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Helena Kliche & Philipp Annen

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School Attendance from the Perspective of Homeless Young Adults – Between Family, Youth Care and Homelessness

Helena Kliche  and Philipp Annen 

Faculty I, Educational Sciences, Trier University, Trier, Germany

ABSTRACT

Homeless young adults generally achieve low formal qualifications or none at all. This article focuses on their view on school and the significance they themselves attribute to the (non-) achievement of formal qualifications. Therefore, the influences of growing up in families and youth welfare services, the resulting instability of school attendance and the importance of school-leaving qualifications as a reintegration strategy for young people are considered. Seven Biographical-narrative interviews conducted in Germany form the empirical foundation for the research. The data was analyzed using narrative analysis.

KEYWORDS

Foster care; homelessness; residential care; school attendance; school graduations

School qualifications have a crucial influence on participation in society. For young adults they are the essential foundation for their future independent lives and help to avoid medium- and long-term risks such as unemployment, a decrease in social contacts, restriction of social participation and stigmatization – and of course a lack of financial resources. Preventive strategies are, however, hardly ever available for homeless¹ young adults. Their school careers are characterized by lower qualifications, or none at all (Lotties, 2024). The resulting marginalization in their everyday lives can also be observed by research on homelessness. Homeless young adults often have crisis-ridden biographies, that correlate widely with their experiences of exclusion in their families of origin, educational and training institutions and assistance systems. Consequently, their societal exclusion is accompanied by stigmatization and a feeling of shame (Annen, 2020). And even so, homelessness is frequently preceded by precarious living conditions such as growing up in families of origin struggling with a wide array of problems, such as economic hardship, household domestic violence, household substance use, parental separation or divorce, emotional or physical abuse, or growing up in youth shelters (Frietsch & Holbach, 2016). Furthermore, there are empirical findings that such Adverse

CONTACT Helena Kliche  kliche@uni-trier.de  Faculty I, Educational Sciences, Trier University, Trier, Germany.

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Childhood Experiences (ACEs) compromise neurological development and increase risk for immediate and that long-term adverse health outcomes are significantly more likely to develop clinical depression, substance use disorders, suicidality, and numerous chronic health conditions including diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular, and respiratory disease compared to people with no ACEs (Felitti, 2003). Nonetheless, Society often tends to blame homelessness and a lack of formal education on individuals, thus viewing homelessness as a consequence of deviant behavior.

In our biographical study we focus on the interplay between homelessness, family of origin, youth welfare and school, and try to identify the relevance of school attendance on young adults' lives from their own perspective. By dealing with homelessness, which is associated with a threatened status as an emancipated and responsible citizen, the question of educational inequality inevitably comes into focus. In relation to formal education this means turning to a normative understanding of legitimate and illegitimate education, which is socially recognized by the attestation of academic success and failure (Dollinger, 2010).

With regard to homeless young adults, the literature states an educational inequality between this group and their peers who are not homeless (Hoch, 2016). In particular, this article focuses on the conditions of growing up in families of origin, residential care resp. foster families² and homelessness and their significance for formal education. Building on the current state of research on homeless young adults ("Homeless young adults") and their school attendance ("Homelessness and school attendance"), as well as the presentation of data collection ("Design and sample recruitment") and data analysis ("Data Analysis"), we examine the adverse effects on school attendance resulting from the transfer of family problems to school ("The shift of family problems to school and vice versa"), school attendance during the stay in residential care ("Successive exclusion from residential care and school"), and the significance of school attendance and catching up on formal qualifications in homelessness ("Significance of and catching up on school qualifications during homelessness"). The discussion of the findings ("Discussion") is followed by an explanation of the limits of the conducted study ("Limitations"). The article ends with a conclusion ("Conclusion").

The current state of research

Homeless young adults

On the international level, the number of people threatened and affected by homelessness has been rising for years. Particularly striking is the sharp increase in the number of homeless young adults. Current national statistics show 4.2 million homeless young adults (under the age of 25) in

the United States of America (NCSL (National Conference of State Legislatures), 2023), nearly 28.200 (aged 12–24) in Australia (ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), 2023), and 136.000 homeless or at risk of homeless young adults (aged 16–24) in the UK (Centrepoint, 2023). In Germany, the, *Wohnungslosen-berichterstattungsgesetz* (Homelessness Reporting Act) was only introduced in 2020, which provides for official statistics on housed homeless people. The statistics were carried out and published for the first time in 2022 and records homeless people who were housed in shared accommodation, collective accommodation or facilities for the homeless. Homeless people who live on the streets without any accommodation and forms of hidden homelessness (for example, people who are staying with friends or relatives) are not included in the statistics. By the survey key date in 2023, 140.375 people under the age of 25 were considered homeless. Across countries, a much higher number of unreported cases is suspected – for example due to ‘couch surfing’ at friends’ houses and the resulting lack of statistical recording (Chikwava et al., 2022; Destatis, 2023). The Federal Government is pursuing the EU-wide goal of overcoming homelessness in Germany by 2030. Given the actual efforts made by the federal government, this goal seems unrealistic. It is more likely that the number of homeless people will increase. Homelessness is

not randomly distributed across the population, but rather the odds of experiencing it are systematically structured around a set of identifiable individual, social and structural factors, most of which, it should be emphasized, are outside the control of those directly affected (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 112).

