

Thematic Article

The Statistical Analysis of the Academic Achievement of Young People Living in the Child Protection System

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Recommended citation:

Erdei, I., & Kovács, K. E. (2020). The Statistical Analysis of the Academic Achievement of Young People Living in the Child Protection System. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 2(3), 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.37441/CEJER/2020/2/3/8527>

Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on placing children in foster care. Our main research aims to explore the connections between the future orientation of disadvantaged young people living in residential care homes and foster families. In our pilot-study, we made it measurable by a comparative analysis of their study results. The sample consists of children raised in the child protection specialist and aftercare system of the Greek Catholic Child Protection Centre of Debrecen and Nyírség. The comparative analysis included 57 children and young people living in residential care homes and 57 children and young adults living in foster care. The members of both groups were born between 1993 and 2003, so are 15-25-year-olds. The comparative analysis was made on the basis of the available documents and study statistics between June 2019 and November 2019, to measure and compare the academic achievement of young people living in residential care homes and with foster parents. According to the statistical analysis, it was found that the academic achievement, based on year repetitions, show a more favourable picture of students living with foster parents. Depending on our results, a number of additional research questions arise.

Keywords: profoundly disadvantaged situation; specialist system; child protection system; academic achievement; future orientation

Introduction

Currently, 23090 children and young adults supported by the child protection system live in Hungary (KSH, 2019). To restrain its social reproduction, it is important to see the recruitment, that is, who they are, where and why they got into the child protection system. Our aim is to explore some characteristics of adolescents and young adults raised in child protection in connection with school and their peer relationships, which are thought to hinder or promote their academic achievement and shape their vision. Ensuring the physical and mental health of children is in the interest of children on the one hand, and that of the society due to the reproduction on the other (Ferge, 1994).

In terms of the practical benefits of the research, the importance of the attitudes of young people in the child protection system is unquestionable from a psychological, educational and educational political point of view. It is important to meet the goals, desires and plans of young people as these contain their hopes and fears. The relationship between personal goals and self-regulation is one of the determinants of quality of life that promotes integration into society. In the present research, we aim to compare the demographic characteristics and academic achievement of children raised by foster parents and in residential care homes.

Child protection system

Regarding the issue of foster care and residential care homes, the child protection system needs to be mentioned first, as this provides the basis in both cases.

Child protection is a set of activities, tools and institutions that aims to protect the rights of the child, the harmonious physical, intellectual, emotional and moral development of children, their upbringing in the family,

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the prevention and elimination of vulnerability, and the reintegration of children separated from their families. Through these aims, it assures special protection for children, which is justified by the lack of physical and mental maturity (Szikulai, 2004).

The child is placed in the child protection system if he/she is taken out of their family. The institutions of the system include children's home, residential care homes and foster care (by a foster family). The removal of a child from his/her family happens in the case of irreversible endangerment within the framework of primary care (Veczkó, 2007). Vulnerability is 'a condition developed as a result of a child's or another person's behaviour, omission, or circumstance that hinders or impedes the child's physical, intellectual, emotional, or moral development' (Szöllösi, 2016). Currently, according to the 2020 data of the Central Statistical Office, the number of children and young adults placed in the child protection system increased between 2010 and 2019. From 21418 in 2010, the number raised to 23090 in 2019 an increase of 1672 people. 20876 of them were minors and 2214 were adults in aftercare. In child protection specialist care, the number of children between the age of 6 and 13 years is the highest. Number of children placed in the child protection system increased despite the number of the Hungarian population decreased with 244798 capita in this period (KSH, 2020).

Table 1. The number of youth treated in child protection specialist care in 2019 (KSH, 2020)

Year	0-2 years old	3-5 years old	6-13 years old	14-17 years old	Minors total	18 years old or older	Total
2019	2560	2820	8944	6552	20876	2214	23090

In 2019, according to the data of the Central Statistical Office, 7072 people lived in children's or residential care homes, while more than double the amount, 15526 children/young adults, lived in a foster family. Most of the children, 10105, are living in child protective care between 1 and 5 years (1:2 ratio). The proportion of children living in institutions and those living in a foster family reversed in 2004. Among youth in aftercare, quadruple young people live with foster parents compared to residential care homes. One of the conditions for a young adult to remain in special care as an adult is to have student status.

