



## D 9.3 Aspirations of Vulnerable Young People in Foster Care

### Young people partners:

Ross, Jaymi, Sunneka, Amy, Matt, Sitara, Raija, Rosa, Katy, Chloe, Lorna, Laura, Sam, Katarina and Lefteris (some of these are real names, others are pseudonyms depending on the preferences of the young people involved)

### Academic authors:

Professor Angie Hart and Dr Claire Stubbs, University of Brighton, UK

Stefanos Plexousakis, Dr Maria Georgiadi and Professor Elias Kourkoutas, University of Crete, Greece

## WP9 - Vulnerable Voices and Cultural Barriers: Attitudes and Aspirations

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This document summarises the aims and content of the highly illustrated resilience toolkit developed for young people in foster care, their carers, and practitioners. It was prepared by young people from the UK and Greece, alongside colleagues from the University of Brighton, University of Crete, civil society organisations and local councils.

## About the authors

**Professor Angie Hart** - <http://www.style-research.eu/team/angie-hart>

**Dr Claire Stubbs** - <http://www.style-research.eu/team/claire-stubbs>

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## Executive Summary

Youth unemployment is significantly associated with mental health difficulties. This collaborative research project was conducted in Greece and the UK. It aimed to understand the work aspirations of a group of vulnerable young people in care and the barriers they face in terms of youth unemployment. The task within this work package was to support young people in foster care using a qualitative participative approach to identify resilience strategies to help other young people in care. Co-producing a resource that is of value to the young people involved in the task in each country was the main deliverable. This report provides a summary of the work conducted and provides an outline of the highly illustrated resources that were developed. The resources are available to download from: [http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one\\_step\\_forward\\_-\\_resilience/1](http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one_step_forward_-_resilience/1) (UK edition) [http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one\\_step\\_forward\\_-\\_resilience\\_-\\_gre/1](http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one_step_forward_-_resilience_-_gre/1) (Greek edition)

The young people decided what they wanted to do for this project and the adults involved supported their participation. Adopting a Youth Participatory Action Research approach (YPAR) the focus was to build the capacity of fifteen young people in Greece and England, enabling them to identify the issues they faced in relation to unemployment, and to consider helpful strategies to overcome them. They acted as young researchers to further understand the nature of the issues, and were supported to develop a resource that would be useful to other young people, foster carers and practitioners. Finally, young people have been supported to advocate for actions to facilitate change.

## Key words

Vulnerable young people; mental health; employment; attitudes; aspirations; resilience

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## Abbreviations

ACEVO	Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
RT	Resilient Therapy
YPAR	Youth Participatory Action Research

# 1. Introduction

The focus within this package was to understand the work aspirations of very vulnerable young people with multiple disadvantages. This task supported young people in foster care using a qualitative participatory approach to identify resilience strategies to help these young people in two very different settings: the UK and Greece. The aim of this task was to co-produce a resource that is of value to the young people involved in each country. The young people have been supported to produce highly illustrated resilience toolkits in both Greek and English. To skip straight to these, follow these links (UK edition: [http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one\\_step\\_forward\\_-\\_resilience/1](http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one_step_forward_-_resilience/1) Greek edition: [http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one\\_step\\_forward\\_-\\_resilience\\_-\\_gre/1](http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one_step_forward_-_resilience_-_gre/1)).

The authors adopt a resilience lens to tackling circumstances of disadvantage such as youth unemployment. Resilience is a word that is growing ever more popular and is being used by lay people, professionals and researchers alike across the broad spectrum of human behaviour. Resilience involves a person faring better than you would expect in the face of adverse experiences. “Bouncing back” and “overcoming the odds” are expressions illustrating how an individual adapts. Put very simply, resilience is something we all have that enables us to get through life, and mechanisms within our environments, such as family, peers, support services and significant turning points, can support the resilience process. Understanding better the dynamics which underlie displays of resilience may assist attempts to promote favourable development when the circumstances are unfavourable. Successive UK governments have drawn heavily on the concept of resilience to find ways to improve outcomes for children and young people who are having a tough time, and as highlighted, being unemployed as a young person can be an adverse experience that has long term consequences.

The authors are based in Brighton, UK, and Rethymnon and Athens, Greece. Within the UK, the youth unemployment rate stands at 16.2% (Mirza Davis, 2015), and in Greece, the rate of youth unemployment stands at 59% (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015).

