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Educational Experiences of Children and Youths in Foster Care: A Multidimensional Approach

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Abstract: *In the context in which school education can be a source of support for the social integration of children and youths in the welfare system, their educational experiences become relevant. This article pinpoints the school experiences of 65 children and youths in the special residential care system in Romania, with references to several numbers of international studies. Educational experiences are described through a multidimensional approach, from a psycho-emotional, pedagogical, and relational perspective. Based on the perspective of institutionalised children and youths, feelings and emotions related to school, perceptions of the educational act and climate, educational needs, as well as relationships with peers or teachers are explored. The research methods used were mixed; we used both the questionnaire-based survey and the interview. The research results suggest that the voices of institutionalised students need to be heard and valued. These are important resources for restoring the right of these children and youths to a fair education.*

Keywords: *educational experiences, foster care, students, feelings towards school, school climate, relationship with peers and teachers.*

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Introduction

The right to education is one of the fundamental rights of children and is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28 (Miller et al., 2021). It is the duty and responsibility of the social actors involved in the educational process to provide this right to all children in an equitable manner. However, it is known that institutionalised students are often educationally disadvantaged if we think about the situations of abuse, vulnerability, and loss that they have experienced in foster care (Palmieri & La Salle 2017; Font & Gershoff, 2020; The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008). As a result of these disadvantages, children and youths in foster care are at the highest risk of poor academic outcomes (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

Children in the foster care system face school integration problems that result in unfavourable educational experiences. The increased rate of school failure is mainly found among children belonging to socially disadvantaged categories (Rădăcină, 2022). In this respect, children growing up in the foster care system are at higher risk of experiencing educational problems and difficulties (Klasen, 1999; Hernandez et al., 2017; Stănescu et al., 2013; Toth & Mina, 2020). These may be poor academic performance, increased absenteeism, deviant behaviours, or dropping out of school (ibidem).

Despite the poor educational outcomes of children in foster care, schools can mitigate the impact of adversity or trauma by facilitating opportunities for connection and stability (Gilligan, 2000). School education offers opportunities to improve physical, intellectual and social well-being, providing economic support for adulthood (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Continued school attendance can facilitate coping mechanisms for institutionalised children (Pirttimaa & Välivaara, 2017), helping them to cope with the vulnerable situations they have experienced. Education also contributes to a better quality of life, reflected in personal, professional, and social opportunities (Day et al., 2012).

Alternatively, schools can become sources of trauma and failure through punitive disciplinary measures, bullying or ineffective pedagogical methods (Townsend et al., 2020). The educational experiences of children and youths in special residential care system are closely linked to psychological, social, cultural and educational contexts. It is very important to try to understand the experiences faced by institutionalised students from a multidimensional perspective in order to be able to propose educational support measures appropriate to their needs and challenges. This is the only

way we will be able to provide equitable education and to truly support children and youths in the care system on their way to socio-educational integration.

Literature review

Several aspects can be drawn from the specialist studies on the educational experiences of children and youths in the welfare system. Firstly, in a very large number of cases, school is seen as a safe environment that supports children's learning (Clemens et al., 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). Quite the opposite, other research has shown that children's/youths's experiences in school environment are negative, as they are victims of bullying, ill-treatment and violence at school (Day et al., 2012). The effects of traumatic experiences, lack of early attachment or insecure attachment can lead to emotional-cognitive, learning, or other social difficulties (Tessier et al., 2018; Maté, 2011). The very fact of being enrolled in the care system can be a situation that is a source of stigmatisation and bullying in the school environment (Clemens et al. 2017). Experiences of neglect and mistreatment result in learning difficulties, poorer school attendance and an increased rate of absenteeism compared to children who are not fostered (Fantuzzo et al., 2011). The stress associated with entering the foster care system makes it difficult to concentrate at school, limiting children's ability to complete educational tasks or homework, and causes difficulties in coping with school demands and the children's ability to learn (Day et al., 2012; Clemens et al., 2017). On the other hand, there are many reports of situations in which institutionalised students display deviant behaviour in the school environment, and aggression directed both towards teachers and other students (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; SOS Children's Villages, 2020).

