



Trinity  
College  
Dublin

The University of Dublin

# The keys to a successful emancipation process for care leavers: an international perspective

Professor Robbie Gilligan

School of Social Work and Social Policy

May 4th 2017

Barcelona



# Barriers to Doing Well for Care Leavers

- Low expectations
- Broken connections
- Lack of support
- Weak agency of young person
- Stigma
- Unstable accommodation / care
- Poor educational support / opportunities
- Higher risk of unemployment
- Fixed care leaving age (18 in many countries)

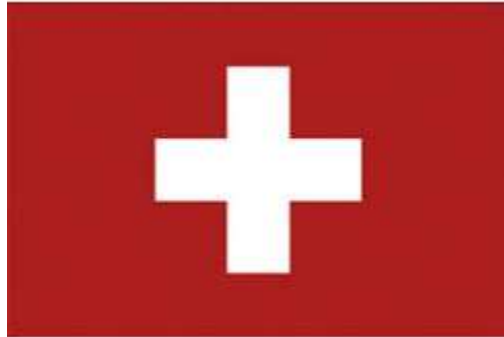
# Emancipation and Transitions

- Emancipation may be fixed to a date (18th birthday)
- But *transitions* happen in their own good time
- Emancipation may be an event but transitions are *processes* that take time
- Many transition processes

# Transitions to Adulthood

- Leaving care / family
- Finishing school
- Starting work
- Committed intimate relationship
- Setting up own home / moving in for first time
- Becoming a parent
- Becoming a voter

# Youth transitions NOT like Swiss railways – they do not run on time



- Transitions **not** an event
- Transitions are a ***process***
- ***Transitions take time (especially for care leavers who usually have less support)***
- ***They do not begin at 18 or end at 18 (or other official age for leaving care)***

# International Trend towards Raising Care Leaving Age to age 21

- Scotland (for all young people in care)
- England (for those in foster care)
- USA – in 22 states
- New Zealand
- 
- Australia 'The Home Stretch' NGO campaign for reform

# What helps in emancipation / transition?

Support

Connections

Positive  
Identity

Young  
Person's  
Agency

Time



# Support

- Practical support
- But more than that
- ***Emotional*** support also important
- Value of 'perceived support'
- Critical value of belief that support will be forthcoming when looked for

# Connections

- Social Capital
- Bonding ties (strong)
- Bridging ties (loose)
- Being in care often means weak ties
- Therefore weak support
- Where to find support in twenties, thirties and beyond?
- Build 'Network for Life' (family, friends etc)

# Positive Identity

- ‘Narrative of Potential rather than narrative of failure’ (Gilligan, 2015)
- Positive expectations for the future by the young person
- Positive expectations by others for the young person
- Positive aspirations

