and allows them to acquire knowledge and learn more about subjects that interest them; and (5) as a pleasant or fun activity when there is action during class, games or experiments, or as a boring activity. However, more importantly, we showed that these meanings evolved over their learning careers in response to changes in their personal and family lives, school environments and placement histories. As Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) discussed, transformations in learning careers, especially changes in the meanings young people assign to learning, often relate to a critical turning point in their lives. Our results based on the experiences of young people and their summary timelines show that the youth experienced periods marked by several adverse events or influences but eventually arrived at a turning point that resulted in a sudden upturn in their learning career. Their learning careers were, therefore, punctuated by periods that were more negative and more positive, depending frequently on changes in their environment.

From a research point of view, investigating the educational experience and learning careers can lead to a more nuanced assessment of the educational outcomes of young people in out-of-home care. Outcomes and longitudinal studies have informed us on the educational pathways at the edge of the transition to adulthood or near the end of compulsory school and the cumulative delays they face or the difficult insertion in post-secondary education. Indeed, it seems essential to take an interest in the experiences and backgrounds of young people before this and to recognise the influence of young people's environment on their learning careers. Moreover, while the biographical approach provides an opportunity to review learning careers through time, it was in telling their stories that the young people reconstructed the sequences of events from memory. It would be interesting to use a longitudinal approach to document the school experiences of young people and the changes in their lives over time.

Our results can also help youth workers envision an upturn for young people experiencing low points at critical times and demonstrate the importance of working to understand how young people portray and feel about various events and situations regarding their school and learning experience. For example, one quantitative indicator of academic delay could show that Clara was on track and that Wilfried was falling behind. However, it was clear from the outset that Clara did not consider herself as succeeding at school at that time, which she attributed to chance and her challenging relationship with the school. In contrast, despite his academic delay, Wilfried did not feel he was falling behind or failing. He attributed his delays to different events, such as hospitalisation. Without understanding their point of view, this vision of academic delay could result in more or less adapted practices. For example, in past research, some youth workers expressed feeling powerless over the academic delay accumulated by young people. Some attributed the youth's lack of motivation for school to that delay and were more likely to direct them

into the labour market (Denecheau & Blaya, 2014; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Marion & Mann-Feder, 2020). This leads us to emphasise the importance of professionals considering the young person's experience and understanding what influences their educational experience and learning career. Sharing these results can help reduce the feeling of powerlessness of the youth worker involved in these young people's lives regarding the young people's educational progress (Marion & Mann-Feder, 2020).

We also found that the turning points were commonly associated with changes in young people's care. These included moves to more suitable environments, more understanding teachers, recognition of needs and support in developing a life plan. Our results show that young people's relationships with their teachers influenced their learning careers. When faced with too many challenges or made to feel inferior (e.g. owing to negative comments from their teacher), Clara experienced high stress levels, became withdrawn and feared asking for help. Instead of remaining in that position, our results show that some can start to miss school. Conversely, she seemed to fall into a virtuous cycle when allowed to learn at her own pace and provided with the support they felt she needed. This is in line with the results of other studies that show that a common protection factor was the educational, academic and emotional support and encouragement received by young people in out-of-home care (Hunter et al., 2014; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Merdinger et al., 2005; O'Higgins et al., 2017). Being surrounded by teachers, social workers and others who understand their situations and needs helped change their experience. Considering these findings, we reiterate the recommendation of Townsend et al. (2020, p. 8) that 'training is needed to help promote teachers' understanding of the complexities of the care system, the impact of being in care on children's learning, and how teachers might facilitate learning environments that optimise student learning'. On the other hand, if increasing the school completion and attendance rates of these young people can be policy goals (Mercieca et al., 2021), our results highlight that intervention measures that only target the youth will probably prove inadequate in the long-term to achieve those goals since the environment influences young people's experiences and learning careers.

Finally, our results also clarify the importance of understanding how young people construct meaning in their experiences and identities. Based on our analysis and other recent research, such as Johnson et al. (2020), the feeling of a stigma of living in residential care plays a significant role. For example, Wilfried's perception that he was seen as a delinquent affected his emotional state when he arrived at school and later his engagement with formal learning in school. Thus, the discretion of the professionals working with young people becomes essential to protecting their privacy and ensuring that they maintain a positive self-image, which considerably impacts their experience and engagement. In Clara's story, we see that the fear of stigmatisation could drive young people to hide their situations from their teachers and others, which could sometimes come at the expense of negative consequences resulting from a misunderstanding of their situation or behaviour in school and later their engagement with formal learning. This type of result differs from those of outcomes and explanatory research. We think that making this type of information known can ensure that the public, the decision-makers and stakeholders do not take shortcuts that would portray these young people as simply disengaged or disinterested in school and formal learning.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to better understand the educational experience of young people in residential care while using the concept of learning career developed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000). Based on biographical interviews in this article, we analysed the learning careers of two young people from their entry into secondary school in Grade 7. The

framework we used has enabled us to demonstrate that learning careers were non-linear for young people in residential care and to provide a more detailed understanding of how they transformed. Secondly, by studying turning points, we highlight the critical role that institutions, teachers and youth workers can play in fostering a positive or negative learning career. Finally, we noted learners' different responses to these circumstances and differences in learners' perception of their measured performance and their influence on their engagement with formal learning. We, therefore, want to reiterate the necessity of considering young people as the main actors and producers of meaning regarding their educational experience and learning careers. That can, for example, inform us of necessary changes in young people's environment. Then, conducting comprehensive research and promoting practices and policies that take that into account appears necessary.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT AND CONSENT STATEMENT

This project was approved on 15 February 2021 by the Comité d'éthique Jeunes en difficulté, CIUSSS Centre-Sud-de-l'île-de-Montréal #MP-CER-JD-20-21 and written consent was obtained.

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