Residential Treatment for Children & Youth

ISSN: 0886-571X (Print) 1541-0358 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wrtc20

Personal Agency and the Path to Higher Education: Experiences of Youth in Residential Care

Beatriz Rodrigues, Helena Carvalho & Paula Mena Matos

To cite this article: Beatriz Rodrigues, Helena Carvalho & Paula Mena Matos (09 Feb 2026): Personal Agency and the Path to Higher Education: Experiences of Youth in Residential Care, Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, DOI: 10.1080/0886571X.2026.2622013

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2026.2622013

Published online: 09 Feb 2026.

RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH
https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2026.2622013

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Personal Agency and the Path to Higher Education: Experiences of Youth in Residential Care

Beatriz Rodrigues[a], Helena Carvalho[b], and Paula Mena Matos[c]

[a]Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, University of Porto Portugal, Porto, Portugal; [b]Psychology, inED – Center for Research and Innovation in Education School of Education, Polytechnic Institute of Porto Portugal, Porto, Portugal; [c]Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The enrollment of young people in residential care in higher education remains significantly lower compared to their non-institutionalized peers. This study explores the role of personal agency in the decision-making process of care-experienced youth entering higher education. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 young individuals currently in residential care and pursuing higher education. Thematic analysis, revealed variations in influencing factors, such as internal versus external agency and future orientation, which led to the identification of three distinct profiles. Further analysis examined how experiences in residential care, school, and extended family shaped their educational pathways. Findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions that foster internal motivation and emotional resilience, essential for navigating higher education and the transition to independent living. The study highlights the critical need for collaborative efforts across care systems, emphasizing the value of nurturing supportive relationships and fostering belief in the aspirations of these youth.

KEYWORDS

Residential care; personal agency; higher education; bioecological model

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- Develop integrated, multi-level support systems that connect educational, social, and psychological services to address the complex and interconnected needs of youth in residential care.
- Prioritize stable, long-term relationships with committed adults, including educators, caregivers, and mentors, as a central strategy for strengthening motivation, academic engagement, and future aspirations.
- Implement coordinated community-based programs that actively involve schools, care institutions, families, and local services in collaborative networks of support for young people.
- Address structural and systemic barriers to higher education by creating targeted policies that expand access, provide academic guidance, and counteract low expectations toward youth in care.

CONTACT Paula Mena Matos pmmatos@fpce.up.pt Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, s/n, 4200-135, Porto, Portugal

- Invest in mentoring and psychosocial support initiatives that enhance both educational achievement and socio-emotional well-being, recognizing that personal agency is shaped by relational and contextual factors.

The underrepresentation of young people in state care within higher education is a global issue, linked to higher risks of unemployment, poverty, and mental health challenges (Cameron et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2020). In contrast, continuing education beyond secondary school plays a crucial role in improving labor market outcomes and breaking the "cycle of poverty" within families (Lee et al., 2012). These disparities emerge as early as primary school, where children and young people in residential care (RC) often perform academically worse than their peers (Instituto da Segurança Social, I.P, 2024), a pattern that is also observed internationally (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2019; Okpych & Courtney, 2019; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). In Portugal, approximately 83% of students who complete secondary education pursue higher education (HE) (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência [DGEEC], 2024). However, the situation for RC students is significantly different: only 17.9% go on to higher education, and just 5% engage in post-secondary non-higher education programs (ISS, 2024). This is a concerning figure, especially given that Portugal has one of the highest rates (94.7%) of children in out-of-home care within residential care settings in Europe (UNICEF & Eurochild, 2021). According to the CASA 2023 Report, in Portugal, 54.2% of children and young people in care are male, while 45.8% are female. The average length of stay in care is 4.8 years, with the primary reasons for family separation being neglect (34.5%), exposure to harmful behaviors (23.1%), and psychological abuse (12.7%). Despite these well-known statistics, research on the factors influencing the educational success of young people in RC who achieve higher education remains scarce. Qualitative studies (Ellis & Johnston, 2022; Hass et al., 2014; Hudson, 2013; Neal, 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018), framed within a resilience model, suggest that the interplay of individual factors (e.g., internal locus of control) and social and instrumental support from schools and care institutions may explain why some individuals can overcome these challenges and succeed academically.

Personal Agency in the Transition to Higher Education

Personal agency refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to influence and shape the course of their life. This concept, originating in sociology, initially centered on the impact of social structures on personal trajectories (Hitlin & Elder, 2006). In psychology, it gained prominence through

Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989, 2006), becoming a key focus of research in the field (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Nunes et al., 2022; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). However, its empirical conceptualization remains fragmented, with various studies emphasizing different dimensions, challenging the development of a cohesive model. According to social-cognitive theory, human agency encompasses four main dimensions: intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection (Bandura, 1989, 2006).

Recent contributions from socioecological theory suggest that individual agency develops through interactions within diverse sociocultural contexts. This perspective underscores the importance of considering multiple agency components, including beliefs, expectations, values, intentions, and self-regulation abilities (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). Thus, agency is not a static trait but a relational process, emerging from the dynamic interaction between individual capacity and the social structures in which it is nurtured (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). In this study, personal agency is conceptualized as a contextually situated capacity for intentional action within structural constraints. It is therefore analytically distinct from related intrapsychic constructs such as self-esteem or self-concept which primarily refer to evaluative or descriptive beliefs about the self. Rather than focusing on how young people feel about themselves, the personal agency approach emphasizes their perceived capacity to participate in decisions, project future trajectories, and act upon opportunities within enabling or constraining social contexts.

