

## Navigating adulthood in Romania: Educational resilience and social integration among youth leaving residential care

*Felnőtté válás Romániában: Oktatási reziliencia és társadalmi integráció bentlakásos ellátásból kikerülő fiatalok körében*

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### Abstract

Youth transitioning out of the child protection system face one of the most decisive and vulnerable periods of their lives, as they enter adulthood with limited social, psychological, and educational resources. This study examines the role of educational resilience and institutional support in shaping the future orientation and social integration of care leavers in Romania. Drawing on a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-six young people aged 18–21 residing in residential care facilities across Mureş, Harghita, and Covasna counties. Additional interviews with professionals—social workers, educators, and psychologists—provided insight into institutional practices, mentoring programs, and systemic constraints.

The findings indicate that positive relationships with teachers and mentors, trust-based communication, and pedagogical reinforcement significantly strengthen youth's self-efficacy, educational aspirations, and transition planning. Conversely, insufficient educational support, scarce mentoring, and abrupt exit procedures increase the risk of social exclusion.

The study highlights the necessity of coordinated action between child protection and educational systems, emphasizing mentorship, individualized learning support, and aftercare services. Strengthening educational resilience emerges as a key pathway to improved social mobility, reduced vulnerability, and long-term integration for young people leaving the child protection system.

**Keywords:** educational resilience, child protection, care leavers, social integration, mentoring, institutional support

### Absztrakt

A gyermekvédelmi rendszerből kikerülő fiatalok életük egyik legmeghatározóbb és legsebezhetőbb szakaszával néznek szembe, amikor felnőtté válva korlátozott szociális, pszichológiai és oktatási erőforrásokkal rendelkeznek. Jelen tanulmány a nevelőintézetből kikerülő fiatalok jövőorientációját

és társadalmi integrációját formáló oktatási reziliencia és intézményi támogatás szerepét vizsgálja Romániában.

A kutatás kvalitatív megközelítést alkalmazott: félig strukturált interjúk készültek 26, 18–21 éves, Maros, Hargita és Kovászna megyében élő bentlakásos ellátottal. Ezenkívül szakemberekkel – szociális munkásokkal, pedagógusokkal és pszichológusokkal – készült interjúk betekintést nyújtottak az intézményi gyakorlatokba, mentorprogramokba és a rendszerbeli korlátokba.

Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a tanárokkal és mentorokkal kialakított pozitív kapcsolatok, a bizalmon alapuló kommunikáció és a pedagógiai megerősítés jelentősen növeli a fiatalok önhatékonyságát, oktatási ambícióit és átmenettervezési képességeit. Ezzel szemben a nem megfelelő oktatási támogatás, a kevés mentorálás és a hirtelen kilépési folyamatok fokozzák a társadalmi kirekesztődés kockázatát.

A tanulmány hangsúlyozza a gyermekvédelmi és oktatási rendszerek közötti koordinált együttműködés szükségességét, különös tekintettel a mentorálásra, az egyénre szabott tanulási támogatásra és az utógondozási szolgáltatásokra. Az oktatási reziliencia erősítése kulcsfontosságú út a társadalmi mobilitás növeléséhez, a sebezhetőség csökkentéséhez és a hosszú távú integrációhoz a gyermekvédelmi rendszerből kikerülő fiatalok számára.

**Kulcsszavak:** oktatási reziliencia, gyermekvédelem, bentlakásos ellátásból kikerülők, társadalmi integráció, mentorálás, intézményi támogatás

## Introduction

Ensuring equitable access to education and supporting the social mobility of vulnerable children remain core responsibilities of contemporary educational systems. However, young people raised in the child protection system experience significantly disrupted educational trajectories, reduced learning motivation, and limited access to institutional and relational support. These disadvantages persist well into adulthood, making the transition out of care one of the most critical and risk-laden periods in their lives (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018). Entering adulthood without sustained guidance, stable housing, or clear educational pathways places this population at heightened risk of unemployment, homelessness, and social exclusion.

International research consistently highlights that successful transitions from care are closely linked to educational resilience—understood as the capacity to achieve academic progress despite adversity—and to the availability of supportive institutional environments (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Masten, 2014). Educational resilience is strengthened through meaningful relationships with teachers, mentors, and caregivers, who can help young people develop self-efficacy, maintain academic engagement, and form realistic future plans. Yet, in many child protection systems, including Romania's, mentoring, career guidance, and individualized learning support remain limited or inconsistently provided.

