



“And then I was back home again...” lived experiences of young people returning to their families from residential care

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ABSTRACT

Returning to the family from out-of-home care is a critical life event with profound implications for young people's social and personal development. Yet, their voices and lived experiences are rarely represented in research on this transition. Drawing on biographical-narrative interviews with 18 young people (aged 14–18) who have returned to their families from residential care in Switzerland, this study explores how the young people experienced their return. Data analysis employed Reconstructive Grounded Theory, integrating narrative analysis and Grounded Theory to develop a nuanced understanding of young people's return experiences. An empirically grounded typology of six experience types is presented, based on young people's *Agency* in the decision to return, their sense of *Belonging* to the residential care facility and their families, and their *Post-Return Trajectory*. It captures the diversity of return experiences, from straightforward transitions to crises following return. Building on this typology, recommendations for policy and practice are provided. By centering young people's perspectives, the study contributes to a more differentiated understanding of return experiences from residential care and to a growing body of research that emphasizes the voices of young people within child welfare.

1. Introduction

In child welfare, safety, permanency and well-being are regarded as guiding principles and intended outcomes (Rosanbalm et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant in out-of-home care, where the state intervenes in young people's lives for child protection reasons. Attention is therefore directed not only to life in care but also to transitions from care.

In most child welfare systems, transitions from out-of-home care are organized around the principle of permanency (Akin, 2011; Rosanbalm et al., 2016). Returning to the family is generally considered the preferred permanency outcome when it can be achieved safely and sustainably (Berrick et al., 2023a). This reflects the view that children should be raised within their families whenever possible – a view that resonates with Art. 9 UN-CRC and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children (United Nations General Assembly, 2010 et passim). In research, such returns are referred to as family reunification describing the return to parental care after placement (Farmer, 2018). When a return to the family is not feasible, alternative care arrangements are pursued to ensure permanency. Depending on the legal and policy context of a given country, such arrangements may include adoption from care, guardianship or other long-term family-based arrangements

(Akin, 2011; Lindner & Hanlon, 2024). If no permanent care arrangement is achieved before adulthood, young people transition to independent living, often referred to as leaving care or aging out (Lindner & Hanlon, 2024; Mann-Feder & Refaeli, 2025).

Transitions from out-of-home care are regarded as critical life events involving substantial changes in young people's living arrangements, relationships, and support systems. Research on returns to the family shows considerable variation in trajectories and stability, with some returns remaining stable and others followed by re-entry into care (Akin, 2011; Davidson et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2025). Given the potential instability of returns to the family and the risk of re-entry into care, extensive research has focused on identifying risk and protective factors influencing stable return processes (Davidson et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2025).

However, most of these studies rely on administrative data, while the voices and lived experiences of young people in return processes have received comparatively little attention (Mateos et al., 2017; Walakira et al., 2022). Considering the perspectives of those directly affected is crucial for designing effective transition support services that young people can benefit from.

This study aims to contribute to the limited body of qualitative

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research on this transition by providing insights into the lived experiences of young people returning to their families from residential care in Switzerland.

1.1. Research on return to the family from out-of-home care

An extensive body of research on return to the family from out-of-home care, typically published under the term *family reunification*, has primarily focused on risk and protective factors, as well as outcomes, in order to generate knowledge that can be used to facilitate stable return processes and to prevent re-entries into care (Davidson et al., 2019; Esposito et al., 2022; Farmer, 2018; Fernandez & Lee, 2011; LaBrenz et al., 2020; Martín et al., 2020; Mc Grath-Lone et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2025). Limited parenting skills and a lack of social support are considered the strongest predictors of re-entry, whereas addressing the reasons leading to placement, permanency planning, and long-term support services after return have been found to be the most effective factors in ensuring stability (Davidson et al., 2019; Farmer, 2018). Additionally, age at first out-of-home placement, time spent in care, and age at return have been identified as factors negatively associated with both the likelihood of return to the family and its stability (Lutman & Farmer, 2013; Martín et al., 2020). Some studies also examined the objective or the subjective well-being of young people returning to their families (Biehal et al., 2015; James et al., 2017; Lutman & Farmer, 2013; Osswald, 2026).

To date, only a few qualitative studies have examined young people's lived experiences and challenges following their return to their families. Bullock et al. (1998) developed a phase model describing the general process of return to the family from care, including an initial honeymoon phase, subsequent conflict, and a renegotiation of family roles. More recent qualitative research has only emerged in the past decade. Studies from Spain, based on focus groups with children, parents, and professionals show that reintegrating into the family is challenging making continued support highly valued by both children and their families (Balsells et al., 2017; Mateos et al., 2017). In their study, Mateos et al. (2017) reported the loss of important relationships formed during care, feelings of discomfort and sadness, and the fact that children are often informed of their return on short notice, leaving insufficient time to prepare. Similarly, a study from Denmark highlights feelings of alienation upon returning to the family and emphasizes the need to engage with concepts of home, family, and belonging (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018).

Research from the Global South provides additional insights. For Uganda, a study reports mainly positive experiences when parental training successfully led to changes in parenting behavior (Walakira et al., 2022). By contrast, research from Ghana highlights more challenging aspects of return experiences (Frimpong-Manso & Bugyei, 2019), including the loss of important relationships during care, feelings of disappointment and emotional hurt related to the family's initial placement decision, and experiences of stigma and discrimination within families and communities due to young people's care history. Both studies point to economic and educational difficulties faced by young people returning to their families, which can increase the risk of dropping out of school. These findings underscore how a country's welfare and education systems create transition regimes into adulthood (Walther, 2006), which also shape post-care transitions.

In German-speaking countries, return processes following out-of-home care have only recently received increased attention in research (Lienhart, 2024; Osswald, 2022, 2026; Pluto et al., 2024; Wolf, 2020). Lienhart (2024) points out that, in German-speaking debates, return to the family is frequently overlooked and quantitatively underestimated, as out-of-home care is generally regarded as a measure of last resort and thus a one-way street. Nevertheless, studies indicate that return to the family is in fact a relatively common form of leaving care in German-speaking countries (Lienhart et al., 2018; Osswald, 2026; Pluto et al., 2024). Regarding foster care in Switzerland, it is reported that the

possibility of returning to the family is frequently overlooked or ignored, creating a lingering sense of uncertainty for those involved (Seiterle, 2018).

1.2. Residential care and return to the family in Switzerland

Internationally, child protection systems vary considerably in their organization, with out-of-home care embedded in diverse legal and institutional frameworks (Berrick et al., 2023a; Burns et al., 2017). Building on Burns et al.'s (2017) distinction between risk- and service-oriented systems, Switzerland has been classified in different ways. Jud and Gartenhauser (2015) emphasize its family service orientation, whereas Schnurr (2017) characterizes it as primarily risk-oriented because of its statutory child protection framework. More recent typologies distinguish five types ranging from child exploitation-protective systems to child rights-protective systems (Berrick et al., 2023b), yet Switzerland remains difficult to categorize. While its national legal foundations are primarily oriented toward protecting children from endangerment and harm, some cantons provide preventive and supportive services that reflect a broader child well-being orientation. Overall, the difficulty of classifying Switzerland within international typologies reflects its decentralized and multi-layered governance structure.

Unlike countries with more centralized child welfare systems, Switzerland has neither a national ministry for children and families nor a comprehensive federal child and youth welfare act. While the Swiss Civil Code provides the legal basis for child protection interventions, responsibility for organizing and delivering services lies with the 26 cantons, each operating its own child welfare system (Schnurr & Gautschi, 2023). As a result, service provision, access to support, and institutional arrangements vary considerably across cantons and regions.

Within this decentralized system, out-of-home placements are generally considered only after less restrictive interventions have been exhausted or deemed insufficient. In general, indications for placement include insufficient parental caregiving capacities or resources, child maltreatment (including neglect), and severe parent-adolescent conflict involving loss of parental authority and risks to the young person's development (SODK & KOKES, 2021). Taken together, these indications illustrate that out-of-home placements in Switzerland extend beyond narrow child protection concerns and may occur when a young person's well-being cannot be ensured within the family context. Educational needs may also constitute a placement rationale when adequate educational provision is unavailable locally, often in combination with family-related difficulties. On a smaller scale, placements may also occur under the Swiss Juvenile Justice Act and follow a preventive developmental rationale.

Regardless of the placement rationale, placements may be based either on parental consent (referring to consent of parents or legal guardians) or on a formal care order. Formal care orders can only be issued by the Child and Adult Protection Authority or the Juvenile Prosecutor's Office/Juvenile Court. In all other cases, placements require parental consent, although they may be initiated or recommended by social services or specialized child and youth services operating under cantonal law (Schnurr, 2017; Schnurr & Gautschi, 2023). This legal distinction is important for understanding return processes. Following a formal care order, returning to the family requires the order to be amended or terminated by the competent authority, whereas placements based on parental consent can end when parents withdraw their consent. In practice, however, social services and residential care providers may influence return decisions by raising concerns about the appropriateness of a return or by referring cases to the responsible authorities. According to inter-cantonal experts, approximately two-thirds of placements occur with parental consent, while one-third are based on a formal care order (SODK & KOKES, 2021). Available data from the cantons of Vaud and Bern are

consistent with this estimate (DGEJ VD, 2026; KJA BE, 2025).

