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Now what? the experience of youth leaving care in four European countries

Roxana Ungureanu

Research assistant, PhD, West University of Timisoara, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, Timisoara, Romania
roxana.ungureanu@e-uvt.ro

Mihaela Tomita

Professor, PhD, West University of Timisoara, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, Timisoara, Romania
mihaela.tomita@e-uvt.ro

Abstract. This paper draws on evidence from an Erasmus+ funded project, Now What?: Preparing and Empowering Youth Leaving Care, which aimed to find out the development of an integrated approach that will successfully achieve the provision of guidance on effective education, work and living in the community and support and help when the youth face crises that are an inevitable part of their transition to adulthood and independence. The research was carried out over two years by a consortium of four countries: Romania, Greece, Albania and Portugal. The principal method used was a biographical narrative interviews with a sample of 390 young people aged 15–20. Positive results came from a range of different interventions, e.g. mentoring projects and structured individualized support. We conclude that most focused interventions seem to improve foster children's poor academic achievements, but mentoring projects have so far the best empirical support from evaluations with rigorous designs. Also there's a definite need for more intervention research.

Keywords. youth leaving care, community, social services, professionals, child protection.

1. Theoretical background

At present, one million children are found in care institutions across the EU; while, every year 150.000 youths leave their “homes” as they age out of alternative care. The process has received very little attention, with the result that this youth is often forgotten once they have left care. Young people leaving care are expected to become independent at a very early age, considerably younger than peers who grow up in their families. These young people face challenges without the usual safety nets on which to fall back, raising the risk of social exclusion. Most European governments lack specific policies and plans of action to address this problem. The consequences of the little importance given to this key transitional period in a young person’s life, throughout Europe, are disastrous. Research findings report how the non-preparedness for the after-care life leads to indigence, homelessness, offending, substance abuse, renewed placement in an [adult] residential facility and even suicide.

The process of autonomization of the young people leaving care institutions presents itself to the majority of young people with a lot of difficulties, mainly due to the lack of institutional or family support. It is thus essential that the institutions help young people prepare a life project so that they can acquire life autonomy after leaving the care institution. A large proportion of young people leaving host houses are in need of psychotropic medication, especially antidepressant medications, because they have problems with stressful behavior that result from difficulties in everyday life or delinquent behavior. In view of this situation it is very important and relevant to know the perspectives of young people about their needs to acquire competences for autonomy of life aspect which was the subject of the administration of a questionnaire to several young people who left or intend to leave the care institutions.

The concept of the autonomy of life of young people is a complex theoretical construct that has been widely analyzed and discussed between the scientific community and professionals of Social Work. It is a concept that has been developed continuously on the basis of three different dimensions and different forms: emotional, cognitive and functional (Hayhoe, 2008).

Autonomy of life is therefore a process that leads young people to achieve an independent life through the establishment by themselves of norms of conduct that arise from the internalization of rules and values of the community where they live that may have been indicated by the various normative systems of independence and social issues. The development of the autonomy of life of young people is thus a process that is usually related to the family or institutional relations which is influenced by personal aspects such as self-esteem and the desire to be independent and by external issues such as family structure and communication and the surrounding community environment.

In general, it is with peers that the young person develops feelings of reciprocity, establishes relationships of solidarity and cooperation, and acquires feelings of social identity, independence and autonomy in three domains: cognitive, emotional and functional (Broke, 2010).

Cognitive autonomy is the ability of the young person to make their own choices, be able to set their goals and think about their actions through cognitive processes. Emotional autonomy refers to a young person's ability to set their goals with confidence independent of family desires, peers, and sometimes institutional decisions. Functional autonomy consists of a young person's ability to make decisions and resolve their issues without help from family, friends and institutions.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is an essential process for all young people, especially those who are in institutional care. Usually, the previous disruptions and institutional trajectories have provoked some difficulties in the transition process, especially when young people leave the care institutions that hosted them, which is very different from the young people who come from stable families and who enjoy a personalized accompaniment throughout their development.