At the same time, child protection institutions hold a dual mandate: to compensate for early adversities and to prepare young people for independent adult life (Emiliani & Bastianoni, 1993; Gilligan, 1999). This includes fostering cognitive, social, and emotional competencies, cultivating educational aspirations, and supporting life-course planning. The quality of this preparation is a decisive factor in whether youth exiting care can successfully integrate into society or whether they remain marginalized due to insufficient skills and support.

Given these challenges, there is a significant need for empirical research that examines how educational resilience develops among care leavers and how institutional practices either strengthen or hinder their transition toward autonomy. In Romania, despite ongoing reforms, there is limited evidence regarding the interplay of educational experiences, institutional support, and future orientation among young people leaving residential care.

The aim of this study is therefore twofold:

1. To synthesize international and regional research on the transition to adulthood among youth leaving residential care, with particular emphasis on educational resilience and social integration.
2. To present empirical findings from qualitative fieldwork conducted with 26 young people residing in residential care across Mureș, Harghita, and Covasna counties, complemented by interviews with professionals working in child protection and education.

This study contributes to the literature by offering nuanced insights into the mechanisms that shape youth's educational trajectories, future planning, and resilience development within institutional contexts. It identifies gaps in current support systems and provides recommendations for strengthening mentorship, institutional collaboration, and post-care programs. Ultimately, it argues that promoting educational resilience is not only an educational imperative but also a social justice priority, crucial for enabling care leavers to achieve long-term social integration and autonomy.

## **Literature review**

### ***The Romanian child protection system***

The Romanian child protection system has undergone significant transformations over the past three decades, shaped by both historical legacies and post-socialist social reforms (Buzducea, 2021; Stan & Vancea, 2015). During the communist period, child protection was characterized by highly centralized and institution-based care, with large residential institutions serving as the dominant form of placement for children separated from their families (Stan & Vancea, 2015). Following the fall of the Ceaușescu regime in 1989, international attention focused on the severe conditions within Romanian orphanages, revealing overcrowding, neglect, and the lack of individualized care (UNICEF, 2013). These conditions became symbolic of the broader structural deficiencies of the institutional care system.

In response, Romania initiated a gradual deinstitutionalization process supported by international organizations such as UNICEF, the World Bank, and the European Union (Deák, 2024; UNICEF, 2013). Legislative reforms, particularly Law 272/2004 on the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights, emphasized children's rights, family-based care, and social reintegration (Buzducea, 2021). Since the early 2000s, the child protection system has increasingly shifted toward foster care and family-type services; however, residential care institutions continue to play a significant role, particularly for adolescents and youth with complex social or educational needs (Toth & Mita, 2020).

According to recent national statistics, more than 35,000 children were receiving child protection services in Romania in 2025, of whom approximately one quarter were still living in residential care settings (ANPDCA, 2025). Adolescents aged 14–17 constitute the largest group within residential institutions, making the transition from care to adulthood a particularly important social policy issue. Although deinstitutionalization has reduced the number of children living in large institutions, regional inequalities, limited professional resources, and uneven service quality continue to affect the functioning of the system (Buzducea, 2021; Eurochild, 2024).

Romania's child protection structure currently combines state-run and non-governmental services. In several regions, especially in Transylvania, church-affiliated and civil organizations play an important role in providing residential care, mentoring programs, and psychosocial support (Kiss, 2010). Nevertheless, young people leaving care frequently encounter difficulties related to housing, employment, education, and social integration (Porumb, 2010; Toth & Mita, 2020). While legal frameworks formally support preparation for independent living, post-care services and long-term mentoring remain inconsistent and insufficiently developed (Ionescu, 2017).

These structural and institutional conditions directly shape the educational opportunities, resilience processes, and transition experiences of care leavers in Romania. Understanding this context is therefore essential for interpreting the challenges and coping strategies identified in the present study.

### ***Exiting the child protection system and independent living challenges***

Leaving the child protection system represents one of the most significant life transitions for youth, as the cessation of institutional care after age 18 marks the beginning of independent adulthood (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018). For many, this transition is accompanied by uncertainty, limited financial resources, inadequate social support, and gaps in educational and vocational preparation. International studies indicate that care leavers frequently face difficulties in securing stable housing, sustaining employment, and establishing social networks, which increases their risk of social exclusion (Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Toth & Mita, 2020). Low educational attainment, interrupted schooling, and limited relational capital further exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Murányi, 2000; Rákó, 2010).