The fragmented organization of the Swiss child welfare system is also reflected in the availability of national data. Switzerland currently lacks a comprehensive national statistic on out-of-home care (Fellmann et al., 2024; Schnurr & Gautschi, 2023), a limitation repeatedly criticized by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021). Consequently, the total number of young people in out-of-home care remains unknown. One initiative intended to address this gap is *Casadata*, a statistical system under the responsibility of the Federal Office of Justice. However, it covers only a subset of placements and therefore does not provide comprehensive national coverage (Fellmann et al., 2024). Although national data are unavailable, cantonal statistics indicate that approximately 72% of placements are in residential care and 28% in foster care (KJA BE, 2025; Liesen & Dettling, 2026).

The fragmented governance structure of the Swiss system is also reflected in the organization and diversity of residential care provision. Facilities range from semi-supported shared apartments to large institutions providing full-time care (Schnurr & Gautschi, 2023). Because no national classification of residential care facilities exists, cantons use their own categorization systems. Basel-Stadt, for example, distinguishes between children's homes, specialized boarding schools, parent-child facilities, and secure placements under child protection or juvenile justice legislation (JFS BS, 2023). Against this background, the research project underlying the present study groups residential care facilities into three categories: (1) children's homes without integrated schooling; (2) specialized boarding schools with integrated schooling/vocational training; and (3) intervention centers comprising open, semi-secure, and secure units. The latter include both socio-educational facilities for young people under juvenile justice measures and facilities providing secure residential care. These settings are not equivalent to juvenile detention, as their primary purpose is socio-educational intervention.

The lack of national data also affects knowledge about returns to the family. Accordingly, no systematic national information on returns or re-entry into care is currently available, and only a few cantons publish corresponding statistics. Nevertheless, data from the cantons of Bern and Zurich show that return to the family is the most common transition following residential care (KJA BE, 2025; Liesen & Dettling, 2026). In Bern, residential care placements last on average approximately 1.4 years, although durations vary considerably, ranging from less than three months to several years (KJA BE, 2025).

Despite return to the family being a common transition from residential care, Switzerland has no national policy framework for planning and supporting returns to the family. Existing inter-cantonal recommendations emphasize that cantons should provide preparation and needs-based support for young people leaving care, including those returning to their families (SODK & KOKES, 2021), but these recommendations are not legally binding.

Research on transitions from care to adulthood points to substantial gaps in the Swiss support system, despite some cantons extending services beyond age 18 (Ahmed et al., 2020; Jarczok et al., 2021; Keller et al., 2025; Stohler et al., 2021). These system gaps may leave young adult care leavers with limited alternatives other than returning to their families, even in cases where family relationships are strained or the return is not desired (Jarczok et al., 2021).

Overall, empirical research on returns to the family remains limited in Switzerland. A recent study (Osswald, 2026) found increases in young people's subjective well-being following return from residential care while also identifying a subgroup of young people who experienced difficult transitions. Furthermore, fewer than half of the study's participants reported receiving professional support during the transition.

Against this backdrop of limited national data, fragmented governance, substantial system gaps in support for transitions from care, and a weak empirical evidence base, return to the family represents a common yet under-researched transition in the Swiss child welfare system.

2. The present study

The present study employs a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of young people (14–18 years) returning to their families from residential care, within the context of their life stories. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the real-life challenges these young people face during their return process.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. The term 'return to the family'

The conceptual framing of the transition from residential care back to the family is associated with ambiguities in research on this phenomenon. First, the commonly used term *family reunification* reflects a normative assumption in which return to the family is seen as the ideal outcome (Berrick et al., 2023). This implies a belief that it is finally about bringing together what inherently belongs together. However, in practice, this process can be more complex and challenging as the term suggests. While the term *family reunification* is primarily used in policy and outcome-oriented contexts, the term *return to the family* refers to the transition process itself and its experiential, relational, and structural dimensions. This study therefore uses the term *return to the family* to distinguish its analytical focus from policy and outcome-oriented contexts.

Second, conventional definitions of reunification/return from out-of-home care typically focus on returning to parent(s), often excluding extended family (Farmer, 2018). Broader definitions, however, recognize that young people may return to other family members, reflecting the socially expanded concept of family and the diversity of living arrangements in different communities (Landers & Danes, 2016). This emphasizes that returning to the family should not be understood as exclusively parental, but as encompassing a range of family connections.

Third, the question arises of what *return* precisely entails. Wulczyn (2004) notes that the family environment may have changed considerably during the out-of-home placement. Out-of-home care aims not only to support positive development and transformation in the young person, but also to address concerns about their well-being by inducing changes in the family environment. Consequently, young people may return to a setting that has changed considerably. Furthermore, family compositions can shift due to factors such as divorce, birth of siblings, or to new stepfamily and patchwork family constellations, especially after an extended period in care. In some cases, a young person may return to a place where they have never previously lived, for example if the family has moved to a different community or if the young person is now living with a parent or relative they did not live with before.

To address this variability, this study adopts a broad understanding of returning to the family, which includes not only returning to parents but also to other relatives, or family places where the young people have not previously lived.

3.2. Transitions as part of the life story: belonging across contexts

As in previous studies, returning to the family in this study is conceptualized as a transition process, involving a pre-, during, and post-phase (Bullock et al., 1998; Landers & Danes, 2016; Wulczyn, 2004). According to Raithelhuber (2013), transitions are considered particularly challenging, sensitive, or risky for a person's life course and have been described as "zones of uncertainty and vulnerability" (Walther & Stauber, 2013, p. 30). Thus, transitions are coping tasks and often nonlinear processes (Karl et al., 2020). Embedded in individual life courses (Stauber et al., 2022), transitions are shaped by past and present experiences.

In this study, returning to the family is understood as a complex biographical transition that requires analyzing two perspectives (Göbel et al., 2020): the "where from", referring to young people's perceptions

of their time in residential care, and the “where to”, concerning their perceptions of the family environment they return to. This approach highlights transitions’ embeddedness within personal life stories and foregrounds the question of where young people feel they belong and how the transition affects their sense of belonging. Belonging, a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), describes “the sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity, a feeling of being at home in a place and of being valued” (Riley, 2019, p. 2). According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), belonging can relate simultaneously to multiple social and spatial contexts, requiring individuals to navigate different constellations of belonging. In this study, the “where from” and “where to” perspectives are considered in terms of the meanings of these places and the sense of belonging associated with them.

3.3. Agency in transitions

Beyond understanding transitions as embedded in personal life stories, it is equally important to view them as relational phenomena (Karl et al., 2020). Transitions are not isolated events but unfold within broader social and structural contexts. As Walther (2006) showed, they are shaped by nation-specific transition regimes, policies, and practices. In the case of returns from out-of-home care, transitions are influenced by country-specific regimes at the intersection of child welfare, education, social security, and the labor market. This perspective highlights the role of young people’s agency within child welfare services. Helfferich (2020) defines agency as the perception of who or what influences whom or what. It is closely linked to experiences of power, powerlessness, support, and trust, and shapes both how individuals interpret their world and perceive their possibilities to act. Successful navigation of transitions therefore depends on young people’s perception of their own agency, their perception of others’ agency, and the options available to act (Göbel et al., 2020). In this study, young people’s perceptions of their own agency and their attributions of agency to others—particularly child welfare services—are key analytical aspects in understanding the process of returning to the family.

4. Methods

4.1. Research design & sampling procedure

This study is part of the *StePLife* project (The personal life of young people in residential care), a three-wave quantitative panel survey conducted from 2022 to 2024, that collected data on participants’ living arrangements, well-being, and other personal and social indicators. A total of 559 young people aged 12–17 participated in the first wave, 430 in the second wave one year later, and 356 in the third wave one year after the second. As all participants were living in residential care during the first wave, transitions could be identified based on changes in living arrangements in subsequent waves.

The present qualitative study focuses on participants who had returned to their families by the second wave ($n = 79$) and who consented to be contacted for interviews ($n = 56$), with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of their return experiences. To minimize participant burden and avoid overlap with the panel survey, interviews were carefully scheduled, making iterative data collection unfeasible. Accordingly, purposive profile sampling (Misoch, 2019; Reinders, 2005) was used to ensure variation in demographic variables (age, gender, type of residential facility) and self-reported transition characteristics (willingness to leave care, degree of transition difficulties), aiming to capture a broad range of return constellations.