Studies reveal that experiences of violence and/or child abuse characterize growing up in the family of origin. Furthermore, poverty, unemployment, excessive debt, parents’ low educational qualifications and addiction problems – within the family or personal, play a crucial role (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Heerde et al., 2022; Keevers & Rambaldini-Gooding, 2020; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). Due to their families of origin, which are suffering from multiple sets of problems, many young people grow up in some form of care placement (such as residential care or foster families) before becoming actually homeless (NCLS, 2023; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). Placement in residential care has itself turned out to be a risk factor for homelessness (Campo & Comerfort, 2016; Chikwava et al., 2022; Shelton et al., 2009). Alongside a large number of de-standardised transitions within and between different forms of support and the related instability of support (Crane et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2018; Kliche & Täubig, 2019), the end of residential care, above all, means a challenge for young adults. “Clearly-evidenced interconnections between care leaver status and homelessness” (Stirling, 2018, p. 12) can thus be explained by

the parallel nature of transitions. The transition from residential care and education is frequently accompanied by the transition from school to the first form of independent life (Heerde et al., 2012). In addition, psychological stress plays a role for many homeless young adults. For instance, Hodgson et al. (2014, p. 78) detect a 55.5% increase in psychiatric disorders such as PTSD, alcohol and drug addiction as well as anxiety among homeless young adults in comparison to their peers.

Drug use, in particular, can be understood as a functional strategy for coping with experiences and the adversities of life on the street. This shows that the expected developmental tasks such as gaining qualifications, positioning oneself and becoming independent are being pushed aside by the need to survive on the fringes of society and on the streets. The uncertainty and instability of young adulthood is intensified to a certain extent and social exclusion threatens to become increasingly entrenched, among other things, by adopting survival strategies typical of the scene (Annen, 2020). In addition to drug use, the lack of vital matters such as food or a place to sleep can encourage sexual abuse, as sex is used as a means of exchange and thus to ensure survival (Tyler & Melander, 2015). These alliances of convenience are primarily perceived and described as exploitative (Watson, 2011). Tyler and Melander (2015, p. 512) conclude a “co-occurrence of violence and substance use.”

The personal, social and economic challenges that homelessness entails for young adults refer to their social exclusion (Watson & Cuervo, 2017) on the one hand, and to the need for support systems providing access to housing and other forms of support in order to escape homelessness (Keevers & Rambaldini-Gooding, 2020). Negative experiences made with professional support measures that preceded homelessness often lead to a reluctance to seek further help (Annen, 2020). In addition, a lack of youth-specific services can be identified in many places (Keevers & Rambaldini-Gooding, 2020). The few existing services are rarely used because young adults often lack the knowledge about the available range of support measures (Gallardo et al., 2020). In contrast, successful support systems are primarily characterized by a stable (Wilks et al., 2008) and positive relationship with professional parties. These positive relationships favor access to employment agencies, the use of educational opportunities and knowledge of accommodation options (Rice et al., 2023).

Homelessness and school attendance

Regarding young adults' pathways into homelessness, multi-perspective experiences of exclusion have already been uncovered in the environment that is supposed to structure their life. Now another instance is inching to the fore, which interacts with the former two and has a direct influence

on the living situation: school attendance. In studies dedicated to the topic of homelessness, school attendance tends to be considered on a rather secondary level, alongside a conglomerate of problems. This is surprising insofar as there is empirical evidence that formal education, or the appreciation and recognition of school achievements, influences young adults' views of their own future (DKJS (Deutsche Kinder- und Jugendstiftung), 2019; Höjer & Johansson, 2013).

In addition to the positive effect of school achievements on the adolescents' own lifestyle, studies indicate that dropping out of school is considered a key situation for entering homelessness. Looking at reasons for running away from different contexts such as family and residential or foster care, the significance of school attendance becomes clear. For example, "trouble at school" (24.7%) and "not passing at school" (16%) were named by a total of 156 homeless young adults alongside other causes such as "parents too strict" (32.2%) or "violence in home" (37.3%) (Whitbeck & Simons, 1993, p. 141). Rosenthal et al. (2006, p. 283) also point out that school problems outweigh conflicts with teachers or children at school among the reasons for leaving home. Furthermore, in the study by Warren et al. (1997, p. 30), more than 62% of young adults who ran away had experienced suspension from school.

Despite different international education systems studies on school attendance generally identify negative educational experiences of young adults (Heerde et al., 2020; Tyler & Bersani, 2008). These experiences include "high absenteeism, poor grades, repeating a grade, social-behavioural problems, dropping out of school, school mobility, discipline (including suspensions or expulsions), and difficulty with peers" (Jones et al., 2018, p. 69). The poor family conditions described above are rarely compensated by school attendance. Instead, they are shifted to school – with family problems overshadowing school attendance (Schmitz & Tyler, 2016), reducing engagement and encouraging dropping out of school (Mirza, 2021). Accordingly, school attendance is primarily described as problematic and can be accompanied by bullying by peers – also as a consequence of growing up in residential care and education (Strahl, 2019) – as well as school refusal, tardiness and violence at school in addition to frequent changes of school (Annen, 2020; Robinson, 2018).

The change of school is also directly related to the separation from the family and the transition to and within residential care (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; Kliche & Täubig, 2019). The educational trajectories, which are in no way linear due to the large number of school transitions (Kliche & Täubig, 2019), are also mirrored by the disproportionately high number of low school qualifications achieved by young adults in residential care (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; O'Higgins et al., 2017; Pothmann, 2007). The attempt to achieve higher school-leaving qualifications, therefore, is met

with substantial obstacles and disadvantages for young adults in residential care. If we look at the support for school attendance provided by residential care, we identify a (re)production of educational inequality (Kliche, 2021; Kliche & Täubig, 2023) and a lack of a “culture of education” (Gharabaghi, 2011) to the detriment of higher school qualifications in everyday life. This group, however, requires increased support from professionals to achieve higher levels of education and – compared to young adults growing up in their families of origin – has to invest more years of their lives to achieve such qualifications (Jackson & Cameron, 2011; Tordön et al., 2014). Once again, the continuity and/or stability of the accommodation seems to play a crucial role in this context (Lundström et al., 2020). This instability can be associated with impaired concentration and lower achievement at school (Harker et al., 2003), as well as frequent changes of school (Kliche & Täubig, 2019). In addition to stability, measures having a positive impact on educational achievement also appear to be characterized by supportive teachers and pedagogs (O’Higgins et al., 2017).