Evidence underscores that the availability and quality of institutional support significantly influence the success of youth transitioning out of care. Youth who receive structured post-care support, mentoring, and targeted educational interventions demonstrate higher rates of continued schooling, employment, and social engagement (Humphreys et al., 2022; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Conversely, the absence of such supports often results in early school leaving, underemployment, and unstable living conditions (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

### ***Educational resilience as a protective mechanism***

Educational resilience refers to the ability of young people to achieve positive academic outcomes despite adverse circumstances (Martin & Marsh, 2008; Waxman et al., 2003). This construct encompasses learning motivation, self-efficacy, and the development of student identity, which are

crucial for subsequent labor market participation and social integration. Pedagogical support, including the presence of supportive teachers and mentors, as well as the broader institutional climate, is a key determinant of educational resilience (UNESCO, 2020).

Research demonstrates that educational resilience is not solely an individual attribute but emerges from the interaction between students' personal resources and their environment (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Masten, 2014). For care leavers, resilience development depends on institutional practices that facilitate academic engagement, provide guidance for goal setting, and reinforce the youths' sense of competence and agency (Bunea, 2023).

### ***Future orientation and life planning***

Adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods for future planning, during which individuals evaluate their capabilities, set goals, and construct life trajectories (Brunstein, 1993; Poole & Cooney, 1987). A positive outlook on the future functions as a protective factor for mental health, while uncertain or negative expectations may increase vulnerability to maladaptive behaviors (Seginer, 2009).

Youth transitioning from child protection care often experience constraints in shaping their futures due to disrupted family environments, limited educational attainment, and insufficient social capital (Heerde et al., 2018; Mester, 2012). The presence of supportive relationships – whether familial, institutional, or mentoring-based – has been consistently associated with stronger future orientation, goal achievement, and adaptive functioning (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Rutter, 1987).

### ***Institutional role in supporting transition***

Child protection institutions perform a dual function: they provide care and protection during childhood while preparing youth for independent adulthood (Emiliani & Bastianoni, 1993; Gilligan, 1999). Caregivers and institutional communities contribute to the development of social and educational competencies, offering relational and societal capital that youth can leverage post-care (Domszky, 1999; Kollár, 2004). Leisure activities, mentoring, and academic support facilitate learning engagement, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging, all of which are critical for resilience and social integration (Mészáros, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a useful framework for understanding these processes, emphasizing the multiple levels of influence – micro, meso, exo, and macro – on youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Palareti & Berti, 2009). In this perspective, the quality of institutional care, interactions with educators, and broader socio-political conditions collectively shape the capacity of care leavers to navigate adulthood successfully.

### ***Multidimensional factors supporting resilience***

Research identifies resilience as a multidimensional construct, encompassing individual, relational, and structural components:

1. Individual factors: include self-efficacy, goal orientation, and emotional regulation, which support adaptive functioning and independent decision-making (Masten, 2014).
2. Relational factors: encompass supportive adult relationships, including mentors, teachers, and caregivers, which foster trust, identity development, and social competence (Rutter, 1998).
3. Structural factors: involve systemic conditions such as educational opportunities, housing support, financial assistance, and aftercare programs, all of which enable successful transitions to independence (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018).

Effective resilience development requires coordination across these dimensions. Care leavers thrive when institutional, relational, and structural supports are available and aligned, allowing them to convert individual potential into real-life achievements (Ungar, 2012).

### ***Transitional programs and social support***

Youth leaving residential care often encounter a so-called “cliff-edge transition,” whereby the abrupt cessation of institutional support leaves them vulnerable to social, financial, and educational risks (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Evidence from countries with structured post-care programs, such as the UK and Canada, demonstrates that mentoring, transitional housing, and educational guidance significantly improve outcomes for care leavers, including academic success, stable employment, and psychosocial well-being (Heerde et al., 2018; Humphreys et al., 2022).

Meta-analytic and longitudinal studies underscore that higher resilience among care leavers is associated with the presence of supportive adults, flexible coping strategies, and realistic but hopeful future expectations (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Programs emphasizing competence-based support, social recognition, and community engagement strengthen youths’ adaptive capacity and mitigate the negative impact of prior institutional or familial adversities.

### ***Empirical insights and research gaps***

Research conducted in Hungary and the broader Central and Eastern European region has similarly emphasized the importance of resilience, educational attainment, and social integration among young people growing up in child protection systems. Homoki and Czinderi (2015) argue that resilience is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by supportive educational environments, stable relationships, and institutional resources that enable young people to overcome adverse childhood experiences and achieve positive educational outcomes.

