

Edu World 2016

7th International Conference

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CHILD IN A FORM OF SPECIAL PROTECTION

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Abstract

A special category that requires special attention and has become a pressing issue in psychopedagogy is that of children under a form of social protection. The present study, conducted in orphanages in the Arges County, tries to analyze the school success/failure of these children/young people and at the same time to identify the cultural, family and educational barriers that lead to issues related to integration, socialization and even finding a job. The analysis of the theme was based on issues of qualitative research, the research methods being document analysis and the interview. The results of this study demonstrate that solving the problems in question requires individualized treatment, non-formal education, vocational counseling and even therapies. The risk of failure of the child is not limited to academic failure. Therefore a sustained effort of both the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, the school and the community is needed to increase the school performance of institutionalized children and at the same time to achieve adequate social integration.

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Keywords: School success; school failure; institutionalized children; educational barriers.

1. Introduction

The training and education of the younger generation have always been areas of great importance. In different societies, the objectives are also varied, as well as the teaching methods, but anytime and anywhere, the ultimate goal of education is to prepare children for independent living.

In Romania, under the Constitution, art. 32, and the Law on Education, it is stipulated that the state guarantees every citizen the right to education regardless of gender, race, nationality, political or religious affiliation, without restrictions that might constitute discrimination or segregation. School attendance and completion of compulsory education, reducing school absenteeism, educational and vocational guidance,



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developing a positive attitude towards work, training, preparation for employment and integration in the workplace, are objectives which the Romanian state, through its experts, tried to attain in the educational and formative process involving children and young people in this country.

A special place in this system belongs to the children under a form of social protection that is children protected in residential, day care centres and foster care services. For many countries around the world, institutional care as a form of alternative care for children who, for various reasons¹, live with their parents generally remains the most widely used (UNICEF, 2010).

According to the report of the National Authority for the Protection of the Child Rights and Adoption (NAPCRA), on March 31st, 2016, in Romania there were 1,477 residential services for the child temporarily or completely separated from his/her family and these units house 20,291 children.

In spite of the good intentions of these institutions, the conditions they offer are often marked by a limited quality of care, because they are usually characterized by unfavourable staff-child relations, limited physical conditions, very rigid daily schedule, employees' shifts and inappropriate care practices (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2011). In spite of all these barriers, the children in the protection system should be encouraged and supported to graduate at least the compulsory school levels. If he/she does not graduate or has a precarious school education, the future adult will have more risks to be marginalized and the circle of exclusion will never close, unfortunately.

This study is trying to identify certain characteristics of school results of the children under a form of social protection namely identify the cultural, family and educational barriers and as well as the risk factors who contributing to the low performance of these children. The survey carried out in the Arges County is one of the few studies of this kind which tries to identify a link and the same time a cause of social failure and the low level of employability in the labor market of most children who leave the protection system. Results highlight that requires a sustained effort from educators specializing to complete gaps in educational system with which they come, but also a greater responsibility and involvement of teachers in educating these children. Equally important is the awareness of the community, especially parents, to increase their degree of tolerance, understanding and empathy for children from protection system to eliminate cases of discrimination that exists at the level of classes.

2. Paper Theoretical Foundation and Related Literature

A central idea of a risk and protection framework is that a range of individual and contextual risk factors are associated with poor developmental outcomes, or with the failure to attain positive outcomes. Positive developmental outcomes are more likely when protective factors are present at multiple system levels. However, all risk and protective factors are not equal in importance, and a key challenge is to identify and target risk and protective factors that are especially influential when seeking to promote positive outcomes and prevent negative outcomes (Fraser, 1997; Garbarino , 1995). Definitions of risk and protection, along with methods for estimating and modeling each, represent powerful tools for building knowledge and developing effective interventions (James Nash., & Gary Bowen, 2002).

¹ Unwanted children or children abandoned by their parents; children from parents with certain physical or mental disabilities, alcoholics, drug addicts, prisoners - people who are unable to educate and raise a child; children from families with poor living conditions (extreme economic difficulties); children whose parents (especially mothers) are abroad looking for a job abroad; orphan children; neglected or abused children.

