



Working Together to Create Meaning: Co-Research with Care Leavers in Eastern Europe

Zoë Kessler, Phd, LCSW, MSW

Salem State University

Abstract

This study investigates the experience of growing up in care through the narratives of young people with lived experiences in Latvia's social care system. To date, many studies use methodologies where participants were positioned more passively. This study used a participatory method and chronicled 19 care leavers' life experiences while detailing three main life phases: before, during and after living in care. Several approaches were employed to extract meaning out of the narratives. The first strategy reported the contextual life story of the participant in their own words. The second, collaboratively traced participants' critical life events and acts of resistance throughout lived experiences. Finally, artistic data (paintings, drawings, and poetry) captured participant's journeys while making recommendations for practitioners and policy makers. Findings supported a deconstructing of stereotypes and dominant assumptions about people growing up in care and thus provided alternative narratives of self-reliance and resistance to adversity. These recommendations emerged from the intentional positioning of the participants as 'knowers of their own experience.' This rich knowledge base can be used to support and inform the practice of children moving through and transitioning from the care system.

Key Words: Children, Latvia, Narratives, Resistance, Social Care