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*Educational values and challenges in institutional  
and foster care in Hungary*

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to investigate what goals, values and challenges of education can be identified in the institutional and foster care of the child protection system. It also examines how professionals, children and young adults think about these values. Qualitative research findings show that the structural problems, gaps in provision and services, and capacity problems significantly limit the professional toolbox with which educational work can be effective and diverse. This shortcoming is also felt by the youth: they need more and better-quality services, individual care and a loving atmosphere in which they can also receive professional help to cope with the traumas of the past.

KEYWORDS: Child protection services, Educational values and goals, Challenges, Professionals' and young people's perceptions

ABSTRACT

L'obiettivo dello studio è indagare quali obiettivi, valori e sfide dell'educazione possono essere identificati nell'ambito della presa in carico istituzionale e dell'affido nel sistema di protezione dell'infanzia. Esamina inoltre come i professionisti, i bambini e i giovani adulti pensino a questi valori. I risultati della ricerca qualitativa mostrano che i problemi strutturali, le lacune nell'offerta e nei servizi e i problemi determinati dall'uso delle competenze limitano in modo significativo gli strumenti professionali con cui il lavoro educativo può essere efficace e diversificato. Questa carenza è avvertita anche dai giovani: hanno bisogno di servizi più numerosi e di migliore qualità, di una cura individuale e di un'atmosfera accogliente in cui possano ricevere aiuto da parte di professionisti che sappiano permettere loro di affrontare i traumi del passato.

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PAROLE CHIAVE: Servizi di protezione dell'infanzia, Valori e obiettivi educativi, Sfide, Percezioni di professionisti e giovani

## 1. *Introduction*

The aim of the study is to examine, on the basis of the opinions of professionals, children and young adults themselves, the goals and values prevailing in institutional and foster care as provided within the child protection system, and the related challenges. It tries to reveal who are the individuals who affect the set of values of the cared children along the educative and fostering process, and how this influence unfolds, again on the basis of their opinions<sup>2</sup>. First the study briefly present education as an activity within child protection, its goals, nature and characteristics. This is followed by the findings of a qualitative research, which was aimed at revealing the values that are articulated and meant to be transmitted in foster and institutional care from the perspective of the various actors, and the extent to which these values are actually embraced in the opinion of children and young people.

In order to understand the environment of child upbringing in the context of the child protection system, it is important to note that the Hungarian Child Protection Act of 1997, although it allowed for the implication of NGOs and church institutions besides the state institutions and local authorities, a significant change in this respect occurred only in the past 10 years. At present 23,000 children and young people are included in the child protection system<sup>3</sup>, 68% of them live in foster care, while 32% in institutional care. According to the survey carried out by the responsible ministry in 2021, 2% of the foster care places are operated by NGOs, while the rest by church institutions. In case of institutional care, 83% of the children's homes are state-operated, and 16% are supported by church institutions<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. *Education in the child protection system*

Care and upbringing are determined by the fact that through the provisions foreseen by the Hungarian Child Protection Act of 1997, child protection meets the specific needs of children, and in order to achieve this, it makes use of the services available within the child protection system and the connected sectors, the knowledge of educators, carers, foster parents, guardians, counsel-

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the study the term 'education' is used to refer to the act or process of imparting knowledge in a non-formal setting while upbringing children, not to education delivered within a program of instruction (i.e. school).

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ksh.hu/stadat\\_files/szo/hu/szo0016.html](https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/szo/hu/szo0016.html) (last access 21-06-2023)

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Human Resources, 2021 (non-published data)

lors and other professionals, and the professional and methodological tools used by them<sup>5</sup>. The needs-oriented education and care in the child protection system are built on the thorough knowledge of the complex needs of the child, i.e. their physical, health, emotional, mental, and social needs. It is important to embed the opinion of the child as well into this process, which, in order to allow for the follow-up of the child's development, includes periodic controls<sup>6</sup>.

