Transition trajectories from youth institutional care to adulthood

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Abstract. The main trajectories of transitions have essential importance for a child and youth living in child long-term institutional care – moving from family care to institutional care, life in institution(s), and the second trajectory – transition from institution to independent adult life. In this article trajectories of child and youth transitions from institutional care are discussed. The study is based on the qualitative methodology. Methods used – 20 interviews with staff of the institutions and youth leaving the institutions. The trajectories of the transitions are analysed on the basis of the assessment of existing practice.

Key words: youth, transition into adulthood, child long-term care institution.

1 Introduction

The objective of this paper is to research how the transition from youth to adulthood for the care leavers is organized and what factors influence the placement trajectory of children and youth from the institutional care.

The percentage of children in institutional long-term social care in Europe ranges from 0.8 percent of the total children population under 18 years of age in Iceland to 2.3 percent in Latvia, with the medium of 1.22 percent in the European Union [1]. There can be many reasons why children have been separated from their parents, e.g., poverty, deprivation, neglect of children, alcohol or drug abuse in family, domestic violence, psychological or sexual abuse, etc. [2, 3]. Some of those children live with guardians or in foster families while some are sent to long-term social care institutions. Institutional care is one of alternatives where children and youth under 18 live when they cannot stay in the family for various reasons – neglect, deprivation, violence, abuse etc. Those children are called "social orphans" [4, 5].

The problems related with institutional care of children have been discussed in the literature on children rights [5, 6], social work [7, 8], social pedagogy [9] and sociology [e.g. 10, 11].

The effects of institutionalisation on children in institutional care have been studied already from 1950-ies by Bowlby [12] and Goldfarb [13]. The authors analysed the effects of deprivation on child cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development. Almost half a century later, Maclean [14], Geenen [15] reported that institutionalisation alone did not lead to deprivation, but there are aspects of institutional care, which lead to risk of social exclusion of youth. Institutional care may significantly impact emotional state of children and youth and may have negative effect on their future [16]. Children and youth from institutional care have poorer physical health and well-being, as well as they have poorer cognitive abilities [17]. If a

child and youth do not feel safe in the institution, later they will not develop self-confidence, which may be the main reason of future difficulties in life.

Institutionalized children and youth grow up in groups where everything is common. Specialists working with larger groups of children, pay less attention to child personality and individuality. In literature it is reported that even *individual problems* have been treated as *group problems.* That can result in limited ability to training skills of being autonomous.

Some authors report the problem of kind of "consumerism" at institutions: children and youth receive everything, because everything is provided for them by the institution. As a result, they grow up in the environment where they do not need to learn practical skills, they are trained to be consumers. Thus the need and motivation to develop practical skills or skills to be autonomous is reduced. As a result, youth has not developed skills for the adult life when they turn 18 and have to leave the institution. The reason lies in the system, not so much in young people themselves [18].

Most of the literature on institutional care characterizes the institutional care as restrictive environment, where children have limited communications and connections with the community and biological family. The work of institutions is not much family oriented [19].

The review of the studies on institutional (residential) care by Bullock [20] has reported the deficits in social and emotional development of children. The main reasons of the problem are – high staff turnover at the institutions and the marginal role of the biological parents. Bullock [20] and Legault [21] have concluded that the best quality of care was at those institutions focusing on needs of children and promoting good relationship between children and carers. Both institutionalized children and staff employed at those institutions mention the importance of a positive relationships influencing placement trajectory. However, the key players in the positive relationships, factors contributing to positive relationships, and the way in which relationships influence the youth life trajectory is not much researched.

A number of studies have examined the factors influencing the life trajectories of children in institutional care. Those studies represent 2 directions – child/youth life from the social worker's or carers' perspective [22] and the life trajectories from the child/youth's perspective [23]. There are international studies which reported on the child and youth experience in a single placement and multiple placements during the life in institutional care and positive outcomes for children growing up in a stable institutional care without placement changes [24], and there are studies reporting negative impact of multiple placements of children and youth [25]. Better understanding of the factors that influence placement trajectory[1] and stability may improve outcomes for children in experienced life in long-term social care institutions.