Schoon and Heckhausen's (2019) study provides insights into the socio-structural circumstances where agency becomes more salient, identifying three critical factors: a) key periods of opportunity, such as transitions between educational levels or entry into the labor market; b) alignment between intentions and competencies; and c) ensuring that socioeconomic disadvantage does not become disempowering, by ensuring young people have sufficient social and financial resources to pursue their goals.

Experiences in RC, along with the cognitive and socio-emotional challenges associated with it, can influence life trajectories through a combination of shared structural factors and individual differences. Young people in care often encounter structural adversities, such as those related to family, school, and child protection systems, at an early age, which may lead them to perceive these systems negatively, as neither protective nor supportive of their development (Halsall et al., 2018). Consequently, both positive and negative experiences across various contexts, and the constraints imposed by social organizations, may affect their perception of personal agency in ways distinct from those of the general population. Therefore, the concept of personal agency offers a useful framework for examining the complex interplay between social structures and individual agency, particularly during critical transitions, such as entering higher education. In this study, personal agency constitutes the central analytical construct guiding data collection and analysis.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model is used as a complementary framework to structure and interpret the external and contextual factors through which personal agency is developed and experienced across different life contexts.

Personal Agency in Youth in RC Through the Lens of the Bioecological Model

According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), the environment in which a child develops plays a critical role in shaping their growth. The interaction between the individual and their environment – referred to as proximal processes – drives development. The biological and psychological predispositions are central to this model, with gender emerging as a key variable influencing the perception of personal agency. Research indicates that men report higher levels of agency than women, often feeling more capable of shaping their life paths and perceiving a wider range of opportunities (Hurault et al., 2020; Nunes et al., 2022). Sczesny et al. (2019) suggest that these differences may arise from persistent gender role expectations, where dynamism, proactivity, and persistence are more highly valued in men.

The physical and psychosocial qualities of the primary contexts in which young people develop (e.g., RC and school) are pivotal in shaping their academic expectations (Melkman et al., 2016). Studies indicate that those who reach higher education frequently attribute their success to the high expectations of caregivers and teachers, consistent positive reinforcement, the value placed on education, and the cultivation of a university-oriented culture (Evans, 2024; Melkman et al., 2016; Neal, 2017). Some young people perceive the care and education systems as providing stability, support, and better educational opportunities. They often describe these environments as a refuge where they can form relationships with adults committed to their success (Pinkney & Walker, 2020; Weiler et al., 2021). Many children and young people identify a specific individual, such as a care worker, teacher, or mentor, who inspired them to pursue higher education by believing in their potential and supporting them through uncertainties (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2019; Parmenter et al., 2025; Pinkney & Walker, 2020).

The involvement and support from teachers and care workers often help to minimize the absence of family support, especially in setting high expectations, a responsibility typically assumed by parents in more normative family environments (Melkman et al., 2016). Teachers play an even more critical role for adolescents who have experienced family adversities (Nauman et al., 2022). Academic performance is also a significant factor; young people who achieve academic success are more likely to believe in their capacity to set and achieve future goals, view education positively, and feel confident in overcoming academic challenges (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2019; Honicke et al., 2023).

At the mesosystem level, the influence of biological and foster families is significant. Studies show that parental interest in education and transmitting educational values are crucial, even when parental figures are no longer present, as they shape young people's future educational goals (Evans, 2024). The availability and quality of community services – forming the exosystem – are also essential. Community organizations such as sports, cultural, and recreational institutions are identified as protective structures that support academic success and self-esteem, which in turn facilitates access to higher education (Neal, 2017). External mentors, perceived as impartial and unbiased, can also mediate youth's relationships with education, especially when RC workers face other challenges (Weiler et al., 2021).

At the macrosystem level, values (e.g., valuing education), social structures (e.g., the State, Child Protection System), and laws (e.g., LPCJP – Law No. 147/99 of September 1) are vital in promoting or limiting access to higher education. In Portugal, the legal framework published in 2017 (LPCJP – Law No. 23/2017) allows young people in RC to remain in the system until age 25 if enrolled in academic or vocational training.

Moreover, youth in care are guaranteed the maximum possible scholarship for higher education (Despacho n.º 9138/2020, 2020). Continued emotional and instrumental support during this phase is crucial, as some young people report that without such assistance, they would not have pursued higher education (Neal, 2017; Pinkney & Walker, 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). At the chronosystem level, broader societal changes, including economic crises and global health issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, add uncertainty and challenges to personal agency. Individuals who are better equipped to manage uncertainty and view setbacks as part of their growth are more likely to see higher education as a worthwhile investment (Saraiva & Matos, 2017).

It is known that optimism and the ability to project the future are key components of personal agency. Therefore, individuals who are better able to manage uncertainty and view failures as inherent to the natural process of growth and development will have greater adaptive potential and may see higher education as a long-term investment, providing them with tools to better navigate instability in society (e.g., Nunes et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings reinforce the multi-level nature of personal agency, as conceptualized in the bioecological framework presented in Figure 1.