A second theme that emerges when considering the educational experiences of institutionalised students is the types of relationships they develop with teachers and classmates (Scheer, 2007). The emphasis is on the importance of positive and supportive relationships with peers and teachers (Berridge, 2017; Clemens et al., 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018; Schroeter et al., 2015). In a study conducted in New Zealand, which examined the responses of seven subjects to their experiences of academic success, it was found that relationships with teachers, carers and friends were sources of support for school success, which were manifested by the opportunity to have their voices heard, to have a positive influence on the decision-making process and access to rights (Miller et al., 2021). They have shown resilience in the challenges they faced that facilitated experiences that

lead to educational success. It is important that the life experiences of children and youths in the welfare system are heard in order to understand what are the factors that have an impact on educational success and influence child protection policies and practices (Miller et al., 2021).

Another study found that teachers were perceived by children to be the most supportive individuals, helping them to acquire academic skills, providing emotional support, encouragement, and boosting children's self-confidence (Harker et al., 2003). Teachers were also seen by children and youths raised in foster care or foster families as sources of support in developing self-regulation skills (Schroeter et al., 2015). Youths who have grown up in the foster care system have shown that positive relationships with teachers helped them in acquiring academic gains, school engagement, and supported their sense of connectedness and belonging (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). Building positive relationships with teachers also provides opportunities for fostered children for academic development and supports them in the process of completing their studies (Hass et al., 2014). Teachers' encouragement is a mechanism to boost children's confidence in their personal strengths, which has an implicit positive effect on the development of the educational success skills (Harker et al., 2003).

On the contrary, if institutionalised students do not develop supportive relationships with teachers, they will perceive themselves as unable to meet their needs, all of which have a negative impact on educational success (Day et al., 2012). Moreover, the lack of support from the employees of the foster care centres, not valuing the child's/young person's wishes regarding his/her educational path can also be a source of loss of school motivation (Bejenaru, 2013). Specialists remind that teachers generally have very little knowledge of the child welfare system and the development of these students makes pedagogical methods and the treatment applied to them unsuccessful (Morton, 2015). One solution might be to place social workers in educational institutions to mediate between teachers and children of disadvantaged categories and to develop specialised socio-educational services.

With regard to peer relationships, research studies in the field have also identified two possible situations. Positive peer relationships increase foster children's sense of belonging to the school environment and are a source of support and motivation that increases the chance of success (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). It has been shown that a classmate mentor, or a former student who has been through the same vulnerability, can play an important and supportive role in the educational journey of institutionalised children and youths (Rutman &

Hubberstey, 2018). The second situation is characterised by peer relationships that have a negative impact on school success (Clemens et al., 2017; Bejenaru, 2013). In particular, these relationships are characterised by various forms of distraction, labelling or bullying of foster care students in the school environment by other peers (Clemens et al., 2017).

From the perspective of institutionalised students, the possibilities to improve educational experiences can be developed by providing material, educational resources and various sources of support (Berridge, 2017; Clemens et al., 2017; Day et al., 2012; Morton, 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). Specifically, youths talk about the need for tutoring, extra help from teachers, transportation to and from school, financial assistance, and access to educational resources (appropriate learning space, computer, internet access, books, and other school resources) (Day et al., 2012; Schroeter et al., 2015). Some of the institutionalised children and youths stressed the need for teaching through practical applications and the development of independent living skills, and for learning to be individualised according to each student's own pace of understanding (Clemens et al., 2017; Day et al., 2012; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018).

Efforts should focus on a less restrictive educational environment and more on early interventions, encouraging positive behaviour and providing services in school and community (Scherr, 2007). Many experts stress that it is essential to ensure the right of children in the foster care system to be heard, to have their views taken into account and to be involved in the decision-making process (Miller et al., 2021).

