THE ISSUE OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS TRAINING IN CHILDREN FROM THE PROTECTION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT: *The objective of training and developing skills for independent living of young people in institutions is to educate and train them to face the next stage of their lives: social and professional integration. This objective must be pursued by social workers, case managers, educators/trainers in residential institutions throughout the psycho-affective development of the institutionalised child.*

Within this general objective, operational objectives can be added such as: reducing the number of unemployed young people from the protection system, reducing the phenomenon of begging, reducing the crime rate among young people from the protection system, reducing the number of young people dependent on the social insurance and social protection system, etc.

In many cases, when leaving the institution, young people experience repeated failures in their social and professional integration, even if they receive support, guidance and monitoring from specialists. This is due to the fact that independent living skills training has not been a clear objective in their development.

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

Introduction

Every year, around 5000 young people are forced to leave the protection system and have to integrate into social and professional life. This is a difficult stage of life for any young person, but even more difficult for young people who have benefited up to this age from a protection measure in the public or private system and are left without previous sources of support [Muga et. al, 2005].

Preparation for independent living as a component of social assistance is a particular form of non-formal, participatory, stimulating and personal development education. The ideal of training young people who are about to leave the system in independence skills is to train them to manage change, to adapt to it, to function normally within new demands and responsibilities.

The requirements are sustained by the contents and meaning of the evolving contemporary world in which the personality profile is not only related to the amount of acquired knowledge and acquired skills, but primarily to the psychosocial competences and skills possessed, of which the following are essential: the ability to solve problems and make effective and promising decisions, interpersonal skills, effective communi-cation, creative thinking, mastering emotions and stress, self-appraisal and empathy.

The data from the report made by the County Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection, in June 2023, show that the number of children for whom social protection measures have been instituted remains constant in Romania, regardless of the efforts made (see Table 1).

Several studies have identified several dysfunctional aspects of the Romanian protection system, such as: the absence or low quality of training for independent living; the imbalance between rights and responsibilities; the pressure of specialists in the system on young people who are expected to become -instantly adults; the lack or insufficient training of staff to successfully manage work with these young people, low job satisfaction with the conditions and pressures of the workplace, etc. [Anghel & Beckett, 2007; Câmpean, 2004; Dickens & Serghi, 2000; in Anghel & Dima, 2008].

Similar difficulties are also mentioned by Neagu and Petrescu (2017): uneven development of support services for post-institutionalised young people and specific programmes for their socio-occupational integration; insufficient number of staff in both case management and independent living skills development specialists; marginalisation/exclusion of young people from the

Table 1 Beneficiaries of social protection services, June 2023

Type of service	number of children (active cases on 30.06.2023)
FAMILY SERVICES, of which:	29090
- to foster carers employed by DGASPC	16017
- to nurses employed by accredited private bodies	54
- to relatives up to and including the fourth degree	9903
- to other families/people	3116
RESIDENTIAL SERVICES, of which:	10976
public	8725
private	2251

Source https://copii.gov.ro/1/date-statistice-copii-si-adoptii/

protection system both in school and in employment; insufficient psychological and financial support from the public system to foster carers to support young people in care; poor development of social and vocational integration services and independent living skills development services; lack of support for the development of social and vocational integration services by the NGO sector.

Faced with new situations and not having been taught how to cope with them, these young people reject the opportunities offered to them in terms of social and professional integration, as this is not an objective that they have to learn and become aware of since the institutionalisation period. An analysis of the motivation of their behaviour reveals that the objectives they set themselves are reduced to satisfying basic needs: food, housing. Having a high tolerance for abuse, material deprivation and precarious living conditions, formed during their stay in the institution, these young people adapt to the poor life outside the institution, they do not aspire to more because they lack notions of other living standards, and they do not have personal experience of higher living standards to set themselves the objective of acquiring them.

In the value system internalized by young people in welfare institutions, work has no particular value, as they are accustomed to receive their rights without any effort on their part, on the contrary, those who work, being minorities, are disregarded in the group because they "can't manage". Moreover, taking on a job of any kind also means following a timetable and hierarchies, which limits their freedom, which young people

see as the only positive aspect of leaving the institution.