## 1.1. Project Rationale

- Young people in care are more likely to be unemployed or spend time out of training or education (ACEVO, 2012).
- 34% of care leavers are not in education, employment or training at the age of 19, compared with 18.2% of the general population (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2013).
- In 2014, only 12% of children who had been looked after for at least a year achieved five good GCSEs including maths and English, compared to 52.1% of children who are not looked after (Department for Education, 2014b).
- Youth unemployment is an adverse experience spiralling into poverty, depression and homelessness (The Prince's Trust, 2013).
- One third of all children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system have been looked after (Department for Education, 2014a).
- 40% of jobless young people report symptoms of challenges around their psychological well-being, including suicidal thoughts, panic attacks and feelings of self-loathing as a result of being unemployed (The Prince's Trust, 2014).
- A historically high level of youth unemployment presents Greece with a huge social and economic challenge (Crowley, Jones, Cominetti, & Guildford, 2013). Compared to an unemployment rate of 23% in the European Union as a whole, the rate of youth unemployment stands at 59% in Greece (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015).
- Greece has the highest proportions of young unemployed people that have been out of work for more than a year. So scarring effects are likely to be large, especially for those aged 25-29 who were hit hardest by the 2008 recession shock and failed to make a successful transition from school to work. An extremely high proportion of these young adults continue to live with their parents (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015).

## 2. The importance of a resilience approach

“Resilience” here is not regarded as a fixed trait or characteristic of the person, but as a quality of the person’s developmental trajectory that is shaped through their individual experiences, contextual circumstances and societal conditions. Past resilience research has been criticised for not acknowledging the social-environmental context when determining what outcomes are defined as “resilient” (Ungar, 2003). If extraordinary achievements are required, over and above the norm for that particular context, then not only will resilience be extremely rare, but it reinforces the idea that resilient people are somehow, “remarkable individuals, possessing extraordinary strength and inner resiliency” (Masten, 2001, p. 227). If, on the other hand, the adverse socioeconomic context is taken into account, then relatively small steps towards living an ordinary life will be recognised as resilient outcomes and resilience will be seen as a common phenomenon: “ordinary magic” as Ann Masten (2001) puts it:

“The conclusion that resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes offers a more positive outlook on human adaptation, as well as direction for policy and practice” (p. 227).

The authors adopt an approach to resilience that is currently being supported by a mounting critique offered by cultural theorists and social critics, who consistently warn against an emphasis on promoting resilience (e.g., Bottrell & Armstrong, 2012; de Lint & Chazal, 2013; Friedli, 2012; Harrison, 2013). From a social justice perspective, government and community-based attempts to build people’s resilience are criticised for maintaining, rather than challenging, the inequitable structure of society, which has been clearly linked with inequalities in health. An emphasis on resilience as an individual trait can obscure wider structural considerations and lead to a focus on individual behaviour change in place of structural reform (de Lint & Chazal, 2013; Harrison, 2013). Since definitions often form the basis of the assumptions that guide resilience measures and interventions, it is vital that definitions encompass the potential to affect the wider adversity context, if the structures that perpetuate disadvantage are to be challenged. Our own definition attempts to capture an element of emancipatory potential by constructing resilience as, “overcoming adversity, whilst also potentially subtly changing, or even dramatically transforming, (aspects of) that adversity” (Hart, Gagnon, Aumann, & Heaver, 2013; Hart, Gagnon, Eryigit-Madzwamuse, Cameron, & Aranda, under review).

Young people may be said to live their lives in different domains, for example, home, school, wider family, neighbourhood, recreational settings, work place or faith community. These domains may

each be seen as developmental contexts within which opportunities and risks arise. Such opportunities and risks may, in turn, impact on the young person's developmental trajectory and outcomes.

Adopting a resilience stance provides the opportunity to focus on a range of individual or structural processes that produce adversity across the different domains. This offers a more extensive application to practice, enabling young people to be resilient to adversity as a whole rather than in one area of their life, such as youth unemployment. Furthermore, within our definition of resilience, the structural conditions that are influencing and compromising the young person's individual processes are actively challenged and have the potential to affect the wider adversity context and contribute towards systemic change.

Using a resilience approach, based on a broad range of evidence and years of practical experience, the authors employ a strategic methodology, through the use of the resilience framework to support disadvantaged children and young people in overcoming the adversity they face in their lives (Hart, Blincow, & Thomas, 2007). From this perspective, we witness how the concept of resilience is capable of capturing the imagination and interest of parents, practitioners and young people alike. The resilience framework is important for youth unemployment as it recognises adversity as a collective experience, and the achievement of improved resources for disadvantaged groups is acknowledged at the social, community and individual level.

