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Pathway planning with unaccompanied young people leaving care: Biographical narratives of past, present, and future.

Abstract

This article presents findings from a qualitative study with Unaccompanied Young People (UYP) who have sought asylum alone in the UK without a parent or guardian. The findings explore how UYP create biographical narratives of their past, present, and future as they prepare to leave care, suggesting that UYP who have settled immigration status create coherent biographical narratives that reconcile the past with a positive imagined future. Themes of return and reciprocity emerged in their narratives as they developed aspirations to reunite with their families and return support received in the past by succeeding in education and careers. Unaccompanied young people who did not have settled status struggled to create biographical narratives and could not imagine the future or the past. These findings have significant implications for pathway planning with UYP, suggesting the need to recognise the interconnected nature of the past, present, and future as well as the role of families and education in future plans. Pathway planning for UYP with uncertain immigration status can be complex as young people struggle to maintain a biographical narrative. Further research is necessary to support young people and professionals with these challenges.

Introduction

The number of children seeking asylum alone in the UK without a parent or guardian is increasing. The majority of these children will be cared for by the Local Authority under Section 20 of the Children Act (1989) and will therefore be entitled to leaving care services as they transition to adulthood. Some of these children will have been granted only temporary leave to remain until they reach adulthood and will face uncertainty about their future in the UK as they leave care. Despite mounting concern for this group of young people (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2013), limited research exists, which explores the experiences of unaccompanied young people (UYP) leaving care and the related challenges for social work professionals. This article presents findings from a qualitative study with 18 unaccompanied care leavers. The findings suggest the importance of creating a coherent biographical narrative of past, present, and future. Where young people were able to construct such narratives, the past and the future were intimately connected with themes of return and reciprocity dominating their stories. Return was envisaged as a literal return home, often in a distant future, or in terms of connecting with family history, morals, and values. Reciprocity was centred on repaying past support from family, professionals, and communities. The medium through which young people envisaged achieving their goals was education, which emerged as a vital part of young people's aspirations. However, a number of the young people had been unable to create coherent biographical narratives or found their narratives destabilised due to external events, most notably the refusal of their asylum claim. For these young people, both the past and the future became unimaginable, and planning for the future became almost impossible. These findings have significant implications for both policy and practice. Social work professionals are obliged to assist UYP in creating pathway plans as part of their leaving care entitlements. The difficulty of planning with a group who have uncertain futures in the UK has been highlighted (Wade, Sirriyeh, Kohli, & Simmonds, 2012). These findings suggest the need to pay careful attention to the inextricable links between the past, present, and future as well as putting educational issues at the centre of pathway

planning. The challenges in planning with young people who have an uncertain immigration status and may be returned to their home country are emphasised as is the current lack of knowledge on this particular topic.

Unaccompanied young people: the legal and policy context

The UK Home Office defines an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) as a person below the age of 18 who is making an asylum claim in their own right and has no guardian or relative looking after them in the UK (Home Office, 2002). Throughout this article, former UASC's who are now aged between 17 and 25 are referred to as UYP. The number of UASC arriving in the UK is increasing following a period of decline. In 2015, there was a 56% increase in UASC applications, a similar rise to the previous year (Refugee Council, 2016). The majority of UASC will be cared for by the local authority under Section 20 of the Children Act (1989) and afforded the same rights and entitlements as citizen children who become looked after, including leaving care services. In terms of immigration status, few will be granted refugee status and allowed to remain in the UK permanently. Most will be granted a period of temporary leave to remain, which expires before the age of 18. Home Office figures for 2015 show that 842 children (out of a total 1,559) were granted some form of temporary leave, 343 were refused any leave to remain in the UK, and 374 were granted refugee status or other forms of more permanent leave (Refugee Council, 2016).