The individual caring and educational plan is a basic document for the child, which sets the directions education, care and therapeutical work would follow, and concrete tasks. Evidently, the goals of education and care are not defined without any preliminaries, since these are linked to the reasons and conditions of the child entering the child protection system, the findings of the expert committee, the requests of the child, the opinions of the professionals who had previously worked with the child as well; it is equally important to take into account the views of the parents<sup>7</sup>.

According to Csókay the uncertainties relying in child protection work have to be taken into account in several aspects, since there are «results unfolding very slowly»<sup>8</sup> due to the fact that the impact of certain methods, situations, forms of assistance, related services, and professionals, respectively of the peers and family are not known, are not unambiguous; even in case of a positive progress, the process is very slow and includes many setbacks. Before reflecting on values determining upbringing, perhaps it is also important to note that the child protection activity is a complex work, during which «Through the delivered professional work, a children's home supports the optimization of personal development, the individual and community education of children, and their integration into the family and society, while taking into account gender and age specificities. It fosters the reintegration of children with specific needs»<sup>9</sup>. In case of foster parenting, the complex goal is the following: «The aim and function of foster care is to create a personal environment for the child, to ensure emotional security and attachment, the intimacy only possible within a family environment, thus to:

- provide for the individual needs of the child for care and education, healthcare, mental hygiene, learning – with special attention to the processing of loss, development and talent nurturing;

<sup>5</sup> A. DOMSZKY, *A gyermekvédelmi szakellátás értékhátttere, a szakellátás alapértékeinek érvényesülését szolgáló biztosítékok, módszerek, technikák*. in A. DOMSZKY (ed.) *Gyermekvédelmi szakellátás – Segédanyag szociális szakvizsgához*, NCSSZI, Budapest, 2004, p. 45-49.

<sup>6</sup> L. CSÓKAY, *Az egyén jellemzőire épülő, szükségletorientált egyéni elhelyezési, gondozási-nevelési terv kidolgozásának folyamata, módszerei, a tervek funkciói, alkalmazásuk*. in A. DOMSZKY (ed.) *Gyermekvédelmi szakellátás – Segédanyag szociális szakvizsgához*, NCSSZI, Budapest, 2004, p. 223-228.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> L. CSÓKAY, *A segítő kapcsolat. A gyermekvédelmi/gyermekotthoni munka mentálhigiénéje, a személyiség mint munkaeszköz megóvásának és fejlesztésének lehetőségei*. in A. DOMSZKY (ed.) *Gyermekvédelmi szakellátás – Segédanyag szociális szakvizsgához*, NCSSZI, Budapest, 2004, p. 274-278.

<sup>9</sup> *Gyermekotthoni ellátás protokollja*, Budapest, 2011 <<https://docplayer.hu/474045-Gyermekotthoni-ellatas-protokollja.html>> (last access 21.06.2023) p. 583.

– support the child to maintain and develop their identity through the transmitting of their life story, while respecting individual rights»<sup>10</sup>.

All two definitions above indicate that education has to be considered one of the aims of care in the child protection system. But what does education mean? What are the values guiding this process?

In the theory of education several definitions, goals and activities can be discerned, since there isn't a consistent framework to education. Typically, though, it is described as a continuous, systematic activity, which implies an acting person (educator) and a person targeted by this act (the educated child), in this sense it is an adult-child relationship. According to certain approaches, this is a bidirectional activity, where the actors have a mutual influence over each other<sup>11</sup>. It is to note that this view is close to the children's rights approach, to the promotion of participation. Biesta<sup>12</sup> argues that when students learn from their teachers, in fact they use them as resources, and whatever their teachers do or tell, the students embed it into their own cognitive framework, their own constructions. To learn from somebody through interpretation is a totally different thing than being taught.

