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Navigating educational success: Modes of expectation among care-experienced young people

Anne-Kirstine Mølholt[1] ⓘ | **Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson**[2] | **Morten Frederiksen**[1]

[1]Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark

[2]VIVE—The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Copenhagen, Denmark

Correspondence
Anne-Kirstine Mølholt, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University—CPH, A.C. Meyers Vaenge 15, DK–2450 Copenhagen, Denmark.
Email: akm@socsci.aau.dk

Abstract

This paper explores modes of expectation among care-experienced young people when navigating educational success. Luhmann's theoretical framework is used to conceptualise experiences of educational success and the role of uncertainty. We identify three modes of expectation: trust, risk and danger. To illustrate these modes, we draw on selected examples from an interview study with 28 care-experienced young people focusing on their experiences of support and aftercare while transitioning out of care. The trust mode of expectation is based in a confidence that the future entails a positive outcome—in the case of this study, regarding educational success. This expectation is characterised by the young person's feelings of belonging, underpinned by a safety net of unconditionally supportive caregivers. The risk mode of expectation is characterised by the young person's feeling of being overwhelmed and burdened by the complexity of the educational system in combination with unknown future circumstances when leaving care. The battle against child welfare services to keep supportive measures increases levels of uncertainty. The danger mode of expectation emerges when educational success is disrupted by the interference of child welfare services. The system is seen as unpredictable and powerful, making the young person withdraw from formal support. We conclude

that educational success for care-experienced young people is closely linked to their mode of expectation with regard to managing the uncertainty of the future and that their mode is highly dependent on their social, institutional and biographical contexts.

KEYWORDS
care-experienced, educational success, modes of expectation, uncertainty

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper examines how educational success for care-experienced young people depends on an ability to keep unusual levels of uncertainty manageable. Based on Luhmann's theoretical perspective of trust, risk and uncertainty, we demonstrate how young people's experiences are placed on different steps on the ladder of uncertainty.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Besides managing the uncertainty experienced by young people in general in relation to educational success, decision-making and individualisation, care-experienced young people must manage high levels of uncertainty in their past, present and future in addition to uncertainty inflicted by child welfare services.

INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces a theoretical framework for understanding the role of uncertainty in the educational choices and success of care-experienced young people. Using empirical examples of Danish care-experienced young people's educational success, we conceptualise and investigate the intersection of uncertainty with the pursuit of educational success in this cohort. Educational choices and success have become increasingly important and problematic because of the rising complexity and volatility of decision-making situations and the increasingly individualised responsibility for success (Zinn, 2008). Structural and cultural changes involve an increased pace of life as well as a decrease in time to make decisions, such as educational choices. This accelerated pace of decision-making is experienced as increased uncertainty by young people and is intrinsically linked to the increasing complexity of societies and institutions (Luhmann, 1988). In their attempt to reduce and manage uncertainty, young people depend on prior experience, contextual familiarity and the resources of institutions and networks (Möllering, 2006; Zinn, 2008). Experience, familiarity and network resources are, however, often lacking among care-experienced young people who have childhood experiences of instability and ongoing uncertainty (Sinclair et al., 2020); this presents challenges in reducing and managing the complexity and uncertainty of educational choices.

Young people who have grown up in out-of-home care have a distinctive dependency on the state through child welfare services, which sets them apart from other young people. Growing up either in foster care families or in residential care institutions, they are reliant on the care system and on professional care. This reliance creates unique forms of uncertainty associated with system shortcomings or failures, such as placement instability and unplanned transitions out of care (Gilligan & Brady, 2022; Stein, 2012; Ward, 2009). The uncertainty produced by the care system is an almost inescapable condition for the young people and can often only be navigated by relying on the very same systems, rather than on family relationships (Boddy et al., 2020). For most care-experienced young people, the transition from care to adulthood is accelerated and compressed (Stein, 2008), involving multiple changes in relationships, access to formal support and housing (Gypen et al., 2017). It is often during this very time that key educational decisions must be made to secure future educational success.

Based on Luhmann's (1979) theory of trust, risk and uncertainty, we conceptualise three distinct 'modes of expectation' that each represent a specific way of experiencing uncertainty and developing expectations about future outcomes of decisions and actions depending on the level of complexity and the young person's ability to reduce the resulting uncertainty. These modes of expectation are trust, risk and danger. These theoretical concepts are developed to improve our sociological understanding of—and empirical sensitivity to—how educational success for care-experienced young people depends on their ability to keep unusual levels of uncertainty manageable. To develop this conceptualisation, we draw on 28 qualitative interviews with care-experienced Danish young people (age range 18–29).