Table 2. The number of children and youth raised in children's or residential care homes and foster families based on the length of care in 2019 (KSH, 2020)

	Year	1-30 days	31-60 days	61-365 days	1-5 years	5-10 years	10-17 years	More than 17 years	Total
Those living in a children's home or residential home	2019	174	256	1462	3351	1259	499	71	7072
Those living in a foster family	2019	299	316	2215	6754	3753	1838	351	15526

Care in the children's or residential care homes

The Act XXXI of 1997 on Child Protection and Custody Administration (hereinafter Child Protection Act) resulted in a significant change in the institutional child-rearing in Hungary. The Child Protection Act aimed at establishing a network of small-size children's homes and created types of institutions that cater to the specific needs of the people living there. Thus, on the basis of this regulation, new types of care were born (Rákó, 2014).

Differentiation of children's homes is also adjusted to the identified needs of the people living there. Half of the places were replaced by a small number of residential care homes. Among the children's homes with larger capacity, we also find specific homes specialised for the majors (KSH, 2012). A residential care home is

a children's home that provides home care for up to 12 children in a detached flat or family home under safe and family-like circumstances (Paragraph 50 (4) of Child Protection Act of 1997).

Care in a foster family

In Hungary, until the second half of the 1990s, the placement of children in state care with foster parents was regulated by Regulation No. 2111/1954 (VIII. 25.). It was allowed only in case of a shortage of spaces in residential care homes. This approach had a strong impact until the introduction of the Child Protection Act. Before the introduction of child protection reform, the traditional foster parent status was established by an agreement between the director of the children and youth protection institute and the foster parent, who was not remunerated for his/her activities. The professional foster parent had civil servant status. The 1997 act defined the legal status of foster parents and set out fundamental rights and obligations for them (Czirják, 2008).

By 1998, at least one foster parent network had started operating in each county. Professionally trained counsellors and caregivers help the work of foster parents and monitor the upbringing of children. The staff of the supporting network and the foster parents are in continuous contact with the biological parents of the foster children, the social workers of the competent child welfare services, the guardianship offices, the staff of the local Children Protection Services and all organisations providing care for the children (Czirják, 2008). Based on the Act LXXX of 1997, the foster parent employment status was replaced with 'professional' foster parent status starting 1 January 2014. The foster parent was thus a fully insured person based on Paragraph 5 (1) of Act CXXII of 2019 on the Eligibility for Social Security Benefits and the Funding for These Services. The foster parent network provided for the placement of children with foster parents. In 2018, 49 foster care networks operated in Hungary (KSH, 2019).

The platform of upbringing and factors influencing it

The primary socialization arena of the child is the family, which transmits values, norms, and behaviour patterns. When the family is unable to perform its socialisation duties, the child may be placed in child protective care. As the socialising role of the family is irreplaceable, a child who does not grow up in a family starts out with a severe disadvantage. The social capital of these children is specially developed, and their primary socialisation arena is extremely diverse and unique, affecting, among other things, their academic success (Andorka, 2006). The family of children in child protective care has several characteristics that make it challenging to provide their children with a suitable place to develop socially – when the family is unstable (experiencing lots of rocking changing); and when they easily let go of family members and accept new ones. As a result, conflicts, violence, and deviant behaviours are common (Herczog, 2007).

The situation of children living in child protection institutions is also special regarding learning, as they struggle with significant disadvantages and learning disabilities. The reason for this is, among others, that the family does not fulfill its social function, and it does not create the necessary conditions for learning (Rákó, 2014). Parents have little or no ability to transfer cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1978). There is a significant difference between young people brought up in the protective care and their peers raised in a family, as less than 3% of young people aged 18-25 leaving aftercare have a higher educational degree. In comparison, 50% have only a primary school education, if any at all, which worsens their chances at employment (Herczog, 2014). Young people growing up in child protective care are included in the bottom 10% of society based on the acquired cultural capital, so they have a high chance of social exclusion (Varga, 2008). However, the residential care home, as an educational arena, plays a significant role in the socialisation of children, providing care, protection, compensation, and preparing young people for adult life.

Another prominent spontaneous agent of socialisation is the peer group. The development of contemporary relationships in the case of children living in the child protection system is influenced by the age at which they were admitted to the system, how long they had been there, and the composition of the group too. The value of group formation and group effects are increased, especially in adolescence, in terms of identity formation (Pikó, 2005).