Regarding its form, education can target the individual, and can unfold within the community, both forms being simultaneously present in child protection. Education is typically regarded as a conscious activity, although it has non-cognitive elements as well. Its function is to shape behaviour through participation in the desired activities, to assist development of an optimal direction, but also to avoid unwanted behaviours by developing socially and individually useful values: «Thus education is the totality of targeted actions, which aim at the development of the physical, moral, cognitive skills of the child; it is a process of transmitting values»<sup>13</sup>. All this shows that the activity of the educator is linked to a goal, which in turn is connected to values. In each society, the values in child upbringing partly refer to qualities a child should assume, partly to an ideal view on children and childhood<sup>14</sup>. Concerning care delivered in child protection either by a family or the state, Neagu highlights that care is a complex and profoundly human act based on trust, mutual responsiveness, and shared consideration<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *Othont nyújtó ellátás a nevelőszülői családban*, Budapest 2011 <<https://www.scribd.com/document/524063974/15-othont-nyujto-ellatas-a-neveloszuloi-csaladban>> (last access 21-06-2023) p. 644-645.

<sup>11</sup> K. BÉRCI BARBAINÉ, *Nevelés a gondozás folyamatában; gondozási feladatok a gyermekkor különböző szakaszaiban*, no year <<https://docplayer.hu/5356621-Munkaanyag-barbaine-berci-klara-neveles-a-gondozas-folyamataban-gondozasi-feladatok-a-gyermekkor-kulonbozo-szakaszaiban.html>> (last access 21-06-2023).

<sup>12</sup> G. BIESTA, *Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From 'Learning From' to 'Being Taught By'* in «Studies in Philosophy and Education», 2013, 32, p. 449-461. <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11217-012-9312-9>> (last access 21-06-2023).

<sup>13</sup> K. BÉRCI BARBAINÉ, no year, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> E. MAJOR, K. BACSKAI, Á. ENGLER, *Nevelési értékpreferenciák az állami és egyházi iskolákban*. in «Educatio» 2022, 3, p. 479-488.

The goal of education can be complex as well. Different approaches to this issue exist, though all share similar content. Such goals can be to enable a constructive lifestyle fruitful on individual level, to prepare the child for future responsibilities, to ensure skills development, individual development, to prepare the child to survival<sup>15</sup>. For Hirst it is a general truth that education means all those activities, which aim at allowing for a 'good life', implying the satisfaction of emotional, physical and social needs<sup>17</sup>. Thus, in the context of the child protection system, the aim of education is to preparing children to good/agreeable life, to quality survival, constructive lifestyle, and future responsibilities in life. The two segments of the child protection care, namely foster care and institutional care are systems built on personal relationships, where the child is not only the target, but also the actor of education<sup>18</sup>.

### 3. *About the research*

The present research included two interviews with professionals well versed in preparing decisions and methodology development, and two focus groups with people working in the two fields. Regarding foster care, 6 persons attended the focus group, all being representatives of church institutions. Concerning their positions, leaders and foster care counsellors were present. Regarding institutional care, 9 persons participated, 2 persons representing church institutions, the others state institutions, all of them holding manager positions.

In order to reveal the views of children and young people, 4 interviews were conducted, 3 with children (aged 16-17) and 1 with a young adult (aged 20). Three of the interviewees were female, one male. All live in the countryside, in three different counties. One of the three children lives in an organisation supported by the state, two in organisations supported by church institutions. At present the young adult is receiving aftercare provision from an NGO. In case of the children, besides the approval of the responsible institution or foster parent, we were also granted the permission of the guardian as well. The young adult participated in the interview on their own right. Regarding their background, the following is worth noting: one of the youngsters, aged 16, lives in the same children's home since the age of one, which at present is supported by a church insti-

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<sup>15</sup> M. NEAGU, *Conceptualising Care in Children's Social Services*. in «British Journal of Social Work», 2011, 9, p. 1-17. <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350719561\\_Conceptualising\\_Care\\_in\\_Children's\\_Social\\_Services](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350719561_Conceptualising_Care_in_Children's_Social_Services)> (last access 21-06-2023).