Due to the large numbers of young people granted temporary leave, the process of leaving care often coincides with a need to re-engage with the asylum system in order to extend their leave to remain or to make a fresh claim for refugee status. There are three possible immigration positions for UYP leaving care. They may have refugee status, still be awaiting a final decision on a claim, or they may have been refused status and exhausted all their appeal rights. Immigration status at the time of leaving care affects the young person's rights, entitlements, experience of leaving care, and ability to plan for the future (Wade et al., 2012).

Unaccompanied young people: the research context

Research in this area has focused on unaccompanied children, and a body of knowledge has emerged highlighting their psychosocial needs, their experience of traumatic events, and subsequent risk of mental distress (Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff, 2008; Huemer et al., 2009). In counterbalance, their remarkable resilience has been demonstrated, and factors that promote resilience have been identified, including access to education and stable foster placements (Rigby, 2011). In the UK, the role of social work services with UASC has also been explored and ranges from critiques of policy (Humphries, 2004) to nuanced accounts of practice with UASC (Kohli, 2006). Whilst there is evidence of patchy and inconsistent services, the positive contribution of statutory services has also been documented, with some studies suggesting that UASC may fare better in the care system than their UK peers, doing better in education, and experiencing less behavioural

problems (Sinclair, Baker, Lee, & Gibbs, 2007; Wade, Mitchell, & Bayliss, 2005). Permeating this varied body of research is an agreement that the uncertainty inherent in the asylum system is an overwhelming concern (Chase & Allsopp, 2013).

Despite a solid research base on unaccompanied children, there is little research knowledge regarding the experiences of the 2,000 unaccompanied young people who leave care each year (Pinter, 2012). This lack of knowledge is causing growing concern (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2013). Emerging research has noted that the leaving care transition represents a juncture at which immigration policy supersedes child welfare interests, exacerbating the increased uncertainty, vulnerability and risk associated with this period of change, and posing challenges and conflicts for social workers engaged with UYP at this time (Kanics, Senovilla Hernandez, & Touzenis, 2010; Spiteri, 2015). In addition to these issues, Stein (2012) asserts that UYP in the UK are more likely than their citizen peers to receive poor quality leaving care services. Proposals in the new Immigration Bill (2015) currently being scrutinised in parliament, propose to remove leaving care services for UYP whose asylum claim has been refused and to remove financial assistance to UYP entering higher education even if they have refugee status and a right to remain in the UK. This will require them to pay international student fees and mark them out from UK care leavers. If passed into law, these proposals have implications for UYP's access to leaving care services and the ability of social work professionals to plan positive futures with UYP, who are highly committed to education and rely heavily on it to for positive outcomes and continued well-being.

Young people, the future, and pathway planning

The way in which young people orientate themselves towards and plan for the future is a key concern within broader youth studies (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). Ongoing debates seek to establish how young people understand and plan for the future in the context of an increasingly uncertain world in which life course pathways are increasingly individualised (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Some accounts suggest that future planning is redundant due to the increased speed of social change, or that the focus on “choice biographies” underestimates the structural constraints many young people still face (Leccardi, 2005). Others emphasise the importance of future planning for the multiple complexities, convolutions, and contradictions of the modern life course (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). The overarching theme that encompasses all these debates is the scrutiny on young people's futures and how to plan for them.

This interest extends to vulnerable groups of young people, including care leavers, whose poor future outcomes have been a concern for a number of years (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Stein, 2012). Part of the UK policy to tackle this issue is for social work professionals to assist care leavers in planning their future. The right of care leavers to have assistance with future planning is manifested in the obligation of local authorities to provide young people with a “pathway plan,” which assesses their needs and explicitly addresses their plans for the future (Department for Education, 2010). Pathway planning has been shown to be associated with better outcomes for care leavers (Stein,