In the following, we first present existing research and the Danish context, and afterwards, we present our theoretical framework of how risk and uncertainty can relate to educational success. We then introduce the study from which we draw our empirical examples. In the main body of the paper, we present three modes of expectation used by care-experienced young people to reduce uncertainty to obtain educational success. Finally, we discuss how integrating a focus on uncertainty allows for more nuanced understandings of how care-experienced young people can reach educational success.

BACKGROUND: EXISTING RESEARCH AND THE DANISH CONTEXT

In Denmark, approximately 1% of all children aged 0–17 are placed in out-of-home care, the majority of whom are teenagers. The most common form of placement is foster families (approximately 65%), but teenagers are also often placed in residential care (Lausten, 2022). Out-of-home care ends by the time the young person reaches legal age at 18, but aftercare can be supplied until age 23. Approximately 60% of young care-leavers receive aftercare, with the most common form of aftercare being short-term prolongment of placement (Deloitte, 2017; Lausten et al., 2020). Overall, many care-experienced young people experience an accelerated transition to adulthood without the family support to which most of their peers have access (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Boddy et al., 2020; Brady & Gilligan, 2019; Flynn et al., 2013; Hanrahan et al., 2020; Harrison, 2020; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Mølholt, 2017; Tessier et al., 2018).

Care-experienced young people are overrepresented in special education, but in general, they are part of and expected to perform within the common educational system (Langager et al., 2021). The Danish educational system is based on a universal welfare model focusing on inclusion, with tuition-free, tax-funded education at all levels, where access to different types of secondary and tertiary education depends on performance in general and grade point average in particular at the previous level. However, while

social mobility is greater than that in other countries (Andrade & Thomsen, 2018), educational inequalities persist, with distinct differences among different students based on their class background and access to different forms of educational resources (Thomsen et al., 2013). Research suggests that this not only reflects differences in educational performance but is also due to the complexity and risk associated with making educational choices in a complex, performance-based educational system (Karlson & Holm, 2015).

The educational inequality in Denmark for care-experienced young people is well documented, and thus, the egalitarian system in combination with aftercare support has not been successful in creating equal opportunities (Lausten et al., 2020; Olsen & de Montgomery, 2018). This educational gap between young people with and without a care background is also prevalent in other countries, and research generally finds that life outcomes among care-experienced young people are significantly worse than those of their peers (Brady & Gilligan, 2019; Hanrahan et al., 2020; Harrison et al., 2022; Kääriälä et al., 2018; Lausten et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2020).

The reasons for the educational gap in Denmark are complex. Some care-experienced young people have special education needs, and the majority do not follow a linear educational pathway and thus take longer than their peers to accomplish their educational goals (Bengtsson et al., 2022; Langager et al., 2021). Remaining in and finalising education has proven to be a key challenge, even for care-experienced young people with educational ambitions (Brady & Gilligan, 2019; Harrison, 2020). There is an increased focus on the educational success of care-experienced young people, and entrance into higher education is seen as 'affording them scope to transcend the manifest disadvantages of their early lives' (Harrison et al., 2022, p. 375). However, an overemphasis on their educational success may have detrimental effects as a result of overlooking and under-evaluating other meaningful performances at the individual level (Rees & Munro, 2019) and suppressing important aspects of the subjective experiences of care-experienced young people (Bakketeig et al., 2020). Further, a narrow focus on educational success may overlook how educational decisions are highly dependent on an ability to reduce uncertainty (Deleuze, 1994; Luhmann, 1993). A focus on the individual young person may additionally distract from the general inequality mechanisms of the educational system (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Successfully navigating complexity is central in decision-making, as well as to staying in the educational system. However, an important aspect of educational success is also the structural inequality that care-experienced young people face, as they experience higher levels of uncertainty than most of their peers and are equipped with fewer possibilities for reducing this uncertainty.

As a result of this insight, an increasing body of research focuses on educational success, as defined not by the system but by the young people themselves (e.g. Bakketeig et al., 2020; Boddy et al., 2020; Hanrahan et al., 2020; Harrison, 2020). In a cross-national study of care-experienced young people's experiences of 'doing well', researchers find that the complex experiences of doing well could not be reduced to care histories or predefined outcomes of educational success; rather, the experience of doing well was closely affiliated with the securement of manageable and happy lives in the context of ongoing challenges and inequalities—and the perspectives of doing well should be viewed in this context (Bakketeig et al., 2020). Following from these insights, we acknowledge that educational success can be based on how the care-experienced young people themselves define educational success and that this perspective is central. However, by directing our attention to uncertainty and modes of expectation, we also want to conceptualise how educational success is highly influenced by structural conditions that cannot be overcome by the individual young person's own framing of educational success.