As a result of growing up in families burdened with a wide array of problems – as described at the beginning – and living in residential care, homeless young adults often tend to achieve lower levels of education than their peers (Stablein & Appleton, 2013). Due to higher school mobility (Gasper et al., 2012), i.e., a large number of nonstandardized transitions during the school years, this can also be interpreted as non-achievement of school qualifications (Hoch, 2016). In addition, Fry et al. (2017, p. 927) point out that “the cognitive performance of young people who have experienced homelessness, foster care, or poverty tends to be below that of their non-disadvantaged peers” (see also Fantuzzo et al., 2013). The lack of (higher) formal qualifications makes participation in society more difficult for young adults and, once again, contributes to social exclusion (Watson & Cuervo, 2017). Furthermore, the loss of the usual sources of biographical structure such as family, school, formal training or gainful employment makes it more difficult for homeless young adults to adopt conventional lifestyles. Even if such a supposedly ‘normal life course’ seems largely unattainable for most people, the imagination still serves as an orientation model. The failure to achieve it can have consequences in that supposedly deviating life courses are stigmatized, a phenomenon that Kohli (1985, p. 2) describes as “Lebenslaufregime” (Life course regime). Reintegration into state schools is often not an option for them due to their previous school experiences. Robinson (2018, p. 49) also states the following regarding support from professionals for returning to school: “Workers reported a profound and commonly shared perception that their vulnerable clients were not necessarily welcome at school and that to enroll or return a child to school may require a ‘fight’”.

Methods

Design and sample recruitment

The current state of research shows that homeless young adults are facing a wide array of problems when growing up, which is also reflected in their (non-)achievement of school qualifications. The present study took this finding as a starting point to shed light on the biographical significance of school attendance in the lives of homeless young adults. The aim was to identify key moments, biographical turning points and significant others (e.g., the relatives or friends who provide biographical meaning, the fellow sufferer, the biographical competitor or the evil, powerful interaction antagonist), that shaped or shape the educational course of young adults from their own perspective. To this end, we chose biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983), which enabled us to analyze the biographical significance of school attendance while growing up in family and youth welfare, as well as during periods of homelessness. The method of biographical research is particularly suitable for gaining access to subjective experiences and social processes through the life stories of young adults. This is because social processes and significant others can be found in stories about the past, which make it possible to construct one's own life story (Rosenthal, 2015). Through narrative interviews, we hope to be able to reconstruct differential patterns of educational careers. Education is seen here as an opportunity to participate. This means that although we are interested in formal education and therefore especially in educational qualifications, we have to go beyond school attendance to focus on the areas of family, friendship, leisure time and child and youth welfare institutions. These are understood as educational places, educational opportunities and environments relevant to educational processes.

The young adults were recruited between October 2022 and January 2023 in the German states of Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate. The federal states differ not only in terms of their geographical location between south (Baden-Württemberg) and west (North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate), but in particular in terms of their at-risk-of-poverty rate. North Rhine-Westphalia is considered the federal state with the second-highest at-risk-of-poverty rate (19.5%) in Germany, while Rhineland-Palatinate (17.3%) is in the middle and Baden-Württemberg has the second-lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate (13.6%) (Statista, 2024). Baden-Württemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia are the two federal states with by far the most homeless people under the age of 40 in Germany, with 92,675 (30,300 under the age of 18) and 105,120 (28,470 under the age of 18) respectively. In Rhineland-Palatinate, on the other hand, 14,140 people under the age of 40 are accommodated (3,755 under the age of 18) (Destatis, 2024).³ For the recruitment, the research team

took up cooperation with facilities providing assistance for the homeless, such as counseling services and residential care services. Apart from the research project, the researchers had no other connection or conflict of interest with the facilities. Two facilities invited us to personally meet the homeless young adults on site and present the research project in order to arouse their interest in participating. Furthermore, other facilities put up posters with information about our research project, which two interviewees responded to. The ethics committee of the funding university was informed about the study; approval was not necessary according to their guidelines. The study is committed to the Code of Ethics of the German Society for Educational Science (DGfE (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft), 2005) and ensured informed consent (Article 8 EU GDPR). Furthermore, we do not consider homeless young adults, despite their structurally disadvantaged situation, as passive victims, but rather as active agents who are interested in sharing their story, drawing attention to their situation and having their voices heard.

In addition to their experience of homelessness, young adults taking part in the study were between 18 and 27 years old. This age range was chosen because at this age, key transitional issues such as transitions in education, employment or independence become relevant, which are directly related to the educational course. Taking the phase of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2004) into account, identity issues are also becoming increasingly important, which is intensified with the end of the responsibility of youth welfare in the German legal system⁴. The participating young adults were presented with the outline of the research project and the precise procedure of the survey and then asked for their consent. They were able to withdraw their consent to participate at any time and were financially compensated for their time with 15 euros. The payment was reflected in advance by the researchers with regard to ethical guidelines (Alderson & Morrow, 2020, p. 74–79). For example, the payment should not be dependent on the length of the interview or participation until the end of the interview and was therefore made at the beginning of the interview. The interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the interviewees and audio recorded. The average length of the interviews was approximately one hour. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim and in the transcribing process all data that would allow conclusions to be drawn about the people (such as names, places, institutions, etc.) were changed. The audio data was then deleted, leaving only an anonymized transcript. The names are chosen randomly, but in such a way that the cultural and social background is reflected. Even if this carries the risk of reproducing stigmatization, this is necessary because there are names in Germany, that are associated with a lack of education and/or poor backgrounds and are therefore often graded unfairly by teachers (Lochner, 2018).