Research data discuss exit from the long-term social care system as one of the most important processes. Exit from the care system and transition to adulthood is marked by new roles and responsibilities in employment, (dis)continuation of education, financial independence and partnership/family formation and birth of a child. Geenen [15] have analysed the following key issues: (a) self-determination; (b) coordination/collaboration (c) importance of relationships; (d) importance of family; (e) normalising the foster care experience; (f) the independent living and (g) issues related to disability.

The basic economic needs and accommodation of institutionalized children and youth are satisfied, but their psychological well-being and socialization is not fully covered. Studies indicate that in situations of suddenly becoming independent adult, youth may feel helpless and hopeless [26].

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[1] The concept of placement trajectory is a way of understanding the children experience in institutions.

Children and youths who remain without parental care usually coming from families were situation is being dangerous for their well-being and they lose feeling of secure [9]. Children and youths from institutions may have problems with adaptation in society, negative viewpoint about everything what happens around, lower self-esteem than those children who live in the biological family, as well as dysfunctional psychological and social development.

Literature reports high turnover of social workers and as a result the way the child's life in the institution (-s) is somehow divided into different sections taken care by different social workers [27]. Due to high turnover, the social workers do not always learn to know the child well. Knowing the child does not therefore help to bridge the gaps of recorded information.

Summarizing, the literature reports that children and youths who live in long-term social care institutions are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Although, institutional care provides with possibility to gain secure education, health and various social services and enhance life chances of children and youths from institutional care, there is not sufficient support to youths. The specialists and staff are not able to provide sufficient attention to all children, which may result in worsen psychological well-being.

2 Child long-term institutional care in Latvia

Already in 2005, Recommendations from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the rights of children living in residential institutions have underlined that "preventive measures of support for children and families in accordance with their special needs should be provided as far as possible". A few years later the Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care (2012) [16] have emphasized that children care home cannot provide appropriate support and person-centred services, as well as it restricts children and youths abilities to participate in society.

In Latvia, the Normative Regulations [28] define long-term social care institutions as one type of child's legal representative, which warrant safety and security, represent child's interests and defend a child. The main objective of children long-term social care institutions is to ensure all appropriate conditions where children and youths will be able to develop, as well as provide care, social services, and education and help to prepare for adult life.

There are three main types of long-term social care institutions in Latvia: some of them specialise in early childhood (from 0 to 2 years old) and are provided by the state; the others take care for children of a wide age range (from 2 years to 18 years of age) and in general are under responsibility of the local governments. Since recently, some municipalities have developed a new initiative to start the youth centres – here are a few institutions that focus on the last period of children social protection (from 16 to 18 years), giving young people the possibility to exercise semi-independent life in terms of self-care (preparing food, laundering, cleaning), practising the financial independence with limited resources. There is also a long-term care for children and youths, covered by the state funding – centres for youths with mental illnesses and social correction institutions for youths with severe delinquent behaviour.

According to the normative regulations [28], children under 18 may be accommodated into institutional care if they remain without parental care temporary or permanently. Youth should leave the institution and start independent life after reaching 18. However, youth may prolong the stay in the children long-term social care institution until the age of 24 if they are successful full time students at school, vocational education or college.

According to the normative regulations, transition preparation and training programmes for the independent life should start six months before the child becomes 18 years old. The young person has to be informed about his/her rights after leaving the institution, and the

municipality, where the young person is coming from and has to return to, is informed about the young person's returning back. According to the normative regulations, local government has to provide support to obtain education finding an accommodation and support for starting the independent life. Besides, those young persons are granted a national social security allowance, the minimum amount of which is determined by the Cabinet for each child. The payment of the allowance shall continue if the person is trained in general education or vocational education and is not older than 20 or is a student in higher education (fulltime studies and the youth is not over 24 years of age). In addition, the young care leaver is entitled to receive a single allowance for purchasing household items and soft supplies. The amount of that allowance shall not be less than EUR 249.71. If the young care leaver studies at the state recognized study program in full time studies, she/he is entitled to a monthly allowance, which is not lower than social security allowance [28]. The local government has also to provide psychosocial and material support to the young care leavers. Since 2014, also the minimum of household goods and soft inventory for the opening of independent life has been has been defined and calculated in sum of almost 500 euro.