For the children in a form of social protection, the negative/positive factors which cause their social and educational failures/performance are tightly related to the family context they come from but also, equally, to the social protection system involved, starting from the service management, i.e. the case manager, but also the education staff in direct relation to the children. Reality confirms, unfortunately, various situations when the children in the social protection system are discriminated at school. There is still a lot to be done for schools to become “Schools for Everybody” and we face problems at the level of the education system – but there are also some positive situations in which school and teachers offer the appropriate attention to these children, stimulate them and help them develop according to their potential (Centru de Resurse și Informare pentru Profesiuni Sociale, 2015).

All the work for education, socialization and preparation for family and social integration developed by the residential service staff and mostly by the educator for the benefit of the child is continued and completed by whatever is achieved in school. Unfortunately, few are the cases in which children from the residential services have exceptional results in learning because the “personal drama” leaves its traces upon their development and, no matter how many efforts are made by the specialists, educators, community and the child himself/herself, these sufferings attenuate after many years and maybe they never fade.

For a residential service child to be integrated in the school community, the teachers, pupils and their parents need to understand him/her better, to know his living background (unfortunately many adults still share the mentality that the residential service represents the former “orphanage house” with its military-like aspect and hard life conditions) and to stop bias-labelling them.

As for the choice of a high school for completing their education, the weak preparation of the young people does not qualify them for choosing prestigious institutions and therefore they try to register any education form in order to be still housed by the centre and, most of the time, the important decisions regarding them are taken by the staff of the institution (Dărăbuș, S. et al. 2006).

Taking into account all these aspects related to the formal and non-formal education of the institutionalized children, this paper aims at completing this *picture* by investigating their school performance and the degree of integration within the mass education. The study was made in a region in Southern Romania, in Arges county, having as objective to investigate the education performance of the institutionalized children from the residential centres subordinated to the General Direction for Social Work and Child Protection.

3. Methodology

Among the objectives of this study are analysis of school results of the institutionalized children in order to identifying the social and educational barriers which hampers the intellectual development of the child and his socio-professional integration.

These objectives represent only a part of the sociological endeavour, since the integration process of a child who was institutionalized, is complex and at the same time sensitive and is influenced by the context and the individual variables, difficult to capture in structured research.

The analysis of the problematic was based on a qualitative analysis using document analysis and direct inquiry, i.e. face-to-face interview. The study will explore school performance reflected by the school results in 2015-2016 school year as well as the specialized educators' opinion regarding the extent of physical and intellectual development, extent of the children's integration in school.

The qualitative research will increase understanding the risks and the protection from the perspective of the research participants and thus the risks will be identified in order to improve their school performance. Completed by other approaches, the definitions and methods presented in this article will be an important part of the researchers' and practitioners' repertory/set devoted to the development and implementation of more efficient approaches for practice.

The method of research mostly used was document analysis in order to evaluate the school results of the children in the 12 placement centres of General Direction for Social Work and Child Protection Argeș, having in view a series of indicators such as: the passing average mark between 5 and 6, the passing average mark between 7 and 8, the passing average mark between 9 and 10, children who do not promote the class, children who have abandoned school, children who have been transferred to another school for various reasons. The indicators were applied to all levels of education: preschool, primary education, secondary education, second chance, high school and academic education.

The non-directive interview applied to the five specialized educators ensured the collection of a great number of data in a relatively short time, offering a large degree of freedom to exploring the phenomenon in a complete and realistic manner. The methodology for these individual interviews was based on a theoretical approach (Allen, 2011; Charmaz, 2000, 2003) by allowing educators expressing their opinions without attracting the researcher's prejudices.

The ethical agreement and the information for this study have been given by the General Direction for Social Work and Child Protection Argeș – the main social work provider in the county.

The creation of working instruments was based on the operationalisation of the main concepts. The analysis of the data and the processing of the responses obtained through the interview and the observation sheet were carried out by means of content analysis, the relevant aspects were collected and summarised and the relevant fragments of discussions were quoted in the study.

4. Results

There have been analysed the situations of 304 institutionalised children/young people in 12 placement centres in Argeș county belonging to General Direction for Social Work and Child Protection, 15 of which were enrolled in preschool education, 83 in primary school, 139 in secondary school, 67 in highschool, 1 in academic education and 2 in *The Second Chance* programme.

