

EDU WORLD 2022**Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****VOCATIONAL AND CAREER COUNSELLING FOR YOUNG
PEOPLE FROM THE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM**

Ana-Maria Dumitrescu (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) University of Pitești, Târgu din Vale Str., No.1, Pitești, Romania, anamaria.dumitrescu@upit.ro

Abstract

Adolescence is a difficult period that involves a series of changes and challenges in the development of young people, especially in the case of those in the social protection system. One of the most crucial moments in their lives is, when they passing from an assisted person to an independent person who has to find a place in the labour market and also in the community. The label they receive once they enter the protection system follows them their whole lives, which makes their social and professional inclusion even more difficult. Usually, these teenagers are unemployed at a higher percent than other young people their age, they are predisposed to have failures at school and to involve in antisocial activities. The study is based on the focus group method, analysis of the documents and the method of observation that particularly collected qualities data. The findings of the study show that, vocational and career counselling as well as informal education play a vital role in helping them to overcome their condition and make them functional individuals in society. Also, the results provide solutions for their easier transition to independent social and professional life.

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Keywords: Career counselling, protection sistem, social and professional inclusion, vocational coueslling, young people

1. Introduction

Any changeover period is often associated with potential problems, and adolescence is one of them, it bringing about changes and challenges for young people and their families. All the more so if we talk about young people in the social protection system because they face a number of quite serious problems related to the disabilities that some of them have and because of the etiquette set by society. Studies show that these people face serious challenges such as unemployment, social maladaptation, emotional disturbances, etc., as the transition period is coming (Kranstover et al., 1989; National Transition Longitudinal Study, 1994, SUA). These teens are unemployed to a higher extent than young people who have families, tend to drop out of school, are at increased risk of engaging in criminal activity and tend to live in a position of dependency for a long time (Edgar, 1988, as cited in Mohanty, 2015). This situation of dependence is somewhat maintained in Romania by the National Education Law no. 1/2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011), update 2022, and by Law 272/2004 (Child Protection and promotion of children's rights Law, updated), as updated. These laws stipulate that young people who turn 18 and follow a form of education can stay in the protection system until they reach the age of 26. Thus, being aware of the problems of socio-professional integration that they will have if they leave the residential institutions, many teenagers in the protection system extend as much as possible their stay in such centres by following a form of education (Câmpean et al., 2010). However, remaining in the system after the age of 18 only prolongs their dependence on the system and thus prevents or blocks their socio-professional insertion.

In addition to these problems, they also face poor development of independent living skills or even lack of such skills, emotional problems, behavioural problems, lack of skills needed to integrate into the labour market, low level of education, lack of housing. The literature also mentions a number of barriers to career development, namely: ethnic and gender discrimination, lack of money, lack of educational opportunities (Luzzo, 1993, 1995; McWhirter, 1997; Swanson et al., 1996). Some institutionalized teenagers, especially those with disabilities, have a rather high probability of losing their job due to behaviour (repeated delays at work, non-compliance with work schedule, difficulties in relating to colleagues, difficulties in fulfilling work duties (Hamond & Haccou, 2006).

The participation of the state through support provided at the time of integration is, in this context, essential. In Romania, employment policies are materialized in measures such as: information and professional counselling, job mediation, vocational training, consultancy and assistance for starting a self-employed activity, stimulating employers to hire unemployed individuals, subsidizing jobs, creating new jobs, stimulating labour mobility. Next, as a degree of importance at the moment of integration, are the consultancy and labour mediation services provided by the state through specific institutions, whose main purpose is to bring teenagers closer to the labour market by expressing offers of concrete insertion. In Romania, too, the emphasis is increasingly being laid on continuous vocational training (Jigău, 2009) which has become an imperative, and the short- and medium-term strategy for continuous vocational training aims to develop a structured, transparent and flexible vocational training system with an adequate level of funding and a strong involvement of the social partners.

The organization of job fairs dedicated to them and the participation of young people leaving the social protection system to such events are a very important way for them to integrate into society. This is

because, on the one hand, potential employers can carry out a complex assessment beforehand in which they can balance the capacity of human resources with the estimated performance target, can select the most suitable jobs that are most adequate to start work with and can estimate how they can meet the needs of those who will be hired in order to provide them with the necessary initial support. In essence, it is not just a simple exposure to/listing of jobs from neutral employers, but a participatory offer through which those who do it, and who are supposed to be informed about the generic profile of institutionalized young people, declare their concrete willingness to come to their aid. A specific case, with multiple positive values, is the one in which the event was prepared in advance with the participation of the social protection institution and if at least some of the employers are companies whose activity the young people had the opportunity to know through document visits previously made in an organized manner. In this way, they get to know the work environment they will integrate in and are psychologically prepared for it, sometimes even having already formulated their own target goals.