Young care leaver has to start independent adult life, having a very short, almost non-existent transition period, when he/she has to learn the practical life skills that youth from families have trained and practised since early childhood. Comparing the two groups, one can conclude that the young care leavers have rather limited material and financial resources and without extensive transition process, without adult advice on important life matters. Taking into account the problems discussed in the literature on the effects of childhood family and long-term institutional background, the young care leavers might experience some kind of difficulties during integration into adult society, which might be both geographically and socially rather far from his/her childhood life in institution.

3 Research design and method

Young people leaving institutionalized state care are recognized to be one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. In comparison to those young people living in a family, care leavers experience high unease on the eve of care leaving. A combination of insufficient upbringing before institutional care and during institutional care serves to disadvantage this group of young people in many ways. Life after leaving institutions marks a new phase in life of those young people, in which they are officially viewed as mature adults.

A qualitative research design was chosen to address the research question, because it emphasises the significance young people put on their experience, and how they connect it to the context of their experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method. An interview guide was developed on the basis of literature analyses and the pilot expert interviews. Inclusion of open-ended questions enabled the researcher to cover the relevant topics and to explore new perspectives on the topic of transition to adulthood. The limitations of this form of research are similar to all forms of qualitative interview: the field work is time consuming and intensive, and can lack generalisation [29].

Research methodology includes interviews with two groups or respondents: (1) experts in the child long term institutional care, and (2) youth leaving the long-term institutional care.

(1) Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of experts working in institutional care system – policy makers on the local government level, social workers, psychologists and carers working with children and youth at the institution with experience in the field of institutional care of between one and 30 years.

Three areas in Latvia were selected – one urbanized area (the capital) and two semi-urbanized areas (with a child long-term care institution (-s) within the territory of the local government). In order to give a comprehensive picture of the role of institutional care in the most important aspects of the problem, the chosen experts had a direct or indirect responsibility over the future of the children living in the institutional care. The main interview themes corresponded to the general aims of the research (analyses of the trajectories of entering and leaving institutional care, identification of the problems and possible solutions).

(2) The second part of the research consisted of interviews with youths and analyses of youths' opinion. 15 interviews with youths leaving institutional care system were conducted. The author researched the capacity of youths from age of 18 to start the instant transition trajectory from the child long-term social care institution (welfare system) to full independence. To explore heterogeneity in youth's preparation for independent life, the interview method was applied to 18–20 years old youths, the age to exit from institutional care.

4 Research results

Usually children and youths remain without parental custody because parents neglect them, there is a psychological or physical violence, alcohol and substance abuse, gambling, etc., and child's well-being is being endangered. The average stay of a child in out-of-family childcare institutions lasts 2 to 6 years, but 12% of children stay in these institutions for more than 10 years [30].

Transition is crucial to getting young people ready for the "risks" of independent life in society, by giving them the time for independence, discovering and understanding it. As Stein mentions [31], coming across danger is possible through chance, so in order to identify valuable and harmful effects by the revelation to these problematic situations, it allows for opportunities emerge for both problem-resolving skills and emotional coping skills [31].

The Latvian study shows that there are gaps in research of knowledge of children in care, leaving care and transition to adulthood. The study shows that care leavers as a group are more likely to be socially excluded. Therefore, the author tries to investigate the transition to adulthood to get better understanding of risk and protective elements for the care leavers.

Age of 18 is a borderline for adulthood and independence for institutional care leavers. According to interviews, some young people have positive experiences in transition to adulthood, whereas the others experience hardships, sometimes including risk of homelessness.

Interviews with both experts and care leavers show that inconsistent preparation and planning for adulthood is common for all the institutions and all care leavers. The situation is even worse for the teenage single mothers. Some experts have emphasized that a holistic approach has to be taken into account when preparation plan is considered for leaving care where "each element needs equal amount of importance; practical skills are equal to emotional wellbeing as well being equal to interpersonal skills" (expert interview No 9).

The study demonstrates that majority of experts are rather satisfied with the policy implementation on child exemption from a family as the best suitable solution for a child; and institutionalisation of a child as the best policy implementation possibility. None of the interviewees has expressed a hesitation that children in institutions have limited connections with the community and biological family, and missing friends. Exemption from a biological family is defined as action *"in the best interests of a child"*.