Although sampling was guided by these profiles, analysis showed that they were not analytically relevant for interpreting return experiences. Quantitative ratings of willingness to leave care and perceived transition difficulties did not consistently align with interview accounts, and no meaningful patterns emerged regarding age, gender, or type of

residential facility. Accordingly, these profile characteristics are not reported.

Between November 2023 and March 2024, a total of 45 young people were contacted via text message by the author of this study, who is also involved in the underlying longitudinal project. Although some participants were familiar with the author’s name, no prior personal relationships existed. Eighteen young people participated in interviews; among non-participants, 14 did not respond, 11 declined, and two young people canceled scheduled interviews. Recruitment showed particularly low participation among adolescents from intervention centers and male adolescents from children’s homes.

4.2. Participants

Participants were 18 young people (9 female, 9 male) from the German-speaking part of Switzerland who had returned to their families between summer 2022 and summer 2023.

Time since return ranged from approximately 9 months to 1.5 years (M/Median = 1.1 years).

They were aged 14–18 years (M/Median = 16.5) and had spent 1–7 years in residential care (M/Median = 3).

The sample included six participants from children’s homes (five female, one male), eleven from specialized boarding schools (four female, seven male), and one male participant from an intervention center. Further sociodemographic details are provided in Table 1.

All participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Types of residential care facilities are based on the categorization outlined in Section 1.2.

4.3. Data collection

Data were collected using autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983), which are particularly effective for exploring complex psychosocial experiences (Svasek & Domecka, 2012). This interview format consists of three parts: first, participants tell their life stories, providing an autobiographical foundation; second, probing questions aim to deepen aspects not sufficiently elaborated in the initial narrative; and third, targeted questions address topics related to the research focus. This structure enables a comprehensive and flexible exploration of participants’ life stories (Schütze, 1983).

All interviews were conducted in person by the author. Participants chose the interview location, with most interviews taking place in public settings such as cafés or parks, and three conducted in participants’ homes. In two of these cases, parents were present in the home but did not take part in the interview. In one case, the participant’s mother requested to be present during the interview, which the participant agreed to; she occasionally added contextual details that complemented the participant’s account.

The interviews lasted between 50 min and 2.5 h, were conducted in Swiss German, and audio recorded. Participants received 30 Swiss francs. All interviews were transcribed verbatim; with simultaneous translation into Standard German and pseudonymization.

4.4. Ethical considerations

Research followed the ethical procedures established by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Social Sciences (Krügel, 2019) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to the interviews. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study and revoke their consent at any point without consequences. Recordings were kept confidential, securely stored and scheduled for irreversible destruction within one year after study completion.

Table 1
Sociodemographic details of participants.

	Participant	Age at interview	Time since return	Type of last residential care facility	Duration of residential care	Family place of return
1	Soraya (f)	18 years	1.25 years	Children's home	1 year	Adoptive parents
2	Tonio (m)	18 years	1.25 years	Children's home	7 years	Parents
3	Laura (f)	16 years	1.25 years	Specialized boarding school	3 years	Mother
4	Niklas (m)	17 years	1 year	Intervention center	11 months	Father
5	Mirco (m)	14 years	1.25 years	Specialized boarding school	2 years	Mother
6	Lina (f)	16 years	0.75 year	Children's home	1.5 years	Mother
7	Josephine (f)	18 years	1.25 years	Specialized boarding school	3.5 years	Initially Mother, then Father*
8	Zita (f)	17 years	1.5 years	Children's home	6 years	Father* (before: Mother)
9	Marcel (m)	17 years	0.75 year	Specialized boarding school	3 years	Mother*
10	Nils (m)	17 years	1.5 years	Specialized boarding school	3 years	Parents
11	Sidra (f)	16 years	1 year	Children's home	1.5 years	Mother
12	Daniella (f)	15 years	0.75 year	Specialized boarding school	3 years	Father* (before: Mother)
13	Fabio (m)	15 years	1.5 years	Specialized boarding school	6 years	Mother* (before: Parents)
14	Sina (f)	16 years	0.75 year	Children's home	1 year	Mother
15	Cloé (f)	18 years	0.75 year	Specialized boarding school	1.5 years	Parents
16	Leandro (m)	16 years	1.5 years	Specialized boarding school	3.5 years	Parents
17	Cédric (m)	16 years	0.75 year	Specialized boarding school	4 years	Mother
18	Aaron (m)	17 years	0.75 year	Specialized boarding school	7 years	Mother

Notes: Unless stated otherwise, the place of return is the same as the place before residential care * = Regular stays with the other parent on weekends.

4.5. Data analysis

MAXQDA 24 was used for transcription and data analysis. The analysis followed Reconstructive Grounded Theory (Somm & Hajart, 2019), integrating narrative analysis and Grounded Theory to enable a contextualized understanding of interview passages within the broader narrative. This approach builds on methodological discussions advocating a productive combination of both traditions (Lal et al., 2012; Ruppel & Mey, 2015).

The interpretive process comprised two interrelated analytical steps. First, a coarse-grained sequential analysis of each interview reconstructed participants' biographical trajectories across key phases (childhood in the family, entry into residential care, placement, and post-return life). Analysis attended to narrative content and structure, including thematic inclusions and omissions, narrative intensity, level of detail, and emotional elaboration. *Agency* and *Positioning* (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004) served as sensitizing concepts, focusing on the attribution of agency to self and others across biographical phases.

Second, all return-related passages were analyzed in depth using Grounded Theory coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This step examined how return processes unfolded within participants' broader life courses, proceeding iteratively between close reading and contextual interpretation. Return-related meanings were systematically compared with other biographical segments to identify intra-case contrasts and continuities. *Agency* and *Belonging* (Sections 3.2 and 3.3) guided this phase, capturing how agency was experienced in the decision to return, and how residential care ("where from") and family contexts ("where to") were narratively constructed.

The entry into residential care was initially considered as a potential biographical reference point. However, comparative analysis did not indicate a linear link between entry and return experiences. Instead, the analytical focus shifted to how entry experiences were processed over time. Accordingly, entry experiences were not used as a separate analytical dimension but remained part of the overall biographical reconstruction.

Across both steps, constant comparative analysis was central. Biographical trajectories were compared to identify patterns and contrasts, while return-related experiences were systematically compared within and across cases. This iterative process showed that *Agency* and *Belonging* did not fully capture all narratives, as some biographies were additionally characterized by instability and disruption after return. This led to the development of a third analytical dimension, *Post-Return Trajectory*, capturing educational trajectories and social integration following return.

The comparative analysis informed an empirically grounded

typology (Kelle & Kluge, 2010; Kluge, 1999). Types were constructed based on similarities and differences in the configuration of *Agency*, *Belonging* ("where from" & "where to"), and *Post-Return Trajectory*, considering internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. These dimensions varied in salience across participants and were incorporated accordingly. The resulting typology comprises six empirically grounded types of return experiences reflecting different configurations of the analytical dimensions and participants' relevance structures.

The analysis was conducted by the author. Interpretations, emerging categories, and the developing typology were regularly discussed in interpretive group settings and with colleagues, supporting the credibility, consistency, and empirical grounding of the findings.

5. Results – a typology of return experiences

Based on the analyses presented in Section 4.5, six empirically grounded types of return experiences were reconstructed. Rather than classifying young people themselves, the typology captures distinct configurations of return experiences derived from the narratives.

Table 2 provides an overview of the six types and the number of narratives corresponding to each, ordered from the most straightforward to the most crisis-ridden return trajectories.

As outlined in Section 4.5, the analytical dimensions were not equally salient across narratives, and these differences were incorporated into the typology. The following sections illustrate how different configurations of *Agency*, *Belonging*, and *Post-Return Trajectory* constitute and differentiate the six types.

Type 1) Return as an Unremarkable Post-School Transition

This type of return experience is characterized by the perception that leaving residential care and returning to the family constitutes a natural and unremarkable biographical episode. It reflects a configuration of unproblematic agency, a strong sense of family-centered belonging, and post-return continuity within a normalized life course.

The type was reconstructed from the narrative of Nils, who entered residential care voluntarily due to a combination of ongoing parental conflict and educational support needs.

Although this experiential pattern is evident in only a single narrative, it represents a distinct configuration of *Agency*, *Belonging*, and *Post-Return Trajectory* that differs fundamentally from the configurations identified in the other types. The matter-of-fact way in which Nils narrates his return illustrates this configuration:

Table 2

Typology overview.