The Present Study

This study focused on young people in RC, who often experience early exposure to the systemic factors – both positive and negative – that shape their life trajectories. While the child protection system is intended to safeguard children and young people, some young individuals may perceive it as a source of injustice due to their limited

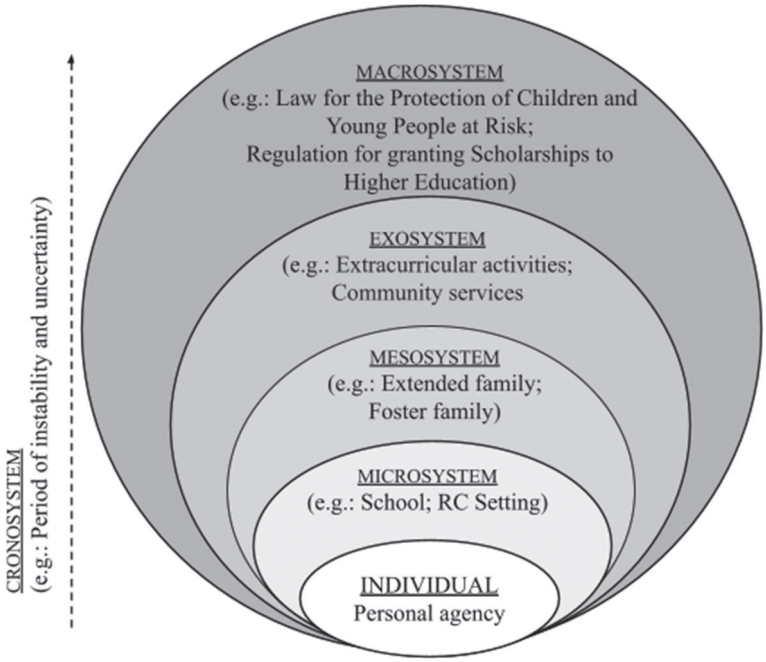

Figure 1. Bioecological model adapted for children and young people at RC Settings.

involvement in decision-making processes that shape their life trajectories, constraining personal agency and contributing to feelings of unpredictability and powerlessness (Delgado et al., 2022; Petersen et al., 2025; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). The research sought to explore how young people in RC experience and make sense of their interactions with structural contexts, and how these experiences are reflected in their narratives of personal agency and future educational pathways. The study was guided by the following research questions: What motivations and future perspectives do these young people describe? How do their educational experiences, life in RC, and relationships with significant others feature in their narratives about decisions related to higher education? Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development (1994) and the construct of personal agency (Bandura, 2006; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017), this study aimed to understand and reflect on the factors that influenced the decision-making process related to entering higher education.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative methodology to investigate the meanings that young people in RC attributed to their experiences, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the complex interplay between

individual and contextual factors. This method facilitated a deeper understanding of how these interactions shaped key developmental and adaptive processes, such as the transition to higher education (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the limited research on this specific population's transition to higher education, a qualitative methodology was particularly well-suited to the exploratory goals of this study. In our study, we adhered to the COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research) guidelines (Tong et al., 2007) by ensuring transparency and rigor in our qualitative reporting, including addressing interviewer bias, providing a clear rationale for the interview guide, detailing participant recruitment and consent procedures, explaining transcription and thematic analysis methods, and presenting findings with direct participant quotes linked to key themes.

Participants

The study included twelve young individuals: six female and six male, aged between 19 and 25 years ($M = 21.5$; SD = 1.98). Regarding their educational background, seven participants completed their basic education in a public school, while five attended a private institution. For secondary education, nine participants attended a public school, and three attended a private school. Seven participants pursued vocational education, while five opted for general education. In higher education, nine participants were enrolled in private institutions, and three attended public institutions. At the time of the interview, six participants were pursuing a CTeSP (Higher Professional Technical Course), and the remaining six were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program. Of these six, three had previously attended a CTeSP, meaning that nine participants initially entered higher education through this pathway. Regarding their involvement with the Child and Youth Protection System, the age of entry into their first residential institution ranged from five to 18 years ($M = 9.17$; SD = 3.74). Eight participants entered between the ages of five and nine, two between the ages of 10 and 14, and two between the ages of 15 and 18. The participants had lived in one to three RC institutions ($M = 1.67$; SD = 0.75), with six participants remaining in the same institution, four changing institutions once, and two living in three different institutions. The participants had spent between 6 and 18 years in RC ($M = 12.42$; SD = 3.82), with ten residing in care for at least 10 years. An overview of participants' sociodemographic characteristics, educational trajectories, and residential care histories is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

Youth ID	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Care Facilities Count	Institutional Stay (yrs.)	RC Entry Age (yrs.)
y1	M	Afro-descendant	23	1	6	18
y2	M	Caucasian	20	2	13	7
y3	M	Caucasian	22	2	17	5
y4	M	Afro-descendant	21	1	10	11
y5	M	Caucasian	24	1	16	8
y6	F	Afro-descendant	20	1	10	10
y7	F	Caucasian	20	2	15	5
y8	F	Caucasian	24	1	15	9
y9	F	Caucasian	19	3	11	8
y10	M	Caucasian	21	1	6	15
y11	F	Caucasian	19	2	12	7
y12	F	Caucasian	25	3	18	7

Note: yrs. - years.

Procedure

Initially, 23 RC facilities in the North of Portugal were contacted via e-mail to present the study's objectives and request the dissemination of information to young people attending higher education. Only one institution responded initially, reporting that it had no young people enrolled in higher education. Follow-up contact by telephone resulted in responses from nine institutions-five with young people attending higher education (two mixed, two male, and one female) and four without any. No feedback was obtained from the remaining 14 institutions. With institutional and individual permission, the e-mail addresses of interested students were requested, and a formal invitation was sent, outlining the study's objectives, conditions, and implications and offering the opportunity to schedule interviews. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and informed consent was obtained for both participation and audio recording. After transcription, the recordings were deleted. Of the 12 participants, nine preferred for in-person interviews at their RC facility in a private room, while three interviews were conducted via Zoom, as these participants were not in Portugal during the three-month interview period. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. This study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the researchers' affiliated academic institution (Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto, Ref.[a] 2022/03-07b).