Based on a narrative impulse (“Please tell me your life story”), the interviews allowed the young adults to present their story individually (for example, the start of the narrative or the underlining and omitting of particular events).

Due to the short duration of the research project, only seven interviews could be conducted. The young adults who shared their stories with us can be described as follows regarding their age, their school leaving certificate, their current school-related situation and their experience with youth welfare (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants.

Name (age)	School-leaving qualification ⁵ (current situation)	Experience of youth welfare services
Malte (18)	No school leaving certificate (general technical school)	Foster care, residential care
Youssef (19)	No school leaving certificate (general technical school)	–
Kalle (22)	No school leaving certificate	Foster care, residential care
Yasmin (22)	General technical school-leaving qualification (preparing vocational training)	Contacts with youth welfare office
Daniel (22)	Special school certificate	Residential care
Max (23)	General technical school-leaving qualification (has applied for the German Armed Forces)	Foster care, residential care
Sebastian (23)	General technical school-leaving qualification (in search of a vocational training job)	Family support, care instruction

Data analysis

The evaluation was supported by MAXQDA software to assist to combine the identified empirical phenomena into codes as linguistically precise as possible. The use of the digital software also enabled the researchers to work together on the data material. The data analysis follows the narrative analysis methodology according to Schütze (1983), which aims to analyze experiences and the genesis of interpretative patterns. In doing so, it was decided not to approach the interviews with a preexisting set of hypotheses or pre-developed categories; instead, each transcript was newly interpreted, and the meaning of individual parts was always reconstructed within the overall context. In the first step, the interviews were structured according to formal linguistic features rather than thematic units of meaning. This allowed for the identification of sequential patterns within the narrative sections, indicated by linguistic features.

In the subsequent second step, a structural description of these sections was carried out. Guiding questions included: Why do the narrators make a break at this point? What has changed from the previous segment? What is narrated, and what is de-thematized? What tone does the narrative take? What perspective does the interviewee adopt? What connections do they establish? How do they introduce people and conditions?

(Küsters, 2009, p. 79). The aim here was to identify individual structures of the life course by formulating questions directed at the text. According to Schütze (1983), such process structures include institutionally defined life stages, dramatic turning points, planned and executed biographical actions, or highlights and entanglements of events (p. 286). These structures served as a heuristic for the empirical analysis of individual biographical sections. Based on this, the specific quality and developmental logic of individual biographical sequences were to be determined as precisely as possible, so that subsequently the developmental logics of individual sequences could be analyzed and the overall biographical developmental logic of the case could be established (Schütze, 1983, p. 288). In the course of this, descriptive as well as analytical categories were formed, which were used in the next step to create an overall biographical framework.

The subsequent step, the so-called analytical abstraction, aimed at detaching the details from the individual segments. For this purpose, the individual episodes were systematically related to each other to work out the currently dominant biographical structures in the individual life stages (Schütze, 1983, p. 286). It was thus about reconstructing the overall course of the biography.

Based on the elaboration of the overall course of the biography, the next step involved identifying the structure of reasoning within the interviewees' own life stories. The associated interpretation of the shifts between the dominant structures of the life course aimed at identifying their orientation, processing, interpretation, self-definition, legitimation, exclusion, and suppression functions (Schütze, 1983, p. 287).

Results

The current state of research already indicates that growing up in problematic families of origin, foster families or residential care and homelessness have an influence on school attendance. In the course of the analysis, these three places of growing up were also identified as being of particular biographical significance for school attendance. The presentation of the results is based on the empirical material, with reference to different biographies. The aim is therefore not to trace individual biographies in detail, but rather to describe the breadth and variance of the biographical significance of families of origin, foster families or residential care and homelessness on school attendance from the perspective of young adults. While families of origin experienced as problematic lead to school becoming a safe place for the young adults, the institutional conditions of foster families or residential care have an exclusionary effect on school attendance.

The shift of family problems to school and vice versa

Yasmin, Max, Youssef, Sebastian and Daniel lived (temporarily) with their parents or one of their parents during their time at school. For this reason, and because Malte and Kalle do not make references to family of origin⁶ and school attendance, this subsection refers only to the five young adults mentioned above. Their narratives unanimously reveal the great significance of school in their lives, which goes far beyond the acquisition of mere formal educational qualifications.

Whoa, the school and I were, let's say, like a family. [...] We REALLY experienced a lot, we even went [to the seaside]. That was my first holiday farther away from city E. (Daniel)

And the teachers were all cool. They always helped you, no matter if you had problems, they always talked to you. (Max)

Both young men describe school attendance as a resource that is primarily based on the social relationships at school. Featuring teachers serving as contact persons for problems and joint activities that are not offered in the family context, school represents a contrast to their frequently problematic everyday life. Daniel describes trips to school camps as “good memories” because “I had some distance from my parents”. However, such a focus on social relationships at school, which also goes hand in hand with a rejection of the family environment, always leads to conflicts in daily school life itself whenever the institutional framework conditions of the school become obvious:

Whoa, that was - I didn't want to go home. I wanted to stay at school [...] And I wanted to stay there forever. And then, at some point, I freaked out and started to throw chairs at them, demolish tables, break things. Until four or five of them, er, had to carry me out, to that bus so that I was taken home. (Daniel)

Thus, the end of the school day marks the end of the stay at a place that is regarded as safe and positive; at the same time, it represents a transition into the insecure and problematic family environment. School attendance and its voluntary extension, therefore, enables young adults to reduce the time spent in a restrictive and unsettling living environment.

