

TAILORING CAREER EDUCATION AND COUNSELING FOR PORTUGUESE FOSTER-YOUTH

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Abstract

Young people living in out-of-homes care usually do not benefit from a gradual transition to adulthood, and without a stable family network to support this process, they mostly face, on their own, the changes related to an independent care from other adults ([1]). In Portugal, a considerable number of young people enter adulthood in an institutional context, leaving at that stage the foster care institutions, due to legal requirements ([2]; [3]). When these young people leave care, employment is necessary to replace the financial assistance assured by the welfare system until that moment. However, foster youth are at a higher risk of unemployment due to the fact that they are more likely, compared to their peers who live in stable family settings, to be involved in the criminal justice system, have lower academic skills and achievement rates, and present psychological and physical health problems. In this sense, these young people will highly benefit of tailored career education and development programs. This paper presents an analysis of foster youth career development and counseling needs in the context of the Portuguese educational system and labor market, and discusses implications for career counseling and educational interventions for this at-risk group of young people.

Keywords: Career Education, Counseling, Foster-Youth, Transition.

1 INTRODUCTION

A sociographical analysis of Portuguese children and adolescents living in foster institutions, conducted by the Portuguese National Commission for the Protection of Children and Youth at Risk - CNPCJR [2], recorded a total of 9561 children and adolescents (54, 5% girls) in this condition. Of these, 52.4% are over 13 years old, with most (66%) residing in the foster institution for more than two years (46% accepted for 3, 4 or 5 years, 29% for 6, 7 or 8 years, 15% for 9, 10 or 11 years, and 10% accepted 12 or more years ago). These facts show the prolonged nature of the host in this type of institutions.

Each year a significant number of young people reach the majority in these foster institutions and, legally, have to start an independent life from that point. The Portuguese Law on the Protection of Children [3] defines that young people may stay in the foster institution until age 18, or upon request, until age 21.

In this context, an important sector of the psychological literature has shown that the development of modern societies involves changes in the nature and structure of social contexts and people's lives, such as expanding the education and employability, and postponing the entry into adulthood ([4]; [5]; [6]). This dichotomy between legal requirements and the social and personal needs in the preparedness for the tasks of adulthood can affect adversely the pathways of life of these young people in foster institutions. Additionally, youth aging out of foster care are typically not afforded the luxury of a gradual transition into adulthood or the safety net of family if they find themselves unprepared for the challenges of independent living. Instead, upon emancipation from foster care, these young people move abruptly into sudden adulthood, typically with no opportunity to return to the child welfare system if they find they are unprepared to make it on their own. Consequences of the instant adulthood these young people experience can be seen in multiple studies documenting the poor outcomes of youth emancipated from foster care ([6];[7];[8];[9];[10];[11];[12];[13];[14];[15]).

Specifically, some studies indicate that, as adults, foster youth are at risk in a considerable number of negative dimensions: unemployment or precarious employment ([7]; [10]; [8]; [9]), low levels of educational attainment ([7]; [8]; [9]; [10]; [11]; [12]; [13]), early parenthood ([7]; [8]; [9]; [10]), criminal activity ([8]; [10]), and mental health problems, such as depression ([11]) and anxiety ([8]; [9]). Youth

in foster care are also less likely to graduate from high school ([14]; [8]), and are under-represented in college preparatory classes, compared to peers with the same skills living with their biological families ([15]).

Because research in this area focuses on the vulnerability of these young people for the establishment of career paths that are less favorable and adjusted, little is known about the factors linked to positive transitions ([16]). However, some authors show that training in financial and domestic management, and the facilitating education and job placement are positive measures for these youth ([11]; [7]; [17]; [18]). In addition, the study of Iglehart and Becerra's [19] suggests a need of a continuous accompaniment of these young people from the stage of preparation for independent living, going through the transition period, until the stage where they are living outside the foster care institution. A comprehensive review of studies of the effectiveness of Independent Living (IL) programs by Montgomery, Donkoh, and Underhill [20] suggests IL programs may improve outcomes in the areas of education, employment, and housing. A recent study by Pecora and colleagues [18] indicates that placement stability, while in care, and extensive IL services, including concrete resources, contribute to better educational and employment outcomes of transitioning youth in adulthood.

The need to develop this line of investigation and practice, as well as the high number of children and young people living in an institutional placement in Portugal, justifies the proposal of the current article, which advocates that these young people will highly benefit of tailored career education and development programs in the transition to adulthood.

The next section of this article offers a brief description of the settings for children and youth living in out-of-home care, existing in the Portuguese social security system. It will then offer a description of some positive practices and recommendations in this field.

