

## LANDMARKS IN THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF POST-INSTITUTIONALIZED YOUNG PEOPLE

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**Abstract:** *Conducted in the Argeş County, the present research is built on a solid theoretical foundation and highlights the main aspects that have a major impact on the success of the social integration of young people who leave the institutionalized social protection systems upon reaching the age of majority. The most common causes of failure are diagnosed and attempts are made to highlight the culprits. The observations take into account both the positive and negative aspects of the activity in the system and are made in order to support its optimization by helping to remedy certain errors. They can provide support for the development of procedural rules. The author finds herself in the position where she has experience in the field and can share it. On this basis, successful procedural models from the Argeş County are also presented. Although they are formulated on the basis of findings from a county, most conclusions may have national validity. As a whole, they highlight the fact that the institutionalized care system for children and young people in Romania is still perfectible.*

**Keywords:** *assisted young people; education for life; social worker; youth assistance strategies; social integration*

### 1. Introduction

The issue of social integration of vulnerable groups is a current, important topic, suggested as a permanent objective to be pursued by the Romanian government and the governing forums of the European Union. Young people who leave social assistance centres at the age of 18 constitute such a group, and their situation is a complex one. Institutionalization really means a distance from social life and they are entitled to feel aspects that, when they worsen, suggest abandonment by all, concludes Alexandru M. (2013). Today, the subject is under the attention of several specialists who, in “the research conducted, had as target groups both adolescents and preadolescents, perceived as vulnerable groups exposed to violence, alcohol consumption, etc.” (Constantinescu, 2018: 15). Moreover, the author, after performing social research, proposes ways to solve this issue by offering integrated and proactive programs to vulnerable groups.

The existence, under governmental coordination, of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection<sup>1</sup>, with a county correspondent, under whose subordination both the residential centres and the social care system through foster carers lie, urges, in the context of a research, to an examination of the way in which those young people can be truly protected and supported, highlighting, whenever possible, the shortcomings of the system. This is an attempt to verify, based on observations on a concrete institution, from a national county, to what extent the current legislative and organizational framework corresponds to the real needs of these young people deprived in most cases of family support in the most important moments of their lives.

Social care is an interdisciplinary field, with its specific phenomena. Their tracking can be done by various methods whose results must be corroborated. This is what this study aims to do, we have proceeded in this direction.

### **1.1. Research methodology**

The aim of the research is to analyse and understand in depth the preparation process that young people benefit from when leaving the protection system and, at the same time, their socio-professional integration (following the specifications of the National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction [2014 - 2020] of the Government of Romania).

The period under analysis is the period 2015-2020, and the population studied includes young people from the Argeş County, whose placement provision has been revoked and they have been integrated socio-professionally. The young people were contacted through social networks, with the support of the protection centres they were institutionalized in. We conducted a sociological survey, based on interviews, co-participatory observation, document analysis, studying statistical data, legislation, official documents, etc. on the basis of which the radiography of the professional integration process of young people from protection institutions was performed; studying the way in which post-institutionalized young people perceive the factors that facilitate or hinder their socio-professional integration; studying the way in which social workers/specialists perceive the ways of developing the social and professional skills of young people during the institutionalization period; identifying the weaknesses in the activities of preparation for an independent life of institutionalized young people.

The research justifies its opportunity based on the de facto finding that there is still no unitary and effective pattern of work, adapted to the needs of this category of young people at the time of their transition to independent

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator's note: General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection will be abbreviated throughout the paper as DGASPC, as is the official abbreviation of the institution in Romanian.*

adult life, the programs and strategies in this field being still in the process of development. At the same time, the efficiency and long-term results of the preparation strategies for independent living in Romania are not operationalized, quantified, and included in longitudinal studies.

According to the existing statistical information in the database of DGASPC Argeş, on 31.03.2017 there were 333 children and young people in the protection system, 219 in the family type system, of which 77 beneficiaries were under foster care, the foster parents being employees of DGASPC Argeş. As regards the exits from the system as a consequence of the revocation of the special protection provision, reported for the period 01.01.2016-31.03.2017, 68 children and young people left the system (13 children aged between 14 and 17 and 55 young people over the age of 18). Regarding the situation of those who have left the protection system, in many cases, they are only partially integrated: while some perform unskilled and seasonal work (implicitly low paid) in Romania, others have gone to work abroad. However, there have also been cases where partial integration has not even succeeded: the situation of those who are still dependent on social services in the adult protection system or those placed with non-governmental organizations providing socio-professional integration services (source: DGASPC Argeş-Monitoring Service).