On the other hand, the feeling of satisfaction for a job well done is foreign to them and the monetary rewards of employment are not immediate, young people prefer casual work. Without a well-developed value system, they often resort to begging, prostitution, theft or even serious crime to earn an income or survive in independent life.

Much of the literature on the transition to adulthood has been based on the concept of -emergence to adulthood - a period when young people consider themselves to be beyond adolescence but have not yet completed the transition to adulthood. It is a time when young people are developing their identities, exploring different life possibilities and focusing on themselves [Arnett, 2000; 2007; Blatterer, 2010; Cote et al., 1996; in Branaman & Ostroot ,2016].

Contemporary transitional theories address in particular pragmatic issues such as labour market flexibility, family dynamics and the expansion of the education sector.

Beck (1992) says that in the transition to adulthood, in the context of modern society, young people construct their identity on the basis of the affinities they have and not on the basis of family or class constraints.

Other authors [Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Skelton, 2002] pay particular attention to structural barriers that restrict young people's opportunities to pursue their goals or desires [Worth, 2009].

Transitions involve diverse pathways, phases and multiple social actors as well as a high level of development, complexity and uncertainty, and are a consequence of alignment between different

developmental stages and a process involving interactions between diverse social groups [Wittmayer et al., 2017].

1. Development of self-identity; self-discovery

According to J.D. Krumboltz [2006], an individual's life is, among other things, a succession of learning experiences leading to the formation of a set of representations. Earlier experiences are a lasting influence in guiding later behaviours, and the representations constructed during various past learning experiences are almost automatically applied in interpreting current experiences.

The term self-identity is a concept that can be approached from several perspectives. Self-identity seen from a dynamic perspective, reveals the great importance attached to the interactions between the individual and the environment, as the individual does not construct his/her identity alone. This construction depends both on the image offered by others and on one's own orientations.

On the other hand, the individual has several identities which manifest themselves successively or simultaneously, depending on the context in which they find themselves: cultural identity, group identity, social identity, professional identity, etc. These different identities are integrated into a structured whole providing a certain coherence.

Self-identity is thus defined as "a polymorphous, dynamic structure whose constitutive elements - psychological and sociological - are related to the relational situation of a social actor at a given moment". [coord. S. Mitulescu, 2003]

Identity is a key concept in E. Erikson. He distinguishes between personal identity as the sense of existential continuity over time, the sense of being the same and the recognition by others of this continuity and similarity, and self-identity - the sense of being a certain way, of being a certain person, of having a certain style of individuality. This identity is built in stages. Each stage is marked by the construction of a certain 'sense of identity'. All identity theories emphasise the fundamental role played by others in the construction of self-identity.

Many young people in the institution have difficulties in forming their self-image, as their personalities become uniform over time in the placement centres, due to the routine of life, lack of interest and proper involvement of staff members, emotional deficiencies, as well as lack of landmarks in the construction of self-identity.

The formation of self-identity should be seen as a result of developmental particularities in the sphere of affectivity, socialisation and moral structures, particularities that are related to the consequences of the deinstitutionalisation process.

In the context of emotional deprivation during institutionalization, abuse, poor socialization and lack of moral values, these young people have internalized a negative self-image. The internalisation of the self-image is a consequence of the judgments the young person has faced throughout their life or the permanent confrontation with discriminatory attitudes towards young people from the institutional system. Many adolescents tend to develop their self-image in comparison with others or with an idealised image of what they should be. Failures in the everyday life of the adolescent often lead to a sense of worthlessness, a lack of confidence in one's own potential. The main factors that lead to the devaluation of young people in institutions are the complex of their origins, the non-acceptance of the condition of young people in institutions, the constant confrontation with people who marginalise them.

The constant presence of frustrating factors, the repetition of adaptation crises generated by the transition from one institution to another, the accumulation of tension, explain the stabilisation of frustrated behaviour. The main frustrating factors are: the complex of origin, the non-acceptance of being institutionalised, the constant confrontation with the attitude of the group which is reticent towards children coming from institutions, the abuse they have suffered in the institution.

The fact of having been abandoned causes feelings of emotional ambivalence, guilt, emotional frustration in young people; they often attribute the cause of abandonment to themselves, tending to idealize the parent and seek an explanation for the abandonment in terms of poor material conditions.