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- (1) Return as an Unremarkable Post-School Transition (n = 1)
 - (2) Return as a Well-Deserved and Smooth Transition (n = 2)
 - (3) Return as Liberation from Child Welfare (n = 3)
 - (4) Return as an Emotionally Challenging Change in Daily and Social Life (n = 6)
 - (5) Forced Return after Unilaterally Decided Discharge (n = 3)
 - (6) Post-Return Loneliness and Transition-Crisis (n = 3)
-

“That was actually pretty simple. Like I said, you got your things, and then your parents picked you up at the graduation party, and then you got home and said, ‘Alright, now I’m home’ (laughs).” (Nils, 17 years)

This quote captures the defining characteristic of this type: return is narrated as an ordinary continuation of the life course rather than as a major biographical event. The sequence of packing belongings, being picked up by parents, arriving home, and simply acknowledging being back is recounted without emotional elaboration. This contrasts with the other types, in which return is consistently constructed as a significant transition requiring explanation, negotiation, or emotional processing.

Agency. The dimension of agency remains largely backgrounded in this type. Placement in residential care is closely linked to the school years, which makes its end predictable and institutionally structured. Returning to the family therefore does not require negotiation or justification. In the Swiss context, compulsory schooling typically ends around the age of 16, a life stage at which independent living is usually not yet realistic. As a result, returning to the family is experienced as a natural next step. This does not indicate coercion or lack of agency, but rather a strong alignment between institutional expectations and young people’s understandings of a “normal” post-school transition. Agency is therefore neither foregrounded nor contested. This contrasts with Types 2, 3, and 5, where agency becomes salient.

Belonging. In this type, the residential care facility is experienced as supportive but not as a significant site of belonging. The family home remains the primary and unquestioned place of belonging, while the facility is framed as a temporary setting associated with a particular phase of life. Nils illustrates this distinction when describing his room in the facility:

“So basically, you were allowed to set up your room [in the facility] however you wanted, but I felt like (...)—I’d rather just leave it as it is, because first of all, it’s not my home. I always said it was like my weekly residence and I thought, I’ll just leave it the way they gave it to me—first, it means less tidying up for me, and second, I always knew I can look forward to my room at home. Had I set it up the same way as at home, then why would I even want to go home afterward?” (Nils, 17 years)

Rather than expressing dissatisfaction with residential care, this account shows a clear differentiation between the facility and the family home. Although personalizing the room was possible, it was deliberately avoided. This choice reinforces the family home as the main place of belonging. This distinction between the two rooms can be interpreted both as a coping strategy during residential care and as an orientation toward return. Because the facility never became a competing site of belonging, return did not require a substantial process of reorientation.

Furthermore, regular stays with the family during weekends and school holidays helped maintain continuity between both contexts and reduced the need for adjustment after return. In this respect, this type contrasts with Type 4, which similarly backgrounds agency but is characterized by a stronger sense of belonging to the facility and a return process that is emotionally demanding.

Post-Return Trajectory. In line with the return being framed as unremarkable, the post-return trajectory of this type is not marked by disruption, instability, or significant adjustment difficulties. Within Nils’ narrative, considerably greater attention is devoted to the transition from compulsory schooling into vocational training, which he describes as successful. Thus, this type is characterized by a socially expected life-

course trajectory after return, indicating that the return does not constitute a biographical turning point.

Type 2) Return as a Well-Deserved and Smooth Transition

This type of return experience is characterized by framing time in residential care as a successful developmental journey and return to the family as the deserved outcome of that development. It reflects a configuration in which agency is exercised to demonstrate the legitimacy of return within institutional frameworks, dual belonging with a stronger orientation toward the family home, and a post-return trajectory marked by successful family reintegration.

The type was reconstructed from the narratives of Lina and Leandro. While the precise circumstances leading to Lina’s placement cannot be fully reconstructed, Leandro identifies behavioral issues as a central reason for placement. Despite differences in placement circumstances, both narratives share the experience that placement was initially undesired.

What distinguishes these narratives from the other types is that time in residential care is retrospectively interpreted as an opportunity for personal growth that was actively embraced. Consequently, return is narrated as the justified outcome of a successful developmental process. This understanding is reflected in the way Lina explains the timing of her return:

“It was also a point where you really noticed that I had already made some progress, so you could say, yeah, now you can go back home (.) if it were somehow (.), if I had gotten worse or something then (.) I am sure it would have taken longer but (.) I really think it was a good time to go back, it was also towards the end of the school year, I already passed my high school entrance exam (.) and I was pretty relaxed about it (.) so it just felt right.” (Lina, 16 years)

This quote illustrates the defining characteristic of this type: return is presented as the consequence of demonstrated progress rather than the result of institutional routines or decisions imposed by others. A similar pattern is evident in Leandro’s narrative. Accordingly, both young people devote considerable attention to explaining why their return was appropriate at this particular point in time.

Agency. A characteristic of this type is that young people express their desire to return, direct it toward the facility, and justify it by referring to their positive changes achieved during placement. This is evident in the narratives that extensively document personal development. While developmental goals may include completion of compulsory schooling, as in Lina’s case, other individually meaningful goals may serve a similar function. Completion of compulsory schooling is therefore not constitutive for this type. Rather, what characterizes the type is the perception that return is conditional upon achieving developmental goals and demonstrating personal growth. In this respect, agency occupies a central position in these narratives, distinguishing this type from Types 1 and 4.

At the same time, agency may take different forms depending on how professionals respond to young people’s return wishes. While Lina’s wish was accepted without resistance, Leandro was initially required to demonstrate that his positive development would be sustained within the family environment. He describes this process as follows:

"Actually, a lot (.) was said about how I would behave at home, whether I'm respectful at home, you know, like most adolescents are not always respectful, and for me it was just really extreme (.) and, my goal was clear—I wanted to prove (.) that I can be respectful (.) and that it works at home." (Leandro, 16 years)

This illustrates that young people depend on professionals recognizing their wish to return as legitimate. Where doubts remain, developmental achievements may first need to be demonstrated during a trial period before return is ultimately approved. In this respect, agency in this type differs from Type 3, where return is pursued despite institutional resistance. It also contrasts with Type 5, where agency is attributed to the facility, which exercises decision-making authority without involving young people. Here, by contrast, young people position themselves as active agents, albeit within a framework in which institutional recognition remains necessary.

Belonging. In this type, the residential care facility is portrayed as a supportive environment that facilitates personal development and in which young people generally feel comfortable. Unlike Nils in Type 1, Lina describes repeatedly personalizing and rearranging her room in the facility. By the end of her placement, most of her personal belongings were located in the facility. Nevertheless, as in Type 1, the family remains the primary place of belonging. While return is legitimized through the developmental progress, the desire to return is rooted in the continued experience of the family as home. Lina explains:

"I just wanted to go home because it's really my home (.) so (.) I mean, for my circumstances, I feel like I've been there [in the facility] quite a while, a year and a half (.) and at some point it just became like (.) I want to go home, I want to live at home again." (Lina, 16 years)

Notably, Lina's account is oriented less toward leaving residential care than toward returning to the family. The wish to return is therefore not framed as a rejection of residential care but as a consequence of the family continuing to be the primary place of belonging.

At the same time, the facility is described as a secondary or temporary home, distinguishing this type from Type 1, where the facility is portrayed in more functional terms. Unlike Type 4, however, attachment to the facility does not challenge the family's position as the primary place of belonging. This also differs from Type 3, where the residential care facility is explicitly constructed as a place of non-belonging.

Post-Return Trajectory. Return is typically described as a gradual process in this type. Farewell rituals and the stepwise transfer of personal belongings allow young people to prepare emotionally for leaving the facility. Consequently, return is portrayed as a smooth process that requires little adjustment, despite a brief period of acclimatization. Lina describes this experience as follows:

"At first, it was a bit like, wow, I'm finally back home (.) I also needed a moment to realize that (.) but then it was really like before, I mean, living at home is still the same as before (.) it's mainly my circumstances—school-wise—and I, as a person, that have changed a bit, but life at home remains somewhat the same." (Lina, 16 years)

Consistent with the broader narrative of successful personal development, trajectories remain positive after return. Young people describe feeling well within the family context and report no disruptions following the transition. Thus, return is integrated into an ongoing trajectory of positive development. In this respect, this type differs markedly from Type 6, where return is associated with difficulties upon return.

At the same time, residential care is remembered positively and often remains an important point of reference after return, making continued contact with the facility meaningful.

Type 3) Return as Liberation from Child Welfare

This type of return experience is characterized by the perception of

residential care as restrictive and fundamentally incompatible with young people's desire for autonomy, normalcy, and belonging. It reflects a configuration in which agency is exercised to pursue return against institutional requirements, a strong sense of family-centered belonging, and a post-return trajectory framed as liberation from child welfare and the restoration of family life.