## **2. Preparing institutionalized young people for an autonomous life and for a future profession**

For a detailed analysis, we identified the *Residential-Type Centre* within the Community Services Compound for Children in Difficulty in Piteşti. The services provided within this centre are in accordance with the standards of organization and operation of child protection services and aim to develop skills of personal autonomy and independent living, maintaining family ties, school and professional guidance, preparing children for family and socio-professional reintegration. At the same time, the assistance and educational counselling services must take into account the age and personality particularities of the individuals counselled. For the choice and pursuit of the aspects of interest, we took into account the fact that the studies highlight affective-emotional peculiarities characteristic of institutionalized young people. We benefited from a consistent theoretical support because the issue of personality and specifically of the characteristics related to the affectivity of preadolescents and adolescents has preoccupied many specialists, such as (Shiopp & Verza 1997, Constantinescu, 2008), (Papalia & Diane, 2020).

We started from the premise that supporting and guiding young people in view of their socio-professional integration by developing the degree of independence and personal autonomy must be achieved not only before leaving the shelter, observing how this is done in fact. A natural conclusion was that the child's personal independence, his/her ability to socialize can be

stimulated and developed only through continuous activities and sustained during the entire stay in the institution. After observing the operation of the centre (*co-participant observation*) we found that the activities meant to have this purpose are carried out both in groups or individually and aim, in principle, to develop the degree of independence of children/young people before leaving the institution. We identified the following as being essential: *socialization* by assimilating attitudes, values, conceptions or models of desirable behaviour; interactive communication as a way of receiving and interpreting social messages; group or individual psychological counselling. Their purpose is to develop the capacity to maintain interpersonal relationships favourable to adaptation and to resolve internal conflicts that have unfavourable social repercussions. From this perspective, the Centre's activity created the premises for success in the effective integration into society of many young people who left the institutionalized system at the age of majority.

There is nothing wrong when young people brought up in an institutionalized system realize that they are a little different compared to others. This is a normal aspect of reality awareness, positive in terms of self-knowledge and individual self-assessment, but it can take on a dramatic aspect if certain perceptions are at one time exacerbated (case studies and procedures exposed according to the *Resource Centre and Information for Social Professions* (CRIPS)). The chance that things may evolve negatively is generated by the existence of existential traumas, in the past, i.e. exactly in the period spent in the residential-type institution or in the maternal care system. We are talking here first of all about emotional disorders, mental states generated by the socio-educational climate, traumatic experiences and abuses, lack of attachment and last but not least the lack of a family model. Any of these can become at some point the cause of an alteration of the development of affections and emotions and later the cause of behavioural deviations with social impact. Children/young people may show affective-emotional instability/lability, exacerbated emotion, feelings of insecurity, frustrations and intolerant attitudes, excessive dependence on the protection system. They can become hostile, aggressive, can show psycho-motor agitation or can show fear of assertion, demobilization in the face of difficulties, anticipation of failure and in extreme cases behavioural regression or even suicide. Last but not least, adolescents impose their desire for assertion, for autonomy, considering obedience a prejudice that must be overcome.

Explanations for situations such as those mentioned above may exist, but excuses do not. Many young people grew up in large institutions, where a single staff member cared for a large group of children. Deprived of the attention and care that any child needs, they have developed compensatory mechanisms, becoming either very agitated or hyperkinetic, or, on the contrary - disinterested or apathetic. Therefore, many of them have difficulties in respecting an educational program, in adapting to the demands of the educational process and in maintaining the focus of attention, which is

reflected in the school results and professional performances. Ignoring these aspects, the lack of proper organization at the level of the institution or the insufficient mobilization of educators can become a major factor in thwarting the ultimate goal: the inclusion into society of young people who have been institutionally assisted. Due to deprivation in the institutional context, at this age the effects of frustration accentuate the “adaptation crisis” in young people. Fortunately, we found quite few such cases in the institution under analysis.

### **2.1. The quality of school and vocational training of young people during institutionalization**

In the research undertaken, we were broadly interested in the factors that influence the process of transition from the protection system to independent living, also considered “agents of socialization” (Lupşa, Bratu, 2006) and how we can approach this transition as a social problem, with the application of important sociological landmarks. I took it as a natural fact, identified as a goal, that in the case of young people in the protection system, the systemic and societal expectations are that the transition to independent living should continue to follow the classic standards: education, career, residence, family. None of this would be possible if a certain quality level were not reached during the stage of training, both in the case of subjects trained in institutionalized centres and of those whose development is carried out in the foster care system.