2 SETTINGS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH LIVING IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE IN PORTUGAL

The Social Security system in Portugal provides the follows settings for children and youth living in out-of-home care:

(i) Family foster care (*Acolhimento familiar para crianças e jovens*): consists in assigning the confidence of the child or young people to a family or an individual, empowered to do so, aiming at their integration in the family environment;

(ii) Temporary foster care centers (*Centros de Acolhimento Temporário*): centers that provide care during the period needed for the case assessment and the definition of a life plan for the child or young person. This transitory care period is of more or less 6 months, providing the environment and the basic conditions to overcome the risk situation;

(iii) Home for Children and Young Persons (*Lares de Infância e Juventude*): temporary or permanent accommodation of children and young persons, aimed at providing them a normal home environment and the conditions they need for their global development;

(iv) Autonomy Apartment (*Apartamento de Autonomização*): residence inserted in the local community to support the transition to adulthood of young people who have specific personal skills. This care is a result of the activation of services in order to articulate and maximize existing resources in the territorial environment. It is a institutionally contextualized response (created by a particular institution - Casa Pia de Lisboa), with little quantitative expression in the Portuguese territory.

All these settings are important contexts for the development of career and educational practices to promote positive outcomes and positive career pathways in this population. In the next section we present studies and guidelines that provide some of these positive practices, which may be important to consider in the Portuguese foster care context.

3 BEST PRACTICES OR GUIDELINES TO HELP FOSTER CHILDREN MAKE A MORE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO AN INDEPENDENT LIFE

As career development is considered a parallel and linked process to identity development of individuals, the career literature and research considers that an early support to the elaboration of a personal life project can bring positive outcomes to psychosocial development of foster young people ([21]; [22]; [23]; [24]).

One of the goals of early intervention with young people at risk, as the young people living in out-of-home care, is to avoid school drop-out, helping to increase the engagement and commitment to education and training and ensuring the achievement of attitudes and employability skills necessary to meet the labor market.

In this perspective, Pechman and Fiester [25] maintain that schools are successful in improving the achievement of at-risk students if they carefully plan their academic programs and if they receive support and assistance from district administration. Concretely, the authors sustain that adequate educational planning and administrative support can provide the most educationally disadvantaged children an enriched curriculum that includes meaningful problem-solving and thinking skills, as well as high caliber teaching.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation suggests that one of the best ways to increase academic achievement and to improve high school graduation rates for at-risk students, like foster children, is for school districts to adopt the 3Rs Solution—readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic ([26]). The 3Rs Solution was stated because the Gates Foundation discovered that two-thirds of ninth graders were leaving high school without the English and Math skills needed to handle college or land a job that can support a family. Thus, the Gates Foundation believes that the following three ingredients are important to an effective education: Rigor - all students need the chance to succeed in challenging classes, such as algebra, writing, and chemistry; Relevance - courses and projects must spark students interest and relate clearly to their lives in today's rapidly changing world; and, Relationships - all students need adult mentors who know them, look out for them, and push them to achieve in school.

According to the Gates Foundation, these 3Rs are the building blocks for a redesigned system of high schools, one that will in fact prepare graduates for college, work, and citizenship. The foundation believes that rigor, relevance, and relationships are the only way education reform can work ([27]).

In the same direction, Christian [28] pointed those successful programs in this area care about the educational needs of foster children. They are a priority for the child welfare agency and are consistently addressed in case plans. Furthermore, there must be a strong, collaborative relationship between the child welfare agency and the education community, including timely sharing of information and participation in meetings regarding the child. And finally, children must have strong advocates or other educational decision makers who ensure that they receive needed educational services. Ferrell [29] maintained that state and federal policymakers are responding to a growing body of research that indicates youths leaving foster care are among the country's most vulnerable young people. Ferrell [29] further pointed out that if foster children do not graduate from high school before they leave care, they are unlikely to do so afterward. For this, many could benefit from tutoring, mentoring, career counseling, or college preparation courses. Likewise, supports that make college tuition more affordable—such as tuition waivers, matched savings accounts and assistance with books and housing expenses—also contribute to the likelihood of educational success, and ultimately, economic self-sufficiency. Similarly, Reid [30] emphasizes the importance of encouraging these at risk young people to do relevant learning into different life areas, before the school leaving age, in and out of the school context, from the support and the development of integrate guidelines and policies of education, employment, transportation, housing and culture.

In addition, Munson [31] advocates the need for a change of focus, from the academic skills training programs, to other programs that promote life skills and aim for the autonomy of these young people living in out-of-home settings. In this field, the purpose of career development programs must include promoting self-esteem, self-control, and to emphasize the importance of life roles in the professional, domestic, and leisure domains. In the same way, it would be necessary to implement strategies for monitoring and conducting follow-ups for these programs, in order to determine their long-term effects.