THEORY: THE ROLE OF UNCERTAINTY IN EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Uncertainty, as a concept, describes how the complexity of the social and natural world makes it fundamentally unpredictable, leading to an experience of uncertainty regarding what outcomes to expect in a specific situation. Experienced uncertainty varies quite significantly between situations depending on their complexity, but different people also experience different levels of uncertainty in the same situation depending on their ability to reduce complexity and, consequently, reduce uncertainty (Deleuze, 1994; Luhmann, 1993).

Complexity reduction—reducing the scope of potential outcomes to expect—is central in handling uncertainty. It involves the ability to identify the few important choices and relevant contingencies among the multitude of potential choices and events in various situations, such as planning one's education. Uncertainty about educational choices is an inescapable part of most young people's lives in societies permeated by great expectations of educational performance and competent decision-making (Reith, 2004). However, situations involving educational decisions require more conscious effort, planning and worrying for care-experienced young people (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

The effort needed to reduce complexity will often decrease over time as situations and contexts become more familiar (Luhmann, 1979). Familiarity develops from experience and knowledge, and it reduces uncertainty by shaping expectations. It thus allows one to envision and expect the likely or usual outcomes, while unfamiliarity means that one has no idea what the likely outcomes of actions and decisions are, prompting one to worry about everything (Flaherty & Fine, 2001; Luhmann, 1979).

Most people, including young people, experience a familiarity-based cohesion with their social surroundings that does not require them to question or worry about these surroundings. Anchored by this familiar experience of cohesion, most young people have a positive expectation of their future, making uncertainty and choices unthreatening despite a lack of certain knowledge (Frederiksen, 2014a, 2016). By comparison, care-experienced young people often have a limited sense of familiarity and cohesion with their social surroundings (Mølholt, 2017), causing them to experience a non-belonging understood as an embodied disconnectedness to places and social relationships (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018). This disconnectedness limits their possibilities of reducing complexity and handling uncertainty, which presents challenges in decision-making and planning for the future. Every decision and action taken appears as contingent and provisional, resulting in increased levels of uncertainty.

Three modes of expectation

Inspired by Luhmann's theoretical notions of trust and risk, we propose a conceptualisation of three distinct 'modes of expectation' that each describe a specific way of experiencing uncertainty and developing expectations about future outcomes of decisions and actions. These modes of expectation are trust, risk and danger (Frederiksen & Heinskou, 2016; Knight, 1921; Luhmann, 1988, 1993). These modes represent three steps on a ladder ranging from a successful reduction of uncertainty and not expecting adverse outcomes to an unsuccessful reduction of uncertainty and being overwhelmed by expectations of adverse outcomes (Frederiksen, 2014a). Crucially, these modes of expectation are not characterisations of objective ability to strategise and make decisions, but rather of the subjective experience of how difficult and threatening the context of decision-making is and how difficult it is for, in this context, the care-experienced young person to envision a potentially beneficial outcome of educational choices (Barbalet, 1996; Brown, 2009). These three distinct modes

of expectation will guide our analytical conceptualisation of how care-experienced young people navigate their educational success.

The first mode of expectation is trust. Trust is an unspecific, positive expectation of the future grounded in experience, knowledge and familiarity (Misztal, 2001; Möllering, 2006). Trust means that people experience the uncertainty of a situation as non-threatening and part of a meaningful flow of events, allowing them to envision an unspecific but positive outcome of their actions (Barbalet, 1996; Frederiksen, 2014b; Simmel, 1950). This expectation is grounded in a combination of knowledge about the situation and experience with the situational context and content, as well as taken-for-granted familiarity with this type of situation. This allows one to act and engage based on a feeling of situational cohesion and continuity, along with a confidence in one's ability to navigate the situation. In the context of education, trust emerges from previous personal experience with educational choices, familiarity with a variety of educational trajectories and successes provided by family and network as well as access to sufficient resources to overcome obstacles, all of which help to envision possible, beneficial outcomes as likely.