2012), although in practice, pathway planning has not always been adequate with evidence suggesting that up to half of young people do not have a pathway plan, and that plans may not include issues that are important from the perspective of the young person. The pathway plan may also be viewed in narrow terms as a plan for independence and moving on from care, with less attention paid to broader future goals (The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 2013). Meeting the planning needs of UYP is particularly challenging, especially where the outcome of their asylum claim is unknown (Wright, 2014). The paucity of research in this area may be a contributory factor. “Triple planning” has emerged as a possible means of managing uncertainty in the pathway planning process for UYP. This approach is concerned in ensuring that the pathway plan takes account of the multiple possible outcomes of asylum claims, including refusal, receiving status, and prolonged periods of waiting for a decision (Wade, 2011). However, the complexity of achieving this has become evident (Wade et al., 2012). Planning for return is particularly problematic as UYP may have difficulty engaging with the idea of a negative decision and possible deportation (Wright, 2014). In order to address return successfully, planning should begin early and focus on developing skills of practical use in the home country as well as preparing young people psychologically for return (Crawley, 2006).

Biographical narratives

As concerns about the difficulty of pathway planning have come to the fore, research has begun to tackle the issue of how UYP might imagine the future, although this has not yet been applied fully to pathway planning. A fruitful area of research lies in exploring how biographical narratives can assist effective future planning. Chase (2013)), drawing on Giddens' (Giddens, 1991) concept of “ontological security” shows how the creation and maintenance of coherent biographical narratives helps UYP sustain a sense of self that is stable across time, space, and context. Ward (2011)) has similarly drawn on the field of psychology (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Lalonde, 2006) to emphasise the need for a continuous sense of self through a biographical narrative, particularly for care leavers who are likely to experience multiple discontinuities. Chase, Allsopp, and Mitchell (2014) explicitly address the need to connect the past, present, and future as a coping strategy for UYP. The findings in this article aim to contribute to this developing discussion by exploring the themes that might emerge within UYP's biographical narratives and identify challenges and barriers to developing coherent narratives. Further to this, the article considers how these findings might usefully inform the process of pathway planning with UYP.

The study

The findings presented in this article are derived from a qualitative study of 18 UYP and 12 social work professionals in one large local authority in the North of England. The study was focused on the transition to adulthood of UYP leaving care. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with the young people, 11 of which were interviewed on two separate occasions over a period of 12 months in order to capture changes that occurred in that time. Sixteen participants were recruited directly through the local authority, whilst two participants were recruited through voluntary organisations in the area in order to access young people who might not be engaged with statutory services. The

young people accessed through the local authority were recruited through a gatekeeper who specialised in UYP. This has methodological implications in terms of the range of access available through one primary gatekeeper. The sample has been drawn from one local authority area, and the findings and conclusion must be understood in that context. The age of participants ranged from 17 to 23, the ages at which young people transition from care. The majority of participants were male ($n = 15$), which is broadly reflective of the demography of UYP. The young people originated from a variety of countries, with the largest numbers originating from Afghanistan and Eritrea.

The interviews were designed using visual methods. The findings presented here are drawn largely from a section of the interview that involved participants in creating a “time tree,” an alternative to traditional time lining methods designed to capture the dynamic and temporal aspects of transition. Participants were provided with a diagram of a tree in which the roots and the trunk represented the past and present, whilst the branches represented the multiple possible futures the young person might imagine. The creation of the time tree provided the basis for the interview conversation. The interview and visual data were analysed concurrently using a narrative approach. Data on the individual level were analysed initially, directed towards extrapolating key themes within the individual's narrative. Analysis was then undertaken across the data set to create a thematic analysis across participants with a particular focus on understanding the effect of time across the life course (Elder, Monica, & Crosnoe, 2003).

Ethical considerations that took account of the particular experiences of the participants were built into the research design. Institutional ethical approval was received from the University of York. Written informed consent was gained from all participants who were ensured that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. As such, the names of participants have been changed, as have some participant's characteristics, which are non-essential to an understanding of the findings.

Findings

Two distinct types of biographical narrative emerged from the interviews with UYP. Some of the young people presented clear, coherent, and positive narratives which assisted them in constructing and achieving future goals. Others, mostly (but not exclusively) those with uncertain immigration status, had less coherent narratives in which both the past and the future were uncertain, unstable, or even unimaginable.