Within the residential-type centre that I coordinate, the preparation for socio-professional integration starts from the moment the minor is institutionalized. His/her skills are discovered and valued, trying as much as possible to make them fruitful through a complex and long process. One way to increase the quality of education is to diversify the stimuli, the means of training. We constantly conclude partnerships with NGOs that organize summer camps each year, during which children/young people receive training courses (such as English and computer courses). At the request of minors over 16 years of age and of institutionalized young people, they also attend free qualification courses in several fields: confectioner-pastry chef, barber, hairdresser, pedicurist - gel nail application, beautician, hotel maid, waiter, chef. School and professional orientation is a topical issue of general interest, its importance and necessity being justified by the novelty and diversity of services on the labour market as a consequence of the development of society.

In the education system, for the Curricular area *Counselling and guidance*, which is allotted one hour per week at all secondary-education levels in the framework curricula, there is a central offer of school programs approved by Order of the Minister of Education, which establish in a differentiated manner, depending on the level of education they are addressed

to (middle school, high school, arts and crafts school, year of completion), the educational objectives and contents targeted. The matters of counselling and guidance of young people are presented by a number of specialists, such as Baban A et al. (2009)

This is important for young people in the institutionalized system because it is necessary to carry out the training in a unitary way, covering the essential requirements for their future social integration. According to these norms, in each school with more than 800 students psycho-pedagogical assistance offices can be established, according to the existing resources and needs, and schools with less than 800 students use the services of psycho-pedagogical assistance units organized in other educational units. The class head teacher has the responsibility to plan, organize and carry out the school and professional orientation activity of the class - based on the existing orientations, the consultation of parents and students and the age and particularities of the students. Especially for students in the final grades of a certain educational level, the activities carried out during counselling and orientation classes include meetings and debates with representatives of educational institutions and local employers, visits to various institutions, application and interpretation of personality tests and aptitude tests and so on.

In the research performed, we noted that these tasks were accomplished, with a special mention on the practical training of students, made on a contract basis to various local employers. During practical training, students get in touch directly with the employees, get to know the working conditions, understand the work requirements and the level of initial training required, receive direct information regarding the salary and other details. The efficiency of this professional orientation is demonstrated by the fact that a significant number of vocational and technical education graduates get their first jobs within the same companies they carried out the practical training in.

## **2.2 Independent living skills**

Specific to the human being is the particularly high share of learned behaviours in relation to those innate. We followed how this aspect is stimulated in the educational activities carried out at the level of the institutionalized care centre. Independent living equals everyday life in modern society, along with our fellow human beings. This is what institutionalized young people need to do when they become mature. They were deprived of the normal possibilities to acquire, during childhood, the adequate life skills. Their pre-existing experience is precarious, lacking primarily the family model. But children from natural families or foster carers may also have shortcomings in "independent living" skills. And they may need to develop certain skills; they may face deficiencies in socialization, adaptation to social life and the culture of the community they belong to.

What is important, in all cases, is the role of the educator, who must be aware, in his/her turn, that (s)he is constantly not only a source of information,

but also a behavioural model. We must honestly admit that not all educators meet the ideal standard. Hence the shortcomings of the system and, from the perspective of the research conducted the emergence of failure cases in the social integration of assisted young people.

Assisted young people must acquire a minimum of skills at an acceptable level. In the opinion of M. Constantinescu (2004) competence reflects an optimal concordance between abilities, individual capacities, working conditions and activity results, an optimal agreement between capacities and activity demands at a given moment... and also includes the attitude towards activities, as an expression of skills, personal traits and value.

In a modern but highly suggestive expression, young people will have to “reinvent” themselves continuously as they go through life. Their ability to adapt will always be tested. Children and young people in placement centres benefit from a training program which is provided for in the operational procedure for training on independent living skills of the beneficiaries of the family-type social service. This program is based on several normative acts, among which we could mention: Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, the UN Convention, Law 272/2004, Law no. 292/2001, and the internal regulations of the DGASPC. The development of independent living skills is a priority for residential centres, and the services provided in this regard have begun to give good results in the Argeş County.

Corroborating theoretical knowledge with the observations reached on the practical level, the development of independent living skills must start from the specifics of the person and this person must be motivated and actively involved. Procedurally, it is recommended that the person be exposed to organized activities in a safe environment (the consequences of the person's behaviour exist only at the psychological level), to later obtain tasks and roles in this environment, to be exposed to spontaneous situations, so that later on the premises of training for real-life preparation can be created. This is how things are carried out at the Residential Centre within the Community Services Compound for Children in Difficulty in Piteşti as well, where young people are stimulated to acquire and then to experience different behavioural aspects that will be useful in the future. Acquiring the independent living skills needed to live on one's own is a process that takes time. Young people themselves are stimulated to understand this by becoming a real partner in the educational process.

