

SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE RESIDENTIAL CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM -case study Alba county-

*Senior Lecturer Ph.D. PETRONELA MARIA TALPAȘ
"1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia, Romania*

ABSTRACT: *Young people leaving the special protection system are a priority segment of the activity of social work but with many gaps that make it difficult for them to successfully integrate into work and society. . The annual assessment of the needs and readiness of young people to leave the protection system is considered a necessity, but there is no time to do it.*

Through this research it was made possible to carry out a recent mapping of the level of preparation of young people for leaving the centre, and to identify common, concrete and uniform actions to facilitate the process of preparation for adult life after the end of their special protection measure.

Key words: *protection measures, protection system, socio-professional integration*

Introduction

Preparing for independent living after the end of the protection measure means training them to be able to plan their own lives, to be adaptable to any new situation that arises in their lives, decision making being one of the most important skills that adolescents need to develop, for the premises of an independent and responsible life as adults.

The phrase 'independent living' represents everyday life in the society in which we live with our fellow human beings, in community. Service users who have been institutionalised for a longer period of time are deprived of the normal opportunities to learn independent living skills, the pattern of independent living being different from that which they have experienced in the institutional environment.

The quality of the training process of educational and care staff in residential centres may be a predictor of young people's ability to integrate into work and society. Work in residential services is very much focused on routine, transitional activities and not on learning, with some of the specialists directly involved in working with young people claiming that all the activities on

training/consolidation of independent living skills are real, but others claiming that they are really only created on paper.

The training/education of employees, which is often formal/theoretical rather than practical, does not lead them to act more flexibly in organising activities, with an openness to the community in which they live, and does not adapt to the needs and psycho-individual characteristics of adolescents and young people.

1. Research design

The research was made possible with the support of specialists from DGASPC Alba - Children's case management and quality management of residential services and care and support staff from each state or private residential service included in this research.

The research was carried out in functional residential centres of the Alba General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (Blaj placement centre, Mănărade family-type home, Blaj community family-type home, Cugir family-type home, Pinochio Alba Iulia emergency reception centre) and in

residential centres developed by other accredited and legally licensed social service providers (Sf. Ioan Botezătorul Aiud, Family-type house Sf. Mucenic Ciprian Ocna Mureș, Așezământul Sf. Vasile cel Mare Alba Iulia, Family-type house Izvorul Tămăduirii Oarda de Jos, Family-type house Sanctuary Ocna Mures, Family-type house Rebeca Teiuș, Family-type house Adolescența Oarda de Jos, Family-type house Ușa Speranței Tiur-Blaj.

The research objectives were as follows:

- evaluation of the degree of personal autonomy of young people under special protection measure in residential services in Alba County, public and private, and their ability to integrate socio-professionally when the protection measure ends;
- assess how well state and private social service providers are able to respond to the training and development of young people's personal autonomy for their integration into work and society;
- identify models of good practice in working with young people with a view to replicating them in other state or private residential services as appropriate.

We started from two research hypotheses, namely: the quality of the training process of educational and care staff in residential centres is a predictor for the ability of young people to integrate into work and society, and the existence of rigorous planning of all areas of independent living skills development would prevent major difficulties in the socio-professional integration of young people into adult life after leaving the child protection system.

In line with the research objectives, we used two research methods: quantitative and qualitative, which provided us with relevant research data.

For the quantitative study, a questionnaire was used as a working tool to identify the opinions of the beneficiaries about their future and the stage of preparation for leaving the centre. The questionnaires were administered

to 116 children and young people in 5 state residential centres, 5 residential centres operating in public-private partnership and 2 private centres, the age category of the beneficiaries being between 16 and 18 years and over.

For the qualitative study, group interviews were conducted with residents of state or private residential services, care and support staff (specialized educators, social pedagogues, social workers as case managers, psychologists) and management staff (residential service coordinators, heads of centres, as appropriate).

The research objectives have been achieved and the 2 hypotheses confirmed. In the current practice there is no annual assessment of the level of readiness of young people for the time of leaving the residential unit, the methods and means of carrying out activities on the development of independent living skills carried out by educational staff can be categorized as good practice in working with young people, but not enough and not fully covering all areas of development of independent living skills.

The new situations they have to face and the types of relationships they have to adopt are different from those in the institution, and they are not prepared enough for them. The ideal of training independence skills in young people leaving the system is to train them to be able to manage change, to adapt to it, to function normally within new demands and responsibilities.

2. Significant research results

As of 30.03.2021, a number of 466 children and young people were under a protection measure established under Law no.272/2004 - residential placement (Table no. 1)

The 466 children and young people are placed in public residential services, residential services operating in public-private partnerships or private residential services, as shown in Table 2.