<sup>16</sup> K. BÉRCI BARBAINÉ, S. KÖTE, *Neveléstudomány és értékelmélet*. in «Új Pedagógiai Szemle» 1998. január <<https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00035/00012/1998-01-ta-Kote-Nevelestudomany.html>> (last access 21-06-2023) and J. NAGY, *XXI. század és nevelés*. Budapest, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> P.H. HIRST, *The Nature of Educational Aims*. in R. MARPLES (ed.) *The Aims of Education*, London, 1999. p. 7-124.

<sup>18</sup> A. DOMSZKY, 2004, p. 47.

tution. The home was taken over by the church a few years ago, but the interviewee does not know the exact year. According to the interviewee, it doesn't have any importance in what concerns care, the only difference being that they have more possibilities to attend different programs, recreational activities, camps. His/her two elder siblings have already left the system. Unfortunately, he/she doesn't know why he/she was included in social care; he/she keeps the contact with the biological mother, though they don't have a close relationship. He/she intends to pursue higher education after finishing high school, at present attempting to take a foreign language exam. The second interviewee was taken to foster care since he/she was born, the foster family being included for a few years in a network operated by the church. He/she didn't perceive new expectations after the supporting organization changed, the transition being undetectable, rather technical. His/her two older brothers have already left the system, two younger half-siblings live in the same family. He/she prepares to pass the final exams attending evening education, as he/she already finished vocational school as confectioner. He/she intends to access aftercare provision for as long as possible. The third interviewee lives in a children's home at present; previously he/she was raised by foster parents from the age of 8 to the age of 17. During his/her pre-school age, before being taken in foster care, he/she lived for one year and a half in a children's home together with his/her siblings. At present he/she is looking for a job as waiter. All of the places where he/she lived were supported by the state. He/she was included in the child protection system together with his/her three siblings. He/she is disillusioned with the system, according to his/her account, the negative experiences within the foster family cannot be compensated by the system, despite its supportive approach. Even if living of own incomes is supposed to be hard, since paying for a rent is difficult, he/she does not want to request aftercare services. The interviewed young adult is 20 years old; he/she was included in a foster care network supported by an NGO together with two siblings; in total he/she has 10 siblings. The parents are separated, but he/she keeps the contact with both, more closely with the mother. The way of life and conditions within the biological family were the reasons of being included in the system; his/her mother was raised also within the child protection system, and in lack of a maternal model, her lifestyle was described by the interviewee as a 'hippie lifestyle', in which the care-taking, education, schooling of children was difficult to ensure. Within the same network, he/she was transferred to a youth home at the age of 16, then, when he/she became an adult, required aftercare assistance, but in his/her own rented apartment, while also finding an employment.

#### *4. Educational goals from the perspective of experts and professionals working in this field*

According to professionals working in the child protection system, it is very important to support children in learning about their family roots, and to dis-

solve their sense of loneliness, providing professional assistance either as therapy, or through empathic consideration and listening. The trauma of being taken away from the biological family, and the double belonging, the detachment from the past and the sticking to an uncertain future mean a significant burden to them<sup>19</sup>. In addition, the repeated transfers from one care facility to the other, typically coupled with change of school are also overshadowed by challenges and conflicts. The educational challenges faced by those who work in the system ensue from this highly intricate situation, in which they have to ensure security to children experiencing total uncertainty, while they are supposed to lay the foundations of a stable future taking into account the fearfulness of the future outside the system. This process is hindered by the dysfunctions resulting from the structural issues of the child protection system, namely the gaps in human resources, the high fluctuation rate, the insufficiencies of professional methods, the burnout of professionals; moreover, the professionals and the cared children alike have to fight social prejudices as well<sup>20</sup>.

The interviewed two professionals agreed that structural transformation can have positive impacts, but from a few years perspective no quality information is yet available. On the basis of the experiences gained so far, it seems that «these church institutions take over the professionals too, not only the foster parents, but the professionals as well, for example the foster care counsellor, who had worked there before. So, in theory there is a basis they can build on. [...] It seems that the church institution tries to have this (wide spectrum of services). So, from this perspective, I'm confident, especially that more money would perhaps be available to foster parents and cared children to make use of the services» (Professional 1).