Hungarian studies focusing on care leavers have consistently highlighted the difficulties associated with the transition to adulthood. Rácz (2012) demonstrated that young people leaving residential care often follow fragmented and individualized life trajectories while facing considerable challenges in education, labour market participation, and future planning. Sziklai (2004) similarly emphasized that successful social integration depends on a combination of personal resources, family relationships, educational attainment, aftercare support, and access to housing and employment opportunities.

Research published by the Rubeus Association further points to the vulnerability of care-experienced youth in relation to school dropout, labour market integration, and social inclusion, highlighting the need for coordinated professional support throughout the transition to independent adulthood. These findings reinforce the argument that educational support, mentoring relationships, and structured aftercare services are essential protective factors that can enhance resilience and facilitate positive pathways into adulthood.

While international evidence has illuminated key protective mechanisms for youth leaving care, country-specific studies – particularly in Central and Eastern Europe – remain limited. Research in Romania suggests that psychosocial resources such as self-efficacy, autonomy, and social competence are crucial predictors of successful transitions, yet trauma processing and emotional support are often marginalized in institutional practice (Bunea, 2023). This highlights the need for empirical studies that explore the interactions between educational resilience, mentoring, institutional support, and life-course planning in local contexts.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the experiences of youth in residential care in Romania, analyzing how educational and social resources, mentorship, and institutional interventions influence future orientation, educational achievement, and resilience development. By linking international and regional findings with local empirical data, this research seeks to contribute to evidence-informed policy and practice aimed at strengthening child protection, educational attainment, and social integration outcomes for young people leaving care.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research objectives and questions***

The present study investigates the future orientation, social integration, and educational resilience of youth transitioning from residential care to independent adulthood in Romania. Particular attention is given to the role of institutional support, mentoring programs, and relational capital in facilitating a successful transition to independent living. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does future orientation manifest in the lives of youth living in residential care, with regard to education, employment, family formation, and social relationships?
2. Which personal and social resources do youth utilize during the transition from care, and how do these resources support their preparation for independent living?
3. How do professionals perceive the effectiveness of institutions and mentoring programs in fostering social integration and educational outcomes?

In addition, the study explores the experiences of youth in residential care from the perspective of educational resilience, with particular attention to academic achievements, educational setbacks, and the institutional and pedagogical factors that support continued learning. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, the analysis focuses on participants' lived experiences and perceptions rather than testing predefined hypotheses. Specific coding

categories included learning motivation, self-efficacy, future educational aspirations, teacher support, mentor relationships, and perceived institutional support.

### ***Research design and data collection***

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the experiences of young people approaching the transition from residential care to independent adulthood. Data collection was conducted between April and May 2024 in three Romanian counties: Mureș, Harghita, and Covasna.

The sample consisted of 26 young people aged between 18 and 21 years residing in five residential care institutions. The sample included 14 females and 12 males and was recruited from three church-affiliated and two state-run facilities. Most participants were enrolled in vocational or secondary education at the time of the interviews and had spent a substantial part of their childhood and adolescence in residential care settings.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were either approaching the transition out of care within the following two to three years or had recently experienced this transition. Inclusion criteria were: (1) being between 18 and 21 years of age, (2) residing in a residential child protection institution, and (3) being close to leaving care or having recent experience with the transition to independent living. The sample was intentionally selected to include young people with diverse educational trajectories and transition experiences.

Semi-structured interviews focused on key thematic areas, including:

- Future orientation and life planning
- Educational and vocational aspirations
- Family formation and relational capital
- Institutional and social support
- Leisure and community engagement

In a second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven professionals working in the participating residential care institutions, including three social workers, two psychologists, and two educators. These interviews explored the availability and perceived effectiveness of mentoring programs, career guidance services, and institutional support mechanisms supporting young people's transition to independent adulthood. The professional interviews were used to triangulate the findings obtained from the young participants and to provide a broader understanding of the institutional context in which the transition process takes place.

### ***Data analysis***

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Coding was guided by the research questions and focused on recurring themes and patterns. Particular attention was paid to:

- Educational resilience: identification of supportive factors and barriers
- Future orientation: articulation of goals, aspirations, and transitional steps
- Relational capital: quality of peer, family, and mentor relationships
- Institutional and social support: perceived availability and effectiveness of programs

Data were triangulated with professional interviews to enhance validity and provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and protective factors influencing youth transitioning from care.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***Education and career choices***

Family backgrounds that necessitated youth removal from the home were found to negatively influence attitudes toward learning and schooling, subsequently affecting academic outcomes. The social environment also significantly shapes learning motivation, with peers and teachers playing particularly influential roles (Józsa & Fejes, 2010).