However, there is a major discrepancy based on studies and statistics: at the national level in Romania there are far fewer jobs compared to the level of demand, including in the segment of young people leaving the institutionalized care system. In many cases, the obstacle is the level of schooling, vocational training and lack of career counselling because greater access to higher education levels, based on self-determination, is still a desideratum.

A very important resource in support of those who aspire to a job is the information and professional counselling activity carried out by specialized centres within the employment agencies, but also by other service providers in the public sector. These centres provide multiple free information to many categories of people in need, including young people leaving the institutionalized system. They can also learn about the organization of courses and the existence of support programs or forms of training appropriate to their situation. The activity of these centres is a landmark in professional orientation and is systemically integrated with the activity of mediators on the labour market.

Last but not least, there are a number of NGOs in society dedicated to supporting the integration of teenagers based on the implementation of active measures that are part of programs carried out with European support.

The role of vocational and career guidance counsellors is to do everything possible to prepare teenagers in the protection system for entry into the world of work. However, this is done taking into account a number of important actions, such as gaining knowledge about employment, opportunities, requirements and trends, as well as the necessary skills and qualifications that make someone eligible for the jobs available on the labour market. To achieve the goal of career guidance, the counsellor will use vocational guidance techniques for individual analysis of the young people (self-appraisal), but the first step that must be taken, as mentioned by a specialist as Ogbodo (2013), is an analysis individual or self-appraisal. The counsellor helps the individual realize his uniqueness as a person, knowing the needs, interests and skills will allow young people to plan for the future, define career goals, understand his environment and acquire decision-making skills.

2. Problem Statement

Vocational and career counselling is one of the methods used by specialists to support the social and professional integration of teenager coming from the social protection system. Vocational and career counselling is a profession that recognizes the importance of giving equal opportunities to education and employment to each person, regardless of their social demographic status or background. Intervention by this method should guarantee the continuous development of one's career through continuous educational development and career progress. In order to achieve these goals, this type of counselling should be ensured both during the institutionalization period and after the young people's exit from the social protection system.

Within the counselling action, the participatory involvement of the young person at important moments for the settlement of his future is mandatory and must be considered a resource as he has the power to support a reasoned decision. In the integration process, the young person's opinion on the independent life and the desired professional field is very important, as well as the knowledge of the young person's attitude towards the efforts necessary to gain independence, his needs and fears regarding independence, his preferred professional fields (Hope and Homes for Children Romania, Save the Children, Romania, 2006).

Vocational counselling is essential for choosing the educational institution for pupils to attend in the future. If pupils with families still benefit from the support of their parents in choosing the educational institution and the professional development to follow, those in the protection system have a greater demand for specialized counselling and vocational guidance services. Even if the choice of the educational institution belongs to the child/young person coming from the protection system, it often does not correspond to the skills and knowledge the latter has, a fact which has consequences on the integration in the labour market because the subject does not have the necessary skills that would allow him to lead an independent life (Câmpean et al., 2010; Ilie, 2014).

3. Research Questions

- i. What are the barriers/problems/that young people coming from the social protection system face?
- ii. What are the professional perspectives of institutionalized young people in the current socio-economic context?
- iii. What are the factors that can influence career choice?
- iv. What are the particular methods of working with teenager in the child protection system that are able to meet the specific needs of this category and facilitate their socio-professional insertion?

4. Purpose of the Study

Investigating the needs of teenager in the protection system for vocational guidance and job identification, providing a theoretical and practical framework for vocational and career counsellors.

5. Research Methods

The research aimed to investigate the needs of young people institutionalized in care homes in the city of Pitești, Argeș County, with and without disabilities. From a deontological point of view, the research followed the ethical principles of the General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection and the young people were informed that their participation is voluntary and that all information is confidentially. Analyzing the point of views of young people helped obtain data regarding on their perceptions of educational training, on how to perceive the skills acquired during counselling sessions (where appropriate), on the skills they developed during the institutionalization period, as well as on the individual, institutional and community barriers.

In this research, the qualitative methodological approach was the most suitable way to focus on the research questions. This meant to establishment of two focus groups of 10 young people each (7 girls and 13 boys, of which 9 of Roma ethnicity) with and without disabilities. The use of this methodology allowed the collection of more in-depth qualitative data.