The type was reconstructed from three narratives, with those of Sina and Sidra being particularly characteristic. The circumstances leading to placement vary considerably across cases and reflect the spectrum of placement rationales (see Section 1.2), including child protection concerns related to parental alcohol abuse. Legal foundations also differ: Sidra's placement was based on a care order, whereas Sina was placed with parental consent. Despite these differences, the narratives share the perception that placement is imposed against young people's wishes, generating feelings of powerlessness and subjection to external decision-making. Against this background, a strong desire to leave care and return to the family emerges. Sina describes this as follows:

"I wanted to leave, I just wanted to leave [...] I just wasn't doing well, I wanted a home, I wanted to live a normal life, and I didn't have that there. I (.) felt shut in, I didn't want the rules anymore, I didn't want that, I (.) I didn't want the so-called home anymore." (Sina, 16 years)

The quote illustrates that the desire to return is driven primarily by rejection of the placement and the restrictions associated with residential care. Return is not narrated as something that must first be earned through personal development, as in Type 2, nor as a self-evident life-course transition, as in Type 1. Rather, the underlying narratives construct return as liberation from an unwanted institutional system. This framing of return represents the defining characteristic of this type and clearly distinguishes it from the other types.

Agency. In this type, return is framed as a pursuit of autonomy and normalcy. Young people actively pursue return even in the face of institutional resistance, thereby expressing agency through persistence and opposition.

Sina, who had been placed with parental consent, exerted pressure on her mother to facilitate her return. Sidra, by contrast, had been placed under a care order. After her initial request for return was denied, she left the facility and went into hiding. During this time, she remained in contact with child protection authorities, making the withdrawal of the care order a condition for her coming back from hiding. She narrates this process as a triumph:

"And then I packed my things, even though I promised myself I would never run away again. I had set a different goal this time—to really run away so I could get rid of that care order and go back to my mother. I was gone for two months, stayed with my best friend during that time. It was a very scary time for me because (.) I was told all the time that I would somehow take the wrong turn and never have a normal life, all that. But finally, I was allowed to go home again, and since then, I've been living at home again, and it's going very, very well at home." (Sidra, 16 years)

This quote illustrates the strong foregrounding of agency that is characteristic of this type, in contrast to Types 1 and 4, where agency remains largely backgrounded. Unlike Type 5, however, agency is clearly exercised by the young people themselves. In this respect, this type resembles Type 2. The crucial difference lies in its justification: whereas Type 2 involves negotiated return based on demonstrated development, young people in this type reject the legitimacy of placement itself. Accordingly, they do not seek recognition of readiness but instead pursue return despite institutional resistance.

Belonging. The residential care facility in this type is consistently experienced as impersonal and restrictive. Consequently, it does not become a secondary or temporary home but is instead constructed as a place of non-belonging, unlike Types 2 and 4. In contrast, the family home is associated with freedom, comfort, and authenticity. This portrayal of the family home as an ideal environment underlines that the family remained the only meaningful place of belonging throughout

placement.

Against this background, narratives contain little reflection on family-related difficulties or readjustment challenges. Instead, young people emphasize relief, freedom, and improved well-being following return. Sina describes this shift:

"I felt a lot better. I noticed that too—back in my room, in our apartment, with my cats again—and not with so many different people, just having a home again, feeling freer, feeling comfortable, and that's just really nice." (Sina, 16 years old)

This quote illustrates how strongly belonging is structured through contrast: residential care as non-belonging versus family as rightful belonging. Return is therefore framed as a movement from an imposed space of non-belonging back to one's true home, indicating that return is experienced not merely as a return to the family but as coming home.

Post-Return Trajectory. In this type, the effort invested in achieving return is retrospectively considered worthwhile. Following return, young people describe the ability to live again in accordance with their sense of belonging. Return is therefore narrated as a smooth and largely unproblematic process. In this respect, the type resembles Types 1 and 2; however, unlike those types, the positive trajectory is not grounded in developmental continuity but in the restoration of family life as such.

Within this type, accounts of adjustment difficulties are largely absent, distinguishing it from Types 4 and 5. In addition, in this type, return is framed not only as a transition but also as a turning point marking the end of life in a restrictive setting.

However, some of these young people retrospectively nuance their accounts of residential care. Sina, for instance, maintains a critical view of residential care as an institution while also acknowledging that some staff members have been supportive.

Type 4) Return as an Emotionally Challenging Change in Daily and Social Life

This type of return experience is characterized by the perception that residential care and the family environment are largely separate social worlds, making return an emotionally challenging transition. It reflects a configuration of unproblematic agency, dual belonging with a strong orientation toward the facility, and a post-return trajectory marked by adjustment difficulties.

The type was reconstructed from six narratives, with those of Laura, Josephine, and Daniella being particularly characteristic. Placement reasons and legal foundations vary across cases. In terms of lived experience, however, placement is generally described as accepted, although not actively desired.

A recurring pattern in the narratives of this type is the strong emphasis on everyday life in the facility. Young people describe social relationships, shared activities, and a sense of community, while also acknowledging that not all memories are positive. What distinguishes this type from the other types is that the facility is described as the primary social world during placement. Consequently, leaving the facility and returning to the family is experienced as an emotionally demanding transition. Laura describes this experience as follows:

"That was really (emphasized) very bad, very (emphasized) emotionally difficult for me (.) it's like—to put it bluntly—it's already, in terms of feelings, been a double life, you know, I had spent most of my time there [in the facility] seven days a week, five days there, I've been crying for weeks, it was really just bad. So oh shit only three weeks left, oh shit I am leaving soon, starting to pack my things. When my room was completely empty at the end, I was really standing there crying at my door." (Laura, 16 years)

The quote illustrates the emotional intensity with which return is experienced. In contrast to Type 1, both sides of the transition—leaving care and returning to the family—are described in detail and marked by strong affective significance. Leaving the facility is associated with

farewell and loss, while returning to the family is likewise emotionally charged.

Agency. In this type, return is typically driven by external factors rather than initiated by the young people themselves. These factors are often institutional, such as the completion of compulsory schooling. In some cases, however, return is facilitated through other actors, as in Daniella's case, where her sister actively pursued her return in a manner similar to Type 3. Here, Daniella's own agency was backgrounded in relation to that of her sister. Although she was formally given a choice, declining return would likely have required justification within the family context. Thus, what characterizes this type is not the specific factor triggering return, but the fact that return is not primarily framed as a self-initiated decision, but as part of a taken-for-granted transition.

What unites the narratives in this type is that return is generally accepted even though it is not actively initiated. Despite being emotionally challenging, its timing is rarely questioned. Accordingly, narratives include few explicit justifications for return, which contrasts this type with Types 2 and 3. Instead, leaving care at this point is framed as socially expected, as Laura explains:

"Well, you have to leave, it's just (.) I mean, I can't start an apprenticeship and just stay there [in the facility] forever and everything, it's (.) I feel like it's just one of those things you have to get through, it's like exactly the same as when they said yeah you have to go there [being placed] and you just had to get through it, it's the same as yeah, you just have to leave now." (Laura, 16 years)

This quote shows that return in this type is framed as embedded in broader institutional and social frameworks that are experienced as part of a normal life course. Even in cases such as Daniella's, in which another person facilitates return, the transition remains consistent with the taken-for-granted understanding of the return, illustrating how agency, while not absent, remains largely backgrounded within this framework of acceptance.

Belonging. In this type, the residential care facility is experienced as a supportive and familiar social world and is often described in quasi-familial terms. Young people spend most of their everyday lives in the facility, which may become a secondary or even primary home. Belonging is therefore strongly associated with the facility and its social relations. Close relationships with peers and staff foster a sense of community and identification with the group, which is expressed by the young people through descriptions of shared activities, excursions, and occasional collective peer resistance toward adult authority. Difficulties are also reported, particularly in relation to entering care and institutional constraints such as rules or chores. Overall, however, residential care is portrayed in positive terms.

Although family visits continue during placement, the family increasingly recedes as the primary place of belonging. This is reflected in the way these visits are narrated: they are not experienced as continuous extensions of everyday life but as movement between two distinct social worlds. Consequently, return is not constructed as a restoration of continuity, as in Types 1 and 2, but as a transition that is associated with the end of a significant life phase. In some cases, this transition is further intensified by the simultaneous completion of compulsory schooling, reinforcing its biographical salience.