From the analysis of the school results of 2015-2016 school year derives the fact that the best school results are in primary school, approximately 70% having the "well" and "very well" qualifications. There is only one situation of a child at this education level who has to attend the same grade once again because he has not promoted it. At the secondary school level, the interest in education diminishes slightly, half of the institutionalized pupils succeed in reaching a medium level in results, 26% have the minimum average grades in order to get to the next grade and, unfortunately, there is a high percentage –

10% - of children who did not succeed in promoting the class. The number of institutionalized children who benefit from the *Second Chance*² programme is low and their results are weak.

Table 1. The educational situation of the institutionalized children in the placement centres of General Direction for Social Work and Child Protection Argeș, in 2015-2016 school year

Children who have abandoned school	Promotion Average Mark between 5-6	Promotion Average Mark between 7-8	Promotion Average Mark between 9-10	Children who have not promoted the grade	Pupils transferred to other schools (mention the reasons) ³
Preschool education		65%	35%		
Primary school	0,5%	26,5%	47%	24%	2%
Secondary school		26%	49%	14%	10% 1%
Second chance programme		2 person			
High school		45%	39%	10,5%	4,5% 1%
Academic education (faculty/ MA)			1 person		

Source: own elaboration

The high school institutionalized pupils have low performance in school, approximately 45% with weak results and 39% with averages between 7 and 8. On the contrary, only 10,5% succeeded to perform well getting aware of the importance of education in their lives. Academic education seems to be harder to reach for the institutionalized young people, most of them preferring to attend qualification courses that will ensure them a job even if not very well-paid.

Medium to weak results obtained by the institutionalized teenagers as well as underdeveloped educational skills, expose them of the risk of marginalization and social exclusion after they leave the placement center. "These minor issues" (school results), for some people unimportant, can have a major impact on social and emotional life of children / youth and their families. The identification and recognition of these problems even at older ages have the potential to change and recovery a numerous gaps that they had accumulated throughout their educational training.

An important aspect to be underlined here is that great efforts are made by the staff of the centres who work directly with the respective children in order to make sure they have continuity in the school where they were initially registered, with rare cases of children transferred to other schools of various reasons. This stability offers them self-confidence and the emotional confidence they need so much. The emotional relations they develop in the collective to which they belong are honest and strong thus contributing greatly to their school and social integration.

As is clear from interviews the school success are influenced by individual and contextual factors. There are reasons for optimism, but also there are reasons for concern, because in some cases of children

² It is the only education alternative for many of the children coming from poor families.

³ The reasons why the young were transferred to other schools are: getting the child out of a negative entourage, the young refused to live on in the school hostel.

who had suffered major trauma in their life, the education in mainstream schools is done with great difficulty and the results are very poor. For young, their interest in school decreases significantly due to negative influences of friends groups, the desire to get money in different ways and the new pursuits that appear along with the period of adolescence. Institutional staff training, in this context, becomes a key component in changing behaviors of young people and their educational and professional formation. Thus, the efforts should focus on supporting for training and establishing standards of qualification for person who work in this kind of institution, especially where there are teenagers.

5. Discussions

The results of the institutionalized children living in placement centres in Argeș county during the school year 2015-2016 are good especially at primary school level, and they become weaker with aging. The lack in basic knowledge – reading, writing, arithmetic – diminishes the level of the communication skills and situation control skills of the children. There are cases in which children coming from placement centres cannot read or compute well. These aspects bring about the formation of school skills enough only to “survive” into the school environment.

The school failure of the institutionalized young people can be related to the fact that in many situations no professional evaluation and analysis of the skills and vocation of the young are made. Most of the time, the choice of the specialization is made function of the free positions in schools, in various vocational schools, all the more if the location of the respective school is close to the placement centre. Negative consequences derive here from, at least on an emotional, motivational and vocational level.

The objectives and expectations about the school results of the child are usually realistic and adapted to each particular child, in few cases (as the study showed) the children from residential services have exceptional results in school. Therefore, some of the main objectives are: preventing school abandonment and getting a graduation certificate.