The findings indicate that the level of educational resilience among youth transitioning out of residential care directly influences future orientation and career planning. Participants reporting positive school experiences and at least one supportive relationship with a teacher or mentor exhibited higher future orientation, stronger self-efficacy, and greater motivation to pursue further education. Conversely, youth who experienced academic failure or early school leaving reported more pessimistic future expectations and limited social mobility. As one participant explained:

*“I want to finish school because I know that without a qualification it will be difficult to find a stable job.” (Participant 12)*

Another respondent emphasized the importance of teacher support:

*“I had a music teacher who supported me a lot. She saw potential in me and believed that I was capable of achieving more.” (Participant 5)*

Most participants (n=19) were close to completing their studies, primarily in vocational or secondary education. While motivation for further education existed, post-care transitions were frequently hindered by limited institutional support, gaps in mentoring, and financial or logistical barriers. Participants' goals included obtaining secondary diplomas, pursuing higher education, and professional development; however, structural challenges in the Romanian labor market often impeded these objectives.

Participants emphasized the importance of realistic self-assessment when planning their future, relying primarily on personal resources. Educational and vocational goals focused on study completion, higher education, and additional professional training.

These findings suggest that educational resilience plays a central role in shaping future orientation and career planning among young people in residential care. Consistent with the findings of Homoki and Czinderi (2015), supportive educational environments and positive relationships with teachers contribute significantly to resilience development and educational attainment. Similar conclusions have been reported in international studies emphasizing the

importance of mentoring and educational support for successful transitions to adulthood (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018).

### ***Future outlook***

All participants articulated visions for their future; however, specifying intermediate steps and transitional strategies proved challenging. Many participants expressed hope regarding the future, but also uncertainty about how to achieve their goals.

*“I did not let myself drift in the wrong direction. I always worked consciously toward my goals and tried to keep several options open – I had a plan A, a plan B, and even a plan C.” (Participant 7)*

*“My future depends mostly on me. I cannot rely on many people.” (Participant 18)*

Key priorities included securing stable housing, integrating into the labor market, and forming families. Most participants intended to have two children within 3–5 years after leaving care. Housing instability, limited financial independence, and constrained social capital were significant obstacles to realizing these plans. Family life goals were primarily expressed in terms of values and priorities rather than concrete steps. For many, parental examples functioned as countermodels, reinforcing a desire for separation from past family dynamics.

Family consistently emerged as the top priority in the value hierarchy. Establishing a stable and balanced family life was the primary goal for all participants. Planned marriage and childbearing timelines were within 3–5 years post-transition, earlier than the average for peers raised in family environments.

The findings indicate that future orientation is often shaped by both aspirations and perceived limitations. Consistent with the work of Rácz (2012), participants frequently expressed ambitions related to stable employment, housing, and family formation, while simultaneously reporting uncertainty regarding the practical steps required to achieve these goals.

### ***The moment of leaving care***

Youth described leaving care as a moment marked by fear and uncertainty. Several participants described the transition as emotionally challenging and characterized by insecurity.

*“I did not know how to pay bills or manage everyday administrative tasks, so I had to ask someone for help.” (Participant 8)*

*“I did not know what to do when it came to managing an apartment or dealing with everyday responsibilities.” (Participant 14)*

Key challenges included entering the labor market, securing stable housing, and establishing independent living. Several participants reported feeling inadequately prepared due to limited access to mentors or social workers, often perceiving themselves as making critical life decisions alone. Previously low self-efficacy and insufficient social capital compounded the difficulties of transitioning to independent living, rendering the period stressful and highly vulnerable (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018).

Respondents highlighted the necessity of continuous post-exit support, including counseling and mentoring services. Housing stability, labor market integration, and independent living guidance were the main needs, while low educational attainment and family-related disadvantages frequently hindered future planning (Bunea, 2023; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).

These experiences reflect the challenges described by Sziklai (2004), who emphasized the importance of aftercare support, housing opportunities, and social assistance during the transition to adulthood. The findings further highlight the vulnerability of young people leaving care when continuous professional support is unavailable.

### ***Social networks, leisure engagement, and spiritual resources***

Peer relationships played a critical role in socialization and support for youth leaving residential care. Friendships often represented an important source of emotional security and practical support.