Informed by resilience research, Resilient Therapy (RT) proposes a range of interventions, entitled "potions", which are the constituents of five separate but interrelated conceptual arenas, termed "compartments" or "remedy racks". The conceptual arenas are Basics, Belonging, Learning, Coping and Core Self. Together, under the umbrella of the four Noble Truths, they form a systemic whole designed to increase resilient responses to overwhelming adversity. The philosophy of RT is one of dual and reciprocal responsibility between the practitioner, their organisation, the professional community and the young person with their historical and current framework and social network. The different compartments within RT are underpinned by a strong research evidence base and the corresponding interventions have been developed through a weave of research and consultation with parents and carers, to translate the research into resilient moves for professionals, parents and carers.

This framework was used to support the understanding and exploration of the young people in care who took part in the project. This was informed by a rationale that proposes that utilizing a resilience based approach works across all aspects of the young person's life, including developmental, social, psychological and physical, recognises the inter-relationship between these different areas, and holds a social inequalities perspective. For example, for a young person who is unemployed, holding a



resilience lens acknowledges that this will have an impact on their identity (core-self) and their sense of place in their family, peer group and society (belonging), they may require skills or knowledge development (learning), and the provision of their basic needs will be compromised due to being out of work (basics). RT provides a systemic framework that works across all of these areas, equipping practitioners who access the resource with the knowledge and interventions necessary to support young people experiencing disadvantage, helping them to achieve their full potential and in the future to be able to respond to adversity, rather than 'just surviving' adversity.

### 3. Methodology & Results

Fifteen young people were involved in a participatory action research project within Greece and the UK. The young people decided what they wanted to do for this project and the adults involved supported their participation.

The research demonstrated how mechanisms that support the young person's basic needs, sense of belonging, learning, coping, and their interpersonal needs, are pivotal in empowering them to overcome barriers to unemployment and nurture their aspirations. In addition, being involved in a collaborative piece of work also impacted on their sense of belonging, self-worth and more general hopes for the future.

The young people have produced a highly illustrated toolkit, with the design work led by a young care leaver. The resource begins by supporting everyone to understand the concept of resilience and the benefits of adopting a resilience approach. The approach is brought to life through interactive activities that carers, young people and professionals can use in support of promoting resilience. Through their work the young people shared stories and role models that had been significant in supporting their own resilience, such as Malcolm X, and such stories are illustrated for the benefit of other young people. The resource details the young people's pathways through foster care and the resilient moves that have been important in their lives in overcoming barriers to success. The resource also matches these stories to the resilience framework (Hart et al., 2007) to support carers, parents or professionals to understand the practice implications. Carers, professionals and young people can use the resource and the exercises in it to:

- support their understanding of resilience
- transfer this knowledge into practice
- foster a relationship between themselves and a young person through completing the activities, or for young people to support their own resilience.

The aim is that foster carers, parents and professionals will use this resource both nationally and internationally. The project has also supported some young people to become resilience trainers for foster carers, practitioners and other young people, and some preliminary feedback on the value of the resource has been received. Feedback has included: *"It has helped me see the experience of foster care through the eyes of the young person much more"* (foster carer). *"I feel more equipped to have some conversations that I have previously been concerned about"* (foster carer). *"I have also used it to support my work with young people who are not in care"* (youth worker). *"I didn't even know what resilience meant and now I'm finding it a useful way to think!"* (young person). *"I like the*

*activities*” (young person). *“It is really easy to use”* (young person). *“Getting involved in this has changed my life”* (young person). *“I’ve learnt some really useful skills through doing this that will help me later on in life”* (young person). The toolkits can be downloaded at: [http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one\\_step\\_forward\\_-\\_resilience/1](http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one_step_forward_-_resilience/1) (UK edition) and [http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one\\_step\\_forward\\_-\\_resilience\\_-\\_gre/1](http://issuu.com/boingboingresilience/docs/one_step_forward_-_resilience_-_gre/1) (Greek edition). A film which profiles some of the young people involved in developing this resource attending and presenting at a research showcase event can be viewed here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bH\\_OXhKdWhQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bH_OXhKdWhQ).

## 4. Conclusions

This project shows that young people from foster care can successfully work with academics and other adults to develop training resources that are inspirational for foster carers, practitioners and to young people themselves. The act of being involved in developing such resources can in fact support a young person's resilience and provide them with valuable life skills. The resource developed in this project reinforces the notion that tackling youth unemployment from a resilience-based approach, that takes into consideration all aspects of the young person's life, can increase the likelihood of change. It also emphasises the importance of working at an individual and social level to tackle youth unemployment, rather than solely focusing on the individual. This builds on Ann Masten's (2013) four waves of resilience research, towards a fifth wave, which encourages an explicit consideration of the links between resilience and social determinants, and of how co-productive resilience-based approaches can affect wider social change.

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