The second mode of expectation is risk. In contrast to trust, risk involves expectations of the future that are based in projective, calculative thinking about uncertainty, a thinking that attributes outcomes to agency (Knight, 1921; Luhmann, 1993). In a situation where uncertainty is not significantly reduced by familiarity, knowledge or experience, uncertainty remains something that must be delt with strategically. Risk, as a phenomenological way of experiencing, means worrying about making decisions that lead to adverse future events and outcomes while simultaneously trying to avoid these by making the right decisions. Using available information about the situation and the involved actors and institutions, people try to figure out which actions or choices may lead to desirable outcomes, and which lead to adverse outcomes (Frederiksen, 2014a; Möllering, 2006). While this may resemble the idealised notion of agency from rational choice theory, it is important to emphasise that this is a phenomenological experience of uncertainty. It does not imply that the calculations of risk are rational nor based on anything near perfect information. Rather, risk is a way of experiencing uncertainty in which the expected outcomes are attributable to individual, strategic choices and associated with a potential for regret (Luhmann, 1988). As a mode of engaging uncertainty, risk is inefficient and cumbersome compared to trust and comes with a heavy burden of calculation, doubt and worry, which can disassociate people from their environment. In contrast to trust, risk as a mode of expectation will often lead to being risk adverse and not aiming for the highest goals or best results, because these are experienced as associated with a similarly great potential for regret. In the context of educational choice, risk emerges when knowledge about possible successful choices is limited and the ability to envision positive outcomes is based on strategic thinking and risk avoidance. The fewer resources are available to the young person to absorb and overcome the consequences of a bad decision, the more calculation and strategic thinking will be required.

The third mode of expectation is danger. Danger means that uncertainty is perceived as a threatening, powerful and irreducible outside force. Danger, as a phenomenological form, is a property usually associated with social institutions, systems and physical environments that are too inscrutable, unpredictable and powerful for people to contemplate engaging them through strategic action (Levi-Strauss, 1955; Luhmann, 1979). Danger occurs when uncertainty is overwhelming and no choices seem to lead to positive outcomes, but only to devastating adverse outcomes. Rather than calculation and strategic action, danger requires retreat: that one try to avoid or flee a situation where danger is involved (Frederiksen & Heinskou, 2016). In the context of educational choice, danger means that a young person cannot imagine or envision any meaningful path to success or perhaps even what success would look like, but that any attempt at education leads to failure. Danger may also occur in

an educational context, when making an educational choice involves system engagement or dependencies that appear dangerous and untenable.

The uncertainty reduction that helps establish a mode of expectation is not only based in familiarity but also takes place by relying on other people or institutions to deal with uncertainty (Luhmann, 1979). Thus, displacing the reduction task to one's social network or the social care system bolsters one's ability to deal with uncertainty. In the context of education, this displacement can be obtained either through educational advice and information from friends, family or professionals, by following the examples set by people within one's network, through resources made available such as housing, funding or tutoring, or simply through the increased confidence that access to such resources may provide (Coleman, 1990; Hardin, 2006).

However, networks and institutions can also increase uncertainty by being unreliable or unpredictable, stopping the young person from reducing uncertainty in other areas of their life due to an overload of uncertainty (Frederiksen, 2014a, 2014b). From this perspective, educational success is based on an ability to navigate and reduce the uncertainty not just of the educational system but of the many decisions facing care-experienced young people in their transition to adulthood. Reducing uncertainty is a key part of any kind of agency, but how to do so successfully can be especially paralysing when young and in a period of life characterised by many formative decisions (Arnett, 2000). Dependence on people, networks or institutions increases vulnerability and, to the degree that these are not experienced as working in one's best interest, also increases uncertainty and changes the mode of expectation.

In the following section, we briefly introduce the empirical study from which we subsequently draw three individual stories to illustrate the role of uncertainty and modes of expectation regarding educational choices among care-experienced young people.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY WITH DANISH CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

The empirical data used in the analyses are based on a study of care-experienced young people's experiences of support and aftercare conducted for the Ministry of Social Affairs in Denmark to form a knowledge base for reforming the aftercare system. The young people were recruited through social media (Facebook and LinkedIn), interest groups and aftercare initiatives. In recognition of their time and effort, the young people were given a gift voucher of 100 Danish crowns (approximately 10 pounds). The individual interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h. They were conducted either face to face (13), over the telephone (16) or over Microsoft Teams (1) in the autumn and winter of 2021 with 30 young people aged 18–29. Among these, 23 had been in out-of-home care until they turned 18, and five had been in care during their upbringing but had moved back in with their biological parents before they turned 18. Twenty-six of the young people had received aftercare support from child welfare services, as aftercare can be given to young people ageing out of care or in the form of contact-person support for young people turning 18 but not living in care. For this paper, we focus on the 28 young people with care experience and their educational experiences. Of these, 16 described themselves as educationally successful.

The study was conducted in accordance with national guidelines for ethical conduct and data protection. This includes protection of the participants through processes of anonymisation, such as all names being replaced with pseudonyms and altering specific details from the interviews. All interviews were transcribed, and the quotes used in this paper were translated from Danish by the authors. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the interviewees' need for support when transitioning out of care, as well as their living

conditions, social networks, educational situation and everyday life in general. It was important that the young people felt they could influence the structure and progress of the interview and end the interview if they wished. There were great differences in the elaboration and depth of the interviews. To respect the young people's privacy, we did not include questions about reasons for their placement or details about their upbringing, as these subjects could bring about troublesome memories. However, many of the young people talked quite extensively about their childhood, almost making some of the interviews into life-story narratives (Mølholt, 2017).

