

SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF YOUNG ADULTS LEAVING INSTITUTIONAL CARE: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: The beginning of an independent life is a challenging time for every young person. Some, however, struggle at the beginning difficult because of release from an institutional environment. The main aim of the paper is to find out to what extent they are able to adapt to the conditions of contemporary society. To achieve the goals, we used a qualitative research design based on intensive contact with the investigated environment. Data obtained from interviews, observations and pedagogical documentation were processed using grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis. The results obtained confirm the fact that young individuals leaving institutional care facilities are at risk of social exclusion and the possible emergence of negative patterns of behaviour. Respondents identify the lack of follow-up support as a significant problem. The outputs of our research offer incentives for the modification of special pedagogical work in children's homes, especially when preparing young adults for their transition period.

Keywords: *children's home, institutional care, follow-up support, social exclusion*

1 Introduction

Embarking on an independent life is an important milestone for all young people. They leave the security of their families and have to face the realities of our society. It is a challenging period that puts many challenges and obstacles in their way. For some young adults, however, the situation is much more complex. Every year, several hundred young adults leave institutional care. They either return to their original families or try to manage the transition to independence on their own. The main aim of this paper is to offer an insight into the reality of young individuals leaving the residential care facility of the Children's Home Klánovice. We will explore the extent to which these young people are able to adapt to the conditions of contemporary society. We will divide the paper into two parts. First, we will describe the research design, the research setting, and the target group. In the second part, we will present the results of the research and in the discussion, we will offer modifications to the educational process that could positively influence the process of resocialisation of young adults after leaving institutional care.

2 Methods

We are working with a qualitative research design that has proven successful in previous research (Daněk, 2022). Qualitative research design can make a significant contribution to the modern inclusive paradigm (Lindsay, 2003; Willig, 2017). Initial data collection is conducted using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The interview is the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research (Švaříček and Šedřová, 2014, p. 159). Currently, we can also observe a change in the researcher's perception of the interview process. Schulman (2009, p.139) believes that it is necessary to allow the researcher to reconcile the personal component with the professional position.

The author works in the researched setting as an educator and risk behaviour prevention methodologist. We believe that a passive researcher would obtain less reliable results than a researcher actively involved in the researched environment (Charmaz, 2006, p.5). As qualitative researchers, we are involved in intensive contact with the researched group (Creswell, 2009, p.270). Due to the involvement of the researcher, we can spend a massive amount of time in the research setting (Toušek, 2015, p.11). Furthermore, it also removes the distrust of respondents that we can sometimes

encounter when the research setting is a very closed community, which the children's home undoubtedly is. We record and then process the information gathered from interviews and observations using a combination of grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis. These research methods are described by experts as highly appropriate for settings similar to ours. Our design allows us to interpret "lived experience" (Alase, 2017, p.13).

A key requirement of the research is the objectivity of the results. In the case of a qualitative design involving the researcher's presence there is a risk that the results could be biased precisely by too much contact with the environment under study. For this reason, we place considerable emphasis on research objectivity, using the principle of triangulation as a tool. Triangulation is a research method in which we subject our findings to the critical perspective of other research methods or other researchers (Flick, 2009, p. 444). We strive for the richest range of research methods themselves. We support interviews with observations, and we confront partial results from the outcomes of the analysis of pedagogical documentation. Comparing our results with the views of other researchers, and above all with those of the professional community, has proved to be the most effective tool of triangulation. The most recent sub-triangulation took place at the national conference of the Federation of Children's Homes. We presented the results of our research to representatives of 28 children's homes and invited them to approve or comment on our findings. We recorded overwhelming approval. Based on this experience, we can therefore state that the results of our qualitative research represent the educational reality of a significant number of children's homes in the Czech Republic.