Coherent narratives of past, present, and future

Chase (2010)) has asserted that the well-being of UYP is “fundamentally linked to the perception of a projected sense of self within a future trajectory,” and the young people in this study who perceived themselves to be doing well were those who displayed the strongest sense of a future. Furthermore,

it was possible to identify the key elements that were present in the narratives, which culminated in a positive imagined future. The interplay of the past and future was a focal point in the narratives. For Roshaan, who had just begun a master's degree, the imagined future was rooted in family history and tradition.

My family built bridges back home. They built one in my home city, so I really wanted to do something like that. When I arrived here I knew what I wanted to do....one day I will go back and rebuild the bridges

Kohli (2007)) has previously noted that for UYP, the past is, on many levels, another country. In Roshaan's narrative, we see through his desire to build literal bridges a metaphor for his aspiration to construct a safe passage home, both in terms of a geographical return to his city, a return to his family who remained in the city, and a temporal return to the past. The conduit for this passage is education. Whilst Roshaan's perfect circle of a narrative connecting past, present, and future was the neatest and most distinct narrative of its kind, it illustrates characteristics present in other young people's stories. Hopes of future success were dominated by educational goals, reflecting previous research, which establishes the vital importance of education for UYP and their future plans (Brownless & Finch, 2010). However, it was the social connections of the past, a desire to reunite and reconnect with family that underpinned these aspirations and motivated young people to achieve them.

Whilst return and reunification emerged in the accounts, for the majority of young people, this aspiration belonged to a very distant future. More immediately, young people's narratives were dominated by a desire to connect with family through acts of reciprocation; returning the sacrifices and efforts that had been made to ensure their safety. Mariam's mother had risked her own personal safety to assist her daughter in fleeing an abusive relationship. Since helping her daughter escape, Mariam's mother had been

punished all the time. That's why I want to help her. She said she was ready for anything to help me. And now I have to help her.

Again, Mariam's hopes of helping her mother centred on education. She had developed a plan to achieve academically and become a professional. At the time of the interviews, she was studying at college to achieve her goal. Whilst Mariam's plan to reunite with and protect her mother had formed soon after she arrived in the UK, key connections made in the UK had crystallised her narrative and inspired more direct goals:

I want to be a social worker. ...because of Davina (her Personal Advisor). She helped me so much and I want to help other people like she did for me. I can't think what to do to thank her other than to help someone else.

Mariam's story alerts us both to the transformative potential of positive relationships with social work professionals and the broader desires to reciprocate that UYP express. The young people in this study conveyed this through a determination to help not just their own families but to develop careers that helped their communities. Imagined future careers in policing, nursing, medicine, and social work were common.

Another young person concerned to give back was Faizal. His plans echoed some of Roshann's bridge-building narrative and illustrate again the themes of reciprocity and return that could be achieved through education.

I want to be more clever. I want to be educated and I want to be someone and then maybe I can go home to Afghanistan and change something...like be a politician.

Whilst Roshan and Faizal had similar future dreams, they had achieved different levels of current success. Faizal, in contrast to Roshan, had not been able to pursue higher education. He was working in a manual job and was frustrated with his lack of education. The role of social work professionals and the process of pathway planning were key elements in his frustration.

My pathway plan should have said something about college and that I wanted to go to university they (the social worker and personal advisor) weren't interested. I fell out with my foster carers and they just wrote about that. I've just had nobody to talk about these things with.

The lack of support and the absence of educational goals in his pathway plan had impacted his ability to meet his aims, highlighting the crucial role that professionals have in shaping young people's futures. Indeed, whilst narratives of the past, present, and future can be enhanced and developed by interactions with others, they can also be disrupted.