# Young Person's Agency

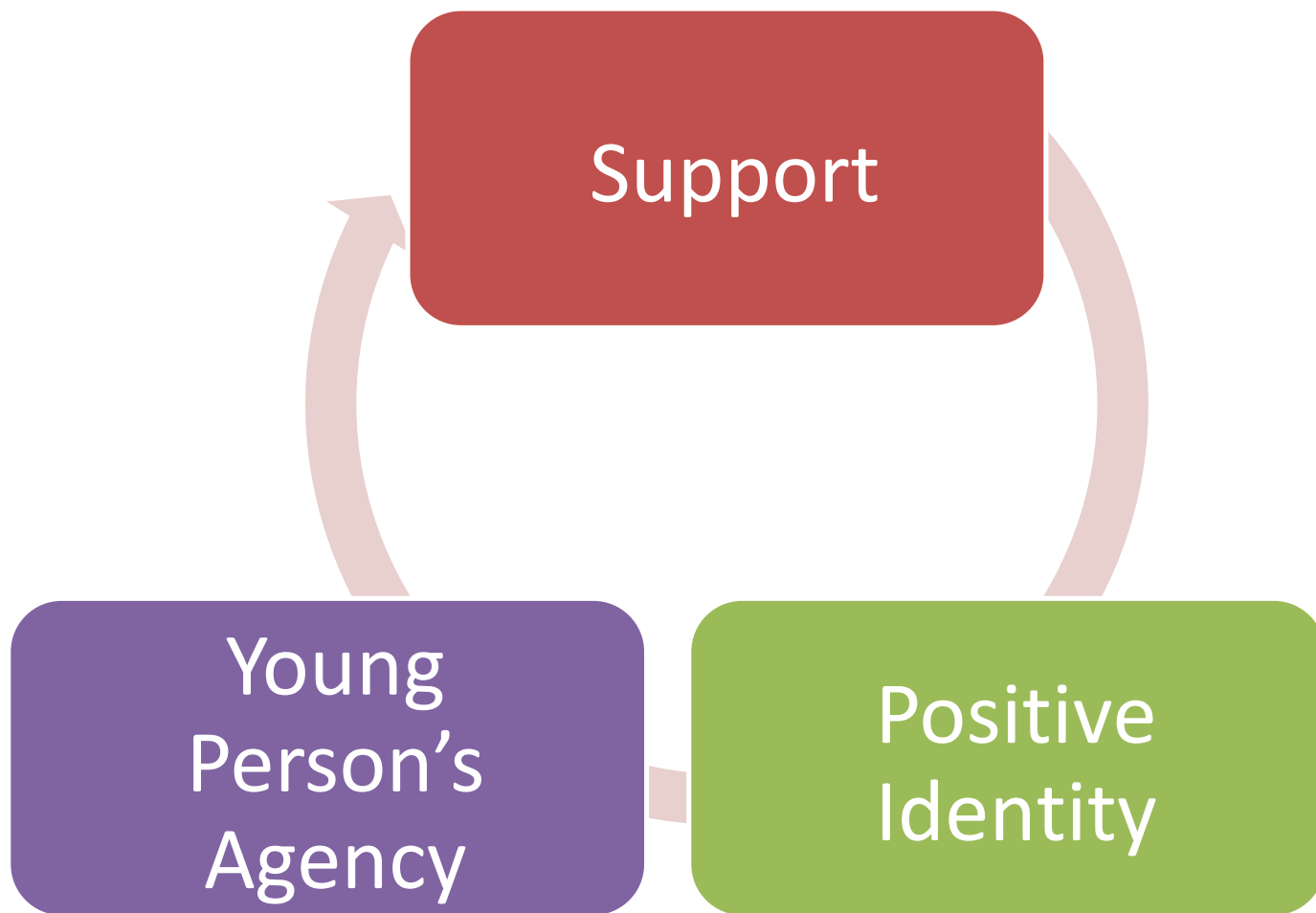
- Being pro-active, Planning, Making Choices
- *Cultivated in :*
  - Education
  - Work
  - Recreation
  - Relationships
  - Accomplishment