The development of the autonomy of life of young people coming from family nucleus is generally affected by factors related to affection and protection in security environments of emotional support and love. The development of the autonomy of the life of the institutionalized youths has a strong relation with the continuous process of connection with the formal caregivers in which the young people feel the investment of affective present figures that allows the young people to create an emotional security that enhances their capacity of adequately deal with situations of an external or internal nature allowing them to overcome the difficulties related to these situations. In this sense, it is considered very relevant that the residential reception of young people is carried out, in which young people are permanently accompanied

by caregivers and educators, which establishes a relationship of trust that has often been shaken due to previous dropouts (Barton, et al, 2012).

In this perspective, it is fundamental to promote and encourage, within the framework of the reception structures, the development of autonomy of life so that it is internalized by the young people and the process of transition to the autonomy of life is experienced in an emancipatory perspective.

2. Method

The main purpose of this analysis of needs is to know, analyze and understand the needs of the young people who will leave the host institutions and the difficulties and problems they will encounter in the transition process after leaving host institutions or Temporary Reception Center (CAT). The analysis also aims to analyze and describe youth services and support agents in order to and the areas in which those needs remain not met.

Although there is some knowledge on the institutionalization and reception of children and young people in Portugal and also on the process of transition to an autonomous life of young people leaving institutions, it is considered relevant and necessary to know the phenomenon from the structural point of support them in meeting their needs and to identify, describe and analyze gaps in the provision of services view for a better understanding of the problem.

In this sense, it was considered appropriate to conduct this analysis of needs in order to better understand the phenomenon of the transition of young people to an autonomous life. This needs analysis will be based on the perceptions, opinions and perspectives of young people who have already left the care institutions and those who still are in the care institutions or Temporary Reception Centers. In addition to collecting and analyzing the perceptions, opinions and perspectives of young people, the identification and analysis of the needs of young people who move to an autonomous life will be complemented by the perceptions of technicians and Directors of the Entities working in this area. Thus, this identification and analysis of needs will be carried out through the use of a questionnaire survey administered to institutionalized youths or in Temporary Reception Center and to young people already left the host institutions and complemented by interviews administered to technicians and Directors of Entities working in these domains.

Purpose and context of the study

In the present identification and analysis of needs, the object of study is to know, analyze and understand the needs of young people leaving the care institutions and the difficulties and problems that they will encounter in the transition process after leaving host institutions. In addition to identifying the needs of the young, this study includes the analysis of the strategies used in the processes of social integration and support for the transition to an autonomous life used by the entities with social responses in the area of childhood and youth in four European countries (Albania, Greece, Portugal and Romania).

The context of the study is characterized by the social responses of long-term and temporary reception offered by entities whose nature is inserted in the so-called third sector or social economy.

Target population

The target population of this needs analysis is composed by young people who are in care institutions or in Temporary Shelter Center and by young people who have already left the care institutions. In addition, the target population of the study includes technicians and heads of the third sector entities that offer social responses in the area of childhood and youth, namely in Home for Children and Youth (LIJ) and Temporary Shelter Center (CAT).

The social response Child and Youth Home is intended for the reception of children / young people in distress, who are abandoned or are self-indulgent, suffer physical or mental abuse, or are victims of sexual abuse. The institutional reception of children / young people in danger is one of the promotion and protection measures provided for the Law on the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger. The Response Temporary Reception Center (CAT) should have conditions for the reception of children / young people in an environment as similar as possible to that of a family dwelling and provide a correct insertion in the community through its integration in local structures, namely with regard to education, vocational training, health, sport and leisure.

Conceptual definition of study variables

The present analysis is related to measures and strategies for social inclusion and support for young people in their transition from leaving the care institutions to an independent life. Thus, in order to obtain an adequate analysis of the needs of young people leaving the care host institutions, it is important to refer to the concepts of reception, social integration and life projects.

Institutional welcoming is defined as the process of placement of the child or young person in the care of an entity with facilities and equipment as well as a technical team that assures them the care appropriate to their needs (Spiegel, 2000).

In this sense, the host entity has the responsibility to reduce the family rupture and to provide a set of new learning and experiences from the moment of reception, implying that the entity has the necessary resources to respond appropriately to each case, promoting the design of reception guidelines, that is to say, of diverse forms of organization and relationship with the new young person to welcome. This welcoming process requires the adoption of multidisciplinary reception and integration strategies through which the success of the life project and the social reintegration of the young people involved pass, and in this sense each entity must have a set of reception strategies with the purpose of reducing the anxiety of young people welcomed and to show them the support and availability to promote their life project and professional development.