Measures

This study used two instruments: a sociodemographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The sociodemographic questionnaire was designed to collect data on: (i) Educational background (type of education attended from basic to higher education, e.g., public/private, regular/professional, CTeSP/Bachelor's

degree); (ii) Child protection and welfare system process (number of RC institutions inhabited, age at first placement, and total years spent in RC); (iii) Experience with vocational guidance services and (iv) Current living situation (Whether or not the participant is living away from home).

The semi-structured interview guide was originally developed for this study to explore young people's perspectives on entering higher education, focusing on their perceptions of influential agents (e.g., internal or external), future ambitions, and experiences in both school and RC that facilitated this trajectory. Internal influence refers to when the young person recognizes themselves as the primary agent in building aspirations for higher education, whereas external influence refers to the role played by adult reference figures in shaping these aspirations. The questions aimed to cover past circumstances that led to their educational journey and integrate their goals, desires (e.g., independence, freedom, owning a home), and future plans that prospectively motivated their decisions.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A theory-informed inductive approach was adopted: while the coding process was primarily driven by participants' narratives, the interpretation of themes was guided by the study's theoretical frameworks – Bandura's (2001) conceptualization of agency and Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model. This approach allowed for the emergence of themes grounded in the data, while also situating them within relevant theoretical perspectives. The first author conducted the initial line-by-line coding of all interview transcripts. Two additional researchers independently reviewed the coded data and participated in peer debriefing sessions to ensure consistency and analytic rigor. Discrepancies in interpretation were solved through discussion and consensus. Reflexivity was embedded throughout the analytic process, as the research team continually examined their assumptions and disciplinary perspectives in relation to participants' accounts. Ongoing discussions and memo writing supported the maintenance of a critical stance toward interpretation, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than researchers' expectations. Codes were organized into preliminary categories capturing both individual (e.g., personal motivations, future orientation) and contextual (e.g., institutional support, educational experiences) dimensions. These were iteratively refined into overarching themes, representing the interconnection between youth agency and systemic factors.

The analysis followed a two-tiered approach. At the first level, individual profiles were developed based on young people's future orientation and motivational sources (intrinsic vs. extrinsic). At the second level, contextual influences – particularly residential care and school experiences – were

examined through the lens of the bioecological model. The two levels were subsequently integrated to highlight how environmental systems shape personal agency and educational aspirations.

A coding scheme summarizing the main themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotations is presented in Table 2. Rather than relying on frequency counts, the emphasis was placed on thematic depth, diversity, and contextual meaning, in accordance with qualitative epistemological principles (Patton, 2002).

Table 2. Coding scheme – personal agency and motivation toward higher education.

Main theme	Subtheme/Code	Operational Definition	Example Quote	Ecological Level
Motivations for Entering Higher Education	Intrinsic motivation	Decision emerges from self-determination and internal drive toward a stable future.	"It came from me and my desire." (y9)	Indivíduo
	External encouragement from social figures	Motivation fostered by key figures (professionals, parents, coaches, siblings).	"My coach is one of my biggest inspirations." (y3)	Micro-, Meso- e Exossistema
	Future orientation (high to low)	Range of planning and projection of future goals, from clarity to avoidance.	"I don't know where I'll be in ten years." (y4)	Indivíduo e Cronossistema
Influence of RC and School	RC as secure base and supportive environment	RC perceived as a protective and enabling setting for development.	"This place is my safety net." (y12)	Microssistema
	School as demotivating or stigmatizing context	Teachers' disbelief or stigmatization undermines motivation.	"Teachers said our class would never get into HE." (y9)	Microssistema
Reference Figures and Relational Agency	Presence of inspirational figures	Supportive figures who believe in youth's potential.	"My godmother believed in me when I didn't." (y8)	Meso/Exo
Systemic and Structural Contexts	Economic conditions and necessity of education	Recognition that socioeconomic conditions demand higher education for stability.	"Nowadays, having a high school diploma means nothing because you earn very little, (. . .) especially because what I want to become, I couldn't do with just a high school diploma" (y11)	Macro/ Cronossistema
Youth Recommendations for System Improvement	Emotional validation and belief in potential	Need for supportive adults who recognize effort and progress.	"To feel that the person is proud of the smallest thing." (y6)	Micro/Meso

Results and Discussion

Motivations for Entering Higher Education

The differences in individual motivations for entering higher education were centered around two main factors: influence agents (internal and external) and future orientation (high and low). Based on these factors, three distinct profiles of young individuals were identified, as outlined in the Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of the profile, influence agent and future orientation.

Profile	Influence Agent	Future Orientation	Participants
Profile 1	Internal	High	y1, y2, y6, y7, y9, y11, y12
Profile 2	External	High	y3, y8
Profile 3	External	Low	y4, y5, y10

Note: y(n) – ID participant.

Profile 1 comprises young individuals with a high future orientation, evident in their explicit description of personal plans for adulthood. Their motivation to pursue higher education emerged from internal drive, with self-determination outweighing external influence. Profile 2 includes participants who, while demonstrating a future orientation, cite external encouragement from figures in their microsystem (e.g., care home), mesosystem (e.g., extended family), and exosystem (e.g., extracurricular activities) as the main motivation for pursuing higher education. Profile 3 involves individuals with a lower future orientation, who report not considering higher education until the end of high school, only doing so after encouragement from institutional professionals.

