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**BETTER COOPERATION BETWEEN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM AND SCHOOL AS WAY TO INCREASED EMPLOYABILITY FOR YOUTH LEAVING FOSTER CARE INSTITUTIONS**

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**Abstract**

A close look on the foster care institutions revealed a complex vulnerable situation of the care leavers at the entrance on the labor market. The literature identified negative influences on their development of growing up in institutionalized environment, fading but acting at the age of early adulthood, under the eagerness for independence and for looking for an employer. The authors of the paper turn on school, as environment of stability and empowerment of these children, stressing the need for more accents on non-formal educative process, the cooperation between them and between them and the rest of community.

**Keywords**: foster care institution, informal education, youth employability

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The literature on human development psychology and the researches on the topic of the paper link the theme to aspects such as: labour market and professional carrier, schools as environments for development, tertiary education as phase in the transition to adulthood, the autonomy development, identity development, the self concept and self-trust development, delinquency, leaving home and running away, living on the street (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009); the influence of the socio-emotional environment on child development, its rehabilitation potential and the children separated from their biological family, stressors from environment that affect human development (Muntean, 2006); between success/un-success and stress/anxiety; minor delinquency (Șchiopu, 1997).

The psycho-therapeutically approach, within the current of emotional intelligence development, link the theme to the acquiring fundamental emotional elements, maltreatment, the lost of empathy, trauma and so on (Goleman, 2001).

Subsequent to this line, the educational sciences turned their attention to strategies for the development of the socio-emotional intelligence in schools through formal, informal, nonformal education (Drăghicescu & Șerbănescu, 2012).

Based on comparisons with non-institutionalized children, findings of some research help in understanding the context of papers’ topic: PhD research of Dumitrana (1997) identified delay (and not retard) in intellectual development, anxiety, generating both inhibition/ withdraw, and hyperactivity/ aggressiveness, low level of initiating and maintaining social contacts at children in institutions; lack of empathy, trauma and recovering efforts, intellectual, emotional and mental differences between children in foster families and those in institutions is discussed by Nelson, Fox, and Zeannah (2013); increased depression and anxiety, suspiciousness, hostility, self-blame for the event that caused institutionalization, low-tolerance toward others in direct relation to self-acceptance is identified by Șoitu (2013) around the age of 14 years old.

In the last 20 years the Romanian children protective care system has gone through a reform process aiming at improving care leavers chances to become part of the society. The explicit socio-inclusive policy promoted within the space of the EU, Romania having it assumed after its European integration, has been not but an additional boost for more steps in this respect. The already existing trend of reducing foster care centers’ size

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and developing alternative care forms (in late nineties) has been backed by more stress on developing the foster family type support, and the cooperation between public and private sphere (2004 and later).

The education system reacted to the socio-economic context by adjustments in its curricula, by notable increase and diversification on higher education, while the vocational one has gone through recession. The enrolment in the latest decreased in number and type of qualifications until 6 years ago, when one could notice a slight recovery. Positive aspects from the perspective of our topic are the development of vocational counseling in schools (since 1996), the creation of few places in high schools and universities for youth in vulnerable groups to be assigned without exam, and the inclusion in curricula, three times per year, of one week of no formal education (since 2009), both starting in first grade. Theoretically, the last initiative is hindered only by teachers’ and schools’ limits (imagination, funds, interest or understanding) in identifying appropriate activities to involve pupils in.

The more dynamic employment policies have turned during the last decade to smooth the transition from school to labour market of youth through regulation on temporary employment, during holidays (2007) and on qualification at the work place (2005), the surviving vocational schools have benefiting the most of them. Both laws complete the subsidized employment for those in vulnerable position on the labor market (2002). In addition, youth expose to the risk of social exclusion could benefit of financial support for housing expenditures (rent, heating, electricity, water supply; 2002).