It is very important to listen to the voices of children in foster care centres in order to understand their educational experiences, needs and to be able to build adequate resources to improve their school integration. The research to be presented aims to give visibility to the educational experiences of children and youths who have grown up in the special welfare system in Romania.

Research methodology

The aim of the research was to identify the perspectives of children and youths in three foster care centres in Transylvania, regarding their educational experiences. The research question addressed in this study is: What are the educational experiences of children and youths in the special residential care system from the perspective of psycho-emotional, educational, and relational dimensions? We used the interview and questionnaire-based survey method. 65 children and youths aged 7-21 participated in the research. 36 institutionalised students were interviewed

and 62 questionnaires were applied. We have worked closely with representatives of child protection institutions, while respecting the ethical principles of research.

Results

Educational experiences cover a wide range of aspects in children's academic trajectory. For this article, we have focused primarily on children's perspectives on their feelings and emotions when they think about school, what are their opinions about the activities carried out there, what prospects they have for improving their educational experiences, and how they describe their relationships with teachers and peers. SPSS software was used to analyse the quantitative data, and content analysis was used to interpret the interview responses.

Psycho-emotional dimension: feelings and emotions related to school

The psychosocial dimension of school experiences' perceptions is an important part of understanding how students relate to educational institutions. Experiences, feelings, emotions associated with the institutional educational framework can determine the degree of involvement in school preparation. Do children feel safe in the school environment? Are they happy? To what extent do they fear in school and why? These are just some of the questions that we try to explore building on the answers given by the institutionalised students who participated in the study.

In the questionnaire-based survey, a large proportion of respondents said they felt safe at school (72.6%), but there are also participants who say they do not feel safe at school (12.9%), while 14.5% of respondents said they sometimes feel safe, sometimes not (Table 1). Although the majority of respondents seem to feel safe, a quarter of them do not always see school as a safe space. However, most of the respondents (91.9%) said that they are not afraid of school (Table 1). However, there were also respondents who said that they are sometimes scared at school. In informal discussions, some respondents reported that they were afraid because of aggression and threats from older peers. However, the low recognition of this fear can also be blamed on social desirability. The concealment of feelings of fear is a practice that can be a source of defensiveness and a projection of a brave self that is seen as desirable. When asked specifically whether they were afraid of being beaten up at school, 21% of respondents said they are always or sometimes afraid. This fear may explain why a quarter of respondents do not see school as a safe place.

The percentage of those who said they were happy at school is lower compared to those who said they felt safe. Thus, only 59.7% say they are happy at school, while 32.3% of respondents said they sometimes feel happy at school, sometimes not, and 8.1% that they are not happy in the educational establishments they attend.

Almost half of the respondents (48.4%) answered that they see school as a pleasant place to be, where they can't wait to go. On the other hand, however, a quarter of respondents (24.2%) say that school is not a pleasant place, where they can't wait to go, and a further 25.8% say that sometimes it is a pleasant place, sometimes not (Table 1).

		Number	**Percentage**
Is school a place where you feel safe?	No	8	12.9%
	Yes	45	72.6%
	Both yes and no	9	14.5%
Are you happy at school?	No	5	8.1%
	Yes	37	59.7%
	Both yes and no	20	32.3%
Do you like school?	No	7	11.3%
	Yes	38	61.3%
	Both yes and no	16	25.8%
	I don't know	1	1.6%
Are you afraid at school?	No	57	91.9%
	Yes	3	4.8%
	Both yes and no	2	3.2%
Is school a pleasant place you can't wait to go to?	No	15	24.6%
	Yes	30	49.2%
	Both yes and no	16	26.2%
Are you afraid you might get beaten up at school?	No	49	79.0%
	Yes	8	12.9%
	Both yes and no	5	8.1%