Out of the 466 children and young people, 23 children with disabilities (medium, severe and severe) were excluded, leaving a sample of 116 children and young people aged 16-18 years and over 18 years (Table 3).

answers to this question shows that 69% are satisfied, while 22% say that the institutional environment is not satisfactory for them. The analysis of the respondents who are dissatisfied with the living conditions offered

Table no.1. Distribution of children and young people in the residential care system, by age and gender, on 30.03.2021

Age group	Girls	Boys	Total
1-2 years	1	0	1
3-6 years	7	7	14
7-9 years	32	33	65
10-13 years	75	45	120
14-17 years	69	131	200
18 years and over	41	25	66
Total			466

Table no.2. Distribution of children under special protection measure on 30.03.2021 in residential system

Public residential centres	118
Residential centres in public-private partnership	277
Private residential centres	71
Total	466

Table no.3 Distribution of beneficiaries included in the research by type of residential service

Public residential centres	45
Residential centres in public-private partnership	45
Private residential centres	26
Total	116

The questionnaire administered to the subjects comprises 24 questions aimed at capturing as accurately as possible their level of preparedness for independent living after leaving the residential centre where they are placed.

The first item of the questionnaire opens the battery of questions about the residential centre where the beneficiaries live, testing how they rate the living conditions in the institution. The special protection system has seen remarkable infrastructural changes in terms of improved living conditions and refurbishment of living spaces. Analysis of the

by the institution shows that the proportion of responses is equal in terms of the institutional environment: state or private (fig.1).

With regard to the services provided in the residential centre (food, clothing, school supplies, personal items, teaching materials, information and counselling services), in accordance with the recommendations of the relevant legislation (GD no.904/2014 - on the establishment of minimum expenditure limits related to the rights of children under special protection measure), in particular the quality standards laid down for residential

services (Ord.25/2019- Annex no.1- for residential social services for children in the special protection system), 92 beneficiaries representing 79% of the sample consider them very good, and 14 of the beneficiaries are of the opinion that food, clothing and footwear are provided at a minimum level considering them satisfactory (fig.2).

they are concerned about the future, 11% are a little concerned, and 3% are disinterested in their future (fig.3).

In this respect, 40 respondents want to take a job as a first step in the future, followed by 30 respondents who plan to migrate to another country. Another 20 respondents associate their personal future

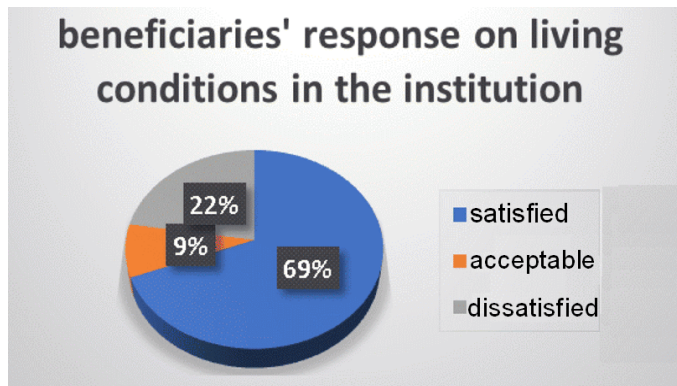


Fig.1. Living conditions in the institution

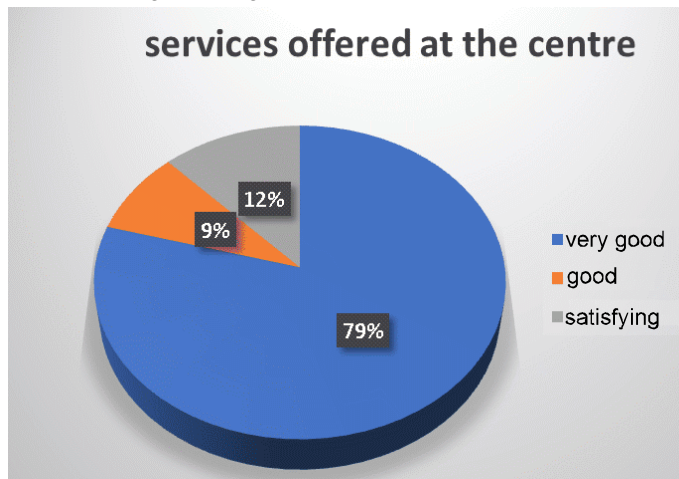


Fig. 2. Services offered to beneficiaries

Poor relationships with beneficiaries who have behavioural disorders and who are placed in the same residential centres and not in other special centres, as well as the existence of favouritism created by staff, or insufficient pocket money are problems cited by most respondents at both public and private residential centres.

As for the future, 86% of respondents say

plan with returning to their family of origin, and 11 of them want to continue their education in the future (fig.4).

In the next question, subjects are interviewed about how the care and support staff working in the residential centre are involved in their future. Thus, 17% of young people experience the feeling that care staff do not think about their future at all, another

13% consider that there is little involvement of staff in this aspect of their lives, followed by 27% of respondents who answered that staff are involved with them in planning for the future (fig. 5).