### **3. Ways and procedures for the social and professional integration of young people**

Through social inclusion, young people go through a process of social maturation, which must take into account the values and norms of society, the ways of desirable social behaviour, developing appropriate social perception

and proper understanding of social problems in the socio-cultural environment, in order to establish proper moral conduct. In fact, their behaviour changes significantly so that from elementary socialization they will have to reach social involvement in which not only the rights, but also the obligations they have are important. In order to give practical value to the research, we will examine this moment from the perspective of possible failures, insisting on the aspects that will have to be remedied.

We will start by noting that, in the case of young people from institutions, one can see poor communication through difficulties in expression, lack of knowledge and interest in an appropriate relationship, or often the manifestation of hasty conclusions in a conversation. The formation of positive social relations, respectively the formation of a desirable social behaviour implies from the young people a more efficient communication with the other members of society. It is not only their fault, but also the fault of the system if they have not acquired this capability at an acceptable level in time. The difficulties of social relationships can be observed through the insecurity they manifest from the moment they leave their family space, inside the institution, and have to explore new places and situations. Young people in institutions, most of the time, turn to their educators to take steps to address certain social services or find a job. In their case, one cannot notice, with the proper exceptions, the existence of a clearly structured own value system that essentially includes school, work or family.

Socialization is defined by Marin, F. (2006) as the process of transformation into a social being by assimilating certain ways of thinking, feeling and acting provided by society and this does not involve, in the case of young people, a mechanical conformation and a unilateral adaptation, but a creative internalization, consistent with their own way of understanding, which sometimes contradicts the adults' rules. This leads to behaviours that deviate from the normative model of educational factors, without necessarily being destructive (for example, the denial of traditional values). Some acts that violate the norms of coexistence fall into the so-called non-conformist manifestations (for example, hostile gestures, protest behaviour, verbal and physical violence, indiscipline, family or school breakout, alcohol consumption, smoking, adopting an ostentatious fashion style, having a bad entourage with dubious concerns). Under the circumstances of an inappropriate socialization, respectively under the circumstances of a socialization deficit, the personality of some young people can be disharmoniously structured, forming many negative, undesirable attitudes, such as: low tolerance to frustration, poor self-control, egocentric tendencies, impulsivity, aggression, underestimation of the mistakes and antisocial acts committed, undevelopment of moral feelings, indifference to useful social activities, avoidance of voluntary effort, opposition to legal and moral norms and their rejection, self-devaluation, adherence to an undesirable social lifestyle, false image about world, about interpersonal relationships, about autonomy and individual freedom. Socialization is, in fact, "a staged, continuous process, not a final goal, a finite state, but rather a



permanent construction of the individual's identity through his/her interaction with the social level of existence" (Rîșnoveanu, 2010: 25).

Through the process of identification in relation to others, the young person adopts the characteristics of the attitudes and behaviours of the people (s)he comes in contact with. For some children, this process is a relatively calm one, with minor tensions and conflicts, but for others, the process is a difficult one, the conflicts are strong and with an attempt to undermine authority. Under the circumstances of emotional deficiencies, the young people who have undergone an institutional path often show emotional instability, feelings of emotional frustration, emotional ambivalence, emotional inversion, mistrust, hostility, aggression (*Hope and Homes for Children Romania Save the Children Romania, 2006*).

What else can happen to these young people? Due to their low self-esteem, they maintain a permanent state of tension in the community they belong to at a given time. They are suspicious of how they are viewed by the group because of the complex of an institutionalized person. In the space created between the frustrating social situations they experienced and the personal ego, the defence mechanisms intervene, they function as buffer solutions, ameliorating the impact of adversities and threats from the environment. One of the issues raised is the relationship of these young people with authority, compliance with social norms and rules. Their attitude is, most often, one of revolt against the authorities. Often, due to the lack of respect for authority and norms, young people who have undergone an institutional path fail to assume the responsibilities of a job they abandon. The lack of responsibility in assuming certain tasks and the inability to organize a perspective plan in which to analyse the consequences of one's own acts can also contribute to the situation of abandonment.

Referring now to the positive aspects that occur at the time of social integration of young people leaving an institutionalized care system, we will note that adolescence brings with it an increase in social skills and these skills facilitate group interactions. For many of them, this turns into an asset for adaptation in a group, being known that "the presence of these social skills in social life allows the young person to mobilize or be a source of inspiration for others, to succeed in intimate relationships, to convince and influence others or make them feel at ease" (Constantinescu, 2004: 70-72).