3 Researched environment

We researched the school facility for the performance of institutional care, the Children's Home Klánovice. One of the pedagogical and educational priorities of the Children's Home Klánovice is to prepare children and young adults for the moment when they leave the children's home and start their independent lives. For young adults who have reached the age of majority, training studios are available on the premises of the Children's Home. Ten of these are currently available, and young adults are able to have the opportunity to live independently without the constant supervision of teaching staff. The Children's Home Klánovice also manages four starter flats, which young adults can use after leaving the Children's Home. The target group of our research was young adults who use this training and starter accommodation. These included seven respondents. All of them came to the Children's Home Klánovice from pathological backgrounds. In their original families, they have experienced alcoholism, substance abuse, and a large number of respondents have experienced domestic violence. The negative influence of the original families on the respondents was long-term, all other forms of intervention failed. Therefore, institutional education was also mandated. Based on our research, we can argue that the original family is the main factor directly responsible for most of the problems that the child and young adult encounter during their stay in the children's home. The most significant difficulties are observed in the area of educational and social competencies, and recently, the number of children and young adults with psychiatric diagnoses has increased. We observe a low aspirational level, difficulties with long-term planning, and the observed children's and young adults' expectations about life in today's society are not realistic. The youngest respondent of our research was 18 years old, and the oldest was 25 years old. There were seven young adults in the study sample, four females and three males. Three respondents had already left home, while the other four were planning to leave in the near future.

We conducted the interviews and observations in the natural environment of the respondents. Contact with young adults who had already left the Children's Home Klánovice was made by telephone or through social networks. The research activities have been taking place in the Children's Home Klánovice since 2014. Because of our involvement in the research setting, we could spend a considerable amount of time with the respondents. We also spoke with the teaching staff of the Children's Home Klánovice. In particular, we investigated whether the preparation for leaving the institution is sufficient and what support options are available for young adults after they leave the institution. With respondents who had already left the Children's Home Klánovice, we extended the scope of the questions to the area of reflection on their expectations and contact with the reality of independent life.

4 Significant findings

Several interesting findings have emerged from our research. Educational staff rated the level of preparation of the young adult for leaving the children's home as sufficient. In their words, preparation for leaving the children's home starts several years before the actual departure. The most important areas identified by the educational staff were supporting young adults in achieving the highest possible education, optimising the educational process, supporting the young adult to build up work competencies and, last but not least, an emphasis on financial literacy. Educational staff positively rated the involvement of the non-profit sector. In the conversations, there was a demand for cooperation with child social protection authorities, which, according to the educators, was insufficient in terms of preparation for the departure of young adults. Educational staff also pointed to the low interest of young adults in being actively involved in the process of preparing for their departure.

While the young adults were aware of the fact that they would leave the institutionalised care, they did not have a clear idea of their future in mainstream society. The young adults positively evaluated the efforts of the educators to prepare them for their departure. But in their words, it was not among the priorities of the educational process of the children's home. Rather, the young adults focused on staying in the educational process, which allows them to remain in the children's home. The young adults took part in the activities of the non-profit organisations that cooperate with the Children's Home Klánovice, but in their words, they did not see the potential for their future life. Respondents clearly articulated their reluctance to take part in such activities several times. This was clear when observing the involvement of young adults in events in the non-profit sector, where we did not observe an effort by young adults to engage in discussion, and passive expectation of the event by the organisers prevailed.

It cannot be argued that children and young people are educationally and socially behind solely because of institutionalisation. According to our findings, children come to the children's home with pre-existing difficulties. The narrative analysis helped us to penetrate the period of development of children and young adults before their arrival at the Children's Home Klánovice. It was clearly shown that a significantly important period preceded the stay in the children's home when the child was exposed to pathological influences of dysfunctional family environments and the efforts for rehabilitation by the authorities of social and legal protection of children were not successful. The issue of the original families proved to be crucial. It is the family of origin that can be a source of stress rather than support (Häggman-Laitila, 2018, p. 139). However, none of the respondents had distanced themselves from their family of origin, and rationalising excuses were regularly heard by young adults to explain their parents' actions. In interviews, respondents who had already left the Klánovice Children's Home confirmed our assumption that at the moment problems rose that they were no longer able to cope with, they tried to seek help from their original families. However, none of the interviewees received the necessary support from their families.