Unconsciously expressed in childhood, the origin complex becomes a constant psychological structure during adolescence, with a negative, decompensating effect on the general balance of personality. The origin complex is found in those who come from unknown parents, those who are abandoned, those with immoral parents. Teenagers wonder who their parents are, why they left them,

why they neglect them, why they do not visit them, why they are not loved. They are outraged by their parents' vices, their antisocial acts. In their consciousness, the feeling of being nobody's, the feeling of having been wronged by abandonment, settles in. Attitudes towards their families of origin have a wide range of manifestations: some want to be reintegrated into the family, idealize their parents, create illusions, others are ashamed of their parents, avoid them, refuse to meet them, or when they do meet them, reject them. Others persistently search for their parents, look them up in the files in the institution's archives, and turn to law enforcement agencies to identify them.

Some of these young people cannot reconstruct a personal life history, so in adolescence they search for their past, which is of utmost importance to answer the question "Who am I?". Adolescents who enter adult life without having come to know their true identity will have problems adapting and integrating into society.

Vocational identity is important in the formation of one's own identity and manifests itself as the discovery of aptitudes, capacities and abilities. With a negative self-image and low self-esteem, young people who have followed the institutional pathway show a large gap between aspirations and capacities, idealised preferences, and imprecise motivation for choices. These young people lack well-defined interests and aspirations. Their will and activity are characterised by lability of action and a weak capacity for prioritisation in the motivational system. This vocational identity fuels the future projection of these young people. Most of them project material independence without long-term prospects, seeking rather the benefit of the moment and the affirmation of independence.

One of the most important elements of vocational guidance is the development of self-image through exploration and self-discovery activities and a positive orientation to personal characteristics.

An important element in defining self-identity is the value system to which the individual adheres, a value system that provides the individual with rules for evaluating his or her own behaviour and that of others. The self is constructed and refined through values. Values play a very important role in the process of constructing self-identity in adolescence. The young person's values provide him with a framework, reference points or benchmarks and lead him towards the progressive construction of his school, professional and life project.

Very few of them include starting a family in their future projections, they lack confidence in the stability of the couple and many of them reject the idea of becoming parents. At the other end of the spectrum, especially some of these young women want a stable family, children, and forward-looking projections to compensate for their traumatic past.

Due to a lack of emotional maturity and a lack of role models and a value system, some young women end up in inappropriate relationships with older men who provide them with a home and stability.

There is ample evidence that the conditions of care in residential institutions are absolutely unsatisfactory, which has led to negative effects on the physical and motor development of residents associated with cognitive consequences.

Current research shows that these children "lose" about one month of growth for every three months spent in the institution. Although specific figures vary, there is a deviation from the standard for height, weight and head circumference in these children, all of which are below the normal range.

It is also important to remember that a large percentage of the residents of traditional care institutions suffer from chronic diseases such as hepatitis B, gastritis, gastric and duodenal ulcers as a consequence of the low-calorie diet.

The consequences of poor physical development of young residents are: low resistance to prolonged physical and intellectual effort, decreased attention and concentration capacity, difficult motor coordination which can lead to poor professional performance and failure in the effort of professional integration.

Other barriers that intervene both in the preparation process and in the transitional or post-transitional period are: frequent change of placement; friends and birth family [in some cases when they encourage behaviours/commitments that are discordant with the interests of the young people]; systemic barriers and the large number of actors involved in preparation and transition.

The main barriers to transition of young people from the social protection system to independent living: 82.1% without housing, 97.3% unemployed, 11.6% lack of independent living skills training, 8.9% poor access to health services and 39.3% lack of adult or family support.

2. Socialization, communication and conflict

Socialization begins at birth and continues throughout life. This process requires an appropriate developmental framework and desirable role models so that young people can prepare for independent living.