Given the above, returning to the subject of our research, it is necessary for the staff of the centre to develop certain skills and competencies of the assisted individuals, such as the ability to develop high levels of interest, enthusiasm, desire to get involved in a matter from a certain field of work, perseverance, patience, tenacity, self-confidence and personal ability to achieve something important.

The analysis outlines two models, patterns of social relationships after the young people who have reached the age of majority leave the institutions. On the one hand, there are those with high chances of integration, a category that includes young people who have been taken over, recently, by

foundations, who have given them personalized support for employment, for the development of self-management and independent living skills and have managed, for the most part, to internalize socially accepted norms and values. Also here are the young people who remained in the placement centres after reaching the age of 18 to continue their studies, provided they benefit from real support from society at the beginning of social life, after leaving the institutions. At the opposite pole there are the young people who have left child protection institutions without receiving any support from society; those who do not even have a shelter, living on the streets, in parks, in canals. They are the ones with the lowest level of education, of different ages, it seems, those characterized by some kind of mental retardation.

An intermediate group is represented by young people reintegrated into their own families, who have chances of social integration that are differentiated according to the characteristics of the family environment of origin. As most of the families they come from face the spectre of poverty, the chance of reproducing their own parents' way of life is high, as is the possibility of failure.

One way of intervention can be represented, instrumentally, by the Individualized Protection Plan, supported by the government (according to Order no. 286/2006, of the Secretary of State of the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights), whose objective is also socio-professional integration. Any intervention involves first of all establishing an open communication relationship, based on mutual trust, respect, understanding of all the problems and difficult situations that the adolescent in the institution encounters. For an effective intervention, the staff members need the support of the psychologist, of the educator and must collaborate with the teachers from the schools where the respective young people study. The personalized plan is only a stage/part of the service plan. Any personalized plan proposes and directs several intervention programs, through the practical involvement of qualified people, who establish a specific program for their field of activity.

In the process of socio-professional integration of young people, their opinions and suggestions will always be taken into account. Their intentions, their professional desires (where they would like to work, what they would like to do), their fears about the challenges/responsibilities of independent living will be analysed. Many young people "project the job they will have at some point as the sum of their expectations" (ANBCC, collective, 2019).

In the last ten years, AJOFM Argeş<sup>1</sup> has organized in partnership with DGASPC Argeş job market events for young people in the protection system and for people with disabilities. These events aim to enhance institutional structures and social care staff in order to meet quality standards in providing social services to beneficiaries, increase the employment of disadvantaged groups, social support programs for disadvantaged areas, and correlate school curriculum with the qualifications required on the labour market.

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<sup>1</sup>*Translator's Note:* AJOFM Argeş - The Argeş County Employment Agency

As regards the obstacles they face at this stage of life, the participants in our study were faced with both systemic and individual barriers in the transition to independent living. The solutions proposed by young people aim at the continuity of services designed to support them in the educational, occupational or housing field at least for a period of several months after leaving the system, the continuity of social support received from the protection system, providing counselling and mentoring services, more active participation of young people in independent living planning, both individually and through youth organizations. For this reason, at DGASPC Argeş there are projects that aim, as a general objective, at the socio-professional integration of children and young people that are to leave the protection system in Romania, this general objective being achieved by the conclusion of a Collaboration Protocol between the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Argeş and the Association "Sfinții Spiridon și Irina" Pitești, aiming to support disadvantaged people, especially post-institutionalized young people.

### Conclusions

The detailed examination of some essential aspects, through this research, allows and obliges the formulation of conclusions with the specification that, although the data collection area was geographically limited, according to the principle *pars pro toto/part for the whole*, the respective data can also have reference value on a national level. This can be beneficial because, in the field of integration of institutionalized young people in society, the diversity of situations makes it virtually impossible to develop a universal procedural model valid at this time, thus it becomes very important to observe in many ways all the mechanisms of the steps taken. By far the most important conclusion imposed by this research refers to the fact that, in the proper way, the moment of integration/insertion in society of young people leaving the institutionalized system in order to have a life of their own must be prepared throughout their journey in this system, from day one. The careful and, last but not least, skill-based choice of the staff asked to work with young people in care centres should be not only a recommendation, but rather an absolute necessity. Knowledge and generalization of the positive aspects, but also of the wrong procedures that are still encountered in this activity is a necessity that must be prioritized by the system.

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