In general terms, social integration is considered to be the inclusion or education of those who are in a situation of social deprivation (Sarmiento, 2000) and, in this sense, the Entity that is part of it has the responsibility to provide means of social integration taking into account the characteristics of the young person welcomed and the nature of the social context in which the entity is inserted. The expression integrating refers to include the child or young person appropriately in the dynamics of the entity and the social environment, valuing not only the personal characteristics as the social activities existing in the environment. It also means promoting conditions for those who are welcome to take advantage of existing social activities and feel good in the new social context in which he or she is being inserted. This process of inclusion makes it necessary to adopt strategies of social integration of a multiple nature, through which the success of the life project passes.

The promotion of life projects is related to the knowledge of the needs of the young people leaving the host institutions and to the elaboration of strategies conducive to the satisfaction of these needs with the purpose of allowing the young person a future life with quality. The entity that receives and integrates is responsible for promoting strategies that meet the expectations of young people taking into account the means available to the entities and what is established in the legal rules. The process of promoting life projects requires the adoption of specific strategies of multiple natures as a way to guarantee the minimization of the anxiety state of the moment of leaving, as well as to provide a realistic and quality future vision, always with the purpose of avoiding the return to the entity.

Instrumentation of the study

In order to identify and analyze the needs of young people moving to an autonomous life, a questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose will be used for a sample of young people who have already left the organizations that hosted them and a sample of young people who are still in host care institutions. The questionnaire will be structured based on issues related to the youth's needs and difficulties in the process of transition from the host care institutions to an autonomous life of the youth people

In addition to the description of the profile of the young people, the questionnaire questions aim to collect the attitudes, opinions, perceptions, interests and behaviors of the young people of the two samples in relation to the process of transition to an autonomous life. In addition to the questionnaire, documentary sources will be used and interviews will be conducted with a sample of technicians and directors of entities working in these domains.

Data analysis

The data collected by survey was analyzed through descriptive and relational statistics in order to meet the objectives of the youth needs analysis study and to identify and prioritize the needs indicated by them.

In all statistical tests, a level of significance $p = \leq 0.05$ will always be used as a reference to accept or reject the null hypothesis. This is done by using non-parametric statistical tests whose advantages arise from the possibility of being applied in situations of small samples and when the normal distribution is not confirmed (Spiegel, 2000). The non-parametric tests are used as an alternative to the parametric tests when the conditions of application of those tests, in particular when the normality of the variables under study and the homogeneity of variances between the groups, are not verified (Maroco, 2007).

The strategy adopted for the analysis of the variables, namely those that describe the youths' characteristics and those which describe their needs will be based on a descriptive statistical analysis, namely proportions and measures of central tendency. On the other hand, the variables that aggregate a numerical scale will be analyzed using the Friedman test that allows estimating those that, in the perception of young people, are more relevant. The Friedman Test is a nonparametric statistical strategy that allows estimating the relative importance of a set of dimensions whose relative importance is submitted to the perception of the same target group. The test allows, through the ranking of means established, to identify the perception of respondents about their most relevant needs and identify the most important promotion and protection measures used by the entities to meet the needs of young people.

The strategies of the institutions described by the Directors and Technicians of the institutions to promote and support young people in the transition to an autonomous life will be analyzed on the basis of content analysis and the descriptive statistical analysis of data related to the promotion of life projects.

With the purpose to deepen and better understand all the problems related with youths' needs perceived by them and their relation to the different dimensions of the needs, a relational statistics strategy will be used.