Post-Return Trajectory. A characteristic of this type is that return is experienced as a process of reconfiguration marked by adjustment difficulties. Young people describe leaving behind a social world that had become central over several years, while simultaneously re-entering family routines from which they had become partly detached. Accordingly, narratives include detailed accounts of the transition itself. Particularly characteristic are descriptions of packing belongings and experiencing the now-empty room in the facility as emotionally significant. Descriptions of coping strategies for farewells are also common in the narratives; Josephine, for example, describes filming her final week in order to preserve memories. Alongside this, young people express both anticipation and ambivalence regarding return. Daniella captures

this tension as follows:

"Yeah, I loved the facility. That sounds kind of silly when I say it like that, but I mean, it was like a little family for me because, yeah, I lived there, ate there, slept there. I was just there all the time, and they kind of became like a little family. But, of course, I was happy to go back home again, to be able to enjoy the freedom I didn't have in the facility—like, staying out later in the evening, you know." (Daniella, 15 years)

At the same time, narratives often include concerns about reintegration into family life and fears that previous problems may resurface. Josephine recalls:

"I was also a little scared—like, about what happens when I leave the facility. Will it be like before? Will I fall into my low point again? Or will everything get better?" (Josephine, 18 years)

These anticipatory concerns prior to leaving the facility reflect a recurring pattern of this type; however, within the post-return adjustment phase, experiences vary across cases. Some young people report their return as less difficult than expected, whereas others describe a challenging period marked by feelings of estrangement. Laura, for example, recalls feeling overwhelmed by the transition:

"I just felt kind of overwhelmed, the switch from, like, a structured daily routine to having way more responsibility for myself. [...] And especially, going back into the family—they'd been a tight team for years, and I had my own rhythm, and then I was back again. And it felt kind of, well, not really uncomfortable, but, you know, I didn't really feel fully accepted at first, because I knew they were a team, and then I just kind of came along again." (Laura, 16 years)

Despite these emotional challenges, it is characteristic of this type that young people ultimately succeed in managing the transition. Across narratives, return is followed by stabilization processes, most notably successful transitions into vocational training.

In this respect, this type shares similarities with Type 5, where return is likewise experienced as challenging. However, the underlying sources of difficulty differ. Whereas Type 5 is shaped by an unexpected, externally imposed discharge, this type is characterized by a process of reintegration into family life after a prolonged period in which the facility had become the primary social world.

Type 5) Forced Return after Unilaterally Decided Discharge

This type of return experience is characterized by discharge from residential care that is experienced as sudden, incomprehensible, and unilaterally decided. It reflects a configuration of denied agency, a sense of belonging to the family that remained intact yet conflictual during placement, and a post-return trajectory marked by difficulties arising from the abrupt transition.

The type was reconstructed from the narratives of Cloé, Marcel, and Soraya. Placement reasons and legal foundations are heterogeneous across cases. Soraya, for example, actively sought placement due to conflicts with her parents. Cloé entered residential care with parental consent following conflicts with her mother and in response to educational support needs. Marcel, by contrast, was placed under a care order against his wishes. Experiences of residential care also vary considerably, ranging from the facility being described as a supportive environment to accounts of it as a restrictive setting. What distinguishes this type is agency in the context of the leaving-care decision, which is experienced as sudden and decided by others. Cloé recalls her experience:

"Initially they said, you will definitely stay another year here, everything was already arranged, including funding (.) and then it came as a complete surprise to me, and for me, it's just (.) I can't deal with changes very well [...] for me, it's just (.) it overwhelmed me because it was a sudden change (.) and it was just (.) decided." (Cloé, 18 years)

This quote illustrates the extent to which the decision is experienced as externally imposed and beyond young people's control. This experience is reflected in narratives marked by strong emotional responses. While this partly resembles Type 4, the affective dynamics differ: whereas Type 4 is characterized by farewell-related sadness, young people in this type primarily express anger, frustration, and incomprehension. In this respect, discharge functions as a trigger for a distinct return experience that differs from the other types.

Agency. A characteristic of this type is that young people feel confronted with a discharge decision made by the facility without being meaningfully involved. In addition, they are left without a plausible explanation for the decision and without opportunities to influence it. This situation is experienced as highly distressing and is associated with feelings of loss of control, powerlessness, and anger, as Marcel illustrates:

"Of course, it was nice that I could finally get out (.) but it wasn't exactly how I wanted to leave; it was out of my control (.) and that (emphasized) just made me really angry because when something is out of my control (.) and something is decided about me, that makes me aggressive because it makes me feel like I'm not even allowed to decide about my own life." (Marcel, 17 years)

As the quote shows, agency is not absent in this type; rather, it becomes particularly salient precisely because it is experienced as denied. Following such discharge decisions, young people face the consequences of a transition they did not initiate themselves and are often left to deal with this on their own, as illustrated by Marcel's account of his mother's reaction:

"I was thrown out there without anything being decided with me, my mother got upset, she was aggressive towards me again all day and all week, and she had outbursts again against me when I was back home (.) and yes." (Marcel, 17 years)

From the young people's perspective, such reactions within the family may themselves be a source of concern that would warrant attention, yet they appear to play little or no role in how the discharge decision was made. Although rule violations may have contributed to discharge in some cases, other narratives point to communicative shortcomings on the part of the facility. Thus, what defines this type is not the objective reason for discharge nor how young people experienced their placement, but the experience of a major life transition being decided without meaningful participation.

Given the suddenness of the discharge decision and the short time that young people are given to leave the facility, return is framed as an unavoidable consequence of discharge, because establishing alternative living arrangements seems not feasible under these constrained temporal conditions. Thus, agency is constrained not only in relation to leaving care but also in the decision to return.

In this respect, Type 5 can be understood as a counterpart to Types 2 and 3. Whereas young people in those types actively pursue return, young people in this type are excluded from the decisions regarding this transition.

Another characteristic of this type is the lack of explanations regarding return, which contrasts with other types, that frame return as conditional or as part of an institutional logic. In this type, however, discharge occurs at varying and sometimes seemingly arbitrary points in time. As a result, young people experience their return as largely disconnected from developmental readiness, timing, or future planning, which reflects the difficulty these young people face in making sense of the return circumstances.

Belonging. Residential care is experienced in markedly different ways within this type, ranging from a secondary home to a place of restriction and discomfort. Family contexts prior to return are typically described as conflictual, and narratives include feelings of worry, sadness, and uncertainty in response to this unwanted transition. At the same time, they reveal a marked ambivalence: return is experienced

both as imposed and as a form of coming home. Cloé captures this ambivalence:

"I was happy to come home. I didn't really want to, but I was happy because I thought, I actually like being at home (.) the problem is just my mother and that's just (.) well (.) I just thought (.) I have to tolerate my mother, but at least I can be at home." (Cloé, 18 years)

This illustrates that the family remains the primary place of belonging despite placement and despite young people not desiring the form or timing of their return. Although Cloé developed a sense of belonging to the residential care facility, she continues to reserve the notion of "home" for her family. Familial belonging thus remains fundamentally intact even in the context of strained relationships. Accordingly, return is not experienced as re-entry into a now secure environment but as re-engagement with familiar yet unresolved conditions.

A further characteristic of this type is a partial decoupling of belonging and agency. While the family remains the primary place of belonging, return is not experienced as a self-determined movement toward it. In this respect, Type 5 differs from Types 2 and 3, where return is actively pursued and closely linked to young people's own efforts, as well as from Type 4, in which the facility often becomes the primary social world during placement.

Post-Return Trajectory. In this type, leaving residential care and returning to the family is experienced as a rushed and overwhelming process. Young people are not only confronted with what they perceive as expulsion and forced return but also with highly limited time to prepare for the transition. They describe having only a few weeks to reorganize their everyday lives, make future plans, and leave the facility.

In this respect, Type 5 differs markedly from Type 4. Whereas leaving care in Type 4 is typically gradual and accompanied by farewell rituals and opportunities for emotional processing, young people in this type describe organizational pressures as dominating the transition. Cloé describes this experience as follows:

"I was not (emphasized) ready, I really handled everything in two weeks (.) signed my apprenticeship contract, said I would move back in with my parents in this case, packed, already brought everything home (.) finished school, and had only one day left to say goodbye and then I was gone." (Cloé, 18 years)

Similar to Type 4, these young people frequently describe difficulties in reintegrating into family life. However, these difficulties arise under different conditions. Whereas Type 4 is characterized primarily by challenges of readjustment, young people in this type additionally face the challenge of returning to family contexts in which many of the problems that originally led to placement are perceived as persisting. Cloé describes this situation:

"The whole (.) family stress continued, and I just found myself right in the middle of it (.) and I wasn't used to it anymore because I made a huge development (.) and going home over the weekend knowing that I could go back if it doesn't work out (.) and living at home again was definitely (.) a very big difference." (Cloé, 18 years)

This illustrates a broader pattern of this type: young people return not only to a family life from which they have become partly detached during placement, but also to largely unchanged family circumstances that confront them with earlier conflicts. At the same time, return is framed as a definitive transition. Unlike weekend visits, there appears to be no possibility of returning to the facility if difficulties arise.

Despite these challenges, a further defining feature of this type is that young people ultimately succeed in establishing a viable post-return trajectory, distinguishing it from Type 6. However, the pathways through which this occurs vary: avoiding ongoing conflict, changes in family circumstances initiated by others, or gradual improvements in family relationships. What unites these narratives is not a shared strategy but the fact that, despite an initially forced and difficult return,

young people are able to stabilize their everyday lives within the family context.

Type 6) Post-Return Loneliness and Transition-Crisis

In contrast to Types 1–5, this type of return experience is characterized by post-return crisis as well as the absence of a meaningful peer network in the family's local community. It reflects a configuration of no consistent pattern of agency, a sense of family-centered belonging combined with weak peer relations, and a difficult post-return trajectory.