Yasmin, the only woman in the sample, is attributed sole responsibility for running the household with her father demanding that she performs household chores before school, therefore prioritizing household management over educational attainment:

Every morning before I went to school, I had to clean up shot glasses, had to clean up beer bottles. [...] Yes./Because when I forgot to, for example, vacuum or to clean, he completely lost it. [...] (.) This um, (.)⁷ I said to him: “I just came from school. I have to do my homework”, because I had gotten homework there, had to learn, just

like one does, (.) „I just did not get to it, did not have the time to, because it all had gotten too much for me.” [...] And then he just said: „I don't care, you still have to clean”. (Yasmin)

Instead of supporting his daughter's achievements at school, her father and her domestic environment offer reliability to Yasmin only as long as she carries out her supposed duties. Otherwise, she is threatened with being thrown out and thus becoming homeless. The dual challenge of running the household and attending school leads to Yasmin being unable to cope with everything, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, also makes it difficult for her to meet the expectations placed on her by school, namely that homework is to be done at home.

Overlaps between family problems and school attendance are also visible in the other interviews, even though the dynamics differ in regard to the details. In Sebastian's case the emotional stress caused by his mother's illness and the violence he experienced from his biological father along with the associated psychological problems play a role initially. At school he displays a non-conformist and violent behavior. As a result, he is moved to a special school with a focus on “mental development”, where he feels out of place and patronized. Notable is his stepfather's interest in his schooling, although the interest diminishes as conflicts arise between his (step)parents, resulting in his massive school absenteeism going unnoticed:

Um, I just know that my biological father used to beat me for three years. That's when (.) the mental health problems began (.). Um, that continued right into school (.). Um that's where you have often found yourself (.) getting into fights with other people (.) outside of it. Um (.) school actually always went (.) quite well (.) Except for, the tiniest problem was my mom, who um (.) used to get hospitalized yearly, because she smoked too much. And her lungs were already under a lot of strain. (Sebastian)

Youssef also cites family problems as the cause of his school problems:

I'm not so good at school with teachers or other students [...] some teachers were not okay for me [...] I told my story, I have problems with my family and stuff, so that the teacher understands [...] And she could help me a little bit [...]. Because if someone had big problems like me, I can't do well in class [...] Because I have problems at home, [...] the school helped me in this matter. (Youssef)

These problems are also one of the reasons why young adults are not able to cope with school requirements [“I had problems with my father. And I don't do my homework” (Youssef)]. His statements reveal an ambivalent experience of school, as – unlike Yasmin – he complains about the lack of support not only at home but also at school. Some teachers do not show any understanding for his migration background and the

associated language problems nor for his particularly stressful family situation with a violent father. In contrast, teachers who are ready to listen and to show understanding are named as a particular resource when it comes to dealing with family problems. Their support goes beyond the mere content of lessons, for example by helping him to join a sports club. As a result, and similar to Daniel, Youssef often stays at school longer than usual so that he can stay away from home. Despite their poorer achievements at school, school attendance is always described as a resource by the young adults when teachers offer understanding and support – especially concerning problems that go beyond school matters. In this case the school acts as a counterpoint to the multi-problematic family environment and at least offers the potential to find a way out of the dynamics of the biographical trajectory by providing the young people with new potentials for action.

The narratives of the young adults show that the shift from problems in the family into the school by far outweighs the shift from school problems bleeding into the everyday life in the family. At the same time, the shift – both from school and the family – is closely intertwined with the dynamic of the trajectory: The events at home and in school seem to pile up into an insurmountable obstacle that seems to suppress any intentional and autonomous action of the young adults.

Successive exclusion from residential care and school

The state of research available so far already indicates the influence of growing up in residential care and education on school attendance. We are also able to identify this connection in the material we have gathered, as four of the seven interviewed young adults covered by our study address the transition from a multi-problematic family environment to residential care and the impact on their school performance.

the days at the children's shelter were, like, well, I can hardly remember, because there were just so many of them. I just went through so much in all the children's homes [...] always different shelters [...] And yet the youth welfare⁸ said, no, we'll just put him in the next residential community. Again, not following the rules, AGAIN the next residential community. [...] Because it's understandable somehow that you then say, I'm dropping out of school now, I don't feel like it anymore. I change school every time, when will I change to the next school? [...] And the same with the rules, I didn't even know which rule to take. (Kalle)

For Kalle a lack of reliability on the part of the youth welfare services becomes obvious, which is demonstrated in a so-called youth welfare career (Höllmüller, 2015). As he is not able to adapt to new residential communities and their rules, a disposal mentality (Fend, 2004) toward

residential care becomes evident – as is otherwise also described in relation to school. This ‘disposal mentality’ can mean the classification as “difficult” or “problematic” (Morales-Ocaña & Pérez- García, 2020, p. 665), being suspended from everyday school routine or referred to lower forms of school (Kliche & Täubig, 2019; Melkman, 2022). This includes the removal of difficult adolescents to another residential community (Kliche & Täubig, 2023). This not only involves transitions within the youth welfare services but also causes a large number of transitions between different schools. Daniel’s school attendance is also shaped by the transitions between different residential care groups. For both Kalle and Daniel, dropping out of school can be seen as a result of growing up in residential child and youth care. The reasons for this are primarily the lack of reliability provided by youth welfare services and the resulting numerous transitions, which were accompanied by many changes of residence and school. Malte reports similar experiences: “Many moves, I was so fed up. I thought to myself, I don’t give a shit”. Along with the increasing precarisation of their living and housing situation, it becomes more and more difficult for young adults to comply with the requirements of school – such as regular and punctual attendance of lessons and completion of homework. A closer look at the organization of these transitions reveals a lack of agency on the part of the adolescents when transition decisions are taken:

First, I went to a normal primary school. Left elementary school and then went to a special school. [...] That was my mother’s decision. And, also, my O-, that was, at the same time, my grandma, so foster grandma⁹. [...] I didn’t want to at first, I was like, no, seriously? Why do I have to go to such a stupid special school for stupid people or so (laughing slightly), I thought, so, well, I was young. (Max)

On the one hand, the perceived powerlessness in transition decisions can involve a perceived incompatibility with the school to be attended and therefore a rejection of it. On the other hand, such an incompatibility can also be the result of an experienced contradiction between the demands of school and one’s own educational aspirations. Such a confrontation with the educational aspirations of others also becomes crucial in the further course of schooling when the conditions of residential care collide with the adolescent’s own educational expectations:

It annoys me that I didn’t continue school. That I listened too much to grandma, even though she meant well. And she was actually right. (.)Because I actually wanted to continue school, but I was living with her. And, er, (.) yes, she wanted me to take up an apprenticeship. (...) Yes, and then that’s what I did. (Max)

It is interesting to note in this context that the foster mother, whose family Max describes as “an orderly family, an upscale family, an educated

family” (Max), does not appear to comply with the educational aspirations of the social background (Bourdieu, 1996). Rather, the framework conditions of youth welfare, which is set to end when the young adults attain the age of majority, appear to be the crucial factor. The afore stated “culture of education” (Gharabaghi, 2011) to the detriment of higher school qualifications (Kliche & Täubig, 2019) determines Max’s educational trajectory. A similar lack of support for achieving higher school qualifications is also a focal aspect quoted by Malte– even so the time structure of residential care and education being geared toward school attendance:

Er, there it was like you had a (.) fully scheduled morning. You had to get up at six o’clock, and there was morning sports at six five. (.) Then, when you were upstairs, you had a timed shower, set the table, cleaned, had breakfast at seven forty-five and went to school at eight fifteen. [...] you are pressed into a schedule; you are prepared for your working life. It’s all beaten INTO you, if you don’t do it, you get punished, you’re not allowed to do this, you’re not allowed to do that, you’re not allowed to do that. You’re locked in your room; you’re forbidden dinner and shit like that. (Malte)

In addition to the time structure, in Malte’s narrative, the physical workload he experienced before school can be seen as a measure to produce disciplined and calm bodies, which are considered as good students in everyday school life and are expected by the teachers (Kliche, 2021). Following on from this, Malte describes everyday life in the shelter as a preparation for working life, which also refers to the aforementioned lack of a “culture of education” (Gharabaghi, 2011): Education and discipline seem to be the focus for Malte, but not the opportunity for free development. The close link between preparation for working life and sanctions also means that Malte is excluded from the group areas and activities at the residential group if he fails to comply. At school, the young adults then experience the challenges associated with being placed in residential care, which were hardly considered by the teachers [“But the teachers didn’t really care sometimes. Because sometimes I slept in class, the teachers, at least some of them, just didn’t care” (Kalle)].

As a result, young adults generally perceive growing up in residential care as having a negative impact on their school attendance. They emphasize the instability of the shelters, which leads to an instability in school attendance; furthermore, they mention the lack of support for school attendance – especially their own aspirations –, and the fact that they depend so much on others when it comes to making educational decisions concerning their own future. The practice of youth welfare, which – as highlighted in the interviews – is characterized by instability and the end of care without sufficient aftercare, leads to restrictions on educational pathways. This practice thus contradicts the orientation of youth welfare which should aim to support young people and reduce disadvantage. The threat posed to the development of young adults by youth welfare services

must be highlighted by research such as this one in order to draw attention to the special situation of care leavers and initiate (political) change. An important step has been taken with the change in legislation in 2023 which provides for a right to aftercare in Germany following foster care and residential care. Nevertheless, this legislation does not materialize for the interviewees surveyed here – both from a time perspective and, it can be assumed, due to their poor experiences with the welfare system.

Significance of and catching up on school qualifications during homelessness

During their homelessness, the young adults are critical of the fact that the desired educational qualifications are not achieved by the time they leave residential and school care. The slip into homelessness, in combination with the associated conditions, which include a daily “struggle” for food and shelter (Kalle), makes it difficult to meet the obligations of school or the work force. Accordingly, the material disadvantages are described as a challenge by the young adults. Other forms of oppression include poverty and the stigmatizations that are associated with being homeless. This situation is marked by having to cope with rather than by fruitful plans for the future. Gaps in the curriculum of education and work tend to become ever larger:

everything just kept going rough for me. Meaning, er, (.) I didn't feel like apprenticeship anymore, I dropped out. (...) I chilled for two years, did one or another job from time to time. I did work. (.) But it didn't last long (laughs briefly). (.) Lived here and there with friends. And, er, (.) yes, at some point it was enough, (.) I couldn't go to anyone anymore. And then, er, I was in a homeless shelter. (Max)

In addition, a turn away from own educational aspirations and the manifestation of a trajectory become apparent in this case: Instead of biographical plans or the attempt to change his situation, there is a “two-year chilling out” period (Max). As a consequence of piling up of negative experiences, Max displays purely reactive or rather passive behavior instead of becoming active in view of the series of events and their consequences.

It is only when young adults move into a residential shelter offering support for the homeless that school attendance becomes a focal issue once again. The support from professionals in regard to obtaining educational or job qualifications can be cited as one crucial reason (Yasmin; Sebastian; Youssef). Daniel also mentions former teachers as providing support upon his return to school:

Now a former teacher of mine is trying to get me back into the shelter so that I can make a fresh start again. (Daniel)

For Daniel, catching up on his general school leaving certificate implies, on the one hand, a continuation of his previous school career and, on the other hand, a return to his old school. The attempt to return does not seem to be Daniel's responsibility alone, but rather that of his "former teacher" (Daniel), who acts as his advocate toward the school. Nevertheless, a delay in achieving the general school leaving certificate compared to his peers is unavoidable. Yet, the prospect of finishing school and the support he experienced from his teacher provided Daniel with a positive assessment of his current situation and an optimistic view of his future: "So, I'm actually on the up again" (Daniel).