The positive effect of contemporary socialisation is that it promotes the development of social competence, provides support, emotional security and a sense of belonging for the individual (Asher, Parker 1989). Experts see the adverse effects mainly in the fact that peers significantly influence the development of deviances (Pikó, 2005; Elekes-Paksi, 2005).

Children and young people in child protective care mostly belong to those multiple disadvantaged and vulnerable groups who are at increased risk of early school leaving, even in their families and communities.

Unfortunately, this danger cannot be significantly influenced or improved by the child protection system. It is difficult to distinguish whether the initial backwardness or deprivation causes early dropout, or the lack of appropriate assistance and equalisation of opportunities (Herczog, 2014).

In several cases, leaving school is the result of placing the child in a new care locale. In such cases, finding a new school does not happen immediately. Statistics show that in the UK, children in child protective care are ten times more likely to drop out of school than their peers living in the family (Höjer et al., 2008).

The socialisation arena of profoundly disadvantaged students living in child protective care is very exclusive. For them, the goals set by the Hungarian education system are hard to achieve, as the social environment from which they come does not provide an adequate education. Schools intensify backlogs because pedagogical practices are based on knowledge transfer. Supportive education policies can offer a real opportunity for social mobility through academic success and positive self-esteem.

Only few of the youth living in the child protection system enrol in higher education. Children who have matured and learnt in the educational system are children belonging to aftercare in the child protection system. They still live with the foster parents in the residential care home setting an example for the other children living with them. Rákó (2014) investigated how the system can help the further education of children placed in aftercare. The author stated the preparation of youth for higher educational studies is the result of a haphazard and non-planned process. The reinforcement of the intention for further education is significant for the students, which is usually given by the foster parents or guardian. Students studying in higher education consider the work of the child protection institutions and foster parents essential regarding the higher educational career (Rákó, 2014).

The aim and methods of the research

In our basic research, we examine students living in child protective care divided into two subgroups. One group consists of young people living in residential care homes while the members of the other group live in a foster family (and those living in aftercare due to adulthood or living independently). Both groups consist of young people (15-25 years old) born between 1993 and 2003. The aim of our study is to explore the similarities and differences in the future orientation of profoundly disadvantaged young people living in child protective care.

Our basic research is territorially limited to the Northern Great Plain region of Hungary, containing Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok counties. In terms of child poverty, this region is the most vulnerable, with the highest number of children receiving child protective care. The planned number of participants in the research is a minimum of 100 people per group, which means 100 children and young people living in residential care homes and 100 living with foster parents. We have sent the appropriate ethical permission to the heads of the child protection centres. This includes a request for residential care homes as well as foster care networks, with special attention to asking the guardians of the children under the age of 18 to allow them to complete the questionnaires.

In our complex research, the first aim is to thoroughly examine the recruitment of young people living in residential care homes and foster care networks of child protection centres in the area researched. Based on this, we formulate several questions. How and why were placed the children and youth participating in the study in the child protective care? Have the children raised in residential care homes ever lived with foster parents? Are they currently attending school? What education do they have? What are their professions and careers? For the questionnaire survey, we used a structured self-administered questionnaire format, divided into three subscales according to questions related to economic, social, and cultural capital. The questionnaire gives a picture of the young person's education, employment, learnings needs, leisure activities, social relations and family relations. The present study can be considered a pilot-study of the complex research, which thus presents a statistical analysis of the academic achievement of the research sample in the pre-study phase.

The pilot-study

The aim of the pilot-study is the statistical analysis academic achievement of 15-25-years-old youth living in residential care homes and with foster parents concerning the school years of 2018/2019 and 2019/2020. The results of the end of the school year were provided to us by the head of the institution from the statistical data of the child protection centre. Given that distance education was introduced in the second half of the 2019/2020 school year. Due

to the Coronavirus pandemic, the results of this period are not analysed in the present research, and its data will be examined in our subsequent research.

We conducted our research with students living in the residential care homes and foster care network of the Greek Catholic Child Protection Centre of Debrecen and Nyírség. They carry out their activities in 5 settlements thus in Debrecen, Téglás, Nyíradony, Nyíracásád and Nyírmártonfalva providing a total of 94 places in 9 residential care homes. The foster parent network can accommodate 267 children in 78 foster families.

The evaluation was based on the academic statistics provided by the head of the institution.