Experts have emphasized that institution provides a child with *"necessary resources for child's development and quality of life, and participation in education"* (expert interview 1).

Experts working at the institution, nevertheless, mention that "*majority of children and youths have average or poor success at school. Not all of them graduate from basic education. The best can enter and graduate from secondary vocational schools*" (expert 7). Some other experts mention that *"there are a few young people, who have started their studies at University or college, but the number of such young people is rather small – 2–3 from a hundred whom we have here"* (expert interview 6).

Majority of the social workers at the institutions have described the institutionalized children and youth as vulnerable, deprived, and having various kinds of problems. They live in institutions at overprotected environment, where all the decisions for themselves are already made: *"at the institutions they do not need to take any responsibility and as a result they have not learned and exercised responsibility that they should take as adults"* (expert interview 4).

Experts try to explain the reasons of poor success at school of adolescents at the institution *"At the institution all the necessary resources for the child development, education and child's quality of life are provided. For some reasons, such as development disorders, late start of education lack of learning skills and others, majority of adolescents at institution have average or poor success at school. In the best case the youth go to vocational school"* (expert interview 1).

Interviews do not report on any cases of child's or youth's participation. Neither experts, nor care leavers have mentioned any cases when the youth's opinion on their life in institutions have been asked or taken into account. Young persons have not participated in the decision making at the institutional level. In addition, due to the stigmatized attitude towards them at school, none of the young care leavers have ever participated in the decision making at the school level. They are excluded from the school life.

According to the research data, children and youths at institutional care are not asked to comment on their institutional care trajectories, they have not ever practiced to express their own voice on matters related to their life at the institution: *"we try to live according to the instructions given to us, and do not try to express our opinion. I may say what I think but I know I should better keep my thoughts to myself"* (boy, 18).

The study shows that children and youths have not been asked to comment or express their views concerning their future. When the interviewer asked youths to comment on the factors that influence life trajectories after half a year after leaving the care, the attitude of some young people was rather suspicious and showed clear unwillingness to speak about that. A few youths expressed a fear that *"expressing opinion might be used against me at orphanage or at school" (girl, 18)*. The inability of children and youths to express their opinion might have to do for the most part with the way the system has structured the opportunities for children and youths to express their views, because the mechanism for expressing a view have been created by adults and is based on their concepts of what "children need instead of what children say they want for themselves".

The interviewed youths told they knew the reason why they live at institution, not in a family, but they have not been told how long they should stay at the institution, whether they would be placed in a different institution: *"I have changed 4 different institutions since I live in children's home. I did not know in advance whether I stay there until 18 or I change to a different one. Now I know that they cannot move me somewhere else – I stay here until I reach 18, because only 6 months are left"* (boy 17,5).

Before the young person has to leave the institution and start independent life, they participate in a training programme to prepare for independent life. In some institutions, it starts already from the age of 16, when adolescents move to "half way homes" or "youth

centres" where they learn on practice how to exercise independent living skills. According to the expert interview adolescents start to live at the youth centre, they have a small furnished room to share for two persons, they receive a weekly sum of money for their weekly purchases, and they have to take care of the order in their room and kitchen shared by several other youngsters.

The expert describes that managing their own money has been rather difficult for all young people: *"they know the weekly amount of money they have on their card, but they are willing to buy everything in the shop. In the beginning, they have their money only for two days, and nothing was left afterwards. It was not an easy experience – to calculate and to live a real life, not just exercising independence. They also want new clothing etc., but for that we exercise other measures – they have to show the success at school in order to buy what they want. If the school success is poor, there is a longer procedure to buy what they want, and it takes at least a week or more"* (expert 3).

Youths have expressed the need for ongoing support when exercising the independence, the youth centre. They all remember about the beginning of starting shopping by themselves with their limited weekly budget. Those, who are already 20 and still study and live at the youth centre, are very much satisfied with the experience they had at the age 16 to 18. For example, a girl A., who is 20 and still in education, continues to receive financial support from child protection services: *"that was not an easy experience. On first days, I bought sweets and Cola because I have a sweet tooth. Then I had money left for some bread, but then I realised that I have no food and no money on Thursday afternoon. It is good that someone has extra pasta or milk, and then feeds me. Then I learned to calculate my weekly money. And, you know, you may not ask others all the time to feed you, because they have the same amount of money as I have"* (girl, 20).