Profile 1. High Future Orientation; Intrinsic Motivation

The group of seven participants in Profile 1 stated their primary motivation for entering higher education was to seek a better, financially stable future, recognizing that an academic degree would provide career opportunities and enable them to achieve personal goals. Two participants added that the challenging economic and labor conditions in the country also influenced their decision, reflecting factors within the macro- and chronosystem:

> Nowadays, having a high school diploma means nothing because you earn very little; you can hardly live a dignified life. Many places now require a degree, so I think it was a good decision, especially because what I want to become, I couldn't do with just a high school diploma. (y11)

One participant, despite demonstrating future orientation, expressed concern that this is compounded by the awareness of a lack of familial support,

anticipating reduced emotional and instrumental support once they leave the institution:

> (. . .) I have no family support at all, and I'm afraid of leaving and having no house, no job, becoming homeless. It's true that this place is my safety net (. . .) It's one thing to be able to 'fly,' knowing I have my nest, but it's another to fly, knowing that one day I might have nothing, and I don't know what will become of me. (y12)

This testimony is particularly significant, as this participant had the most residential transitions (five, including three institutions) of the entire sample. Research suggests that insecurity and instability hinder the emancipation of young people from normative family settings (Saraiva & Matos, 2017), and this transition is likely even more anxiety-inducing for those in RC. Although these participants recognized the institution's support and that of specific staff members, they emphasized that their decision to pursue higher education originated internally, stemming from personal discernment: "They were supportive and encouraged me (institution), but it came from me and my desire; if I hadn't initiated this idea, they wouldn't have pushed much' (y9). Another participant reiterated individual contemplation, adding that peers and the school environment can also ignite the ambition to pursue higher education, downplaying the institution's role: '(. . .) I started learning on my own, observing others and aiming for the same. I realized that to achieve that, I had to act (. . .) but I believe people here need to learn that on their own" (y2). Future orientation for these participants is reflected in their descriptions of plans for adulthood, which primarily focus on obtaining their own homes and working in their chosen fields, highlighting a desire for autonomy and stability: "I imagine myself in my own place, in my apartment, something of my own, working in my field (. . .) going out with friends, focusing on my work, and having a good, stable life" (y9).

The fact that these actions and plans are internally regulated fosters a stronger sense of personal agency in achieving projected goals (Kristiansen, 2014). Thus, it can be considered that participants in this profile exhibits a higher sense of agency compared to those in Profiles 2 and 3.

Profile 2. Moderate to High Future Orientation; Motivation from External Figures

The second profile consists of youth exhibiting a high future orientation and long-term plans, similar to Profile 1: "To have a small house, my own space, working in my area and leading a stable life where I can stand firm" (y8). However, figures from various systems largely influenced their decision to pursue higher education. These participants were the most critical of both the school and the institution. In their narratives, external adults counterbalanced the perceived lack of support in their immediate environments. For example,

one youth, the only participant with special educational needs, expressed negative peer experiences and low expectations for entering higher education:

> I thought it was a bit too much for me . . . When I was in high school, I had a classmate who also wanted to go to college . . . they said it was hard for him, and I know that if it's hard for him, it'll be hard for me too. (y3)

Despite initially showing no future orientation, it is possible that higher education always seemed unattainable due to his negative school experiences and low self-efficacy perceptions. Although a professional introduced the idea of higher education, his parents and sports coach became his main sources of encouragement:

> He (coach) is one of my biggest inspirations . . . my parents also motivate me a lot, and they're proud I'm in college (. . .) but I'm really thankful to the person who believed in me (y3).

Profile 3. Low Future Orientation; Motivation from External Figures

The third profile includes three participants who only considered higher education after suggestions and encouragement from RC professionals upon finishing high school: "When I was finishing Form 12 I didn't foresee myself studying in the future, but what led me to it was (. . .) X (director of the RC institution) called me to say that it was a good bet, we were still on holiday, and my coordinator also called me to say that a course with a lot of opportunities was going to open . . . with him talking and with X, the initiative grew and led me to enroll on the course at the time!" (y10)

These participants exhibited a low future orientation, with a tendency to avoid long-term planning: "I don't know where I'll be in ten years, I don't even know where I'll be in a year, honestly (. . .) when the time comes, it comes" (y4),

> I . . . don't really like making plans. I go with the flow (. . .) because it never goes as you plan, it's more destructive . . . . (y5)

These responses are not surprising, given that youth living in RC often experienced unpredictable environments and negative consequences beyond their control. Their prior experiences hinder the relationship between expectations and achievement, leading to frustration and learned helplessness. This may explain their defense mechanisms of not planning or expressing future aspirations (Oshri et al., 2018).

Gender Differences in Perception of Agency

Female participants were more prevalent in Profile 1—the group characterized by higher expressions of personal agency – with five out of seven participants

being female and two male. Profile 2 included one male and one female participant, while Profile 3 was composed exclusively of male participants. Although the small sample size and qualitative nature of the study prevent any definitive conclusions, this pattern may suggest gendered differences in how agency is experienced or expressed in the context of RC. This observation contrasts with findings from studies on the general population (Hurault et al., 2020; Nunes et al., 2022), where male participants tend to report higher levels of agency. One possible explanation is that shifting gender roles and expectations in Western societies may lead female youth – particularly those facing adversity – to develop stronger future-oriented agency as part of resilience-building processes. Nevertheless, this is an exploratory observation that warrants further investigation in larger and more diverse samples.

In summary, while the motivations for entering higher education are consistent across the profiles, in-depth interviews revealed nuanced motivations influenced by the various systems in which these young individuals operate. This diversity allows for the organization of the participants along a spectrum of personal agency, with those in Profile 1 demonstrating the highest level of agency, followed by those in Profiles 2 and 3. Nonetheless, the heterogeneity observed within and between profiles underscores the relational nature of agency, shaped by interactions with various systems, resulting in diverse narratives even among participants clustered within the same quadrant.