3. Results

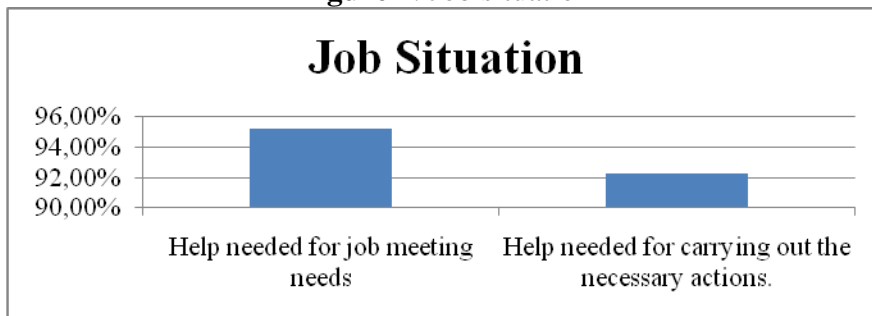
The results from the survey have verified international findings on the issue. Care leavers need to receive specialised and specific services so as to be more prepared to enter an adult and independent life. These services include training on specific life skills, such as financial skills, skills to find and maintain quality accommodation and social skills which promote healthy relationships with other people. Finally, the need to have one person to consult and return in case of need or emergency was also pointed out by all groups who participated in the survey.

These findings are also in line with the work carried out by the *Now What?* partners, whose primary aim is to build a process to support and strengthen young care leavers to pursue their adult life, according to their dreams and aspirations.

Some more results are presented in the following figures:

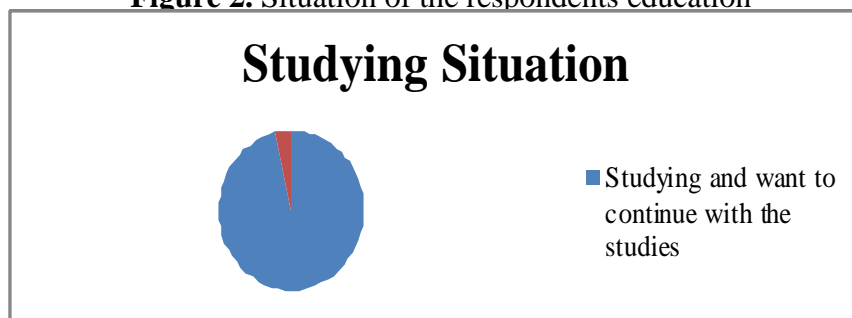
95.2% needs help to find a job that meets their needs and 92.3% need to carry out the necessary actions.

Figure 1. Job situation



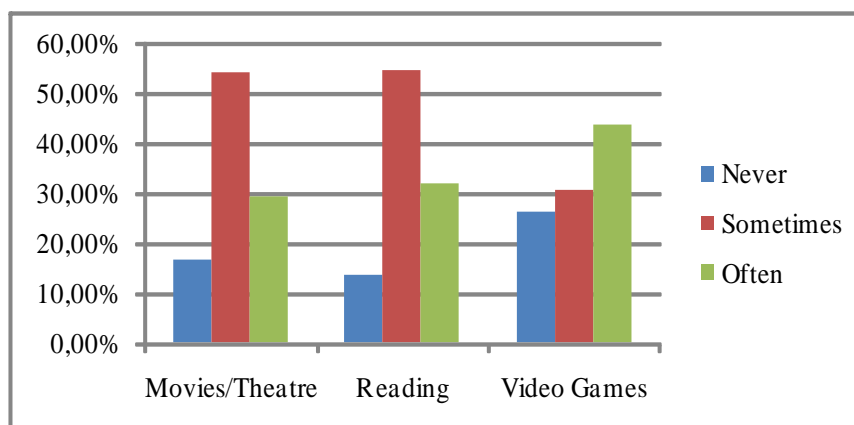
96.6% are studying and want to continue their studies, while 3.4% is not studying and does not want to go back to school.