Youth in FCIs benefit of the facilities granted by the educational and employment policies systems for those in vulnerable groups. As for any other group, the less obvious barriers toughen the visible one in relation to the socio-economic inclusion, so that addressing the last one is by far not enough for the success of the process. Among the few studies on the topic for the Romanian context, psychologists and social workers (Dărăbuș & all, 2006; Ghebuță & all, 2009) revealed the unbelievable difficulties at their first steps of independent life: not being able to administer a budget of money or time, not being able to use public transportation, not having basic communication skills for a minimal polite conversation, not being able to use a map to go from a point to another doubling low tolerance to frustration, effect of the various forms of deprivation they have suffered or rebel, bold or naughty attitude for not being perceived un-protected or for masking their lack of knowledge (it is cooler to say I do not want instead of I do not know).

Not all, but some of these inabilities were met during our research, the reform of the system showing already effects. Even this, in the latest years, they have obstructed to great extend these youth employability. Of course, the active employment measures can’t cope them and this is why, based on a close picture of the FCIs, we turn to school, as environment for development, questioning if isn’t it any point in which their intervention could better prepare children for the labor market.

2. METHOD

The core data of the paper is provided by a qualitative research carried out between September – October 2014, in several FCIs from Bucharest (BU) and the neighboring county of Prahova (PH). There was envisaged youth of 17-26 y.o, without severe disabilities. At 18 years of age youth in protective care leave the system if not are following a short of long term formal education; they can be cared further up to 26 y.o. The research consisted on group-discussions/face-face interviews with youth, or face to face interviews with specialists (psychologists, social workers, educators, teachers, NGOs activists). For those below 18 years of age just group discussions were carried out with the presence of an educator/tutor.

The discussions with youth were based on in interview guide focused on their school stage, the reason for choosing a school or another, what they like to do, what they would like to do as profession, how they have prepared for this, which are their short terms plans, if they already have some work experience, their social capital inside or outside FCIs. The specialist were asked about the institutional relationship with schools and labour market institutions, about the possibilities they have to counsel and guide children /youth for the professional life, about problems they encounter with youth in this respect. About 70 people participated to the research, in 12 FC units their leading offices, public and private, professional orientation and training services, and schools, but the paper uses just information relevant from education perspective.

The short time duration of the research did not allow a gradual accommodation of the research team this the youth, the team just being announced when the youth wanting to participate are available. This is why we thought that a group discussion will make youth more comfortable in the presence of a stranger and of the recorder. The risk of altering the response due the presence of others was very low, the questions not being of an intimate nature; as we could notice during the research they know very well each other, which this fueled discussion. The budget and time limited the geographical spread, as well as the inclusion of the youth in foster care families.
3. RESULTS

The FC system aims for children and youth with adverse life course at providing guidance for education, work and independent life until they become adults. This could happen in private or public residential centers (with 30 to 100 children, of various ages), in family type houses/clusters, in foster families (several children in the care of a mother/couple) and to less extend in maternal care (a form rather specific to infants). Children with health problems could be hosted in dedicated centers, depending on the severity of their problems. All these forms function under the supervision of the Local Social Work Department (LSWD), being financed by the state; even private centers can benefit of a monthly allowance/ per child transferred from LSWD. Since 2004 the Romanian system has been explicitly built on the rights based approach: children are informed with respect to their rights, are offered counseling on health and hygiene, periodical health tests, vocational counseling, and psychological supervision when the case.

The centers are organized and equipped similarly to the social model, but there is still a deficit of affectivity and attention children can benefit of. Also, there is need for them to exercise a larger set of skills for an autonomous and responsible life, more challenges for act, think and decide (BU, youth; Dărăbuș&all, 2006; Nisiparu, 2010; Șoitu, 2013). As the non-formal education week in schools, this objective has been left rather at the imagination of the educators, with no particular resources. In the last few years good practices/initiatives have spread and improvements have been made, even still insufficient; teenagers can leave the institution (upon request), have friends from outside FCIs, are going alone to school, have occasional working cooperation with or without educators recommendation, and to more and more extend are involved in domestic activities. The family type houses come just before adulthood to develop basic abilities for independent life, youth being in charged with various daily activities (cleaning, cooking, budgeting money and time) for themselves and sometime for limited time (BU, PH).