# Value of work experience

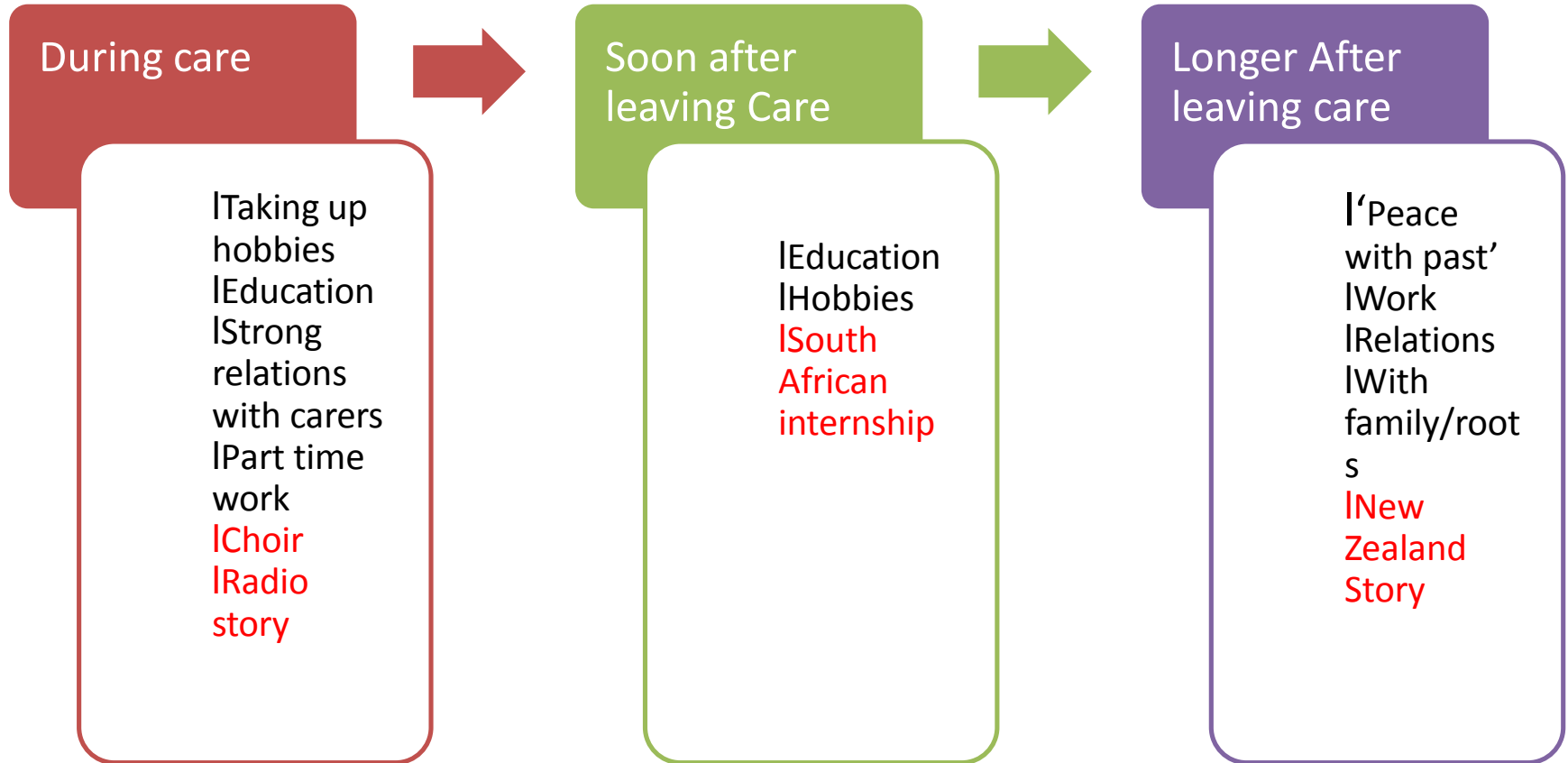
- 'Hard' skills
- 'Soft' skills
- Confidence
- Employer reference
  
- Different forms of 'work'
  
- Value of :
  - Early work experience
  - Volunteer experience

# Value of flexible opportunities in Education





# Time - and Timing of Experience Influence on Successful Outcomes





# Influences on key long-term outcomes for care leavers

- Making peace with the past
- Finding a foothold in the world of work
- Having positive childhood experiences may have long term impact
- Early mentoring and work experience may be transformative

# Story 1: Brent Mitchell (New Zealand) and his wife Yolanda

– making peace with the past



Brent Mitchell aged 57, - living in New Zealand,  
-making peace with his roots (at age 57)

- Reared in care from birth
- Multiple placements
- Foster care in Canada, New Zealand (when his fifth foster family moved there from Canada),
- Then, residential care in New Zealand and Australia (in his teens)
- Has recently made a *transformative* re-connection with his tribal roots in Canada (Metis tribe)

# Brent and Yolanda Mitchell

Special indigenous marriage ceremony conducted by elder of the Metis tribe in Canada, using the tribal sash



- “He has never met any of his biological family but continues to search for his siblings today.
- “But I have got family now, the tribe is my family. And I know where my biological family was born in Pinefalls, Canada, but they could be anywhere now.”
- <http://gisborneherald.co.nz/lifestyle/2732111-135/the-journey-begins-now>

# Story 2: Finding a foothold in the world of work

South African young person from care on his  
internship experience – from Tanur, (2012)

*‘What I enjoy the most is the people that I work  
with and the friendships that they have for me.  
I have learnt to cook and to make a lot of stuff.  
I have learnt that I can stand up for myself.  
I can be with people that I am not used to being  
with as equals and I can make friendships with  
them.....’*