In the comparative analysis, the first group of the study sample consisted of children raised in the residential care homes of the child protection centre (N=57). The second group consisted of children and young adults living in foster families of the foster parent network of the child protection centre (N=57). The comparative analysis was carried out on the basis of the documents available to us between June 2019 and November 2019, to find out the study results of profoundly disadvantaged young people living in residential care homes and with foster parents, and to map similarities as well as differences.

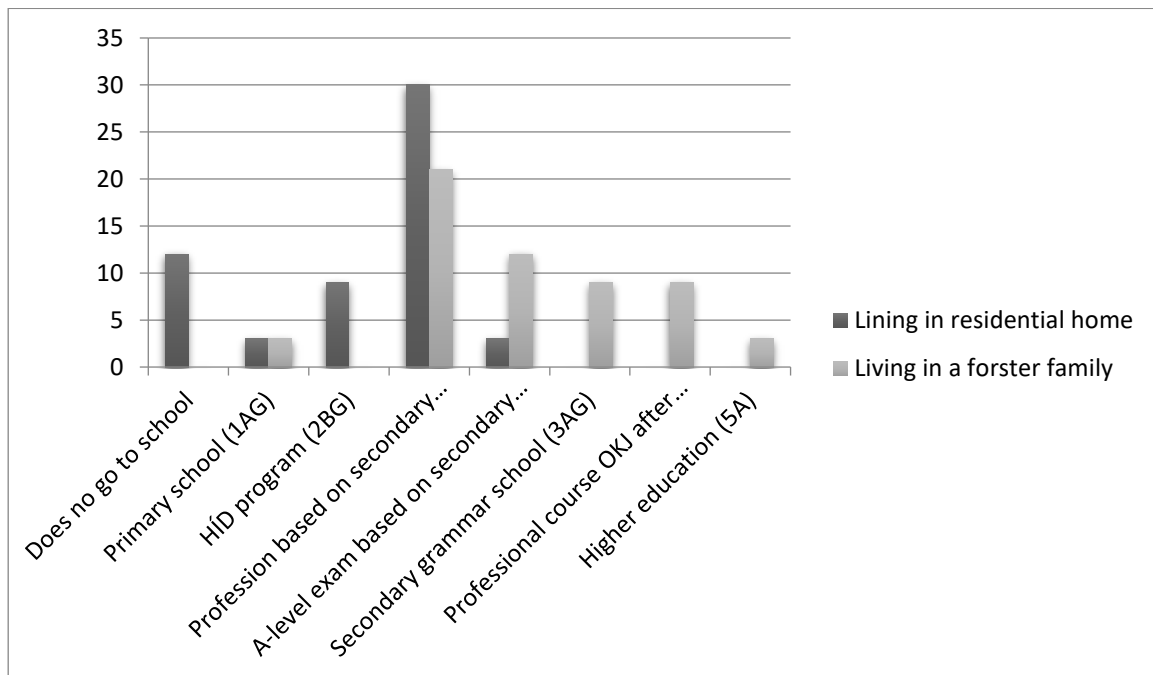
Results

The demographic comparison of children brought up in residential care homes and foster care

Based on previous research, vocational training in child protection forms the basis of secondary education. The academic achievement of children aged 15-18 paints a terrible picture (Hodosán-Rác, 2009). Similar research has been conducted in children's and residential care homes, where it has been found that the expansion of higher education has less impact on the young people interviewed. This can be one of the reasons why the significant educational disadvantage of children that cannot be compensated by institutions (Rákó, 2014).

A comparison of students living in children's homes and foster families based on the type of school shows a significant difference in favour of those living in foster care. Significantly more children study in vocational secondary schools and grammar schools. In contrast, 57% of those living in children's homes study in secondary technical schools or technical educational institution outside the school system (Farkas-Rác-Szabolcsi, 2018). Among children living in the special care system, the proportion of 12-year-old children with at least 1 or 2 grades backlog is 39%, and that of 13-14-year-olds who are learning in a lower grade than is permissible is 11.5%. The proportion of 17-18-year-olds is the same as for the children in protection, which is 55% (Homoki, 2014). Based on previous research data, concerning the time spent in the specialist care, the academic performance of the children shows a positive change (Homoki, 2014). The comparison of young people living in residential care homes and foster families by school type is illustrated in Figure1.