Eilertson [32] argues that one way that schools and social agencies working together can improve social and academic skills for high school foster students is to provide assistance with independent living skills. Some transitional living programs, according to the author, will offer emancipating teens housing stipends, allowing them to live in the community on their own.

Many older foster children frequently get several necessary practical financial lessons as a part of groundwork for independent living. Ferrell [29] states that there is some evidence to suggest that coursework without hands-on experience is of little value. As a result, the author suggests that programs that include daily money management through debit, savings or individual development accounts may prove more effective in teaching critical financial management skills. In addition, rewarding positive financial behavior, such as matching savings deposits, helps to build assets. These

programs enable these young people to purchase important items, experience a sense of self-sufficiency and feel hope about their future.

Another example of positive policies and programs to help foster children receive an equal opportunity for a successful education is given by New Hampshire State in USA. In 2001, they amended its education laws to permit a foster child in placement to continue attending the school he or she attended prior to placement, provided the following conditions have been satisfied: continuing in the same school district is in the child's best interest; the placement is within a reasonable distance of the school; and suitable transportation can be arranged without imposing additional costs on the school district or the state child welfare agency ([27]).

According to Avery's study [33], to reach academic goals such as improving the graduation rate for foster children and improving academic success, schools must include a focus on addressing barriers to student learning, to ensure all children have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Such a focus requires that schools create policies that are committed to establishing an "enabling component" or educational advocate to support students who are most in need. Putting an enabling or advocacy component into operation, the study goes on to state that schools develop a framework of basic program areas and then create an infrastructure to restructure and enhance existing resources, such as remedial education programs and other academic support services to better meet the needs of these students.

4 CONCLUDING COMMENTS: BEST PRACTICES FOR CAREER EDUCATION AND COUNSELING FOR FOSTER-YOUTH IN PORTUGAL

This article focused on foster care youth and the relevance of the development of career research and interventions for this at-risk population.

Indeed, older youth, like older children and youth in foster care, are vulnerable despite their increasing age and autonomy. They are in the foster care system because they have experienced maltreatment and the temporary or permanent loss of their homes, families, and communities. Older youth in foster care also experience the typical challenges and transitions that other emerging adults face in contemporary society. Given their chronological, personal, and support challenges, older youth removed from their homes by the court should be able to rely on the foster care system to provide them with stability, support, and needed services. Foster care system decision makers, who listen to youth, respond to their needs and respectfully and actively partner with them can aid them in their transition to greater independence ([34]).

The analysis of some best practices in this field shows that career and educational interventions could be fundamental in the guidance of these children and young people's life projects. Counseling services for this at-risk youth may include career planning and decision making, academic advising, mentoring, social skills development, study skills training, college access facilitating, and assistance with school and college completion and financial aid application ([35]), as well as domestic management. Facilitating the adjustment of foster-care youth to the world of work may include coaching and counseling for work adjustment goals, such as promoting proactive behaviors by the individual, stress management, and enhancing self-efficacy, specially concerning these young people's beliefs about their ability to adjust to changing life conditions (cf. [36]).

The knowledge about foster-care youth's needs should be used to regulate, in a consensual way, the support that is given to young people living in out-of-home care in Portugal, especially in their preparation for adulthood. Portuguese literature and policies in these domains present some positive practices, but they are restrict to some particular contexts and suffered a restrict divulgation or attention to permit their generalization. An example of positive practices with these young people as well as other at-risk youth is the career development intervention programming carried out in Lisbon, at the Casa Pia of Lisboa, a public-school institution, covering pre-school to high-school, which is attended by residential foster-care youth as well as children and adolescents living in families struggling with impoverished or instable life conditions. As a pilot-project [37] developed by the in-house psychologists and supervised by academics specialized in career development, from the University of Minho, the interventions are tailored for each developmental stage, from childhood to late adolescence, and for children's and adolescents' particular characteristics and needs, in order to promote self-awareness and occupational exploration, as well as decision-making and planning. Interventions also include training teachers and counselors.

Directions for tailored career interventions for foster-care youth as at-risk youth include enhancing the training of career counselors, applying research to practice in this particular field, facilitating individual career exploration and planning from childhood to early adulthood, increasing educational enrichment and reinforcement, involving significant others for these young people such as mentors, teachers and social workers in vocational guidance and consultation, providing these young people with relevant role-models and mentors, incorporating apprenticeships in academic curricula, facilitating the use of computer-based technology for career exploration and planning, and integrating career and personal counseling in life-transitions (cf., [38]).

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