The type was reconstructed from the narratives of Mirco, Niklas, and Tonio. Placement reasons and legal foundations vary across cases. Whereas Mirco and Tonio were placed with parental consent due to educational needs and behavioral issues, Niklas was placed under a juvenile justice order in an intervention center. Given this heterogeneity in placement circumstances, the narratives do not show a common pattern that would suggest a systematic connection between type characteristics and placement circumstances.

A characteristic of this type is a distinct post-return trajectory marked by disruption of educational pathways and crisis, with young people seeking formal post-return support, including psychiatric treatment following emotional distress. The second defining characteristic is the shared experience of peer relationships being absent or only weakly developed, both prior to placement and after return. Thus, while the typology is generally structured around the family and the residential care facility as key places of belonging, this type highlights an additional aspect of *Belonging* that becomes salient and shapes the return experience in a distinct way.

Agency. In contrast to other types, no single dominant pattern of agency in the decision to leave care and return to the family can be reconstructed in this type. Mirco, for example, experienced his return in a manner similar to Type 5, describing discharge as a unilateral decision by the facility. Unlike in Type 5, however, he does not attribute this decision to institutional wrongdoing but retrospectively links it to his own behavior at the time. This contrasts with the experience of powerlessness that characterizes Type 5. Tonio's return was initiated by his mother, who withdrew her consent for placement due to dissatisfaction with the facility. Tonio neither actively supported nor opposed this decision. By contrast, Niklas actively pursued his return in a manner similar to Type 3. However, in contrast to dynamics of Type 3, he retrospectively reframes his action in a critical way:

"Honestly, I got tired of the facility at some point, and I have pretty good people skills (.) so I knew what they wanted to hear so I could leave (.) and maybe that was the mistake, looking back (.) because, well, it did me (..), uh, a lot of good at the time (.) I was free again, I could do whatever I wanted (.) but it wasn't smart for the future, yeah (.) so it didn't help much (.) I probably should have stayed there longer." (Niklas, 17 years).

This reassessment of return is a recurrent pattern of this type. Across narratives, the young people suggest that the circumstances or timing of their return could have been different. However, they do not primarily attribute responsibility to the facility. Instead, they reflect on their own role in shaping the return process and its consequences. In this respect, agency is not absent but retrospectively reconfigured.

Belonging. Experiences of residential care vary considerably within this type. Tonio describes the facility as a meaningful social context in which he participated in shared activities and gradually developed a sense of belonging. By contrast, Niklas and Mirco experienced residential care as an imposed community to which they never developed strong attachments, even though Mirco generally speaks positively about aspects of his time in care. At the same time, he emphasizes that the facility was not the right place for him at the time:

"I actually got along well with everyone there. The problem was simply that the others really had serious (.) serious problems. And when they

would lose it, for example at school (...), suddenly a child would get up, scream, hit someone, and leave. You can't learn there, you can't work, and (...) yeah." (Mirco, 14 years)

In this type, young people describe their family as the main place of belonging, while belonging remains concentrated within the family context. The absence of meaningful peer relationships within the local community after return is repeatedly emphasized by the young people, constituting a characteristic of this type. At the time of return, peer relationships were either concentrated within the facility, or have already been limited prior to placement. Consequently, although young people return to a family context to which they feel they belong, meaningful peer relationships within their everyday environment remain limited or absent. This reflects the difficulty of maintaining and developing meaningful peer relationships in the family's local community during placement due to spatial and social separation between the family's home and the residential care facility.

Post-Return Trajectory. Following return, young people in this type encounter multiple interrelated challenges, including establishing new daily routines after leaving the structured environment of the facility, reintegrating into family life, and major educational or vocational transitions. Although these challenges are not specific to this type, as they were also described in Types 4 and 5, what distinguishes this type is that these processes unfold in a context characterized by a lack of meaningful peer integration. Tonio describes how the loss of structure after return was followed by further difficulties:

"I was used to having a daily routine throughout my whole time in residential care, so like, you get up (.) then you do that chore then you do this chore (.) I didn't have that at home (..) and that was something completely different, of course, I had to get used to it for a while (.) over time, it got better (.) and then (emphasized) (.) at some point, I dropped out of my apprenticeship and everything just started to go downhill." (Tonio, 18 years)

This quote reflects the highly structured organization of daily life in residential care, which contrasts with the less tightly regulated contexts young people encounter after leaving the facility. At the same time, it highlights a sequential process characterized by an initial phase of disruption of structured routines after leaving the facility, followed by a phase of adaptation and stabilization, before a renewed disruption in everyday life occurs when the apprenticeship is lost. Similar patterns of post-return educational disruptions are evident in Mirco (school dropout) and Niklas (apprenticeship dropout).

In the absence of meaningful peer relationships in the local community, young people experience increasing social isolation. They describe extended periods spent at home, with the already limited access to peer networks further restricting opportunities for social support and peer orientation. Within this context, emotional distress is reported, which in all three cases is associated with inpatient psychiatric treatment. Rather than constituting a linear sequence, these developments form part of a broader configuration of post-return challenges. This configuration is characteristic of this type but should not be interpreted in terms of individual deficits, but rather as reflecting differing conditions under which post-return adaptation takes place.

Mirco describes how these dynamics are also shaped by experiences of stigmatization:

"Before [my return], I was only there [mother's residence] on weekends. I didn't really know anyone. [...] I was just in my room all the time. I didn't know what to do. I was always sad because of the facility [discharge] and (.) I (...) well, I tried going out sometimes (.) but every time someone saw me, they'd say, 'Look, there's that weird boy.'" (Mirco, 14 years)

This illustrates how return may involve exposure to a social environment in which young people feel neither integrated nor accepted within their local peer context. In this respect, post-return challenges are closely linked to the absence of meaningful peer relationships, while

family belonging remains intact.

Importantly, these experiences should not be interpreted as fixed outcomes or deterministic trajectories. Although all three young people report substantial difficulties following return, they also describe ongoing efforts to re-establish stability through ambulatory and community-based support, including therapeutic interventions and vocational counselling. Instead of re-entering out-of-home care, they actively seek formal forms of assistance to regain orientation.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on young people returning to their families from residential care by presenting an empirically grounded typology of return experiences. This typology does not classify individuals or predict outcomes but reconstructs distinct configurations of *Agency*, *Belonging*, and the *Post-Return Trajectory* through which return is experienced and interpreted. The findings demonstrate that return experiences cannot be understood as a linear consequence of placement characteristics, legal frameworks, or entry reasons. Instead, their significance largely depends on how these factors are integrated into young people's biographies over time. Return experiences are also not solely shaped by belonging to either the residential care facility or the family, as agency in the decision to return plays an important role, whether actively exercised (Type 2, 3) or denied (Type 5). Post-return contexts, particularly social integration within the local community, can further shape how return is experienced (especially Type 6).

Consistent with prior research (Balsells et al., 2017; Frimpong-Manso & Bugyei, 2019; Mateos et al., 2017), reintegration into the family was found to be challenging. Extending these findings, this study shows that these challenges are not equally pronounced across return experiences. Substantial adjustment difficulties are particularly reported by young people who experience their return as an emotionally challenging change in their daily and social life (Type 4), as a forced return after unilateral discharge (Type 5), or who face post-return loneliness and crisis (Type 6). In contrast, young people who perceive their return as an unremarkable normal transition (Type 1), as well-deserved (Type 2), or as liberation from child welfare (Type 3) rarely report reintegration difficulties. In these cases, family life had either not changed substantially, or the family was constructed as an idealized environment in which acknowledging difficulties would have conflicted with the narrative young people sought to present.

This study therefore helps to reinterpret seemingly contradictory findings within previous re-search. Earlier studies have reported both predominantly positive (Walakira et al., 2022) and predominantly challenging return experiences (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018; Mateos et al., 2017). Rather than contradicting one another, these findings appear compatible once different configurations of return experiences are distinguished. Positive returns may result from improvements within families, but they may also emerge because young people experience their return as evidence of their personal development (Type 2) or as successful self-assertion against a restrictive child welfare system (Type 3).

The findings further underline the importance of social and relational dynamics. Previous research has highlighted the loss of relationships established in care (Mateos et al., 2017). The present study refines this observation by showing that such experiences are particularly salient among young people experiencing their return as emotionally challenging (Type 4). At the same time, these findings reveal that feelings of sadness (Mateos et al., 2017) frequently coexist with joy, relief, and pride, illustrating the multidimensional emotional character of return.

The study also addresses the role of peer integration after return. While previous research has primarily linked educational risks after care to economic hardship and structural disadvantage (Frimpong-Manso & Bugyei, 2019; James et al., 2017; Walakira et al., 2022), the present study suggests a more specific relational mechanism that may contribute

to vulnerability in the post-return period. In particular, limited access to peer networks within the local community emerged as a relevant condition that can shape how young people navigate their return, especially when difficulties in school or vocational training arise (Type 6). Rather than operating as a direct causal pathway, peer absence functions as a relational constraint that reduces opportunities for informal support outside the family context. This highlights that successful reintegration is not limited to reintegration into the family but also involves reintegration into a broader social context beyond the family.

