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Sink or Swim: Leaving Care in New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Social Policy
at Massey University, Albany,
New Zealand

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2000

For young people in care

Acknowledgements

This study was inspired by my contact with young people in care in the Wellington region. It could not have begun without the willing participation of the eight people who contributed their very personal stories to it. Heartfelt thanks are also due to my supervisors and supporters Judith Morris and Neil Lunt, to Anne Caton 'la patronne', to Jon Smyth the computer whiz, to Raewyn Good and the CYPF Act R&E Committee, to my long suffering family, friends and colleagues, and to Harry.

You sing 'Bravo, bravo',
You're a brave brave man,
I know it's just bravado,
You never sink, cos you swam
And when your ship can't handle
The heavier seas
Your spirit will get you through,
Go down on bended knees.

(from 'Whaling' by Dobbyn, Guy, Warren and Kinney)

Abstract

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to highlight the issues for young people who are in out-of-family care at the age of sixteen. It has involved interviews with eight young New Zealanders about their experiences in care, their circumstances when leaving care and, for the seven who had already left care, their ongoing transition to adulthood.

In many countries and states overseas the difficulties of young people leaving care have received considerable attention, resulting in legislative change and programme development to ensure ongoing services and support. In contrast, the topic has been overlooked in New Zealand in recent years and most young people leave care on, before or shortly after their seventeenth birthdays, with no follow up services or monitoring.

For all but two participants in this study, the point of leaving care coincided with other important steps towards independence, such as independent living circumstances and independent financial management. This placed enormous demands on their coping abilities and limited life skills. Since leaving care only two had been in continuous fulltime work and only three progressed with their studies. Most had moved frequently after leaving care, one was homeless, one was a single mother in supported accommodation and one was awaiting a possible jail sentence. Relationships with family were mostly very poor. Four of the participants had significant psychosocial disorders and very little secondary schooling and their level of risk was acutely heightened on leaving care, two struggling with long-term substance problems and at least three with depression.

There were, however, two examples of well managed and empowering discharge processes, one to permanence and one to independence. Most participants readily expressed appreciation of positive aspects of the care experience and were quick to

defend the commitment and efforts of caregivers and social workers working under difficult conditions.

The findings raise issues about adherence to the care and protection principles of the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 and compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Act's guardianship provisions to the age of twenty provide scope for policy and practice development in this area.

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