*“My friends are the people I can always count on when I have a problem.” (Participant 20)*

*“Find someone you can rely on, because it makes a huge difference when there is someone you can call when you need help.” (Participant 11)*

Their primary functions included emotional and practical support and facilitating social integration. The majority of participants (n=20) reported reliable friendships, while a smaller subset (n=6) described friendships as instrumental, lacking mutual respect and genuine interest (Bunea, 2023; Józsa & Fejes, 2010).

Leisure activities, sports, and community engagement contributed to mental health support and stress management. Religious education and practices were less prominent in daily life; however, in church-affiliated institutions, spiritual and moral guidance provided an important resource for some participants (Emiliani & Bastianoni, 1993; Gilligan, 1999).

The findings confirm the protective role of supportive relationships and social networks identified in both resilience research and studies of care leavers. Friendships, community participation, and mentoring relationships appear to function as important sources of emotional security and social integration, particularly during periods of uncertainty and transition (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Homoki & Czinderi, 2015).

These results align with both international and regional research highlighting the significant role of educational and social support, institutional environment, and the quality of social networks in shaping the future orientation and resilience of young people (Bunea, 2023; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018). Similar findings were reported by Homoki and Czinderi (2015), who emphasized the role of supportive educational environments and stable relationships in fostering resilience. Likewise, Rácz (2012) and Sziklai (2004) highlighted the challenges associated with educational attainment, labour market integration, independent living, and social inclusion among care leavers. The present findings reinforce the argument that mentoring relationships, career guidance, and psychosocial support services play a crucial role in facilitating successful transitions to adulthood and long-term social integration.

From an educational policy perspective, the findings suggest that fostering educational resilience is not solely a psychological concern but also a matter of school practice and teacher education. Pedagogical and mentoring strategies can enhance self-efficacy and facilitate

achievement of academic goals. Teacher training and social pedagogy programs should place greater emphasis on supporting students from child welfare backgrounds. Individualized learning pathways, mentorship, and promotion of student self-reflection are essential tools to support academic success and broader social integration.

Overall, strengthening the pedagogical role of child welfare institutions, alongside improvements in teacher education and social pedagogy programs, is indispensable for promoting equitable opportunities. Enhancing the resilience of care leavers is both a social and educational imperative: schools, teachers, and care professionals are central actors in ensuring that young people find their place in society and are prepared for lifelong learning.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study underscores the critical importance of fostering the future orientation and resilience of youth transitioning out of the child welfare system for their social integration and successful transition to adulthood. The findings clearly indicate that these young people have limited access to meaningful support in education, career guidance, and further learning, and that comprehensive programs promoting the development of competencies and life skills are largely absent (Bunea, 2023; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Heerde et al., 2018). These challenges should also be interpreted within the broader context of the Romanian child protection system, where ongoing deinstitutionalization efforts coexist with persistent regional inequalities and the limited availability of post-care services.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed:

- Implementation of mentoring programs and individualized learning support during both pre- and post-transition periods, with particular emphasis on developing educational, vocational, and life-management skills.
- Enhancement of educational competencies and career guidance programs, supporting youth in setting and achieving realistic and attainable goals.
- Strengthening post-secondary and vocational pathways within child welfare institutions, including preparation for higher education and professional development opportunities.
- Development of social capital and relational skills, with a focus on supporting peer networks and mentoring relationships.
- Provision of comprehensive support during the transition to adulthood, particularly through the expansion of aftercare and mentoring services within the Romanian child protection system, addressing housing, labour market integration, and independent living through coordinated financial, psychological, and social support.
- Regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms to assess youth integration and developmental progress systematically.
- Post-care educational support at least until ages 21–23, enabling youth to continue their education and achieve professional goals.

The study also emphasizes the necessity of collaboration between child welfare and educational systems. Strengthening the pedagogical role of child welfare institutions and

improving teacher training and social pedagogy programs are essential to creating equitable opportunities. Education should not be considered merely a vehicle for knowledge transmission but as a key mechanism for fostering social resilience, ensuring that youth exiting care do not merely survive but thrive as independent, responsible adults (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Ungar, 2012).

Finally, the findings contribute to the development of mentoring programs, preventive strategies, and evidence-based interventions for youth leaving care. Future research should further investigate which life-management and social skills are being developed within the care system and explore methods for extending these competencies into post-transition life. Overall, promoting future orientation and resilience in youth leaving child welfare systems is essential for their long-term social integration, highlighting the complex interplay of institutional support, social networks, and transitional programs.

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