That the original families failed did not surprise us. In our analysis of educational records, we did not find a single case of an original family that had the capacity to provide support for a young adult. We noted repeated instances in the past where the own family had quite openly taken advantage of the young adult, depriving them of all finances and personal possessions. They subsequently discarded him or her, leading to a return to the children's home. It was alarming to find that young adults did not have enough support from the state after leaving the children's home. There were repeated statements that after leaving the children's home, all support activities were discontinued and the young adults found themselves completely on their own in the reality of contemporary society. It is a sad truth that currently there is no comprehensive system for young people leaving institutional care in the Czech Republic, financially supported and professionally guaranteed by the state (Běhounková et al., 2012, p. 166). Individual services do not operate under a single platform, and demand far exceeds supply. Respondents clearly stated their concerns that the necessary aftercare is not available in the current society to support them in the process of adaptation to an intact society. Respondents who had already left the Children's Home Klánovice confirmed these concerns. According to them, the reality of current society does not consider the fact that they have spent a significant part of their lives in institutional care. All respondents had experienced a sharp decline in their standard of living after leaving the children's home. It should be stressed that falling into poverty is associated with a number of negative concomitant phenomena, such as a loss of self-esteem, the possibility of risky behaviour and the reinforcement of the feeling that the individual living in poverty has been completely rejected by society (Bray et al., 2020, p. 4). Another negative phenomenon associated with the financial situation of young adults is foreclosure. Respondents reported that after leaving the orphanage, they found themselves in situations where they were forced to address their financial affairs with a loan or were unable to meet their financial obligations.

5 Conclusion and recommendations for practice

In our research, we aimed to explore the reality of young adults leaving institutional settings and to map their possibilities of adaptability in today's modern society. The goal was achieved, but our conclusions are not optimistic. We are aware of the fact that our outcomes cannot be universal because children's homes are not identical. At the same time, these settings do not always have the same effect on young adults themselves (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2011, p. 25). However, there is no disputing the fact that young adults leaving through the gates of children's homes are at greater risk of social exclusion compared to their peers. In intact families, young adults leave for mainstream life later (Stein, 2006, p. 274) and, moreover, can turn to their families for help when needed. Young adults from children's homes have their start in independent life determined by law and their original families are usually unable to offer them help. Moreover, they often do not accept that they will be on their own when they leave the children's home. Hence the frequent displacement and rejection of the reality of the situation and the unwillingness of young adults to actively prepare for leaving the children's home.

Although educational staff described the preparation for the young adults' departure as sufficient, we would beg to differ. Our findings suggest that this is not a systematic and auditable process. The solution could be an amendment to the current legislation, where the obligation to prepare for leaving the institution from the very beginning of the stay would be anchored. There is currently a legislative debate on the need to modernise the legislative instruments of social protection (Stárek, 2020, p. 76). Given the interdisciplinary nature of the issue of institutional education, it would certainly be beneficial if preparation for leaving children's homes were a legal obligation of the child social protection authorities. The cooperation between the social welfare authorities and young adults should continue even after leaving the children's home. Interdisciplinary teams should be established so experts from

different disciplines may work together (Little et al., 2008, p.207).

Young people leaving children's homes need comprehensive support. It should be strongly pointed out that, compared to their peers, they have considerably more difficult starting conditions at the beginning of their independent life. If they fail to get off to a good start, the risk of them turning to negative behaviour patterns such as drugs, alcohol and crime increases significantly. Children and young adults in children's homes are at risk of substance abuse, which is also a serious problem for young adults leaving institutional settings (Csiernik et al., 2017). The current gradual problem of non-substance addiction, especially on social media and virtual environments, cannot be overlooked (Grajek, 2022).

There is a need to lead the line of support in several directions. On the one hand, we need to intensively rehabilitate the original families, while building a quality aftercare network. In residential care facilities, it will be necessary to intensify the preparation of young adults for departure; ideally, this preparation should begin on the day of their arrival. We see synergistic cooperation across disciplines, from social work to sociology to special education, as essential. The energy invested and the money spent will be returned to our society many times over. The young adults will have the opportunity to overcome difficult challenges tied to their past, both in their original families and in children's homes, and will have an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential. After all, equal opportunity is at the heart of the inclusion paradigm. We have a long and challenging process ahead of us. But it will undoubtedly be meaningful and the results will be undeniable!

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