When we talk about socialization in young people who have gone through an institutional pathway, we have to take into account the fact that young people have to have the necessary skills to live in society, to form a series of social skills to be able to adapt to the society in which they live. Thus, it can be observed that young people leaving institutions present a series of difficulties both in assimilating knowledge and skills related to the development of a positive self-image, understanding of their own inner world and in social relations with those around them, people of the same age or older, of the same sex or different, people with different social positions or roles. Possible explanations could be on the one hand emotional instability or feelings of emotional frustration and on the other hand limited space for social relationships, lack of opportunities to practice developing a positive self-image or relating appropriately with people around them.

Thus, the conditions that lead to insufficient social maturation or underlie a deficit in socialisation and the formation of moral judgement are certain learning conditions - for example, the absence of necessary learning or insufficient internalisation of desirable norms of conduct, incomplete learning, ineffective learning, or inaccessible learning.

The difficulties in social relationships can be seen in the insecurity they show from the moment they leave their familiar space - the institution - and have to explore new, unknown places or turn to certain community institutions to obtain rights such as health care, legal assistance, employment, housing. Young people in institutions often turn to educators for help in applying for certain social services.

Due to poor social relationships some young people are unable to maintain a job for a stable period of time so services are often short term and extremely varied.

The formation of positive social relationships and socially desirable behaviour requires young people to communicate as effectively as possible with other members of society.

Achieving adequate, effective communication depends on the communication skills of young people [e.g. direct, positive, assertive communication, active listening, including the use of nonverbal language in a conversation], but at the same time it is also necessary to take into account the possible barriers that may arise in communication, barriers related to the source/sender of the message; the message, the communication channel and the target/receiver of the message [A. Băban, 2001].

In young people in institutions, poor communication can be observed through difficulties of expression, lack of knowledge and interest in a proper relationship or often hasty conclusions in conversation.

Through the process of socialization we can say that young people go through a process of social maturation, which must take into account the values and norms of society, the ways of socially desirable behavior, the development of appropriate social perception and proper understanding of social problems in the socio-cultural environment in order to establish appropriate moral conduct. Thus, young people must internalise the values, basic norms and fundamental beliefs of the society in which they live. With the help of values young people can judge social actions. Values form the basis for the formation of attitudes, decision-making and greatly influence social behaviour. In the case of young people in institutions, it can be observed that they do not have a clearly structured value system.

In the case of young people in institutions or who have followed an institutional path, the value system is an unstructured one, without a well-consensual morality.

Building this value system and moral judgement is sometimes a difficult process, which does not work in a bottom-up or positive way.

This is because socialisation does not require young people to conform mechanically and adapt unilaterally, but rather to internalise creatively, in line with their own way of understanding, which sometimes contradicts and conflicts with adult norms. This leads to behaviour which deviates from the normative model of educational, moral factors, without necessarily being destructive (e.g. denial of traditional values).

Some acts that violate the rules of moral coexistence are not criminal offences but fall under the so-called non-conformist manifestations (e.g. hostile gestures, protesting behaviour, verbal and

physical violence, indiscipline, family or school evasion, alcohol consumption, smoking, adopting an extremist style of dress, frequenting dubious social circles).

Acts that do not harm social values but only affect the moral norm are called moral deviance and are considered pre-delinquent manifestations.

Other authors referred to the conditions of discordant socialization, that is, in conditions of socialization deficit, the personality of some young people can be structured disharmoniously, forming many negative, undesirable attitudes, such as: low tolerance to frustration, poor self-control, egocentric tendencies, aggressiveness, underestimation of the seriousness of mistakes and dyssocial and antisocial acts committed, non-development of moral feelings, indifference to useful social activities, avoidance of voluntary effort, opposition to and rejection of legal, moral norms, generation of major conflicts in relations with others.

The problems that lead to conflict in this case are related to poor communication and self-centred tendencies of these young people. However, it should not be forgotten that any conflict can be constructive and not only destructive.

3. Stress and stress control

Paraphrasing M. Miclea, 1997, I could say that young people from the institutional system show a low resistance to situations of stress or frustration. For them, the new situations they are confronted with during their social and professional integration generate stress, which is why they need support and monitoring in crisis situations. The focus should be on the stress involved in living on their own, on developing mechanisms to help them cope with stress, such as: keeping the house clean and paying the rent, healthy eating habits, punctuality at work, rest and leisure activities...