UNCERTAINTY AND MODES OF EXPECTATION WHEN PURSUING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

The following three analytical sections present young people's stories of how steps on the ladder of uncertainty and modes of expectation intersect with care-experienced young people's lives. For this theoretical purpose, we deductively selected empirical examples from our study to illustrate how the care-experienced young people attempt to reduce uncertainty to obtain educational success. We further demonstrate how their experiences of uncertainty are linked to the level of complexity in their everyday lives. First, we analyse expectations of trust, then expectations of risk avoidance and, finally, expectations of danger. Initially, it is important to notice that each mode of expectation is a theoretical typification and thus is not detached from the unique conditions of an individual young person, nor are the modes mutually exclusive. This means that young people may switch between modes if their situation changes.

MODE OF EXPECTATION: TRUST IN THE PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Trust as a mode of expectation is an unspecific, positive expectation of the future used by most young people, especially those without care experience or without difficult circumstances. Despite the complexity of educational choices, the expectation is that any difficulties will resolve themselves and that the outcome will generally be positive. This trust is grounded in experience, knowledge and familiarity with previously having made successful decisions, as well as having access to the resources of networks and institutions (Möllering, 2006)—things that are rarely part of care-experienced young people's experiences or available to them. Rather, they have experiences of fragile family relationships and changing professional relationships that are formally controlled by social authorities. These unique conditions are pointed out by several young people in our study as central inhibitors for creating the much-wanted and needed taken-for-granted familiarity. Stability in the past and present life directly affects experiences of familiarity and belonging. It brings about a sense of cohesion in young people's lives on which they rely to navigate the complexity of educational decisions and shape their expectations of the future (see also Bengtsson et al., 2022 and Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018).

While trust was out of reach for most of the young people in the study as a main strategy for securing educational success, one young man, Peter, emphasised trust as his main mode of expectation. Peter was 24 years old when interviewed. He was placed in family foster care together with his younger brother at the age of 9 because of his mother's mental illness. Peter tells how he is emotionally close with his foster parents, who he describes as well-educated and resourceful:

> We [Peter and his brother] have been so fortunate that we had a great deal of resources and that we didn't miss a thing. The focus has been on our development. So, for me, there's been time to study and just be a normal teenager—partying and doing whatever teenagers do. I've never missed anything, really.

The extensive support Peter received from his foster parents limited his need for contact with child welfare services both during upbringing and when transitioning out of care. He emphasises, 'I have always had a good safety net, and if I needed anything, I could ask my foster parents or my birth family. So, I've never needed anything' (Peter, age 24). When Peter turned 18, he received aftercare in the form of prolongment of placement until he turned 19. He then moved to his own apartment because he wanted to live on his own and be self-reliant, have a job and 'Well, just be normal' (Peter, age 24). He stresses that it was his own choice to move and that he did so with the help and support of his foster parents and without need for welfare services: 'It is always my foster mom and foster dad [that I turn to]. I see them as my nuclear family, so it comes very naturally that I discuss everything with them. And if I experience any problems, we discuss it and find a solution' (Peter, age 24). Peter has full confidence that his foster parents will always support him and be there for him, not only when it comes to financial and material support but also support in finding solutions and making decisions, providing a full set of the most important resources for educational choice and success.

This knowledge and experience of supportive caregivers allows him to trust in a positive, if unspecific, outcome. At the time of the interview, Peter was studying to earn a bachelor's degree in international hotel management and dreamed of being the head of management at a hotel. He had recently moved back in with his foster parents, as he wanted to save up money to travel for his studies. Peter's foster parents wanted to give him the opportunity by letting him stay for free and for as long as he wished. During his time in care and now, after formal care has ended, their unquestionable support has provided him with taken-for-granted knowledge about what to expect and the freedom to not worry excessively. He has been allowed to develop an embodied trust assuring him that important educational decisions and wishes are manageable and will most likely be successful. The complexity of making relevant decisions among the multitude of potential choices is resourcefully reduced, making his choices appear easy and logical as part of a trusting mode of expectation.