Majority of the interviewed young people living at the youth centre emphasized the importance of emotional support. A girl, who started to live at the youth centre at the age of 16 after five years at the regular institution, compares both institutions and support available at the centre: *"at the institution, they say they care of you, yes, they provide food and cloth, and they request everything to be in order... But emotionally they are not there for you...? Yes, we have some kind of a home and food, but some personnel are very nice, but some are really... How to say ... they could do a better job"* (girl, 20).

However, majority of the interviewed youths do not feel secure and some even feel scared to leave the institution, including the youth centre, and want to stay at the institution as long as possible: *"if I study, I can stay here until I turn 24. I will try to study and to live here as long as I can. Although I have independence – money, shopping, my own room, doing laundry and being responsible for the order in kitchen, there is some stability. I can always have the other people around... and I can ask the personnel if I have a serious problem. I am happy to have people around. I never feel lonely" (girl 21).*

The interview shows that the young people are used to living in a group and do not feel secure to be on themselves. They need a group of other people around, otherwise they feel loneliness, and they are scared of being alone for a longer period: *"when I want to go somewhere, I have always someone to go with. I have always someone nearby. When I face a problem, I can always ask a girl or boy next door, or go to a career at the institution. When I leave the youth centre, I will stay totally alone. I am scared of that. I will try to stay here until I turn 24"* (girl, 19).

The expert has also confirmed the willingness to live in a group, not individually: *"after reconstruction our youth centre had an opportunity to make one small apartment, in addition to those group apartments for 6 youths each. And – you know – there was nobody who wanted to move to that apartment. In the end there was one girl who moved there, but she told that she felt so lonely in the evenings"* (expert No 20).

5 Discussion

The study was limited by a small non-representative sample. However, the results provide a contribution to the research of institutional care in Latvia, including further understanding of both personnel and care leavers' perspectives of the systemic factors that contribute to placement transitions of the young people.

The results from expert interviews and interviews with young people could be summarized by the following key themes: transition from institutional care to independent adulthood is understood as a very important stage for young people, and that period needs a preparation for it; young people do not feel prepared for independent life and would prolong stay at the institution. Majority of youths are used to living in bigger groups at the institution and feel scared to independent life and feel lonely. However, children's and youths' experiences of life at the institution(-s) might change over time and institution.

Some young people complain that professionals at the institutions are more interested in the order, and are not interested to take into account the views and opinions of young people, they do not feel being involved in decisions regarding themselves, therefore youths have not developed independent thinking and decision making. Majority of youths want to have prolonged support to them or prolonged stay at the institution. The reasons are related not only with financial support. They emphasize emotional support in particular.

Some of the topics discussed in interviews seem to focus on communication with personnel at the institutions. Experts emphasize their attitude towards youth as all being done for youths as it was done in best interest of youths. The research does not provide with trustful reason about personnel's hesitation in communication with youths at regular long-term child care institutions. Some interviews show that might be due to discomfort of personnel, lack of time or limited knowledge and training for the personnel.

On the other hand, interview analyses show that the young care leavers did not always trust the communication with personnel because they did not feel reciprocal, truthful communication between themselves and the personnel. At the youth centres youths were more trustful to personnel.

In conclusion, the results from the Latvian study were somehow similar with results from the international literature.

6 Conclusions

1. The literature reports that children and youths from long-term social care institutions are one of the most vulnerable groups in society.
2. Youths have reported limited or no involvement in decision making regarding placement changes. As a result of the placement changes, they experienced the loss of their previous contacts and friendships, peers, school and sometimes even siblings.
3. According to the interviews, there should be permanency of stay at the same institution during the whole stay at the institutional care.
4. Although majority of interviewed personnel thought that they knew well the youths they work with, part of interviewed children and youths reported not getting along with the staff at the institution and not getting the help they needed.
5. Part of interviewed experts and care leavers report inconsistent preparation and planning for adulthood is common for all the institutions and all care leavers
6. Training for independent life should start before the age 16 and the programmes should be elaborated for each youth individually.
7. The competences trained should include socio-emotional competences. Preparation for leaving the institution should be ensured by an adult who is a reference to young person, and should be ensured also at the beginning of independent life.

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