‘Soft bigotry’ taints views of foster-care students

Program aims to raise expectations of those from out-of-home care backgrounds

NICOLA BERRY

I am not an inspiration. I attend university, I work a part-time job and I live in a share house in Melbourne’s northern suburbs. These things are not achievements — except they are.

For someone from my background, a foster-care background, I am considered a success story. I do not feel like one.

Attending university is something that almost 50 per cent of young Australians do. For care leavers like me, this figure is a dismal 2.8 per cent.

I will admit that I have defied odds when faced with these statistics, but I do not want my case to be celebrated. I want it to be normalised.

After leaving care, I did not experience homelessness, as 35 per cent of my peers do in the first year of independent living. I did struggle financially and it was four long years of poverty before I was able to obtain stable employment that allowed me to provide for myself without the support of welfare payments.

If I choose to tell my story, I am usually called “brave” or “strong”. The problem I have with those adjectives is that they imply choice. Ask most people who have experienced adversity how they managed to keep going and they will tell you that there was no other option.

The truth is, I would love to be like most other 24-year-old students who can live at home with their parents, who are supported throughout their lives. Everything that I have learned — and there is a sense of pride in that — but, given the chance, I would have taken help in a heartbeat.

I have had co-workers tell me I was incredible simply for being employed in a clothing store. There were tutors who have said they “never expected anyone from my background to be in this class, because the outcomes are so poor”. Teachers in high school never questioned me if I did not attend or if I refused to submit assignments. As a teenager, this seemed like a great thing. As an adult, I must ask why. Why are the expectations for children in out-of-home care so low?

We have the same potential as those from a more traditional family. We are no less intelligent. We do not lack dreams. The only difference is that through circumstances that are no fault of our own, we can no longer live with our birth parents.

This means that we may require a little more external support, not that we are unable to reach what most people consider average achievements.

You may wonder, if there is no difference in these children, why is their participation in higher education so rare? One possible explanation for this could be found in the “soft bigotry of low expectations”, a phrase credited to former George W. Bush speech writer and later The Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson. While it was originally used to describe the detrimental effects of societal attitudes towards the academic achievement of people of colour, it also can be applied to those from low socio-economic and out-of-home care backgrounds.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has partnered with La Trobe University, Federation University Australia and Swinburne University of Technology in a project to address the lack of care leavers accessing higher education.

Raising Expectations encourages young people in care and care leavers to pursue higher education and provides supports for those who do.

I work part time for the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University, so I have the opportunity to see the efforts on a ground level.

The university has partnerships with several high schools and runs activities for students that aim to demystify higher education. CHEEDR recently held an event for children in out-of-home care and their support networks at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe. The event was a success for those who attended and a great way of reaching out to regional students.

However, reaching the intended audience can be challenging as low expectations are often internalised by people with a care experience, therefore many of them are already disengaged from education. The work being done by the Raising Expectations team is fantastic and making a much-needed difference, but changing prejudices and building equitable supports is an immense task.

The issues faced by children in out-of-home care need to be addressed across multiple platforms for their educational outcomes to improve.

Schools should be monitoring all students and checking in if performance or participation drops, providing additional assistance if necessary.

The additional funding for schools, particularly in low socio-economic areas where parents or carers may not be able to fully fund their child’s education, must be granted by federal government.

There are ways in which to help on an individual level as well. Examine your own prejudices, your preconceived notions, your assumptions. Ask yourself what they are based on and ask yourself to do better.

Every person has the right to an education and has the ability to achieve something great. It just takes some encouragement, the right supports and some expectations to meet.
Nicola Berry is a bachelor of human services and master of social work student at La Trobe University. She works part time within the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research and La Trobe's School Partnership Program.

Why are the expectations for children in out-of-home care so low? We have the same potential as those from a more traditional family. We do not lack dreams.

Nicola Berry admits she has defied the odds but would like stories such as hers to be normalised, not celebrated.