All respondents indicated that they were aware that they were entitled to an extension of their period of stay in the centre, according to Art. 55 para. 3 of Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of



Fig. 3. Young people's concern for the future

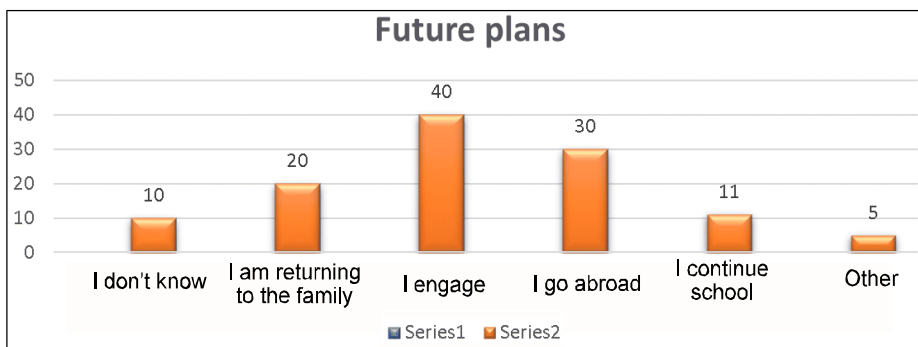


Fig. 4. Beneficiaries' future plans

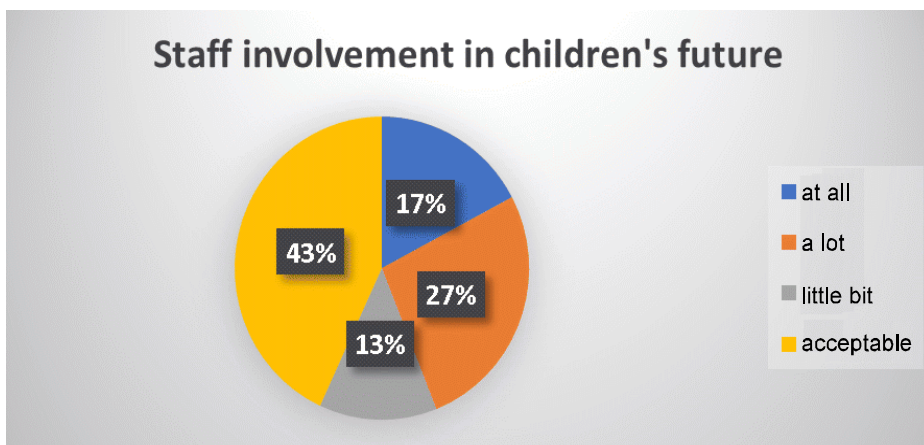


Fig. 5. Staff involvement in children's future

the rights of the child with subsequent amendments and additions *"at the request of the young person, expressed after acquiring full capacity to exercise, if he/she continues his/her studies only once in each form of day education, special protection shall be granted for the duration of studies, but not exceeding the age of 26"*.

The opinion of the specialists regarding the future plans of adolescents and young people agrees with the answers given by the respondents in the interviews: *"few young people look with maturity at the moment of exit, but they are happy to leave the system...that is until they hit hard times"* (A.R-29 years old-psychologist), *"when we discuss with them about the nature/type of expenses in a household they still relate only to the satisfaction of basic needs, and forget that the priority is to pay expenses"* (Z.E., 54 years old-family home educator).

Another question asks respondents whether they know how to open a bank account, or make card payments. The vast majority of responses were negative (70 respondents), with only 35 answering that they know what this entails. Also in the interviews conducted it appears that the staff of the state residential centres theoretically create this type of activity with the beneficiaries but do not identify concrete situations in which they help young people to experience this.

On the other hand, educators in public-private residential centres report that within the limits of their possibilities (time and material resources) they accompany children to the bank when opening a personal account for each one, the most banal example being the allowance account, or together with them they make certain payments to the utility bills related to the family-type home, online, or directly to the bank, so that the young person can see all the necessary steps to carry out this step.

It is worth mentioning the opinion of educators in this regard : *"as far as time allows, among other routine activities, we*

play games with the children on how they should present themselves at a job interview"

Educators argue that the bulk of the activities in a day are routine and transition activities, as they are called in the literature. Little time remains for learning activities. The duration of the training courses/regular training of employees is limited and their expectations are sometimes the same as those of the beneficiaries *"to show us how to do, to tell us how to do, we have a block somewhere..."* (MC- 40 years old educator-state residential centre)

From the negative answers of the respondents to the question on employment contract/job description, work schedule, it appears that in this chapter of the independent living skills development spectrum, there is no continuity in this learning process: interview-employment-employment contract-work schedule. The case managers state *"it is considered that this segment of activity is the responsibility of us case managers during the follow-up period of the young person after leaving the system"* (A.V-41 years old - case manager).

Efforts to repeatedly employ the same young person become exhausting for the social worker during the period of social accompaniment, with negative consequences for the young person's independence. *"some give up work too easily and rely on the social worker to help them find a new job"* (VS-32 years - case manager).

Conclusions

Some of their answers reveal psycho-affective immaturity, but others deserve to be taken into account as suggestions and recommendations both for staff involved in working with children and young people in residential services (educational and care staff, care and support staff, residential service coordinators) and for authorities.

The respondents' answers were given to the residential social services coordinators

for analysis, raising several questions beneficiaries with all the services offered in regarding the level of satisfaction of the the residential homes/family-type homes.

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