Figure 2. Situation of the respondents education



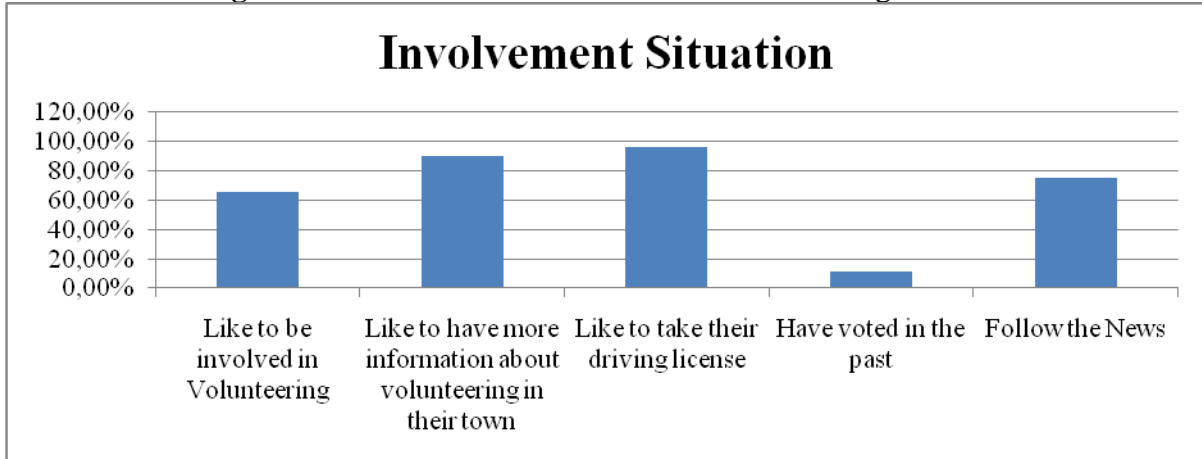
54.2% sometimes prefer to spend their free time watching movies and theatre. Another 54.5% sometimes prefers to spend their free time reading, and 43.5% often prefers to spend their free time playing video games.

Figure 3. Preferences of spend free time



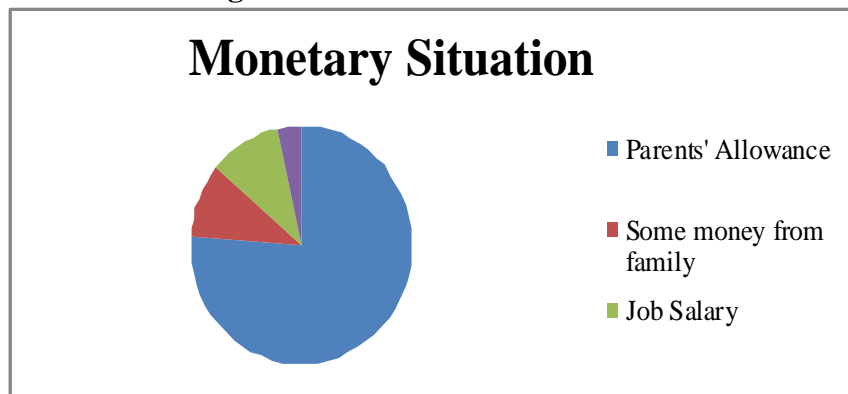
65.4% would like to be involved in volunteering, as 90.5% of them would like more information about volunteering in their town. 96.3% would like to take their driving license, 75% follows the news and 11.5% have voted in the past.

Figure 4. Motivation for involvement in volunteering activities



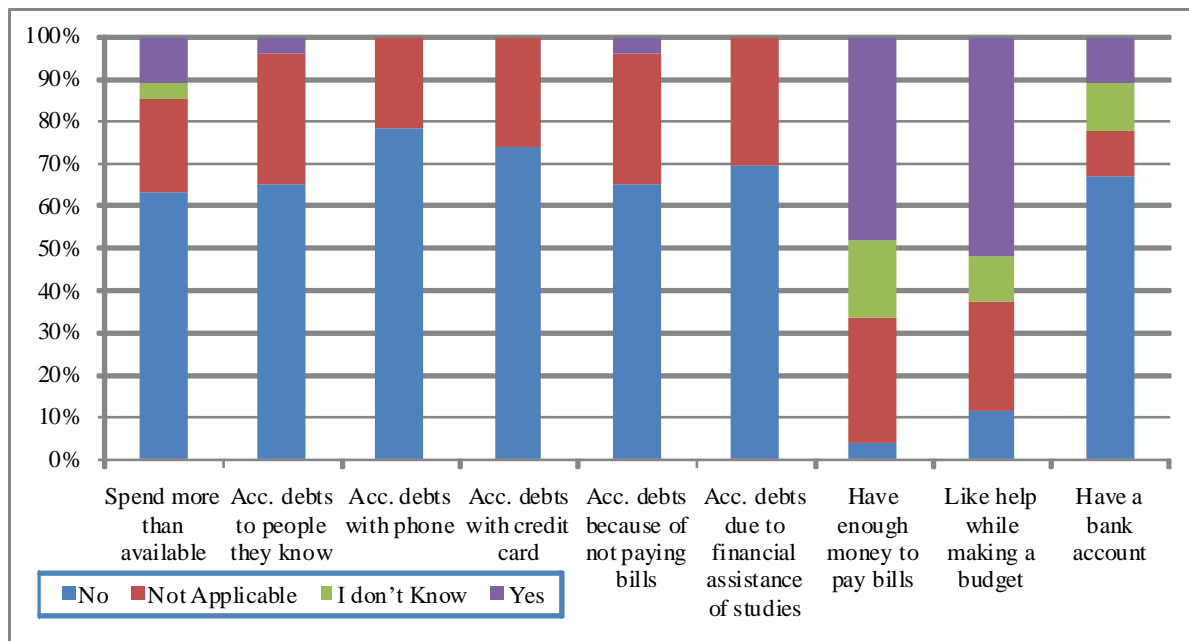
75.9% have confirmed that their money come from their parents' monthly or weekly allowance. 10.3% gain some money from their family. Another 10.3% acquire their money from a job salary, and 3.4% do not know where their money comes from.