Despite the easiness of making the right educational choice, Peter also emphasises that he knows it could be different. When living with his birth parents, they had difficulties supporting him in school, and he fell behind the other students. He explains that, after moving in with his foster family, he went from 'stupid to being able to go to further education' (Peter, age 24). This development made it possible for him to go directly from primary and secondary school to upper secondary school. Educational success was made possible, as Peter feels that he belongs in the foster family and that his educational participation is supported because school attendance is an unremarkable and normative expectation (see also Cameron, 2007, p. 44). The sense of belonging is a multidimensional experience of feeling at home both physically and socially (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This experience intersects with educational success as cohesion and stability patterns that are reflected in care-experienced young people's educational pathways. To have a lasting and grounded sense of belonging is an effective way of reducing uncertainty as a contextual disassociation, allowing the young person to face the world from a position of trust (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018).

MODE OF EXPECTATION: RISK IN THE PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

A majority of care-experienced young people express experiences of great uncertainty as they are transitioning out of care and are about to embark on their independent life. They are in a phase of life in which they are confronted with significant changes in their life: they are leaving care environments and, at the same time, they are to choose their educational pathway. They often feel overwhelmed by uncertainty at this important time in life and experience the period as threatening, placing them in a risk mode of expectation, where uncertainty is not extensively reduced by familiarity, knowledge or experience. For a group of young people in our study, this uncertainty is often reinforced by experiences of unpredictability and instability regarding welfare services, such as limited insight into decisions and processes (see also Boddy et al., 2020). This lack of involvement causes them to feel inadequate with regard to taking control over their own life and having insight into and influence over possible futures.

Andrea was 21 when interviewed, and she was taken into care at age 3. She spent 3 years in residential care and then moved to a foster family together with her older sister, and today, she has no contact with her birth family. When she reflects on her educational pathway, she stresses the uncertainty she experienced at the time she was about to embark on further education. Just as Peter, she considers her foster family as her primary family, and she also wished to continue living with them when she turned 18. However, in contrast to Peter, she could only remain in care if granted aftercare. Her continuation within the familiar care environment was thus dependent on decisions internal to child welfare services. What sets Andrea apart from Peter is her lack of confidence in a positive outcome owing to her dependence on the unpredictable child welfare services. Andrea stresses how she and her foster mother had to fight for her right to aftercare. Not knowing what to expect of the immediate future and whether they would succeed in securing aftercare support induced great uncertainty in Andrea's life:

> I'll say that the period up to my eighteenth birthday, it was … My thoughts were everywhere. I was extremely nervous. Not knowing if I could stay or couldn't, it was horrible. When I received the action plan, which stated that I could receive aftercare until this summer, that was a good day.

Later in the interview, Andrea elaborates on her experiences:

> The insecurity has actually been there almost all the time after I've become older and have begun to understand what was happening. Because through a long period of time they [the welfare services] would like to replace us [her sister and Andrea], because it was too expensive to have us placed where we were.

For Andrea, and many other care-experienced young people, there is a critical intersection of the intrusion of welfare services and the experience of control over life choices and the ability to plan everyday life as well as the future. As a result, care-experienced young people are forced to deal with this uncertainty through attempts of strategy and risk management that are often inefficient in reducing uncertainty.

In the interviews, Andrea highlights her need for help with homework and support in structuring her everyday life in the period up to and around turning 18—a time particularly critical for young people in upper secondary school who are trying to succeed academically. Today, Andrea has finished upper secondary school and is studying business. She dreams of going to university, and she often stresses how she has relied on the support of

her foster mother, who is a trained social worker with legal insights into the child welfare services:

> It [the foster mother's support] means everything to me, or else I wouldn't have had any education. I probably wouldn't have been okay. I wouldn't have had any money; I wouldn't have been in charge. Maybe I would have been an alcoholic like my [birth] mom. I don't dare to think of the consequences if I hadn't received any support.

Andrea emphasises experiences of risk in her life, as her life could easily be turned around if she does not receive the support she is dependent upon if she is to make the most of her life. However, to receive this support, she is also dependent on unreliable welfare services that she, together with her foster mother, seek to strategically overcome. This helps Andrea retain the experience of uncertainty within the risk mode of expectation and strategic decision-making rather than being overwhelmed by the uncertainty produced by welfare services as an experience of danger.

As in Andrea's story, other young people in the study have stories where uncertainty in relation to choosing their educational pathway and ensuring themselves educational success are intertwined with and reinforced by experiences of risks produced by welfare services. Their feeling of dependency on welfare services and, at the same time, their experience of a lack of sufficient control over and insight into the outcomes of decisions result in risk modes of expectation. Thus, they balance between battling the welfare services and trying to envision and plan for an education, believing that they have the resources to accomplish it. It is essential that the young people have supportive and resourceful adults to whom they can displace their experienced uncertainty.