For Malte, attending school became the starting point for a positive view of the future too, as he "noticed [...] that things are slowly getting better again. [...] I'm finally going to find a flat soon, move in with my girlfriend. And then look beyond further plans for the future". The high relevance of teachers and supportive professional parties in disrupting existing trajectories is clearly shown in this context. They help young adults to design and implement optimistic goals. Detached from the adversities of the street, residential shelters offering support for the homeless thus make it possible to establish at least minimal structures to meet school-related requirements (such as punctuality or completing school-related tasks) for being a student. The transition to residential shelters offering support for the homeless is combined with the revival of educational aspirations – which makes a difference to residential care and education. Max, for example, hopes to obtain the secondary school leaving certificate by joining the German Armed Forces. It is also interesting to note that despite spending ten years in educational support, he refers to his biological family in his narration, not having incorporated the education aspirations of his foster parents. In addition to viewing his future prospects, which also include a vocational qualification, "as a great opportunity" (Max), they furthermore function, albeit for a limited amount of time, as a prevention strategy for him and a way out of homelessness:

It's now or never, so if I don't do anything now, then I'll become like some homeless person on the street, really like that. And I don't want that. And when you picture a life like that, I think you approach things differently. (Max)

Similarly, other young adults state that the school leaving qualification allows them to have their "own flat [and] a PERMANENT job" (Yasmin). For Kalle and Malte it is even a prerequisite for access to the job market and an independent life: "I definitely have to catch up on my school-leaving certificate" (Kalle); "I do need a school-leaving certificate, otherwise that won't work in life. Otherwise, I won't get a job" (Malte).

Discussion

Ensuing, the findings of the preliminary study are related to known empirical evidence and further conclusions are drawn. Homeless young adults have lower school qualifications than their peers. Their family background and growing up in residential care and education are considered to be the crucial reasons for this (e.g., Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; O'Higgins et al., 2017; Pothmann, 2007, see "Homelessness and school attendance") At the same time, the present study opens up further perspectives on homeless young adults: The significance of school and school-leaving qualifications are focal aspects in the lives of homeless young adults; with regard to the period before homelessness, school is not only considered a place of education but also a contrast to the problem-ridden family background, particularly as a safe place. Contrary to the expectations raised by studies such as Heerde et al. (2020) and Tyler and Bersani (2008), school provides a resource to the young adults, based on their social relationships to classmates and supportive teachers. The relationships established with these people are not only described as more positive than the problematic home environment but also make it possible for them to enjoy experiences and activities that they do not get to experience within their original family contexts. Nevertheless, homeless young adults are obviously not in a position to translate these resources into qualifying educational certificates, nor are they able to use the positive impulses to break out of negative trajectories.

The school attendance of young adults who grow up (temporarily) in residential care and educational support facilities is characterized primarily by instability (Robinson, 2018; Strahl, 2019). The focus of youth welfare services on the achievement of low educational qualifications, which is also mirrored in the narratives of the homeless young adults, has a restrictive effect on their own educational aspirations. The insistence of professional parties on making young adults achieve primarily low educational qualifications (Gharabaghi, 2011; Kliche, 2021; Kliche & Täubig, 2023) highlights the latter's powerlessness to act, which, in turn, leads to them turning away from the path to education and/or training they have started or are striving for and ultimately ends in homelessness. In this context school is closely entangled in the trajectories of processes of suffering by strengthening their feeling of being exposed to the arbitrariness of institutions and/or their representatives and to constant patronizing behavior. This leads care leavers to initially describe leaving youth welfare – even if it means being homeless from then on – as a kind of liberation (Annen, 2020, p. 226).

The question now arises as to what we can learn from these facts and what conclusions can be drawn regarding the conditions for achieving

good school education a) prior to homelessness and final exclusion from the school system; and b) during consolidated homelessness and using the structures of assistance to the homeless. Although these questions cannot be answered conclusively in terms of the empirical data, cautious hypotheses can be formulated. For instance, early interventions are particularly important because the educational opportunities of young adults in and leaving care decrease progressively with age (Jackson & Cameron, 2011). For that, good – and most importantly stable – relationships with teachers or supportive professional parties are an important condition (Wilks et al., 2008) not only for learning achievements but overall. When care leavers looked back on what made the difference in sustaining their participation in education, it was having someone, – whether it was a personal advisor, former foster carer or teacher, who kept in touch (DCSF (Department for Children & Schools & Families, 2009, p. 19). We can strengthen this finding through our study, especially in the narratives of Youssef and Daniel. However, good and stable relationships to professionals are not sufficient on their own. Before a street career becomes established, youth welfare efforts need to be made as a preventive measure to achieve success in school and training. It is important that the support is oriented toward the educational aspirations of young people and not an agreement on the minimum consensus of the lowest and therefore supposedly easiest school qualification to achieve. This may even mean supporting the care leavers' decisions to go to university, even if it seems too ambitious at a first glance, because their academic potential and resilience is underestimated.

Aside from that, the case of Youssef shows that the requirements and sanctions of the regular school were not compatible with the reality of his life. However, a biographical process of change set in as soon as the school adapted its requirements to his individual situation and acted with special consideration. The non-application of sanctions for him being late and his absences – along with the support of a trusted reference person – rekindled his educational aspirations. A high degree of goodwill toward Yasmin's absences, which would normally have meant expulsion from school, enabled her to continue participating in school and achieve a general school leaving certificate. In return, the feeling of being patronized and the disregard of the young people's intrinsic educational goals involved a further alienation from the school system.