Table 1: Feelings and emotions related to school

From the interviews conducted, it could be seen that the feelings of children and youths towards school vary, but in general, there is a correlation

between the type of feelings and the school results. A large proportion of children have expressed negative, or sometimes indifferent, feelings when referring to their thoughts about school. Various reasons were given, such as: the uselessness of the study subjects, the demands and the high effort required to prepare for school. *"It sucks, I feel tormented, it seems to me that the subjects are trivial, there is no point in some of them." (I1)*; *"It makes me sick. I don't want to go, I don't like it. (I15)*; *"I'm stressed, nervous and unhappy when I go to school. I feel bad." (I18).*

There were also children who said they have positive feelings about school, they feel good there and even like going to school. A total of 15 children and youths out of the 36 respondents expressed a positive attitude towards school. *"When I think about school, sometimes I get excited, sometimes I get happy. There are no issues that worry me." (I4); "When I think about school, it means joy." (I27); "I feel really good when I think about school." (I32)*

In general, as mentioned, positive feelings are associated with pleasant educational experiences and good learning outcomes. School can also be seen by children as an "escape" space from the institutional environment, i.e. a form of freedom. Therefore, according to the results of the questionnaire-based survey, a higher percentage of children and youths say they enjoy school more than the centre.

One obvious aspect was that the respondents were more open to talk while conducting the interviews, about their not so pleasant feelings and experiences rather than acknowledging them in their answers to the questions in the questionnaire.

The educational dimension: the climate and educational needs

With regard to the difficulties encountered in the learning process, 8.1% of students participating in the study stated they did not understand what they were taught, while 41.9% understood partially. More than half of the respondents (53.3%) found some subjects to be very difficult in general, and 17.7% in some cases. About two-thirds of respondents always or sometimes find school boring. This may be the result of difficulties in understanding school subjects mentioned by some of the respondents. In interviews, the most commonly cited reasons for boredom at school are either difficulties in understanding subjects or unattractive teaching methods. With regard to the support with homework, the respondents indicated that they either did not receive any help at all or receive it only sometimes. In this context, 64.6% of respondents believe that if they received more help with their homework, it would be easier for them at

school, and 74.2% believe that if they understood lessons better, they would enjoy school more.

The need for individualisation of educational activities and the desire for a higher level of student participation in educational activities stems from the responses provided to the question: "If you could choose the subjects you studied at school, would you like it better there?" A large majority of the respondents (83.9%) believe that being able to choose their own subjects would improve their school experience. However, for 9.7% of them, this would not be something that would make them love school more, and 6.5% are unsure.

When it comes to things perceived as unpleasant at school, respondents dislike most the fact that it is boring (29%), that they do not understand the usefulness of certain things they learn (22.6%), that it is too hard (21%) and that they have too much homework (21%). Only 12.9% of respondents say that what bothers them most about school are relationships with peers (Table 2).

It's boring	No	44	71.0%
	Yes	18	29.0%
One does not understand why one needs to learn certain things	No	48	77.4%
	Yes	14	22.6%
It's too difficult	No	49	79.0%
	Yes	13	21.0%
There is too much homework	No	49	79.0%
	Yes	13	21.0%
Classmates	No	54	87.1%
	Yes	8	12.9%

Table 2: What annoys or bothers you most at school?

A large part of the respondents feel the need for a school program that focuses more on interesting, attractive activities, including games, films, themed workshops, etc. Thus, 46.8% of the respondents recall the need for teachers to make lessons more enjoyable and interesting, and 33.9% perceive this need to a great extent. Varied activities at school are perceived as a need by 30. 6% of the respondents and as a very high need of 46.8%.

Many respondents feel that they need more support to better understand what is being taught at school and to cope with homework. More than half of the respondents feel they need more help with their homework. Moreover, 45.2% say they would need more help to understand what they learn at school, and 27.4% feel this need is very high. Even in this

context, 43.5% would appreciate having a teacher nearby to explain when they do not understand something at school, and 33.9% consider this a very great need. The need for institutionalised children to do better at school also results from the fact that 89% of the respondents would like to get better grades.