*.....The internship has given me more confidence and it has helped me to look after myself and my family.*

*It has also improved my relationship with my family as I am able to contribute and my girlfriend's parents respect me now and are always nice to me because I am working.'*



# The power of the 'simple' experience of an internship

- ***Enhanced Relationships:*** with work colleagues, family
- ***Better Skills:*** cooking, making friends
- ***More Personal Agency:*** more confidence, looking after myself and my family

- ***New Valued Social Roles:*** working, contributing financially
- ***New Recognition:*** gaining respect from girlfriend's family, now feels on an equal footing with work colleagues

# Reflections on the internship experience and well being

- Importance of Subjective personal experience
- Social relationships
- Recognition
- Provision – opportunity of internship
- Non – professionals in the story
  - Work colleagues
  - Family
  - Girl friend
  - Girl friend's family

# Lessons for Practice

- At the heart of the young person's story is how his *identity* was transformed
- In many ways his story had changed from a '*narrative of failure*' to a '**narrative of potential**'
- From a child with a past, to a young man with a future
- Importance of **hope** for a sense of well being

Story 3: Having positive childhood experiences may have long term impact

# Good call by an 11 year old

- Met an English man at a conference in Australia some years ago
- Came up to me at the break after I had spoken
- I had been stressing the importance of teachers in children's lives
- He told me his story.....

- At age 11, he was growing up on an extremely impoverished and troubled housing estate in England - and in a very troubled family.....
- He could now see his future was looking very bleak

- Hinted that, looking back, delinquency, educational failure, and even placement in care were likely to be his fate in later teen years
- A teacher at school suggested he join a local choir
- He joined the choir



- The step proved transformative in the path had opened up.
- He had gone to university
- He had emigrated to Australia
- He had recently completed a PhD
- And had just got a job as lecturer in a university

- By attending to the well-being of that 11 year old, that teacher had changed a life.

- Choir offered belonging, identity, structure, routine, role models, positive expectations
- A 'hobby' had changed a life
- A 'hobby' had changed
  - His identity,
  - His aspirations,
  - His life path

# Lessons for practice

- ‘Small is not trivial’ - The power of small steps
- The seemingly inconsequential matter of recommending joining a choir had helped change a life
- Two key actors at outset – [and others later]
- Agency of children and young people - The ‘buy-in’ of the 11 year old also critical
- The influence of the teacher, based on relationship. Support – many ways of expressing

# Story 4: Early work experience may be transformative

Man (now aged 70) recalls the lifetime influence of Jack whom he met when he was sent to reform school as a teen

(Laub and Sampson)

• ‘ .....Jack loved amateur radio. And he got me interested in radio and electrical stuff and things of that nature.....He saw the potentials in me. He saw I enjoyed electricity. I enjoyed radio and stuff like that.



‘He was a prince’

‘ He took me under his wing. And I thought an awful lot of this guy in a short ten months I worked with him. He was a prince.....I prepared my whole life in ten months to do something.....

‘Jack turned me around’

..Think about it. Those ten months were crucial in my life. Because they turned me around. [Name of prison] turned me around. Jack turned me around. Jack was a humanitarian and cared for me as an individual.....



- Let's get down to brass tacks. What if Jack wasn't there? What if I wasn't offered the opportunity?.....He treated me right. As a matter of fact, after I left [name of prison] year after year on a yearly basis I would take my wife and kids, we'd drive all the way to [name of prison] to see Jack' ('Gilbert' in Laub and Sampson, 2003, p. 141