It was really hard to go to college, the teacher was saying I couldn't do it. She said because of my language it would be too difficult to do the course I wanted to. But my social worker kicked up a fuss and they let me try. Zhara

The experience quoted above was relatively commonplace and emphasises the positive contribution social work professionals can and do make to achieving future goals. However, many young people relied on the social relationships of the past to inspire future plans as well as drawing on professional support in the present.

My dad was always telling me, yesterday is yesterday and today is today. You should think about tomorrow. I don't forget these words, whenever I wake up these words are in my head. Zaki

Whilst Zaki's parents were no longer alive, they were very much present in his current life and motivations for the future. The young people who were able to talk about the past in a coherent way had similar things to say about the way in which morals, values, and advice given to them in the past shaped their present situation and imagined future selves. Whether parents were lost, living, or deceased, their voices echoed backwards and forwards in time, providing a means by which young people could connect the past and the future in a way that positively influenced the present.

Previous research has understandably highlighted the trauma and distress that UYP carry with them from the past (Hodes et al., 2008). Less explored are the positive experiences, social connections, and individual acts of sacrifice that they bring with them from the past and hold into the future. Research on the resilience of UYP has thus far emphasised external service factors such as foster placements and stable accommodation or intrinsic factors such as personal faith and strength (Rigby, 2011). These findings suggest that social relationships in the past, particularly with family, contribute positively to the young person's sense of self and future. The past can be reclaimed by young people, from a narrative of pure loss to one in which the ghosts of the past are not set to haunt them, but are constant companions galvanising them to attain the future life they hope for. The temporal ruptures precipitated by forced migration can be stitched back together, suggesting that time, whilst not reversible, can be cyclical (Adam, 2004). At the core of this cycle for UYP is return and reciprocity achieved through education.

These findings have significant implications for the practice of pathway planning. They suggest the need to sensitively pay attention to the past when developing plans for the future. For UYP, discussing the past can be painful, and entering this realm of discussion can be daunting for young people and their workers. Influential findings from Kohli's (2006) study assert UYP prefer to deal with the "present first, the future next, and the past last." These findings build on Kohli's work to suggest a cumulative stage in which the past, present, and future become reconnected. Previous research with care leavers has appealed for practitioners to understand that the past, like the future, is constructed and reconstructed over time (Fransson & Storo, 2011). Holistic and effective pathway planning can engage not just with constructing a future but with actively constructing a whole narrative that connects the past, present, and the future together.

Beyond this, these narratives highlighted the practical role of social work professionals in not only creating future plans but also in "kicking up a fuss" when necessary in order to support UYP through some of the inevitable obstacles they will encounter in realising future dreams, particularly in educational settings. Along with support for education, the importance of family featured strongly in these findings. Previous reports on effective pathway planning have criticised practice that may be overly service-focused and plans that do not take account of the influence of social networks beyond the service, particularly families (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2013). These findings highlight the need to consider the influence of family networks, whether they are in the UK or transnational, and whether those family networks are active in the present, the past, or the imagined future. The

importance of family networks may easily be missed due to perceptions that unaccompanied young people are parentless and alone.

Unimaginable futures, unimaginable pasts: disrupted biographical narratives

Whilst the majority of young people with settled status expressed the clear and determined future goals that created a coherent thread between their past and future, those who had uncertain immigration status struggled to imagine both the future and the past. Current practice is centred on “triple planning” for a variety of possible immigration outcomes (Wade et al., 2012). However, the findings in this study confirm the difficulty of achieving this. Far from being able to imagine multiple possible futures, those with uncertain immigration status struggled to imagine any future at all. Furthermore, the precariousness of a positive imagined future is exposed. Even where young people had developed coherent future plans, a change in their immigration status could lead to the disintegration of any future vision as the young people became overwhelmed by unbearably present problems.