The conditions for enabling school attendance must, therefore, take into account the specific situation of homeless young adults and must be designed with a particularly low threshold in mind. In cases in which this is not possible – and exclusion from regular public school is unavoidable – other, creative ways of qualifying must be sought. It is necessary to provide young adults with education under the specific and difficult conditions of being

homeless. One possibility are so-called street schools (Fischer et al., 2023). The conditions for their success should also be further researched. In general, there is a great need for adequate services for homeless young adults that cover more than just emergency shelter and meals. A lack of these youth-specific services can be stated in many places (Keevers & Rambaldini-Gooding, 2020).

Limitations

Before concluding, the limitations of the study must be briefly discussed. This study only conducted biographical-narrative interviews with homeless young adults who were living in residential shelters at the time of the survey. It can be assumed that this approach only reached a specific group, namely those who would like to change their current living situation. The relevance of school qualifications for social participation makes the importance of school attendance of these young adults, emphasized in the study, seem obvious. Accordingly, the study sample should be expanded in future to also include young people who were living in other (less secure) forms of homelessness at the time of data collection – i.e., on the streets or with changing acquaintances. In line with the focus on facilities providing assistance for the homeless as a gatekeeper, only one young adult who identifies as female was interviewed. This circumstance can be attributed to the predominant orientation of facilities providing assistance to homeless young men, while homeless young women are often described as hidden homeless (Wesselmann, 2009, p. 46).

Accordingly, it would be interesting to survey more biographies of young women and thus also look at other places that are supposedly atypical for homeless people, such as street prostitution or pubs. Thirdly, only one interview was conducted with someone, Youssef, who did not grow up in Germany but came to Germany as a refugee. Further surveys need to focus more on those young people who first came to Germany as adolescents. The decisive factor here is the increasing number of homeless people with a refugee background (Destatis, 2023). This suggests that young adults with such a background are disproportionately affected by the risk of homelessness.

Conclusion

Our study was able to reinforce the well-known empirical fact that homeless young adults have worse educational qualifications than their peers. Our main intention, however, was to find out what biographical significance homeless young adults attach to their school years. Contrary to expectations, they do not only report negative experiences during

their schoolltime, but often even describe school as a resource and a safe counterpoint to the family, which they perceive as rather insecure. After the transition to residential care, they miss reinforcements in their own educational efforts and feel pressured into school qualifications or training for which they have no or little intrinsic motivation. Paradoxically, their educational aspirations, which they perceive on the one hand as a prevention strategy against a manifestation of their homelessness and on the other hand for an autonomous life, are reawakened under the conditions of homeless services and provided the respective schools recognizing and making concessions due to the challenging circumstances the young adults live in. In "Discussion" we have formulated some further suggestions on how the actors of youth welfare, schools and homeless assistance can help young people at risk to translate the resources they experience during their school years, despite all expectations, into formal qualifications.

What is also needed is political commitment and constant criticism of the status quo. Furthermore, it is not only important to advocate for underrepresented groups, but also to strengthen their voices and raise awareness for the problems they face in their day to day lives. Objectives like 'ending homelessness by 2030' can only be described as meaningless and without any substantial foundation if they are not backed up by investments in housing and the education system.

Our study shows that homelessness is closely linked to an insecure upbringing and low or no school qualifications rather than to a conscious decision. Lastly, it remains to be considered what prevention and intervention strategies in youth welfare and schools could look like in order to resolve this connection between precarious growing up, low school success and homelessness.

Notes

1. We understand homelessness in accordance with the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), which attempts to cover all living situations which amount to forms of homelessness across Europe: rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough); houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter); living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence); living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding) (Feantsa, 2005).
Young adults have a legal right to needs-based support from youth welfare services. German social law defines who, in the sense of child and youth welfare services, is a child (who is not yet 14 years old), a teenager (who is 14 but not yet 18 years old) or a young adult (who is 18 but not yet 27 years old).
2. The German youth welfare system comprises two forms of out-of-home care: foster families and residential care, thus providing a form of placement where young people

are cared for in a private living situation and one where they live in a facility where they are cared for by professional staff. While foster care is mostly geared to younger adolescents living there for a longer duration (~49.1 months), residential care is a form of placement where primarily older adolescents stay for a shorter amount of time (~20.7 months) (Fendrich et al., 2023, pp. 78-81).

3. The median of the 16 German federal states on 31 January 2024 is 27,270 for the under-40s and 8,044 for the under-18s.
4. In Germany, youth welfare is generally granted until the age of 21; an extension is possible in justified individual cases only. Quite frequently, support is stopped already when the beneficiaries come of age, which is at 18 years in Germany. This happens often due to austerity constraints and is therefore illegal. Financial shortages in the budgets of municipal or other social service providers do not represent an atypical reason that could prevent a claim to benefits (Tammen, 2022).
5. The German school system enables the following educational qualifications: special school certificate (very low); general technical school-leaving certificate (low); secondary modern school qualification (medium); vocational diploma (high; it entitles to study at a university of applied science; A-levels (highest school-leaving certificate, entitles to take up university studies).
6. In this subsection, a normative concept of family is used that focuses on the family of origin. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that some young adults also refer to the foster parents as 'family'. However, as they themselves make distinctions in their narratives between their family of origin as the 'right' family and the foster families, and in order to be able to show the difference between the connection between the family of origin resp. youth welfare services and school attendance, this normative definition is used here.
7. Pause in seconds.
8. Residential care and foster families are part of the German youth welfare system. The German youth welfare system is comprehensive and is responsible for the promotion of education and upbringing, educational assistance and the prevention of dangers for adolescents.
9. Pet name of the foster mother.

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ORCID

Helena Kliche  <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-9123-9386>

Philipp Annen  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-2604-153X>

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