In the short term stress can have negative effects on a person's behaviour, resulting in an inability to act in ways that promote health. In the long term, stress can seriously affect an already vulnerable period of illness.
The potential effects of stress can be grouped into five broad categories, namely:
 - *subjective effects:* anxiety, aggression, apathy, boredom, fatigue, malaise, low self-confidence, nervousness, feelings of loneliness;
 - *behavioural effects:* accident proneness, alcoholism, drug abuse, tendency to overeat or smoke, impulsive behaviour;
 - *cognitive effects:* decreased ability to make rational decisions, poor concentration, decreased attention, hypersensitivity to criticism, mental blocks;
 - *physiological effects:* increased blood sugar, pulse, blood pressure, dry mouth, cold sweats, dilated pupils;
 - *organisational effects:* absenteeism, low productivity, isolation, job dissatisfaction, reduced responsibility [J.B. Stora, 1999].

The impact of stress on a person's behaviour can manifest itself in a variety of forms. To relieve stress, many young people turn to drugs, tobacco, alcohol, etc. However, stress does not necessarily have to lead to abuse. Alcohol consumption is seen as a reaction to major stressful events typical of certain age groups. Stress can also affect a person's eating behaviour. Some people tend to eat less when they feel stressed, while others resort to overeating. Stress can affect a person's lack of concentration and cause them to neglect risk factors in their environment.

Teenagers need help to identify the causes of stress in their lives and ways to deal with them.

4. Career guidance

Career is a succession of activities and professional positions that a person achieves, as well as the associated attitudes, knowledge and components that develop over time. Career provides an occupational identity; the profession, the position held, the organisation in which one works are part of the individual's identity. People are different from each other, but at the same time we can determine the things they have in common. By using classification systems we can identify similarities and differences in career orientation. Career orientation is therefore that relatively stable pattern of talents, values, attitudes and occupational activities.

Young people in institutions do not have the skills to plan and guide their careers, because they have not been involved in making decisions that affect them. Jigău, M. [2001,] argues that career planning is a practical method used to help young people make decisions and change roles in a person's work and life. Frequently encountered is the lack of future perspective in these young

people, they state that they do not know how they want their life to go, what would be the best options for them, and what strategy they should use to achieve their goals. They all want a lot of money, to have a family and their own possessions such as a house, furniture, a car, but they do not know how they will manage to achieve all this.

Given that throughout their lives very few of their individual needs and requirements have been met, and personal projects and ideas have not been stimulated or encouraged, young people have learned over time that their own initiative is not wanted by those around them, as a result they no longer dared to dream considering that their future was already sealed and they will respect the plans that the state will make for them.

As they are generally poorly prepared educationally and professionally, and as the requirements for highly rated jobs on the labour market are high and competition is high, these young people unfortunately only have access to jobs that do not stimulate or motivate them professionally.

In this context, career planning and guidance for residents of institutions should be initiated early on by the educators and trainers of the placement centres. This should include the vocational identity of each child/adolescent, innate and acquired personality characteristics, personal talents and abilities, identification with role models.

In making career planning decisions it is very important that the teenager is also involved. It is essential that they choose their profession carefully; they need to be supported to think in the long term about what it would mean in concrete

terms, what the specific activities are, the types of potentially employing organisations, the opportunities, the possibilities to realise their natural potential; there may be a difference between their perception of what the profession means from the outside and what it actually entails.

The information it holds must be sufficient and comparable for each of the alternatives in order to make a real assessment of them and choose the most appropriate one. It is necessary to assess each alternative in terms of its consequences for oneself and for significant others.

It is also important to establish a plan for implementing the decision and its implementation with reference to how they will acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for the chosen field, the selection of educational or vocational training institutions, the jobs for which they will apply and how they will be promoted at work [Jigău, M., 2001].

Conclusions

The phrase *"independent living"* should not create the impression that it is the life of a solitary individual living an existence outside society, without rules to be followed.

On the contrary, independent living is everyday life in modern society, within the family, at work, with our fellow human beings.

Independent living skills do not exhaust the list of possible skills that can be learned by a child by adulthood. When we talk about independent living skills, we mean the minimum set of skills that enable the holder to lead a normal social life, without [further] needing social assistance or accompaniment from social services.

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