Episode Title: How medical educators think about assessment

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Hello, it's Laura Molway here from the Oxford Education Deanery. Today I'm here with Dr Mariela Neagu and we're going to be talking about her research in the field of young people in care and their career prospects and pathways. So Mariele, thank you very much for being here today. Could you begin by telling us a little bit about where this project came from, the genesis of that, and perhaps a bit about your background.

Thanks so much for inviting me. So the idea of the project came when I was working for SCOPE here in the department, and I was doing research for post 16 education,

interviewing young people and education staff and also employers. What came out was that for a lot of young people, uh, they had role models in the family. So quite often they followed the paths of their parents or they had support and they had inside information about the profession. And because I had done for a number of years research with and for young people in care, I thought, you know, what's happening in that space? Who is there for them to help them navigate what is an already very complex landscape in terms of skills and education and professions these days, who helps them form their occupational identities? So teenage years or adolescence is a key period for development, for identity formation. And also when they start to explore their aspirations. So they need that support network to help them really make sense of it all.

Yes, of course, I remember that period in my life as being terrifying.

For all of us.

You feel that one wrong decision could really affect your life.

You absolutely think it's for the rest of your life. If you know, if you fail into something, you feel that there isn't any alternative almost. So, yeah, I really wanted to explore that space. It seemed important to me.

Thank you. Yes. So could you give us a little bit more context around this particular study that we're going to look at today? This was a study asking young people about their experiences.

Um, so yeah, this was a small exploratory study. And I was lucky to get funding from the John Fell Fund of the university. And we ended up doing 12 interviews with young people. Two of them were not in education, or training or employment, and three were professionals because we really wanted to listen to their narratives as well about, you know, the kind of support they tried to offer young people and see how young people, um, perceive support. And I think, uh, we've got a number of really interesting findings.

Great. Well, I'm looking forward to hearing a little bit more about that. Uh would you like to explain some of your key findings from these young people?

Yeah. So, uh, absolutely. First of all, I think one thing which surprised me as a researcher was the fact that foster carers or, uh, social workers were not those necessarily mentioned in the narratives of the young people supporting them, because you'd think those are the more continuous. But it's also true that many of them have been through multiple, uh, placements, so or not feeling that they belong in those families necessarily. So sometimes they feel, you know, that that's where they have to be. But it doesn't mean that they really have meaningful conversations and they don't always regard those as being families. And, uh, actually, it was interesting to hear from a young person that wanted to change his placement from foster care to go into residential care, which he perceived as being a space of freedom. And for someone who worked on closure of residential care, uh, because they were perceived as being prisons, it was quite interesting to hear the reverse story. So it's not so much about what the space looks like, but what their relationship looks like with those, um, who look after you, who are around you.

Yeah.

And same with social workers. They said they didn't, they wished they had those conversations much earlier on in their lives and those hadn't happened. So much of this discussion took place when they were approaching 18 and, uh, not really having enough space and time to explore.

Some of them succeeded much later in life. For example, one of them went to do film studies, and that's because he reflected, and he remembered that during his childhood, uh, he, he loved storytelling, and he wanted to use this skill and this talent he had since he was a child, to tell bigger stories for communities and so on and so forth. So he was 25 when I spoke to him, when he was approached by, uh, his personal assistant. So somebody, you know, was persistent and, you know, kept calling. He reflected on it. So he kind of knew this time, after doing other temporary jobs, he knew what he wanted and went to university. And actually many of them go to university much later in life because they don't have that kind of support early on. And I'll give you another example of, um, this young person who went into dance, she found a charity for care leavers, uh, interested in in dance. And that's again something she loved doing as a child. So, you know, it's a lot of work. They kind of do on their own sometimes.

Right. So you have examples here of young people who have passions, but it took them a long time to find a direction that they could take with those passions. And, and are you saying that perhaps if career guidance and meaningful conversations were happening with these young people earlier, they might avoid those lost years?

I think so, yeah. So they would avoid maybe degrees, which they don't use eventually in that their lives. So, you know, and perhaps they would become, from the state point of view, productive earlier on.

Yes.

From their point of view, you know, building a good life and there was a little bit of regret why they didn't do this earlier on, and again, the engagement with their personal advisors. They said, you know, it depends if you are lucky to find a good one and the good one meant somebody I could trust and somebody who felt like a friend.