Influence of Experiences in RC and School (Microsystem) in Perception of Agency

In terms of primary contexts, particularly RC, most of the participants, with one exception, maintain a positive view regarding the support provided by the institution. They recognize it as an environment conducive to emotional development, offering them a comprehensive educational opportunity:

> I think that since I came here, I've almost always felt proud of myself because before I was a more reserved person, and now I can open up more, express my feelings, and show others what doesn't make me feel good. (y6)

Another statement highlights:

> I can stay here until I'm 25 to study, and I receive scholarships, food, everything. I know I wouldn't have these conditions if I were at home. So, being here and having everything I need, all paid for, because my studies are entirely funded, is good because I know many people outside who, despite being in a family, don't have this kind of opportunity. (y9)

Regarding the school context, the data from this study contrasts with existing literature (Hudson, 2013; Melkman et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2021), as most participants do not recognize a significant positive influence from their school experiences. When asked directly about this context, they even report negative experiences:

> I had teachers who said that most of my class would never get into higher education, they were very pessimistic, and that made me angry . . . I had a math teacher who said she couldn't imagine me passing sciences and technologies, especially math A,[1] but I passed. (y9)

Challenges appeared to be intensified in situations where participants perceived themselves – or were perceived by others – as outsiders. For instance, although all participants were raised in Portugal and spoke Portuguese fluently, some expressed feeling "foreign" within the school context, due to cultural or linguistic markers. One participant shared:

> (. . .) I didn't feel comfortable at school, my teachers couldn't motivate me . . . since I was a foreigner, I had more difficulties with the language, so I felt belittled by the teachers. Many times, I thought about giving up; I often thought I would never get into college because the teachers showed that I didn't have the capacity to get there. (y6)

This narrative highlight how perceived foreignness – rather than actual migration status – can shape young people's school experiences and interactions within the microsystem.

In these cases, a staff member at the RC facility played a crucial role in countering the teachers' devaluation while also promoting the youth's autonomy. Responsiveness in RC settings is essential for protection and should be intentionally addressed as a critical indicator of therapeutic support and a secure environment (Carvalho et al., 2022).

Two young women mentioned their enjoyment of studying, sometimes describing it as an escape, a coping mechanism for dealing with suffering, a sentiment consistent with findings from Neal (2017): "I love studying. Studying has always been an escape for me because when I'm studying, I don't think about the problems that have happened or are happening" (y12).

The narratives highlighted above underscore the pressing need for investment in teacher training. Research indicates that teachers and school experiences are crucial for youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Melkman et al., 2016). Educators can play a pivotal role in addressing and mitigating these inequalities by serving as sources of inspiration and motivation for students who may lack supportive figures to recognize their potential. Nevertheless, one young woman did acknowledge the joint effort between the school and the RC institution, emphasizing the advantage of alignment between different systems in an educational project for these youth:

> (. . .) here (the institution), at least with me, they did that a lot. Since I entered sixth grade, they asked me what I wanted to do, what path I wanted to take, whether I wanted to go to college or not. So, right from the start, I was guided towards achieving that. I had to overcome challenges in the school I attended, and even though the standards were a bit more demanding, they gave me a lot of support when they knew I had big goals. They were more ambitious with me and pushed me. (y7)

Two other participants noted the positive influence of socialization within their family environment before entering RC. This dimension is also highlighted by Evans (2024).

> I was raised this way from a very young age, even before I came here. My own family already directed me a lot, emphasizing the importance of education. When it's time to study, it's time to study; when it's time to have fun, it's time to have fun . . . I think I've been surrounded by people who have always told me that education is important. (y7)

The Influence of Figures of References within the Micro-, Meso-, and Exosystem Recognizing the importance of having reference figures who offer affection and guidance and demonstrate belief in their potential, participants were asked if they had anyone who served as an inspiration. Six participants stated that they had no one in particular, although they acknowledged the occasional support of certain staff at the RC facility. Three of these young people said they considered themselves their own inspiration: "I don't think anyone inspires me . . . I think my own path speaks for itself, I just have to inspire myself" (y5). The remaining six participants mentioned specific individuals, with four naming their siblings, one identifying his sports coach (y3), and another referring to her godmother (y8):

> It was really my godmother . . . I think she believed in me when I didn't, when nobody believed in me, when nobody was there to help me, I didn't really have any guidance. I had the institution's staff here, I don't want to exclude them, but it's not the same. And it doesn't seem like it, little by little, even in the difficult phases, she persisted, she was there, she didn't give up. And I think that also gave me a lot of strength and made me believe in myself (y8)

> I look at him (brother) and see that he has already achieved everything I've always wanted to achieve . . . He inspires me because I see that he has reached what I want to reach, and it's possible to achieve it (y12).

Two of these young people also mentioned the institution's staff members, including the director: "And then, maybe Dr. Y., because of her high expectations for me, and how she sets the bar in our conversations. She motivates me a lot" (y12).

In contrast, two participants explicitly referred to how their parents served as models of what they did not want to become: "I just know I don't want to end up like them (parents)" (y5).