According to professionals, there isn't any significant difference between foster care and institutional care in what concerns the educational values and goals to be transmitted. The supporting organisation isn't much too important either in terms of professional responsibilities and beliefs. Only a few mention their religious background, and when they do so, they refer to the personal example and moral attitude as aspects which have a role in education as a process developing an established set of values. In their view, the most important aspect is to help the children accept their condition, to support them in building self-confidence, and to place them on a path which would ensure them secure living. From this perspective, next to support – in overcoming social disadvantages and processing traumas – they think that education and the acquiring of a competitive training is necessary<sup>21</sup>. «Next to the educational facil-

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<sup>19</sup> M. KÁLMÁNCHÉY, *Nevelőszülőnél élő gyerekeknél előforduló pszichés problémák*. in «Család, gyermek, ifjúság» 2001, 2. p. 43-53.

<sup>20</sup> A. RÁCZ, E. BOGÁCS, *Arcok és arctalan családok a gyermekvédelemben*. in «Szociálpedagógia» 2020, 15. 63-87. <[http://real.mtak.hu/113677/1/racz\\_szocialpedagogia.pdf](http://real.mtak.hu/113677/1/racz_szocialpedagogia.pdf)> (last access 21-06-2023).

<sup>21</sup> A. RÁCZ, *Barkácsolt életutak, szekvenciális (rendszer)igények - Gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban nevelkedett fiatal felnőttek iskolai pályafutásának, munkaerőpiaci részvételének és jövőképeinek vizsgálata*. Budapest, 2012.

ity, the most important we have to ensure is to supplement the family, and to teach them everything they would have learnt in a family, starting from greeting to personal hygiene and everything else» (Children's home, focus group).

They would like to ensure boundaries, predictability, relying on attachment in foster care even more. «in foster families, the transmission of values is the main priority and specificity. There, the child should experience togetherness, and attachment. They should be able to learn what it means to be in a family and have family roles» (Foster care, focus group).

When asked about their responsibilities, they emphasized the importance of healthy self-perception and body-image, and in general the importance of supporting physical, spiritual, emotional and moral well-being. «Learning, other values important to them like exercise, dancing, soccer, depends in what they are good at. So, it's important to help them unlock or unveil their strengths and make them see that they can be good at something» (Children's home, focus group).

Overall, the interviewed professionals think that optimal child protection is about listening and paying attention to children, about allowing them to express their feelings and thoughts; they are both participants and guides in this process due to the close, partner relationship with the cared children for whom they take on responsibility. They consider education being a teamwork: «we ought to proceed as a team. One single person is unable to do this, only a team can» (Children's home, focus group). Such a team would set the predictable boundaries and provide space for sharing both success and failure: «so that they can guide the young person within the proper boundaries, and ensure that specific intimacy where children can always withdraw whenever they are not up to a certain situation, falter, or get stuck, so they must always have a secure supportive background team which would help them out, help them stand up, so the young person can advance and spread their wings» (Foster care, focus group).

In their view, integrity, professionalism, and compassion are the most important values enabling them to put into practice all these educational goals.

#### *4. The views of young people on care and upbringing*

What is important for the interviewed young people regarding professionals is that they listen to them, pay attention, but also to be able to trust professionals, and feel a certain personal bond with them: «the most important thing is to hear the voice of children. For even if they are young teenagers, they have their own life, and their own opinion, and they don't hear that [...]» (Young person transferred from state operated foster care to a home).

When reflecting on their future, they think that supporting the acquiring of cognitive and non-cognitive skills and knowledge is of outstanding importance, as well as those support packages, which serve their ability to solve prob-



lems, to process traumas, in a broader sense their wellbeing, namely psychological assistance, group activities, mental hygiene activities, but also targeted recreational activities. They think the way how professionals support their future plans and desires is also exemplary. «I really feel that care for me, and they try to support me entirely in everything, and I really feel they try to help me make progress towards my goals and dreams» (Young person growing up in a church supported home).