Figure 1. Current learning characteristics of children living in residential care homes and foster families (Source: the Authors)



All of the children aged 15-20 living with foster parents study in the school system. Only 3 of them attend primary school (1AG), 21 learn in secondary vocational school (3CP), 12 in secondary vocational grammar school (3AP), and 9 in secondary grammar school (3AG). After high school graduation, 9 people study in OKJ training (4CV) and 3 of them in higher education (5A, in bachelor training). It can be said that, among the young people living in a foster family (N=57), 33 currently attend or already have a high school diploma.

Regarding the young people living in residential care homes (N=57), 12 of them do not go to school at all, which is not always due to school leaving age, but to an unjustified absence due to a permanent escape. Many are transferred from primary school to the Híd Programme (2BG), in which 9 pupils study. A significant proportion, 30 of those living in residential care homes study in secondary vocational schools (3CP). Only 3 people graduated from a secondary vocational grammar school (3AP). None of them study in OKJ training or higher education.

Comparing those living in residential care homes and foster parents, it can be stated that a large number of people living in residential homes (12 people) do not attend school which cannot be detected among those living with foster parents. Among those living in residential care homes, 9 of them have not received or attained a primary school certificate, so as a temporary solution to replace this, they participate in a special program called the Híd Programme. We did not find any similar cases among those living with foster parents. In both examined groups, a significant number of students participated in vocational training, 30 of those living in residential care homes and 21 of those living with foster parents. There is a significant difference between the two groups in terms of further education based on secondary grammar school (9 people) or secondary vocational grammar school studies (9 people), which is typical only of young people living with foster parents. Another difference is that none of the respondents living in a residential care home study in higher education. In the case of those living with foster parents, 3 respondents are pursuing higher education studies. The results we obtained are consistent with the results of the researches mentioned above.

Referral to specialist care is made for more children because they have not met the requirements of compulsory education. Many of them end up in residential care homes or foster families with a 1-2-3 year-long arrear, which can escalate often. It is a severe burden for both school and child that they are not able to study in a class appropriate to their age.

In Hungary, the Híd programme was a special bridging opportunity for continuing primary school studies and preparing for vocational education, only being replaced by the Dobbantó Programme in the school year of 2020/2021. Regarding children who transfer to the program after reaching their compulsory school age, their study average rises significantly, and the number of repetition of school years is negligible. One of the reasons for this is that the pressure they faced in primary school, largely due to the fact that they studied with classmates

who did not correspond to their age, ceases and they are placed in a small class with young people in a similar situation. Upon entering the vocational class of the secondary vocational grammar school, the average GPA of the young people rises, because after reaching the compulsory school age, only those undertake further education who really want to find a job in the given profession upon graduation.

The academic achievement of children living in residential care homes and foster care

Figure 2. Academic achievement (GPA) of children living in residential care homes and foster families in the spring semester of school year 2018/19 (Source: the Authors)