From the conducted interviews, we could notice that the problems encountered by the institutionalised students in the educational environment cover a wide range of aspects, such as the difficulty of the subjects, sometimes the negative attitudes of the peers or teachers, the ineffective teaching techniques, the "useless" subjects, the lack of adequate support, the large amount of information transmitted, and the rigid school climate. "*Some subjects are difficult to understand. The teachers did not explain the material to us." (I2); "I missed the freedom, the fact that I had to stay within four walls." (I14); "I find the things I don't understand the most difficult in school. But I search the Internet for these things (not always)." (I15) "There are things I don't understand. Teachers don't really explain much." (I17) "I find* Romanian *and maths boring, because we write a lot, it is exhausting and we do the same*

Among the positive aspects related to school were mentioned the creative activities, the practical activities, the non-formal education (from Școala Altfel) or the teaching activities carried out in the favourite subjects. *My favourite subject is maths, I reckon, I like counting money." (I32): "...we did last week, Friday, about trust and we went to all the classrooms and we made little trees, wreaths and I liked it." (I4)*

The children and youths interviewed in the care centres would like to learn more about practical areas or areas that interest them (music, history, biology, cooking, etc.) and have access useful information for a good development and integration into society (financial education, sex education). *"About the financial part, financial education, because we did one year of entrepreneurial education and very briefly." (I35); "About life, to know better the subjects, to be practical courses that bring me closer to the profile I will follow." (I11).*

The main needs expressed by the children and youths that were interviewed are: more support for learning, tutoring, help with homework, the need to be treated equally/like others, the need for school supplies, clothes, a personal computer, workbook, and materials necessary for school. "*Support for school, materials, better computers." (I1) "Yes, I need clothes because I do not feel good if I am not dressed well and I leave school." (I18)*

Children and youths in the residential care system face a number of challenges regarding the activities carried out in relation to educational institutions. The learning difficulties, the rigid school climate and the lack of

adequate support for the real needs they face with regard to their educational training are particularly highlighted.

Relationship dimension: relationships with peers and teacher

According to the questionnaire survey, regarding relationships with teachers, most respondents said that teachers are nice to them (74.2%). About a quarter said that this aspect varied, with teachers sometimes behaving well towards them. When it comes to relationships with peers, 18% of respondents say they are often annoyed by their classmates at school, while 24.6% say this happens sometimes. It seems that relationships with schoolmates are not harmonious for just under half of the respondents.

Another worrying aspect is that 17.7% of respondents say that some of their schoolmates talk badly to them and make fun of them, and 11.3% say they go through these situations sometimes. Moreover, 14.6% of respondents agree with the statement that they sometimes have been the victim of physical abuse by their classmates, and more than half of the respondents say that it happens sometimes the classmates talk badly or hit them. These responses paint a picture of verbal and physical violence, in which children and youths in the centres find themselves in the position of being either victims or aggressors.

From the interviews, it can be seen that the relationships of the institutionalised children with their classmates and teachers are varied. In some cases, the interviewed students recalled harmonious relationships. *"Teachers behave nicely. I don't have teachers who behave badly, they're all good. We had a French teacher who would stand up if we talked in class and give us bad marks when we did not know how to answer." (I15). "I feel good. I get along well with my classmates, I feel safe. Teachers behave nicely, I've never had any problems with them." (I18).*

Bullying or intimidating behaviours is most often perceived by the respondents as coming from themselves towards others, but also vice versa, sometimes with acts of violence, even between peers. Verbal and physical violence is recognised as a defence mechanism, relaxation mechanism, or common practice, especially among adolescents. "*I have classmates with whom I don't get along well, I curse them." (I5); "My class..., my classmates fight, make trouble, I don't like to team up, I mind my own business." (I1).*