> I looked at my mother and thought, 'I can't be this,' and to avoid that, I had to follow a different path than the one she did. (y12)

Youth Recommendations for Higher Education Access

Finally, participants were asked to recommend changes to the Child and Youth Rights and Protection System to promote higher education access for

this population. The suggestions included creating a consistent and ongoing external support group to offer guidance (e.g., explaining minimum grades, registration periods, required exams, and available scholarships) and raising awareness of future opportunities. Participants also suggested fostering a university culture within the institution by encouraging access to higher education and helping explore the youth's interests early on. Most notably, the young people particularly emphasized the importance of feeling that someone believes in their potential. Just like Pinkney and Walker (2020) also found, youth expressed a desire for support that does not equate challenging moments with a lack of effort or ability to overcome obstacles: "I think it's really about support (. . .) to feel that the person is proud of, perhaps, the smallest thing we've managed to achieve. How many times, if we get a mark, it may not have been positive, but maybe we fought to do a bit better than that, but if we don't feel that the people who are supposed to support us haven't shown anything, we'll think 'oh there's no point in trying next time, because I won't get any positive messages from any of the parties." (y6)

Methodological Considerations

Although the study involved a small number of participants and institutions, this scope enabled a detailed and contextually grounded exploration of young people's experiences in residential care. In line with qualitative traditions, depth and richness were prioritized over breadth. The study's exploratory nature allows for an understanding of emerging patterns rather than generalizable conclusions. Replicating the study in different regions and institutional contexts could broaden the interpretive scope and provide comparative insights into the diverse experiences of youth in care.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study highlight the importance of multi-level interventions that promote access to higher education for youth in residential care. These interventions must foster synergies between educational, social, and community systems, aiming to counteract negative expectations and structural barriers. Committed adults who are invested in young people's academic success, who provide consistent and responsive care, and who believe in their potential play an essential role in this process.

Policymakers should consider creating programs that integrate psychological, social, and educational support and that engage local communities, families, and schools in ongoing and coordinated networks of care. Such initiatives can enhance social mobility and educational equity for one of the most vulnerable populations in society.

Conclusion

Drawing on young people's narratives, this study highlights three interrelated findings regarding personal agency and educational pathways among youth in residential care.

First, the findings suggest that personal agency is experienced as relational and context-dependent, shaped by interactions within care, educational, and social systems rather than as an individual trait. Second, supportive relationships with significant adults emerge as central in sustaining motivation and educational expectations. Third, experiences of instability and uncertainty across systems are reflected in how young people narrate their educational decisions and future aspirations.

This study contributes to the growing body of work emphasizing the relational and contextual nature of agency, demonstrating that supportive environments can foster motivation, resilience, and long-term educational engagement.

Future studies could expand this perspective by exploring how emerging factors – such as digital technologies, online education, and social media – shape young people's sense of agency and educational aspirations. Longitudinal approaches may also shed light on how relationships with key adults evolve over time and contribute to sustained academic and personal growth. Further research could evaluate the effectiveness of support mechanisms such as mentoring and psychological support in promoting both academic and socio-emotional outcomes.

As Urie Bronfenbrenner brilliantly summarized, "Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her." This insight remains profoundly relevant: fostering meaningful, responsive, and consistent relationships is central to promoting social justice and equitable educational opportunities for youth in care.

Note

1. *In Portugal, "Maths A" refers to a mathematics course in the regular high school curriculum, typically taken by students who plan to attend university or pursue academic fields such as science, engineering, or economics. This course is different from "vocational courses," which are more focused on practical skills and preparing students for the job market.*

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia [UIDB/00050/2020].

ORCID

Helena Carvalho http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1927-2853
Paula Mena Matos http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5763-8070

References

Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory: The nature and locus of human agency. *American Psychologist*, *44*(9), 1175–1184. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175

Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *1*(2), 164–180. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212163

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In T. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 1643–1647). Elsevier.

Cameron, C., Hollingworth, K., Schoon, I., van Santen, E., Schröer, W., Ristikari, T., Heino, T., & Pekkarinen, E. (2018). Care leavers in early adulthood: How do they fare in Britain, Finland and Germany? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *87*(87), 163–172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.031

Carvalho, H. M., Mota, C. P., Santos, B., Costa, M., & Matos, P. M. (2022). Is it possible to strengthen bonds without breaking hearts? The relational paradox within residential care. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, *40*(1), 24–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2022.2043804

Delgado, P., Carvalho, J. M. S., & Alves, S. (2022). Children and young people's participation in decision-making in foster care. *Child Indicators Research*, *16*(1), 421–445. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-022-09979-5

Despacho n.o 9138/2020 (2.a série). (2020). de 25 de setembro: Regulamento de Atribuição de Bolsas de Estudo a Estudantes do Ensino Superior. https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/143719224

Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência. (2024). Estatísticas da educação 2022/2023. http://www.dgeec.medu.pt

Ellis, K., & Johnston, C. (2022). Resilience, higher education and widening participation: Generating change for care experienced students. *Higher Education*, *87*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00985-8

Evans, C. (2024). Care experienced students' transitions to university: Learning identities, prior educational experiences and socio-cultural contexts. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2392148

Garcia-Molsosa, M., Collet-Sabé, J., & Montserrat, C. (2019). The role of mentoring in the schooling of children in residential care. *European Journal of Social Work*, *24*(1), 47–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1666253

Halsall, T., Manion, I., & Henderson, J. (2018). Examining integrated youth services using the bioecological model: Alignments and opportunities. *International Journal of Integrated Care*, *18*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.5334/ijic.4165

Harrison, N., Baker, Z., & Stevenson, J. (2020). Employment and further study outcomes for care-experienced graduates in the UK. *Higher Education*, *83*(2), 357–378. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00660-w

Hass, M., Allen, Q., & Amoah, M. (2014). Turning points and resilience of academically successful foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *44*, 387–392. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.07.008