MODE OF EXPECTATION: DANGER IN THE PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

During the transitional phase out of care and into adult life, some of the young people in our study emphasise a period of life in which they are met by uncertainty in all aspects of life that they must handle themselves without the support of others. They lose their care environment and primary support as they leave care, and they must find a new place to live, establish supportive networks and try to succeed educationally. Often, their care experience is characterised by instability, thus resulting in them having limited access to supportive and resourceful adults to whom they can displace their experienced uncertainty. As a result, they highlight a great wish to take care of themselves and manage on their own without the help of others, and they express a limited trust in welfare services and in professionals due to many shifts and lack of insight. This creates an uncertainty that is experienced within a danger mode of expectation: welfare services are experienced as powerful, inscrutable and threatening to the young people's success, and the limited possibilities of reducing or displacing the threat block any image of a beneficial future outcome.

Frederik emphasises a chaotic transitional phase in which he had no supportive resources to help him handle the uncertainty he experienced and where child welfare services added to rather than limited the experience of uncertainty, which has had a great impact on his educational pathways. At the time of the interview, Frederik was 20 years old. He was taken into care at age 7 and lived in three different residential institutions. He describes how he had finally found a place to call his home at the last institution. He moved there when he was 14, and, close to turning 18, he was told by child welfare services that he could receive

aftercare support as long as he stayed in upper secondary education. However, shortly after, he dropped out of school and consequently had to move:

> I had visited a psychologist and was diagnosed with a moderately severe depression, and he [psychologist] stressed that it would have a very negative effect on my health if I was forced to move, but it didn't influence their [child welfare services] decision. I know that my contact person [at the institution] tried to have me stay, but as soon as I wasn't part of the upper secondary education, they didn't perceive me as developing, and there was no reason that I should stay. They stated that if I was to live at the institution, it was to support my education, if you know what I mean. The institution should be a platform for my educational participation, so when I left the school, the terms were no longer fulfilled.

Frederik did not receive any form of support when leaving the institution, and it was difficult for him to find a new home, as he had no income. The uncertainty Frederik faced was overwhelming, and he did not experience any possible choices leading to a positive trajectory out of care. He became homeless and later moved into a small cabin in his grandmother's backyard, and he stresses that the disconnection from welfare services made him 'self-reliant' (Cameron, 2007, p. 39). He found an education as a pedagogical assistant and moved into a home connected to the school. When the home closed during weekends and holidays, he surfed couches at his friends' houses.

A year ago, Frederik contacted a social worker to receive additional support but he has not heard back from her: 'So I don't know whether she's still working on it, but I doubt it (laughs). I don't know if she has forgotten about me, but it's strange to promise me to get back to me and then never contact me again' (Frederik, age 20). In his active decision-making and action-taking, Frederik fights back through his self-reliance. He has confidence that he can manage his own affairs, and he has self-confidence in his decision-making, which becomes a way to reduce uncertainty (Barbalet, 1996). At the same time, he protects himself from the complexity and uncertainty potentially produced by welfare services by retreating from the danger they pose and almost completely disassociating himself from them.

Today, Frederik has an apartment where he lives with his girlfriend. He is still enrolled in education as a pedagogical assistant, and he is planning to pursue a bachelor's degree in social education and pedagogy. When reflecting about his prior drop-out from upper secondary school, he stresses that he thought a lot through the years about whether his lack of educational engagement was caused by his upbringing and care background. These reflections have made him stubborn and focused on getting an education: 'Now I am sure that I will make it. I've always achieved high grades. So, I knew it had nothing to do with my academic capabilities; they didn't hold me back. So, I thought, "What is it, then?"' (Frederik, age 20). Regarding his current education, he emphasises:

> I really like the pedagogical assistant education. I've always been told that I should make something out of my good grades. Most of my life, I've wanted to become a lawyer or a doctor. But really, that's not what I wanted. So, when I found out that I wanted to do something pedagogical, I applied for this education. Part of it is a practical training, which, to me, is a great motivator, because I'm being challenged. Academics have always come easy to me, but when I was in practical training, I found that I could improve myself significantly and really be challenged. It has really been great.

Frederik emphasises a 'positive learner identity', as he believes in his own ability to learn, and he stresses 'positive educational memories' (see also Gilligan & Brady, 2022). He has

developed a clear sense of self-reliance and become the principal agent of his own educational direction and success (Cameron, 2007, p. 45). Frederik's story also reveals that his self-reliance stems from and is a response to a lack of sufficient support from welfare services. Self-reliance can, even in adverse conditions, be a preferable mode of uncertainty reduction rather than reliance on 'dangerous', unpredictable systems of support.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper is to enhance an understanding of how educational success for care-experienced young people depends on an ability to keep unusual levels of uncertainty manageable. Our contextualisation of trust, risk and uncertainty illuminate how educational success is highly influenced by structural conditions that cannot be overcome by the individual young person's own framing of educational success. Educational success of care-experienced young people is produced within a structural inequality that often creates high levels of uncertainty and fewer possibilities for reducing this uncertainty (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Boddy et al., 2020; Hanrahan et al., 2020; Harrison, 2020).