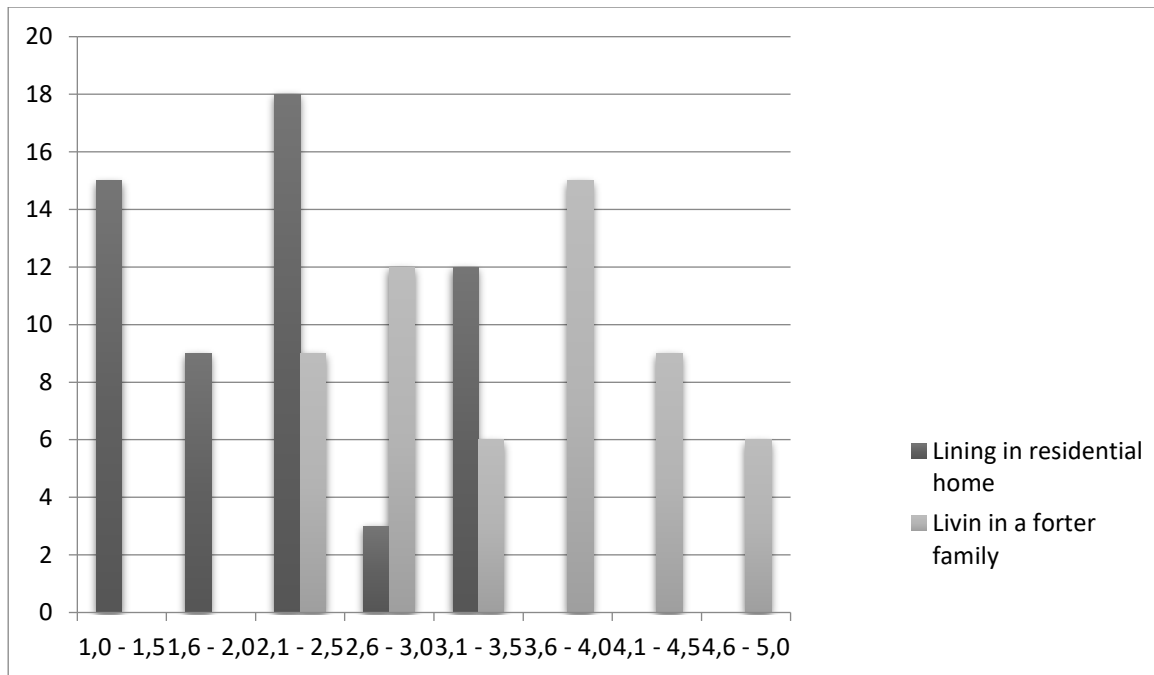


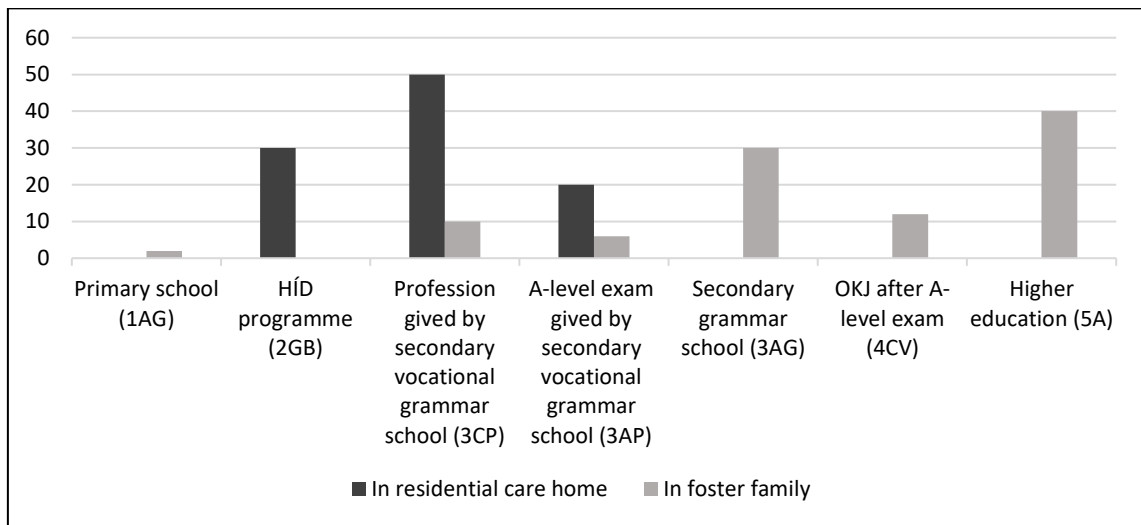
Figure 2 well illustrates the GPA of young people living in residential care homes and foster families. While the GPAs of students living in a foster family are not below 2.0, there was no dropout among them in the examined period, this rate among students living in a residential care home is significant, 3.5 being the highest GPA.

Compared with Figure1, students living in foster families have a higher level of education and a better GPA than their peers growing up in a residential care home. However, it is important to note that previous research suggests that the mental abilities of children in the child protection system influence the choice of care location. Children with appropriate mental development are more likely to be placed with foster parents (Neményi & Messing, 2007).

Young people living in a foster parent network put more stock in the importance of education than those in institutional care. This is a possible explanation for why students raised with foster parents are more effective than their peers living in an institution. As a result of the situation, an anti-school culture is developing in some institutions, so many children do not go to school at all (Höjer et al., 2008). Similar experiences have been reported by professionals working in the residential care homes we examined, but this will be addressed in our future research.