The less bureaucratic administration of the financial resources specific to the private sphere allows these centers to develop more flexible/non-formal educational program for their children, having also a smaller number of children assigned to educators. The public one has to justify and to get hierarchical extra-institutional approval for any money spent on children behalf, from small amounts for various extracurricular activities at school to any innovative, tempting activity they can imagine for the children. While the first can be faced, a travel by train, 2-3 days trips in a different neighborhood or other educative activities could rest a dream (PH). In response to the refusal of a project of vegetable greenhouse, under the suspicion of exposing the children to work, the single strand of tomato grown in the garden kept children attention during all its growing stages and - for a short period of time- a "hosted" rabbit too (PH); these came to respond to their natural curiosity, but as well as to their need to be useful (in the opposition to the sense of guilty for being rejected).

Irrespective its form, the success of FC system depends on pedagogical and psychological abilities of the specialists working with children, and the time they have to help children to deal with the adverse context of their life. Educators’ attention in the public centers is split between 6-12 children and youth, facing constant challenges from new entries, negative inputs in children life course or repeated movements from one school/center to another. Alongside to children abandoned at birth (without any reference to these cases extension in the Romanian FC system, pointing just the variety of situations educators are confronted with), centers’ staff deals with children found begging or unattended on the street, children coming from extremely poor families who can’t provide minimal food and living conditions for them, family dissolution (by divorce, working abroad), teenagers whose parents died in their arms, teenagers victim of domestic violence/ maltreatment, of sexual abuse or of the human being traffic, children/teenagers who run away from their families, having sometimes the experience of living in the street. In several years the age structure of the children in center could change drastically, so that educators’ focus have to change on different priorities in different contexts. School could be a factor of equilibrium in these children development.

Usually, their school performance is not at high level, reflecting the turbulence in their life. For those in institutions from the early ages the risks were mentioned in section 1. When this was not the case, the potential gain of primary education could be spoiled while the child is still in its natural family, particular conditions of it leading to inconsistent school attendance, skipping the homework or school abandonment, if not the inappropriate life course for a child.

At the entrance in FCI the child is enrolled in a class according to its level of knowledge; at 12 years of age he might not know to write and read or at 17 he might follow the first stage of secondary school (when this is supposed to end around 14 y.o). Irrespective the route, the delay in education or cognitive development is hardly recovered due to reasons as the provocative age of 14 within the context mentioned before, the centripetal force of their old habits, the model provided by occasional or old friends which have managed other ways, the illusive
power they gain during the contact with the labor market as unqualified workers in occasional jobs/activities or the school context itself (BU; specialists, youth).

Not at large scale, specialists participating in our study mentioned cases of (BU). Children at low age have to be enrolled in school as close as possible to their place of residence. The impact their life context could have on them can generate difficulties in adaptation process in new environments or in relation to rules and authority. There are cases when the teacher/school refuses to maintain a child from FCI invoking the troubles its presence arises, due to possible ADHD disorders, not intellectual abilities, insufficient cognitive development of the child, its constantly moving in the chair, coughs during classes and so on (BU). The tutors can appeal to law in order to maintain the child in the class, but it is still questionable if is worthy, the child is exposed further to its colleagues and among children coming from well-off families he will be gradually marginalized, because he has not interesting stories from vacations, does not travel abroad, does not wear fashionable clothes and has not fashionable pencil box (BU). Teacher’s openness, the attention and time he dedicates is crucial for the success of these children integration, but can obliterate center’s effort in this respect as well. The risk of teacher disinterest is the whole spectrum of negative experiences of these children with school, added to the preexisting one, which leads to school failure, not-involvement and abandonment. As such undesired phenomenon burdens even more the educators and tutors in FCIs they choose (if possible) to enroll children in school communities with a more appropriate profile.

The first decision with regard to their future professional life occurs at the end of the low secondary education, when based on the hierarchy defined by the results of the ending exam, children choose the high or the vocational school they follow. As they are generally placed in the bottom part of hierarchy, they choose from what is left, and this is just by accident what they do like or suit them. What they do like or wish to do as profession is at very large extend idealistic, feebly rooted; things start to change just over 16 years of age, but still not drastically. In extreme cases, the choice of the high school may be a strategic decision of the FCI staff, as for a child who entered FC system around 14 years of age, being beaten by his father and sent to work, enrolled at the suggestion of the tutors at a religious high school profile.