It is due to his/her own experiences that one person of the interviewed young people has a rather negative opinion on the system (he/she was transferred to an institution from foster care just before becoming an adult). But the other interviewees, although they might not have experienced a very negative or thwarted upbringing within the child protection system, pointed out many deficient aspects through the examples of siblings growing up together or of other children. They put it as a critical observation that after being included in the system, children receive a lot of support, but this support fades while advancing towards teenage years, although they would need it in that period even more. Such support is essential not only in helping them solve the typical problems of teens, but also because this is the age when the adult life is nearing, and they have to take a lot of decisions without any supportive background or substantial guidance.

Related to this age, they also explain that while becoming close to adult age, they feel that their opinion counts more, since previously, even in case of more important decisions, like choosing a career path, a hobby, or assessing their relationships, they had a rather passive role. «While I was there (in a foster family), they told me to choose a profession and stick to it, so that was it. [...] Only after moving out I got the chance to become aware that that's not the only option, I don't need to pick up one single thing and be good at that, but I can try out anything, and I can do many things simultaneously, I can even earn a living from several things, it's just that I will have to find that one thing that best works for me» (Young person receiving aftercare in a civil network).

We were also keen to learn what they can identify and highlight from the set of values of their own family or place where they were raised, as values important to them or to be followed in the future. Their biological family is mostly a bad example from which they wish to delimit, while they also claim that the difficult childhood and the experienced traumas make them more resilient and mature, which they try to see as a positive aspect from the perspective of their future. «There is nothing I would take with me, or would want to pass on to my children, because we weren't taught a value there that I would really show my children as my past» (Young person transferred from state supported foster care to a home).

The two socialization backgrounds revealing different sets of values, namely the biological family and the child protection system show significant differences despite the interviewees' critical observations regarding the system and their personal negative experiences: «If I will have a child, I wouldn't throw

him away, but I would like to have a very good relationship and discuss everything with him, for unfortunately I can't really have a conversation with my mum» (Young person growing up in a church supported home).

Overall, it can be concluded that being present, individual care, and guidance regarding their future are the aspects important to them in order to become decent adults able to accept themselves and their environment, able to cope with their traumas and thrive independently after leaving the child protection system. It is important for them to know that they can access support as young adults as well, since such assistance ensures them security and time to get prepared: «I got very much support by the way, and perhaps that sense of security. [...] So it was very important for example that I left for Budapest, let's say I went there to work for a year and a half, and even though I didn't have that family support anymore, I still had this option that whenever I fail, I can go back, and have enough time to think over what to do, what did I do wrong, what should I do differently to succeed» (Young person receiving aftercare in a civil network).

Putting it as criticism, they claimed that typically they could have meaningful connection with only one adult, since the experts within the child protection system (foster care counsellor, guardian, psychologist) are difficult to access, respectively they don't really feel that they apply the viewpoints of the youngsters. This latter criticism was formulated especially regarding the guardian.

## 5. Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the young people do have opinions on the conditions of how they are raised, on the quality of the provided care, on the different actors within the system, on the supportive or rather neutral, rarely threatening presence of professionals; they are willing to share their opinion when asked. They are critical towards the system, their own negative experiences being decisive in this regard, even if they consider themselves fortunate for having a supportive background or a dedicated professional. The experience of interviewed young people is that whenever they have a problem, they are often left to themselves, and this feeling intensifies from their adolescence. They feel that their opinion counts on system level only when approaching adult age.

They formulated serious system critique when claiming that support often comes late, and it doesn't always react to individual needs; that becoming an adult and having an independent life after leaving the system are very frightening for them. We can conclude that the educational goals formulated by the child protection system are barely aligned to the concept of Hirst on *good life*, in which physical, emotional and social needs are met starting from the conditions, desires, abilities and knowledge of the individual.

The cared children need more and better-quality services, individual care, and a loving environment, which would provide them professional support in processing their past traumas. Likewise, they wish for extended and more personal support in starting their independent life. Such critical observations point mainly to the fact that unfortunately children are rather targets of education, which lacks meaningful inclusion, listening, and shared and responsible reflection on their future.

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