We tried to find a connection regarding what might be the reason for the significant difference in academic achievement between children growing up in residential care homes and foster families. We examined the educational attainment of 70 foster parents working in the foster care network of the involved child protection centre comparing them with the highest educational attainment of adults working in residential care homes of the same institution (residential care home leaders, guardians), the result was no significant difference found. Therefore, we examined the highest educational attainment of the aftercare children living in the investigated residential care homes, as well as the educational level of the aftercare ones living in the researched families and the biological children of the foster parents. The analysis found a significant difference, which is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Highest educational attainment of aftercare children living in a foster family and residential care homes and that of biological children of foster parents (%. Source: the Authors)



In the study, the number of children in aftercare in the 9 residential care homes was 10, which is negligible, as they could show a pattern for younger children growing up there. In the foster families participating in the study, the number of aftercare children and biological adult children was 50, so Figure 3 shows the distribution of educational attainment was shown in percentages. In the residential care homes, 30% of young adults learn in the Híd programme (2GB), 50% in a secondary vocational grammar school (learning a trade) (3CP), and 20% in a secondary vocational grammar school (to earn a degree) (3AP). None of them study in higher education. On the contrary, 40% of adult biological and foster children living in foster families study in higher education (5A) (or already have a degree), 12% own a post-graduate OKJ training certificate (4CV), 30% a secondary grammar school diploma (3AG), 6% a secondary vocational grammar school diploma (3AP), 10% a secondary vocational grammar school profession (3CP) and 2% only a primary school certificate (1AG). We can conclude that young adults raised with children in special care have an “involuntary” mentoring role, providing a guideline for the future. Moreover, we can deduce that adults living with children in the child protection system have the same ‘involuntary’ mentoring role, providing them, too, with a guideline for the future.

Conclusion

As a result of the pilot-study, we confirmed the importance of our research topic, according to which there is a significant difference in academic achievement in favour of young people living in foster families. Pupils raised in foster families have a higher level of education and a better GPA.

One of the problems of young people living in residential care homes is that it is more or less impossible for them to follow the usual educational pathway through post-compulsory education. Several pathways can be seen with interruptions, detours, restarts. When children are placed in the child protection system, a thorough assessment would be required in all areas of development. Child protection and educational institutions need to work together to help a child succeed in social integration. It is the responsibility of educational institutions to do their utmost to educate disadvantaged children; however, they often try to declare the child a private student (Rákó, 2011).

The school performance, personal experiences and opinions of those living in a residential care home should be regularly analysed, the steps taken for their success should be evaluated, and feedback should be given to the professionals concerned. Usually, they enter the child protection system with various, mutually reinforcing problems and disadvantages, which compensate for these disadvantages but a little or not at all. The results show that the appropriate family background has great importance concerning the academic achievement of children.

Several children are placed in the child protection system due to school absences. In this case, the best solution would be for the child to be placed in a supportive environment that offers patterns and opportunities that differ from those of the previous group of friends. The majority of children who are placed in the system due to absenteeism have serious (even 3 years) backlog compared to their peers, they are often too old, and the

new school is not prepared for their admission or to reduce their disadvantages. Professionals working in residential care homes are not prepared to deal with these problems, and the conditions are usually not given.

As in international practice, the data of children raised permanently with foster parents are concerning school dropout, successful completion and further education in Hungary. However, little is known about when and why these children got into that family. No data can be reached regarding the settlement of successful young people and their foster families, the education, living, housing and other conditions of foster parents. Without these data, it is difficult to draw valid conclusions, apart from the fact that these cannot be proven. However, it is well known that foster parents prefer to raise younger, non-Roma, non-disabled, ‘easy’ children, in other words, those whose chances of learning and further education are better (Herczog, 2014).

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Appendix

Disadvantaged children and young adults who are entitled to the regular childcare allowance if one of the following conditions exist:

- (a) at the time of claiming the regular child-raising allowance, the highest level of education is primary education regarding both parents raising the child together, the parent raising the child alone or the guardian.
- (b) at the time of claiming the regular childcare allowance, any parent raising the child or guardian is entitled to care for the active age under the Social Act (employment replacement allowance or regular social assistance) or registered as a job seeker for at least 12 months before claiming the regular childcare allowance.
- (c) the child lives in a segregated living environment or, according to a home study recorded during the procedure, in a semi-comfortable, substandard or emergency house, or living circumstances with limited conditions for healthy development.

Definition of the profoundly disadvantaged situation:

- (a) the child entitled to the regular childcare allowance and an adult child who has at least two of the circumstances set out in points (a) to (c) above,
- (b) a foster child,
- (c) a young adult in aftercare and with student status.



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