To small extend too, cases of support from teachers’ side are mentioned in both primary and high school, but while for the first is purely a matter of professionalism –teacher insisting to not withdraw the child from her class- in the high school it depends almost entirely on the child interest: among pupils barely writing, coming from FCIs, we had one who, in the 3rd year, was among those at the top in his class. He asked me to give him passages from manuals to write them down, in order to exercise the writing. [...] He got hired. He managed (PH; specialist). Expectedly, as higher the education stage as more responsibility is expected from pupils. For reasons mentioned before children form FCIs might not act according to the expectancies not because they do not want, but because they do not know how or are not able to; this is why the involvement and support of teachers is essential in all stages.

As education is not compulsory after lower secondary education, going further to school is youth own decision. In most of their cases this is not based on personal developmental aims, but on the opportunity they have to benefit further of the care protective measure (accommodation, cloths, food) they remain entitled to this way. This behavior is quite common at the end of high school, when if I do not find an affordable accommodation, I go to university (BU; youth). Indeed, opposed to the former Romanian educational system model, going to university is much more relaxed and to large extend matter of youth willingness. Result of the affirmative inclusive measures teenagers from FCIs can become students without exam. If the university profile is not in their area of interest and unused with duties on their own, there is a high probability for studies’ abandonment at the first exam session, when passing the exams is a result of sustained own work and not a matter of rights. The number of those hoping for advanced education is small, partly because youth are eager to become independent at 18 y.o. and try more or less illusive way for getting money soon, partly because most of them choose vocational schools, which hinder the access to university, and partly because the final exam of the high school is an insurmountable obstacle for most of them. Unfortunately, the failure of former colleagues influence them a lot, the distrust in their own success starting 1-2 years before the exam moment: I am already lost, from the former generation of my teacher nobody passed the exam, none of my colleagues from the center passed last year, math rises me problems … all that matrixes and foolish things (BU; PH). The constant need for encouragement, consequence of the recoil and discouragement produced by any negative input in their life was often mentioned by the specialists.

Close to adulthood educators in the centers look for vocational courses to enroll the youngsters in. The enrolment happens with the child consent, meaning the child does not dislike it, based rather on the available courses, affordability (how much they do cost or if is providing allowance during the course or not) and what is considered to give more chances to the child. They could have credentials for several such courses, mostly in the field of services, not particularly connected to each other, with qualification at entry level. Further, at the end of
the school, personal social capital of the educators is activated in order to find an employer or an NGO for support, if the child does not choose the independency he yearned for (reunification with the extended family, goes after good money promising activities in Romania or abroad, getting married, homeless experience).

They are very low equipped for employment subvention of the adults – due to behavioral disorders and altered communication abilities. Let’s note that they avoid to say about their state protective care route, and if this is revealed they could leave the school or the job (BU, youth; Abraham, 2013); reasons are various, but important is they loss this way the key for being understood. What employer sees, beside low or lack of qualification, is non-involvement, lack of seriousness, disrespect for authority, naughty or rebel attitude. Someone has to plead for them and the employer has to know the phenomenon deeply enough and to have a certain level of economic stability to resist for a while to such low productive work relationship.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Let’s recall in this picture the feeble mechanisms of building responsibility, children general low self-trust, masked or not, so that the shaky roots for assuming responsibility, the role of school in developing personality, alongside to the centripetal forces in their school participation. We think that an optimum response to this situation, preventing and hilling in the same time, is given by the non-formal education, in school and in FCIs too, in adequate forms to different level of child development.