And so, just for our listeners who are less familiar with the system that you're describing here, does every young person in care have an allocated personal advisor?

They do when they go in to live in care services, so they start to prepare them over age of 16 and then beyond 18 they get this personal advisor. But the relationship between them and their personal advisors is very personal.

Yes.

Yeah. And I think the narrative for me, because what is interesting again, was that I heard the same kind of things from professionals and from the young people, and it's that need for personal care, for personal engagement. In other words, what parents, good parents do with children, um, there isn't any other secret. So we've got to find ways, even in the professional space, to allow for that personal relationship, human relationship to take place in order to make support, uh, meaningful.

Yes.

And, um, for example the professionals I spoke to, a lot of the work they did with young people was boosting their confidence, telling them, look, you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for and making them believe in themselves. And if we think about it, it's exactly what parents do at home with their children.

Yes, of course. And do professionals have enough time to conduct that kind of conversation, to do that kind of work with these young people?

I think, uh, we know that being not in employment and training, you know, it's been on the rise. And one of the main barriers for young people in general population is mental health. We also know that a lot of young people in care, um, face loneliness. For them it's much more difficult. That's why we end up with a percentage being about ten times higher for them ending up being NEET compared to the general population. So that's really not good enough.

Wow. No.

So you know, while I've listened to a lot of good practice, they also spoke about things which could be improved and were quite critical of career guidance and information. And I've heard that in another study interviewing young people as well, it's, you know, they're given a lot of information, but how do you navigate that? Uh, you end up with, with a bunch of links you need to open and understand. It feels very impersonal. So sometimes some of them spoke about, you know, having friends doing apprenticeships and following their paths, getting advice from their friends. Yeah, so there is concern, for example, that two who are not in education or employment were involved in some type of volunteer work, so they were somehow in contact with services. There were attempts and yeah, I think another finding which was um, interesting was that, you know, some of them go into professions like being um, teaching assistants for children with special needs. And that's why, because in their family there was a child with special needs. So that sort of altruism, wanting to do good for the other, there was no absolutely no mention in any of the interviews of mother or father who they obviously know of being a role model for them. But they picked up, you know, what they found around them. It might have been a good professional, might have been a friend, taking the very practical advice or, uh, you know, just being inspired by their own childhood or by someone in their family and wanting to do good for them.

And there was another interesting example here, you will like this one, I think, a young person who came as, um, a refugee in this country and she was in some form of education, but she had an allocated independent adviser from a charity who would, you know, just go out with her and spend time together over the weekend and they were going for a bike ride. And that person told her, well, you know, you should apply for to this prestigious university and told her exactly about the specific opportunity. And that's what she did. And then she was studying for, you know, a very ambitious degree in, in politics and having these huge aspirations of global change.

Now the sad news for this was that actually that charity doesn't exist anymore, providing independent advice. and so there is this resource in society out there of people, you know,

wanting to do good for others, which is not necessarily tapped in and, and used. And you might miss positive turning points like this one.

Yeah. So what a wonderful story. But uh, but yes, borne of that individual connection with somebody who has taken time

Has taken time. The conversation happened, you know, in an informal manner, you know, while going for a walk or, you know, taking a ride or something. Not in the formal space of a meeting. So I really think that for me, one change which should happen would be to redesign services with these young people. They took part in interviews because they wanted others to hear what they had to say. And, you know, they had recommendations, for professionals.

Yes. Great. Thank you. So we're starting to move now into the implications of this work.

And, and clearly, there's an opportunity here to capitalise on a resource in terms of young people who have experiences of the system and can help us to redesign. Is there anything else that you would recommend to policymakers or to, perhaps the professionals who are already working with these young people as a result of these findings?

I really think it's important to listen to the young people and to take time to listen to them, both individually and collectively. So on an individual basis, as early as possible, you know, having that time and believing in them and taking time to listen to them and take them seriously. And secondly, when I say collectively, you know, get them together and see what's not working and why, what should those services look like?

And then consider a set of services, a broad, you know, create more opportunities for them to engage. And I think if that happens, even in the absence of, you know, family support, I think it might take them a lot shorter to do meaningful things out there for community and for society and for their own benefit, and see work as a sort of purpose and meaning in life beyond income.

Yes, yes. Beyond the sort of fundamentals of survival. Wonderful. Mariela, thank you so much for speaking with us. We look forward to hearing more about your research in this area as it develops. But for now, thank you and and goodbye.

It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

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