In this situation you are not in your right mind. You can't think of make decisions. All you are thinking of is getting killed and how they are going to kill you. They will kill you not with a gun, they will chop your hand one day, the other the next day, then on leg, then the other. There is nothing else you can think about. Kamal, who had just been refused asylum after eleven years in the UK

For Kamal, who had established a career and personal relationships, a rich and clear future had imploded into one in which the only thing he could envisage was fear and death. For the young people who had exhausted their appeal rights, future thoughts were often consumed by fears of death and dying. Two of the participants revealed that they might kill themselves rather than be forcibly returned to their home countries. Return was inconceivable, beyond imagination. Becoming a refused asylum seeker was like a black hole, which sucked in all their future dreams and left a blank space they were unable to fill with anything but the immediacy of the fear.

If I had to go back. I don't know what I'd do. I've no idea. I'm totally lost.... We don't talk about that. There is no plan for that. I can't plan for that. It's impossible. It is like hell to me. If they send me back it will be killing me. It they try. I will kill myself. Aziz

The quote above demonstrates clearly the difficulty of planning for any future beyond return. For Aziz, the future had reduced down to “keeping safe, just being safe is my future dream.”

Where these young people allowed themselves to imagine a future in the UK with status, they were able to express some hopes, but they lacked the clarity and coherence of those with a more certain future in the UK. The desire to look after family remained, but how to achieve that aim was hard to picture clearly.

I can't really imagine anything. If I had my documents, maybe I could be a hairdresser, maybe I could work in a pizza shop. I know I would look after my family but really I just don't know. Yousef

It is evident that uncertainty about immigration status impedes young people's ability to imagine any kind of future for themselves, in the UK or elsewhere. Moreover, uncertainty about the future destabilises the whole biographical narrative leading to an inability to connect the future and the past. The past, mirroring the future, becomes blurry as the threads that have thus far sustained the narrative begin to unravel. Aziz, who said he had been able to talk in some detail about his pre-migration past with workers when he arrived was no longer able to speak about this time with coherence. When asked about his past, his reply was stark:

I can just say fear. The key word I want to say is fear. Someone was trying to destroy my family but we don't really know who. I don't know anything. I was just a child playing cricket, with a stick, in the street, playing making houses of mud. I didn't really know what was wrong. My mum might have been protecting me. I don't know.

This quote illustrates the difficulty some participants expressed in making sense of the past and highlights the challenge of imagining a future in a place that remains a profound puzzle. One issue is the age at which young people migrated and their limited understanding of events, compounded by the desire of families to protect children from frightening and complex knowledge. Other participants felt similarly that they were too young to comprehend what happened to them, or even to remember much about their home country. But for those who had a settled status, a coherent narrative of pre-migration life and departure was still possible, albeit with gaps in the concrete knowledge of events

Those without a settled status were struggling to keep together the fragile narratives of their past in the face of future uncertainty. Cutting at the threads that connected young people to their future seemed to have the effect of unravelling the whole web of the biographical narrative. Unlike the young people who identified positive inspiration from past relationships, these young people were more likely to be confused and distrustful of any personal relationships.

you don't know. In the world, anywhere, if anyone know you are in a bad situation they won't help you. Kamal

I really don't know where I would go now if I needed help. Maybe Lesley (an adult friend) but I don't think she could help me she has her own plans. I don't think I would go there.....too many questions in my mind. Are the social workers gonna help me? Where can I get help? Aziz

The findings in this section paint a vivid picture of the potential challenges of pathway planning for this group. In stark contrast to those with status, who have begun to envisage a distant future return, reunification and acts of reciprocation with family and loved ones, young people without

refugee status were at best deeply confused about their past, present, and future and, at worst, devastatingly frightened.