A follow-up opportunity for the Center Education 2000+ Project (Partnership for education. Grants for School In Difficulty) funded through Emergency Fund by Open Society Foundations, Romania) occasioned by the Grundtvig Project Manage Labor Integration (developed in international consortium under the general coordination of Promoción Educativa Sociedad Cooperativa/Spain, and of the Center for Democratic Development for Romania; for details see Ilie, 2014) has revealed unforeseen positive impact of the non-formal education on children. The project offered grants up to 5000 USD based on project proposal of mainly primary and secondary schools from disfavored areas. The proposed activities were mainly in the sphere of the non-formal education, like visits to museums, short trips inside and outside the county, hand-made products from paper/textile/wood/ceramics, dancing, staging of theater played by children, reading stories or music hours, exercising writing, education for environment protection, visits to asylums/universities/factories. In the follow-up process, teachers named the increasing interest and presence at school of children in risk of school abandonment, the increase of children self-trust and self-esteem, improved communication skills among children in classes, and increasing interest of the parents, including of those of the children in risk of school abandonment, for the educational process. Some of those children, like many in the FC system, have never had the opportunity to leave their neighborhood. Throughout these activities they came into contact to different people, communities, skills and jobs, found out what they can create or be part of, and school, as mediator, becomes interesting.

During the study on FC system, alongside to the tomato strand and the rabbit, there were identified activities in which children gladly participated to afternoon sessions with seniors for making homework, learning to knit and to tailor (BU), paying attention to how is constituted and functions a radio set under the supervision of former electrician (now member in an association for people with severe physical disability), to how is repaired a car engine or is made a wood chair by the center staff, visit a salami factory (PH). For higher age is to mention a girl which at 19 y.o. completely forgot the anatomy class included in the curricula of the lower secondary school, but delightful recounting chats with peers about the biggest or the most used muscle of the human body (BU, youth; Abraham, 2013); reasons are various, but important is they loss this way the key for being understood. What employer sees, beside low or lack of qualification, is non-involvement, lack of seriousness, disrespect for authority, naughty or rebel attitude. Someone has to plead for them and the employer has to know the phenomenon deeply enough and to have a certain level of economic stability to resist for a while to such low productive work relationship.

A recent study on youth (Abraham, 2013), discussing problems of the 10-18 years of age teenagers, hitting the channels of HIV exposure, concludes on the usefulness of day centers, after school programs, multifunctional centers for non-formal education and leisure, among other type of services for youth. The study points also the decreasing interest in school after primary education for reasons as decreasing parents’ interest in it, un-up-dated educational process to the rhythm of children development under the impact of new technologies, un-adequate ways to regain respect in class, bad relationships with colleagues and teachers, alongside to a burden curricula, as suggested by one of specialists in the FC system research too.

The non-formal educational week in school or after school/week-end/summer holiday activities held by teachers or by educators in centers, parents, professionals or NGOs offer rooms for interesting, educational activities which can keep children and youth interest, irrespective their possible sinusoidal trajectory in school. "A day of my life", described by children under anonymity, in vulnerable groups or not, can be changed between centers/schools/localities and even countries and discussed in class, which will rise awareness on different

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vulnerability profile and possible on cultural differences, for both children and adults; the same for a day of a sport or music star, entrepreneur or a professional; analyzing a mobile phone components could occasion a lesson of physics, chemistry or geography, a trip – a lesson of geography, history or biology, a tailor course - a lesson of math, rising awareness on tobacco/ alcohol/ drug consumption a lesson of anatomy or chemistry; organizing an imaginary vacation to different regions, a cultural event with international guests, an imaginary process of deciding upon buying a car/house and the process of getting a loan for it provoke the children to think at the interdependency of any decision; and so on. Many of the training courses developed within the ESF frame, like entrepreneurship, TIC, landscaping, gardening, livestock, hairdressing, cooking, interior design could have been as well developed as 1–2 weeks of summer courses in a school premise, without the aim of qualification credentials, for offering to teenagers alternative for leisure, empowering them in the same time by increasing knowledge, better self-knowledge, social and professional skills. Some of these activities are just matter of imagination and good will. For others central and local authorities in education, youth, sport, work and social protection, other ministries could assign small amounts of money, eventually based on project and/or in joint committee.

In such conditions, the temporary summer jobs and the apprenticeship would become more interesting for youth and more effective, the qualification courses for credentials more demanding from both parts and the employment subvention a more successful active employment measure for youth.

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