The study method was the focus group, a method that aims to clarify and understanding some views (Krueger & Casey, 2005), and in our situation the scope of the focus groups was to explore and analyse the experiences of formal and informal education, as well as the experience gained during the vocational and career counselling sessions, their aspirations and professional perspectives, some job search techniques, their ideas about the world of career - salary, benefits, colleagues, superiors, quality, barriers (major problems they face), etc. During the conversations, young people were also supported to talk about their daily life concerns, fears, expectations and disappointments.

In addition to the focus group method in research, we also resorted to the analysis of the documents provided by the care homes (Intervention manuals, Standards and procedures for specialists), as well as to the analysis of existing documents at national and European level (Handbook on procedures related to the socio-insertion of teenager leaving the child protection system, Ștefan Dărăbuș (2006), Non-cognitive skill development in adolescents in Romania, UNICEF, 2016; State of adolescents in Romania, Centre for Urban and Regional Sociology and the Institute of Education Sciences for UNICEF, 2013; Social inclusion of young people, Eurofound, 2015), to the analysis of national and European public policies in the field of youth and in related fields, of legislative documents as well as the method of observation (observation of young people during the focus group).

5.1. Limitation

This study focused only on the perception of institutionalized young people and did not include the opinions of other people like: teachers, specialists in the care homes or within the General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection, of other persons who have had a crucial impact on their life or of potential employers.

Also, the results of the study cannot be generalized because the number of people involved in the research is very small, but they can be used in the process of improving the quality of services provided to institutionalised young people.

6. Findings

First of all, the problems of socio-professional inclusion start from the fact that most of the institutionalized young people have a low self-esteem and a negative image of themselves. They consider themselves ugly, inferior, with many flaws and no quality, (They are always laughing at us... and I always sat in the last desk... and the teachers very rarely ask me about how I feel. (16-year-old teen) and some of them admit that they like to be antisocial (I behave towards them the same way my classmates behave towards me... if they hurt me... I hurt them too... because this is what they deserve....they also have to pay, not only us (17-year-old teen).

The lack of involvement in the educational act leads to the assimilation of gaps and implicitly to the weak development of the skills. That is why one of the important problems facing teenager in the social protection system is the lack of transversal skills needed for professional inclusion. Employers request not only the existence of particular abilities for the job offered, but also the presence of transversal ones that the young person should possess - the ability to analyse and synthesize, to communicate, to relate to others, to work in a team, the ability to take decisions etc.

In addition to this aspect, unfortunately the humiliating attitude of rejection and isolation only generates feelings of frustration, shame, anxiety and then the young person either withdraws or becomes aggressive with those around him. In this context, intervention is needed not only on the professional side, but also on the psychological side.

Furthermore, the transition literature suggests that young people in the protection system need training for self-advocacy, training for employment skills, education for life skills, family involvement (where possible) and continuing support to receive and stands up a job for a long period of time (Clark, 1994; Wehman, 1993; World Health Organization (WHO, 1997). Therefore, transition skills, employment skills, and relevant social skills need to be developed during the high school years to ensure pupils success in the adult world.

An important and at the same time worrying result of this research is the fact that only 30% of the young people who participated in focus groups benefited from career counselling, the others, unfortunately, are not familiar with any technique to look or apply for a job. The vast majority of young people who took part in the study do not know where to find information about finding a job, do not know how to write a CV or a letter of intent and have never been advised to do so. Only five of them mentioned some sources of information: newspapers, internet, the National Agency Employment Office, directly to the employer or with the help of friends or of the social worker in the centre.

Paradoxically, a fairly high percentage (80%) want to practise a profession other than that obtained after graduation. Atypical occupations (temporary or part-time) are the most sought after because they are an chance for teenager to get acquainted with the labour market, to obtain money in parallel with attending school, to gain professional experience, etc. Among the occupations listed in the focus groups we would like to mention: waiter, barber, truck driver, and for girls: saleswoman, babysitter (jobs that do not require a lot of effort and still bring a rather satisfying income), but they also prefer to go abroad, where they can take advantage of benefits from the host state, especially the youth with disabilities.

For a country's economic system, this kind of job supply means a decrease in the pressure on the social security budget (decrease of the number people with unemployment benefits). However, it is

crucial to monitor the long-term effect of this kind of job on the socio-professional trajectory of teenager. Specifically, in the case of these young people, is this type of occupation is a strong stimulus to full professional integration or a route to poverty, marginalization? (Booth et al., 2002, as cited in Blasco & Givord, 2010, p. 75). The same question applies at the societal level: will reducing the coercion on the labour market and the short-term social security budget by directing young people especially towards atypical occupations have positive or negative effects on the economy and society in general in the medium and long term?