Figure 5. Financial situation



11.1% spend more money than they have available. 21.7% have accumulated debts with their mobile phones. 26.1% have accumulated debts with credit card. 4.3% have accumulated debts to people they know. 4.3% have accumulated debts because they did not pay the bills. 69.6% do not have accumulated debt due to the financial assistance to their studies. 48.1% do not have enough money to pay their monthly bills. 51.9% would like to be helped while making a budget, and 11.1% of the participants have a bank account.

Figure 6.



Finally, the specific part of the questionnaire which focused on the care leavers' priorities and worries regarding their future (V Section: Path to adulthood: my priorities for action) revealed the issues which provoke feelings of anxiety and stress to the group. Participants had to choose from a series of potential areas which worry them the most. Most of the respondents answered that they are worried about financial issues (my money), accommodation issues (my accommodation) and their "personal plans". These issues also appeared as crucial in the relevant parts of the questionnaire, as described above. In the same section the issue which gathered most answers was "my relationship with others" (48%). In other parts of the questionnaire this anxiety was also apparent, especially concerning the new circle of people who will get to know them through their education or their job. Finally, an issue which seemed to worry the care leavers was their personal characteristics (or resources), such as self-esteem and persistence.

4. Conclusions

The transition to autonomization of the young people should be subject to a deeper analysis and understanding as well as to the accompanying and intervention of the technical staff of the institutions as well as the forces influencing the individual transition processes, as well as to increase the capacity of the young people to manage their participation in educational and training programs, to have a professional occupation, to know how to manage their daily lives, to obtain and manage an accommodation and to receive social benefits, among others. This is very important since in Portugal there is often a gap between legislation, sectorial policies and recommendations concerning the rights of young people, and the difficulties and problems that are usually faced in the operationalization of rights.

On the other hand, it must be taken into consideration that subjective issues are fundamental since the process of transition to independent living presupposes that young people are empowered to recover these issues since in most cases the trajectories of young people have been decapitalizing themselves.

The autonomic subjective heritages vary from young to young and the capital with which each young person moves to an independent life sometimes happens without specific care.

Each young person has a different anchorage point, and their accompaniment in discovering what they are doing is essential, based on their own experience. It is therefore essential to take into account respect for the period of time of transition that takes place before, during and after leaving the institution so that young people are empowered for their autonomization.

The provision of social and economic resources for young people, namely the access to basic services (health, education, and housing) as an inalienable right is strongly related to the development of subjective issues related to personal and developmental issues that have developed in the past of the young person. As is well known, it is during adolescence that issues such as identity, degree of belonging, and the way social relationships are configured are identified and developed. In this sense, it can be seen that the transition of young people to autonomous life can accumulate the normal issues that must be considered during this stage of development with the issues of the past suffered and sometimes very traumatizing of some of the young.

The accompaniment of the young people by the institutional technical teams (caregivers and educators) should be started from the first day of entry of young people in the host house with the purpose of promoting and guaranteeing the highest possible levels of autonomy of life for young people. As it is known sometimes the deinstitutionalization of the young is confused with the acquisition of their autonomy life.

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