Hitlin, S., & Elder, G. H. (2006). Agency: An empirical model of an abstract concept. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *11*, 33–67. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1040-2608(06)11002-3

Hitlin, S., & Johnson, M. K. (2015). Reconceptualizing agency within the life course: The power of looking ahead. *American Journal of Sociology*, *120*(5), 1429–1472. https://doi.org/10.1086/681216

Honicke, T., Broadbent, J., & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, M. (2023). The self-efficacy and academic performance reciprocal relationship: The influence of task difficulty and baseline achievement on learner trajectory. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *42*(8), 1936–1953. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2197194

Hudson, A. L. (2013). Career mentoring needs of youths in foster care: Voices for change. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, *26*(2), 131–137. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcap.12032

Hurault, J. C., Broc, G., Crône, L., Tedesco, A., & Brunel, L. (2020). Measuring the sense of agency: A French adaptation and validation of the sense of agency scale (F-SoAS). *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, Article 584145. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584145

Instituto da Segurança Social, I.P. (2024). CASA, *2023 - Relatório de caracterização anual da situação de acolhimento das crianças e jovens*. https://www.seg-social.pt/documents/10152/13326/Relat%C3%B3rio_CASA_2023/da8913ce-97e0-4b5d-ae10-bf16c7a88901

Kristiansen, M. H. (2014). Agency as an empirical concept: An assessment of theory and operationalization. https://publ.nidi.nl/output/papers/nidi-wp-2014-09.pdf

Lee, J. O., Hill, K. G., & Hawkins, J. D. (2012). The role of educational aspirations and expectations in the discontinuity of intergenerational low-income status. *Social Work Research*, *36*(2), 141–151. https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svs025

Melkman, E., Refaeli, T., & Benbenishty, R. (2016). An empirical test of a model of academic expectations among youth in residential care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *67*, 133–141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.05.023

Nauman, C., Goble, P., Alfaro, E. C., & Weimer, A. A. (2022). Adolescent academic success: Teacher-child interactions as a buffer for early childhood relational adversity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *32*(7), 1895–1910. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-022-02496-7

Neal, D. (2017). Academic resilience and caring adults: The experiences of former foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *79*, 242–248. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.005

Nunes, F., Mota, C. P., Schoon, I., Ferreira, T., & Matos, P. M. (2022). Sense of personal agency in adolescence and young adulthood: A preliminary assessment model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *196*, 111754. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111754

Okpych, N., & Courtney, M. (2019). Longitudinal analyses of educational outcomes for youth transitioning out of care in the US: Trends and influential factors. *Oxford Review of Education*, *45*(4), 461–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1592747

Oshri, A., Duprey, E. B., Kogan, S. M., Carlson, M., & Liu, S. (2018). Growth patterns of future orientation among maltreated youth: A prospective examination of the emergence of resilience. *Developmental Psychology*, *54*(8), 1456–1471. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000528

Parmenter, S., Shockley McCarthy, K., Benavides, J. L., Bayar, Ö., Maguire Jack, K., & Yoon, S. (2025). The lived experience of youth in congregate care: Youth perceptions of safety, relationships, and support through qualitative inquiry with 10 young adults. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *42*(4), 467–480. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-024-00969-w

Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative Social Work*, *1*(3), 261–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325002001003636

Petersen, M., Križ, K., Shier, H., Lotan, H., Schwartz-Tayri, T. M., Naddeo, L., Sundby, R., Vidiz, M., & Vigevani, D. (2025). Children and young people's participation in child protection: Outcomes of transformative participation in international contexts. *European Journal of Social Work*, *28*(4), 907–921. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2025.2482889

Pinkney, S., & Walker, G. (2020). "It was me, but it was them that helped me": Exploring the issues for care experienced young people within higher education. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *108*, 104576. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104576

Rutman, D., & Hubberstey, C. (2018). Fostering educational success of children and youth in care: Perspectives of youth with experience living in care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *94*, 257–264. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.10.022

Saraiva, L. M., & Matos, P. M. (2017). Becoming an adult in Portugal: Negotiating pathways between opportunities and constraints. In R. Žukauskienė (Ed.), *Emerging adulthood in a European context* (pp. 117–137). Routledge.

Schoon, I., & Heckhausen, J. (2019). Conceptualizing individual agency in the transition from school to work: A social-ecological developmental perspective. *Adolescent Research Review*, *4*(2), 135–148. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00111-3

Schoon, I., & Lyons-Amos, M. (2017). A socio-ecological model of agency: The role of structure and agency in shaping education and employment transitions in England. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, *8*(1), 35–56. https://doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v8i1.404

Sczesny, S., Nater, C., & Eagly, A. H. (2019). Agency and communion: Their implications for gender stereotypes and gender identities. In A. Brehm & B. Wojciszke (Eds.), *Agency and communion in social psychology* (pp. 103–116). Routledge.

Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, *19*(6), 349–357. https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042

UNICEF, & , E. (2021). Children in alternative care: Comparable statistics to monitor progress on deinstitutionalisation across the European Union. In *DataCare Project*. Eurochild. https://eurochild.org/uploads/2021/12/Children-in-alternative-care_Comparable-statistics-to-monitor-progress-on-DI-across-the-EU.pdf.

Weiler, L. M., Lee, S., Zhang, J., Ausherbauer, K., Schwartz, S. E. O., Kanchewa, S. S., & Taussig, H. N. (2021). Mentoring children in foster care: Examining relationship histories as moderators of intervention impact on children's mental health and trauma symptoms. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *69*(1–2), 100–113. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12549