The attitudes of classmates and teachers towards children in foster care can be varied. Either there are tendencies of pity, compassion towards students in the residential environment, or of repulsion, violence or hostility, perceived by institutionalised children and youths. " *With the gypsies who are older classmates from the other school. The gypsies beat me and only when Miss comes with*

me in the morning do they leave me alone, but after classes she doesn't come with me anymore." (I6); "When you're from the foster care, you're seen in a different light Teachers hate you too, they doesn't wanna help you." [sic] (I1)

The disharmonious relationships with schoolmates that children and youths in the centres experience in school may be a result of their classmates' hostile attitude towards students from a disadvantaged social category. On the other hand, however, in the case of institutionalised children and youths, there is a tendency to act aggressively. In most cases, this tendency to react violently, especially verbally, appears either as a defence mechanism or as a result of a lack of knowledge about techniques for controlling and managing emotions. This highlights the need for counselling and therapy services tailored to the needs of children and youths in residential centres, to give them the opportunity to discuss the problems they face and to learn conflict management skills.

On the positive side, most respondents say they have schoolmates with whom they get along very well, only 9.7% of them say this is not the case. We emphasize the need for students in the foster care system to be treated the same as other students. This was mentioned repeatedly by the children and youths participating in the study. Even during the interviews, several youths told us that they did not want the others to know that they were from the "foster care", so that they would not be treated differently by their peers or teachers.

Limits of the study

The limits of the study are mainly related to the relatively small number of subjects, which–does not allow a more in-depth statistical analysis. Besides this aspect, in the context of convenience sampling and qualitative data analysis, we cannot talk about representativeness or extend the conclusions to a wider scale of subjects. However, we consider that the study is relevant for the targeted category of subjects, especially based on the fact that the results of the study broadly align with the conclusions of the research at the international level.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of the research carried out are broadly in line with the internationally findings presented in the first part of the article. We observed a tendency to respond more positively to educational experiences based on the questions asked in the questionnaire than in the interviews. This is due

to social desirability but also to the format of the questions in the questionnaire.

A theme emerging from the research reviewed that could provide benchmarks for further research in the field is the educational success of children and youths who have grown up in the care system despite the adversities they have faced (Clemens et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021). Even if the percentage of youths in this category is relatively low, they recall that they have built on the background of the problems and adversities suffered as sources of motivation and success (Clemens et al., 2017). These youths stressed the importance of increasing personal control and freedom in choosing the educational pathway (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). This conclusion was also reflected in the responses provided by the participants in our study.

Our research also highlighted the need to diversify teaching methods and curriculum by introducing "useful" subjects to meet the challenges they face.

Referring to research ethics, we mention that the study followed a rigorous ethical procedure. Participants gave their informed consent. In the case of minor respondents, the legal representative has expressed written consent for them. We also emphasize that the study's participants were informed about maintaining confidentiality and were given the freedom to engage or not in the data collection process. Before this stage, the research project received approval from a research ethics committee.

The educational experiences of children and youths in the welfare system are diverse. There is a correlation between educational experiences with students' feelings and experiences. The more favourable the educational climate, the more developmentally appropriate it is, the more likely it is that the feelings and experiences of institutionalised students will be favourable to school. Despite the shortages, educational institutions remain a source of support for a large number of students, sometimes a more pleasant place than the residential centre in which they live. In the context of the traumatic experiences brought about by the foster care condition, children and youths in the foster care system face learning difficulties, behavioural problems, peer abuse, deprivation and unmet needs. Beyond material needs, institutionalised students stressed the need for curricular adaptation, the diversification of teaching methods and more attractive presentation of learning content. The individualisation of learning, additional homework support and the involvement of students in the foster care system in choosing their educational pathway are needs recognised by children and youths in foster care centres. It is also very important to keep in mind that

an equitable education means additional educational support and services tailored to individual needs.

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