We have conceptualised three distinct modes of expectation that each describe a specific way of experiencing uncertainty and developing expectations about future outcomes of decisions and actions. These three modes—trust, risk and danger—provide us with an insight into the navigation of risks and uncertainties that care-experienced young people must undertake to be educationally successful. The three modes can be placed on a ladder of uncertainty, with trust as the least uncertain and danger as the most uncertain. A higher level of uncertainty reduces the space for agency as the mode of expectation becomes increasingly an expectation of adverse outcomes and a need for strategic action.

Trust as a mode of expectation is an unspecific, positive expectation of the future used by most young people and by care-experienced young people without difficult circumstances. In this mode, the complexity of educational choices is reduced by the expectation that any difficulties will resolve themselves and that the outcome will generally be positive. Risk as a mode of expectation is characterised by experiences of great uncertainty, such as transitioning out of care without knowing if the needed support will be there. In this mode, the young person worries about making decisions that can lead to adverse future events and outcomes while simultaneously trying to avoid these by making the right decisions. Danger as a mode of expectation is characterised by the experience of uncertainty in all aspects of life. Uncertainty is experienced as a threatening, powerful and irreducible outside force over which the young person has no control.

Educational success has become increasingly important but also complex as, for care-experienced young people as well as for young people in general, it is closely linked to their experiences of uncertainty in concrete situations, such as the choice of education, but also to their general social, institutional and biographical contexts. Uncertainty is a fundamental phenomenon of future complexity being unpredictable, and it is a characterisation of young people's lives as part of the increasing complexity of societies and institutions (Luhmann, 1993). However, besides managing the uncertainty experienced by young people in general in relation to educational success, decision-making and individualisation, care-experienced young people must manage high levels of uncertainty in their past, present and future in addition to uncertainty inflicted by child welfare services at a critical time in their lives. These complex life situations of care-experienced young people often disrupt the 'normative' pathways and timescales of the educational system.

When the level of experienced uncertainty is high, it leads to an experience of the future as unpredictable and unmanageable. Successfully navigating complexity is central in decision-making as well as in staying in the educational system. When care-experienced young people are educationally successful, it is because they can manage the uncertainty of future

outcomes and actions, not only in relation to their education but as a form of general modes of expectation. Harrison et al. (2022, p. 373) stresses in this regard that educational success additionally can 'pay off' by reducing future uncertainty as it might 'provide "reassurance" by increasing the chances of achieving stability by reducing the risk of long-term unemployment'. However, it is also emphasised that 'for care-experienced students, the absence of safety nets means their need for "pay off" is arguably higher' (Harrison et al., 2022, p. 373).

It is a significant finding based on the care-experienced young people's stories that the child welfare services did not assist them in reducing complexity and uncertainty. Quite the opposite happened. The child welfare services often inflict great insecurity in care-experienced young people's lives while in care but especially also at the critical time of transitioning out-of-care, as they experience limited possibilities of control over the unpredictable and formal decisions. It is not within the scope of this paper to operationalise how modes of expectation can be addressed and the development of trust can be assisted within policy and practice. However, from a theoretical perspective experience, knowledge and familiarity are emphasised as central aspects of developing trust, and it is important to ensure that situations are experienced as non-threatening and as a meaningful flow of events.

A limitation to this paper is that it is based on the empirical data of 28 interviews with care-experienced young people collected during a study on their experiences of support and aftercare. Thus, the primary focus was not their experiences of trust, risk and uncertainty but a finding. To further explore experiences of uncertainty among care-experienced young people is fundamental if we are to gain insight into the complexity of the modes of expectation as well as the young people's navigation of uncertainty. Our examples stress how educational success intersects with experiences of uncertainty in all aspects of life and relates experiences in the past with the present situation and expectations for the future. Thus, more research is needed to explore these intersections and the navigation of the young people with the aim of reducing the modes of risk and danger in care-experienced young people's lives. Additionally, it is important to conduct research from a life course perspective to gain further insights into how modes of expectation intersect with changes in the young people's lives as they transition out of care and embark upon their young adulthood.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with national guidelines for ethical conduct and data protection. This includes protection of participants through processes of anonymisation. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms and specific details have been altered from the interviews.

ORCID

Anne-Kirstine Mølholt https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5978-7325

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