- Education
- Work
- Relationship building
- Making peace with the past

Belonging

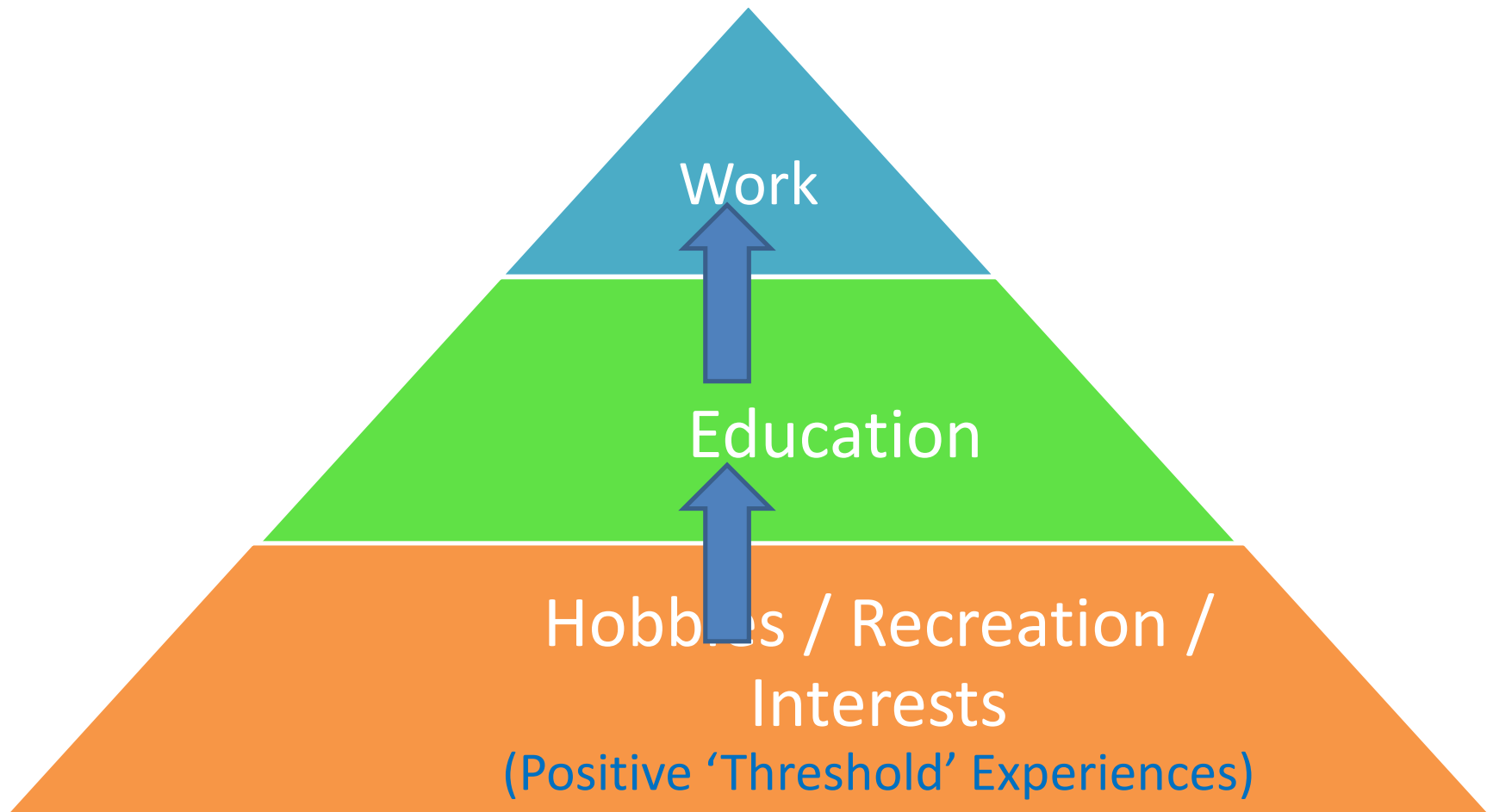
Recognition

Support

Agency

Narrative of  
Potential

# Hobbies etc as Motivating and 'Threshold' Bridging Experiences towards Inclusion



# Recent Study of evidence on resilience and children

NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL ON THE DEVELOPING CHILD

Supportive Relationships and  
Active Skill-Building Strengthen  
the Foundations of Resilience

WORKING PAPER 13

Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY

- Two key messages:
- **Power of supportive relationships**
- **Value of skills and skill building**

- Value of early work experience
- Value of flexible education system that allows re-entry to education over lifetime
- Carers (and other supportive adults) alert to their role in supporting education and work
- (Messages from recent studies on work and care leavers in Ireland and Catalonia by Laura Arnau and myself)



Trinity  
College  
Dublin

The University of Dublin

# Thank You

[robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie](mailto:robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie)

@RobbieGilligan

<http://people.tcd.ie/Profile?Username=rgillign>