Also, 40% of the young people interviewed mentioned that during the institutionalization period they benefited from at least one qualification course they took within an NGO from Pitești, mainly pedicure/manicure, waiter's and barber's courses. These courses were highly valued because, in addition to learning a trade, they learnt a lot about themselves, developed a range of skills, and even discovered that they were talented and would like to practise the respective profession.

Another issue raised during focus groups by young people who have not received career counselling is that jobs have been found and somewhat imposed by care home specialists without asking them if they like to do the job or if they have the skills to perform it.

One day the lady came with a list from AJOFM1, showed me the job she had found for me and told me that I had to show up there the following day. It doesn't seem right to me... she should have asked me what job I would have wanted ... (18-year-old young woman).

Also, in the case of teenager in social protection services, there should be a greater emphasis on training and developing independent living skills. This is considered to be a crucial part of non-formal education, complementary to that carried out in educational institutions and which takes place within the protection services (Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, 2007. Order 14/2007 for the approval of the Compulsory Minimum Standards on the Service for the development of independent living skills and methodological guide for implementing these standards). Although there is legislation (Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, 2004), regulating this field of independent living skills, establishing a department at the level of the General Directorates of Social Work and Child Protection with attributions in this respect and standards for its functioning, in public institutions there is not enough specialized staff to deal with the evaluation of skills, abilities and resources of children/young people for an independent life (Dan et al., 2016).

Institutionalized young people who benefited from both vocational and career counselling mentioned during the focus groups that these counselling hours were very helpful for them. In addition to discussing relevant issues about their skills and passions, about career guidance and socio-professional inclusion, as well as about society and the community, they also discussed about the skills and abilities that are required by employers and the expectations the latter may have of them: to carry out their duties, to respect the schedule, to collaborate effectively with colleagues, to be disciplined at work, etc.

All these findings of the study show that, from a theoretical and legislative point of view, young people coming from the social protection system can benefit without any restrictions from vocational and career counselling services, but in reality they are deprived of these interventions which could facilitate to a high extent their transition to an independent life and to a smooth social and professional integration.

¹ Translator's note: *County Agency for Employment*

7. Conclusions

In Romania, it is a common fact that, unfortunately, there continues to be a form of disguised discrimination that young people in general and those coming from social protection institutions in particular continue to face, amid a lack of confidence in their possibilities. In this context, there may still be employers willing to hire young people from social protection institutions, but they show a certain dose of reluctance towards the latter's responsibility and seriousness. The legislative framework provides opportunities and perspectives for the professional integration of teenager. The openness of economic agents towards them is also ensured through the benefits granted to the former. Currently, the difficulties they face are related to the lack of emotional and material support immediately after leaving the institutions. The negative consequence of non-harmonization with the labour market supply is the attempt to find work solutions outside the legal framework. Certainly, in Romania there is no genuine synchronization of the training of the labour force in relation to the concrete needs.

There is also no collaboration between the education system and the local businesses that provide jobs. There are no partnerships between these social actors to help young people both in their internships and in obtaining a potential job. Moreover, the skills that Romanian education shapes are not well enough correlated with the requirements of the business environment and the services for the development of social participation are insufficiently developed and diversified. There are no adequate teaching materials in schools to support the training of skills needed to practice a profession in the future.

Every young person in the protection system should receive training in the transition to independent living through vocational and career counselling. These transition services are designed as part of a results-oriented process that promotes the transition from school to post-school activities, including vocational training, post-secondary education, continuous and adult education, developing skills for independent living, community support and involvement, specific services for adult, etc. All this should be based on the particular necessities of the young person, without excluding his wishes, interests for certain fields of activity, and we would mentioned: functional vocational assessment, training, carrer counseling, development of different jobs and activities of personal development. Acquiring these skills for adaptive and positive behaviour enables young people to cope efficiently with the requests and obstacles of daily life.

Vocational and career counselling can also improve one's perception of the self and of the social skills that are so important in socio-professional integration, it can contribute to the successful passing of a job interview and to maintaining a job, to informing young people about the rights of people with disabilities, it can familiarise the subjects of this study with job search techniques and provide them with support in finding a job, it can also contribute to the analysis of potential jobs and to the monitoring of these young people after getting a job.

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