Many of the children/young are somehow forced to attend school because if they are not integrated within a form of daily attendance in the education system until 26 years old, so as to be prepared to be on their own, the authorities will not offer them social protection and housing in the institutions after the age of 18. (Educator, 36)

Discriminating attitudes play an important part because school success or failure of the child under a special protection involve not only the aspects previously outlined regarding the promotion extent, but also acceptance and comprehension by the persons who contribute to their formation. The risk of failure of the pupils are limited not only to school failure, but it also includes a large series of inappropriate behaviours in terms of social relation, self-affirmation, self-realisation and, on the other hand, the idea of multiple causality in determining the phenomenon which comprises psychological, somatic, institutional factors and pedagogical methods.

The educator is the person in direct relation with the children, he/she cooperates with the teachers of every child in the placement centre and is involved in the educational centre. He/she participates in the parents' meetings organized by the school and he/she can ask for the participation of the child's parents if they are present in the life of the child.

He is the one who interferes when the child is labelled by his colleagues or by the teachers because there is a danger that the pupil may refuse to attend school. Truancy situations are considered serious problems which are communicated by the educator to the manager of the service and to the other professionals in order to draw a common intervention plan (Centru de Resurse și Informare pentru Profesiuni Sociale, 2015).

There have been many cases of discrimination and unfortunately most of them have come from adults! It is hard to live the same story every day, to assist at the same discussions, to be always rejected only because you come from an orphanage!! (Educator, 42)

There are cases in which the young people have faced all types of situations that have negatively influenced their attitude towards school and who were created no climate favourable for learning and these things can account for their rejection of the idea of attending school and going on with their education. (Educator, 48)

Not all the children/young like the school activity, therefore the specialized educator and teacher has the task to motivate them. On a stable psychological system and with a coherent education programme from all the persons involved in the growth of the child/young man, the respective child/young will acquire the necessity to learn so that, at a given moment, the school activity will become a habit, not a chore.

6. Conclusions

The research outlined the fact that school success is conditioned by many factors and school results, mostly at a medium level, derive both from the children's extent of involvement and wish to pass barriers, but also from the specialized educators' way of accomplishing tasks.

The education and recovery of the institutionalized children represent a problem which involves great efforts from the part of the teachers. Unfortunately, the reality of the young brought up in institutions differs from the reality of a young man brought up in a loving family. As a consequence, the behaviours developed by these two types of children/young men are different.

Learning resistance can be recognized in the physiological and psychological indisposition, in the lack of interest in certain subjects, in the refusal, protest or hostility for the learning tasks, in discouragement when there is no reward for the learning results or when the reward is considered as inappropriate. Learning resistance becomes the modality of protection against school obligations, against the learning effort and it is reflected in the weak and poor results, in school failure. It is difficult to separate inability from refusal to learn, real from apparent fatigue. The elimination of laziness and inaptitude is possible if the causes are known and some remedies for prevention are found, as well as through therapy (Șoitu, Laurențiu Conțiu, 2003).

The causes which trigger learning resistance are numerous. Among them, we mention the physical and psychological deficiencies and the deficiencies of the emotional-relational behaviour. We can also mention the discrimination and marginalization of the children coming from orphanages or other alternative services which can occur in the school environment. It is beyond any doubt that the intervention of the specialist is necessary in such situations, by taking immediate measures so that the

situations should not degenerate and deeply affect the young man. One measure can be the transfer to another school if the discrimination attitude persists (Şoitu, Laurențiu Conțiu, 2003).

For this, the protection institution must develop an education-therapy process which should attenuate and, if possible, eliminate the causes generating frustration and compensate with the disorganising tensions of the psychological balance of the child thus creating the necessary tonus for learning.

Moreover, the school should conceive and apply differentiated and individualised strategies of psycho-pedagogical assistance and should especially project curricular routes for recovery in the following school year for the pupils who got weak results in a critical number of school subjects in a certain school year/grade.

The child in a special protection institution has problems similar to those of a usual child upon other specific problems. In order to solve the problems under discussion, individualized treatment should be made, as well as non-formal education, vocational counselling and even therapy. It is important to understand that these children from a disadvantages category are as loving, proud, optimistic and able of good things as their colleagues coming from usual families. Therefore they need the love, support and assistance of everybody around them.

The General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection and the school will be able to meet the special educational needs of children in need and educational support of their families only through their internal efforts and the community support.

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