Although some of the participants described multiple challenges shortly after return, the findings remain compatible with evidence of improved subjective well-being after return (Osswald, 2026). As the narratives show, most challenges arise shortly after return and tend to diminish over time, consistent with the phase model proposed by Bullock et al. (1998). However, the presented typology should not be interpreted as a developmental stage model. The six types do not represent sequential phases through which young people progress. Rather, they represent different experiential configurations irrespective of timing. While phases such as farewell, reintegration, and stabilization can be identified within most narratives, the ways these phases are experienced differ substantially across types. Particularly Type 6 illustrates that serious post-return crises may emerge only after an initial period of apparent stability.

As discussed in Section 3.3, transitions are shaped by institutional and organizational regimes. The presented typology therefore reflects characteristics of the Swiss child welfare system. Thus, the study's findings should not be transferred uncritically to other national contexts. As outlined in Section 1.2, Swiss residential care serves a comparatively broad range of placement purposes. These institutional characteristics are reflected in several types. For example, Type 2 illustrates a return logic in which young people perceive their return as something that must be earned by demonstrating developmental progress. Conversely, the narratives rarely frame return as contingent upon changes of parental skills or family functions alone, even when serious child protection concerns had contributed to placement. This suggests that within the Swiss context, return decisions are not solely organized around matters reducing parental risk but also around young people's own developmental trajectories and well-being.

However, the findings also illustrate that this institutional logic of residential care as a place that provides children with supportive developmental conditions when family life is difficult does not always operate as intended. This becomes particularly visible in Types 3 and 5. Whereas young people in Type 3 reject the idea of a return that is conditional upon institutional approval and actively pursue their return against professional requirements, Type 5 illustrates that, from the young people's perspective, returns are not always implemented as carefully planned, child-centered transitions. Although individual discharge decisions may be considered justified by involved professionals, the narratives suggest that some young people experience these decisions as insufficiently explained and the transition itself insufficiently supported. This stands in contrast to the recommendations for leaving care processes published by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Social Services (SODK) and the Conference for Child and Adult Protection (KOKES) (2021), which emphasize participation, preparation, and gradual transition planning as guiding principles, even though these do not constitute a coherent national policy framework, as no such framework exists in Switzerland. At the same time, such experiences cannot be attributed solely to characteristics of the Swiss child welfare system, as similar accounts of poorly prepared returns have also been reported in other countries (Mateos et al., 2017).

While the typology is shaped by contextual characteristics of the Swiss child welfare system, it is not limited to this context. *Agency, Belonging, and Post-Return Trajectory* are analytical dimensions through which return experiences can be understood across different child welfare systems.

6.1. Recommendations for policy and practice

The presented typology indicates that return processes from residential care are highly heterogeneous and cannot be addressed through uniform transition procedures. Instead, they require needs-oriented – and therefore flexible – support structures. Considering the configuration of *Agency, Belonging, and Post-Return Trajectory* in an individual case can be helpful to design case-specific support.

In addition, transparent and participatory decision-making emerges as a fundamental principle. Decisions about leaving care should be communicated in comprehensible ways and with sufficient notice to allow emotional preparation. The findings indicate that when agency in this decision is severely restricted or absent, it may be experienced as a deeply felt violation of rights and autonomy, intensifying feelings of rejection and disorientation (Type 5). Such return constellations should be avoided wherever possible. If a unilateral decision to terminate a placement is deemed unavoidable, for example, when a placement has reached its limits in meeting the young person's needs, two safeguards appear essential. First, the reasons for the decision should be communicated as clearly and transparently as possible, including an acknowledgment of institutional limitations. Second, an independent external professional (e.g., a social worker not affiliated with the facility) should accompany the young person and the family throughout the return process to provide emotional support in processing the decision and assistance with navigating practical arrangements. This may mitigate experiences of abandonment and help ease the return.

The findings further indicate that preparation for return should extend beyond practical arrangements. Young people benefit from opportunities to process the impending transition emotionally, to say goodbye to significant people and places, and to discuss expectations and ambivalent feelings about returning to the family. Because return affects the entire family system, these preparatory conversations should ideally involve both young people and their (wider) families. Joint discussions of expectations, concerns, and anticipated challenges may reduce adjustment difficulties and facilitate reintegration after return.

Furthermore, practitioners should engage with young people's sense of belonging when a return is imminent to understand the meaning the return holds within the young person's biography and to develop individualized support strategies. Particularly for young people who experience residential care as a place of belonging, their return can constitute a challenging transition (Type 4). However, this does not imply that young people should generally avoid developing a sense of belonging during placement, as such belonging is important for their well-being (Köngeter et al., 2026; Magalhães & Calheiros, 2020). Rather than preventing belonging, practitioners should focus on ensuring that residential care and family environments are not experienced as disconnected worlds.

Another cross-cutting recommendation concerns social embeddedness. Access to a supportive peer network in the local community is a crucial stabilizing factor, as evidenced particularly by Type 6. Thus, young people should be enabled and supported throughout their time in care to build and maintain meaningful peer relationships. Encouraging participation in community-based activities, such as joining local sports or music clubs, may serve as entry points. Maintaining contact with the former residential care facility upon return, through alumni gatherings or post-return visits, can further support continuity across life phases.

The findings also suggest that transition support should remain flexible after return. Some young people may require only limited follow-up, whereas others experience increasing difficulties at a later stage. Support systems should therefore allow assistance to be intensified when necessary and include access to educational support, vocational counselling, therapeutic services, and family-oriented interventions. Importantly, these forms of assistance should not be framed as indicators of failed return. As illustrated by Type 6, some young people seek formal support after experiencing crises, without re-entering out-of-home care. Such help-seeking can be understood as an

expression of agency rather than failure. Reducing the stigma associated with accessing further support may therefore lower barriers to seeking help when difficulties emerge.

Finally, the responsibility of child welfare authorities and residential care facilities should not be considered fulfilled on the day a young person leaves care. Rather, child welfare services and residential care providers should remain responsible for ensuring that stable educational, vocational, psychosocial, and family support arrangements are available and that emerging difficulties can be identified and addressed at an early stage. Thus, transition support should be conceptualized not as a short-term administrative procedure but as an extended process combining preventive preparation with flexible post-return support.

6.2. Limitations and further research

While this study offers a typology that provides a nuanced understanding of return experiences, several limitations should be noted.

First, the typology is based on the experiences of young people aged 14–18 who have returned to their families from residential care. It therefore does not capture the experiences of younger children, of those returning from foster care, or of young people who re-enter care after return. Second, interviews were conducted between nine months and one and a half years after the return. Because biographical narratives are always reconstructed from the present, experiences may have been described differently if captured earlier. This applies particularly to difficulties in the initial post-return period, when challenges tend to be most pronounced. However, this methodological decision allowed participants to reflect not only on the return itself but also on their initial post-return adjustment. Had interviews been conducted at a later stage, a longer post-return period could have been captured, while accounts of the initial transition phase may have become less precise or more difficult to reconstruct.

Third, this study relies exclusively on the young people's narratives. Neither family members nor caseworkers were interviewed, so return experiences could only be examined from the young people's perspectives, without case-level information to relate these accounts to institutional assessments.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs capturing the dynamics of return processes over time. Such studies could provide insights into emerging challenges, coping strategies, and the role of professional interventions. Ethnographic approaches, for example, could illuminate how social workers respond to challenges and how these interventions are experienced by young people and their families.

Research should also include young people whose return was "unsuccessful" to better understand processes leading to re-entry into care. However, this study shows that return trajectories may become crisis-ridden without re-entering care. This suggests that future research may benefit from adopting a broader understanding of re-entry into care that includes not only renewed out-of-home placement but also engagement with formal support services. At the same time, it should be taken into account that seeking professional help following return may be interpreted not only as an indicator of difficulties but also as an expression of agency.

Finally, further qualitative studies from different child welfare systems would allow the transferability of this typology to be explored. Although the empirical constellations identified in this study are shaped by characteristics of the Swiss child welfare system, the analytical dimensions of *Agency*, *Belonging*, and *Post-Return Trajectory* may provide a useful framework for comparative research across different national contexts. Such studies could examine how different child welfare systems shape the configuration of these dimensions and the young people's return experiences.

Declarations

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Ethical statement

The ethics committees responsible for the two universities FHNW and OST reviewed the research project and found it exempt from review, since it is not covered by the Swiss Human Research Act. According to swissethics (Umbrella organization of the cantonal ethics committees), research that is not covered by the Swiss Human Research Act does not require ethical approval in Switzerland. Both universities formally confirmed compliance with ethical standards.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares to have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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