Conclusion

The findings from this study have developed our understanding of how unaccompanied young people construct coherent biographical narratives and plans for the future as well as identifying situations in which those narratives become destabilised and future planning is jeopardised. Crucially, the current policy in the UK of granting only temporary leave to the majority of UASC creates a system of temporariness, which breeds uncertainty and instability, limiting the capabilities of UYP to create coherent biographical narratives. Where young people are granted some permanency in their immigration status, they are able to create biographical narratives built on themes of return and reciprocity through education. The prevalence of these themes draws our attention to the neglected role of the past. Kohli's notable (2006) insight that UYP prefer to tackle the present first, the future next, and the past last is relevant here and reminds us that UYP may face immediate and urgent problems, which take priority. Adam (2004)) has suggested that people in general are future orientated, and researchers have emphasised the acts of "futuring" inherent in migration (Griffiths, Rogers, & Anderson, 2013). Broader youth research is engaged in debates about young people's orientations to the future and amply theorised how young people approach the future in the modern world (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). Building on this, Chase (2010)) has highlighted the particular need for UYP to construct a sense of future self. However, the findings from this study suggest that it is the inter-relationship between the past, present, and future that is vital to the creation of a biographical narrative and coherent sense of self. The narratives in this study suggest that the past, present, and future are intimately and inextricably connected. An understanding of the interlocked nature of these three stages may be useful in understanding how UYP create and maintain narratives that help them plan for the future.

In terms of practice, these findings highlight the need to be mindful of the past, an often difficult task given the traumatic nature of some young people's experiences and the limited ability to gather information from sources other than the young person themselves. Despite these difficulties, social work professionals can and do play a crucial role in making meaning out of the past, present, and future. Justifiable criticism has emerged of accounts in which positive outcomes for young people are attributed solely to professionals and systems rather than young people themselves, and the intention of this article is not to overstate the role of professionals at the expense of the agency of the young person in planning their own future (Chase, 2010). However, leaving care professionals remain duty bound to prepare young people for the future, and the pathway plan is an opportunity for biographical narratives and future aspirations to be explicitly addressed and supported.

In particular, attention should be paid to the way in which UYP rely on educational success to achieve their aspirations to support families and eventually reunite with them. The proposed Immigration Bill (2015)) poses a serious threat to the ability of professionals to help UYP access

education. This is already a challenging area of practice (Gladwell & Elwyn, 2012), and removing the right to funded higher education will have devastating consequences for UYP and the practitioners working with them. In the meantime, these findings, in alignment with current guidance and regulations (Department of Education 2010), suggest that educational goals should be a primary consideration in pathway planning with UYP.

Where a young person has uncertain immigration status, pathway planning becomes even more challenging, and the findings presented here demonstrate that not only are young people reluctant to discuss return but they are also unable to imagine it all. Faced with a negative decision, their biographical narrative destabilises, and all that remains is the overwhelming concern to stay safe in the immediate present. This can leave young people extremely underprepared for negative asylum decisions and their consequences. Despite official guidance reiterating the need for return to be explicitly addressed in planning (Department for Education, 2010), this issue remains under researched, with a paucity of knowledge for practitioners to draw on. Wright (2014)) has explored the problem from a practitioner perspective and revealed concerns that discussing return can damage relationships with UYP and may be interpreted as coercion or surveillance. Issues such as these, combined with the inability of young people to imagine returned futures partially help to explain the “planning drift” with these UYP (Wade et al., 2012).

Ultimately, these findings establish the very different imagined futures and imagined pasts of UYP dependent on their immigration status as they leave care. It is the difference between having some control over one's future and feeling powerless to influence it. Whilst our understanding of the biographical narratives of those with some permanence and stability is growing and has the potential to improve pathway planning, there remains significant gaps in our knowledge of how best to plan with those who have uncertain status. These findings do not necessarily provide an answer, but rather promote further questioning. Pathway planning with young people may not just be a matter of broaching the subject of return, or dealing with the inherent tension between the social work role and immigration agendas. It requires social work professionals to undertake the task of helping young people unlock a possible future, which is beyond their current comprehension and imagination, a future that seems to bear little connection to their past or present. Helping young people make these connections could be the key to rebuilding their narratives and assisting them in coming to terms with a story that may end (or indeed begin) with return. The process of pathway planning is the mechanism through which this might be achieved.

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