

THE INTEGRATION OF POST-INSTITUTIONALIZED YOUTH ON THE LABOUR MARKET - 15 YEARS' EXPERIENCE

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Summary

1. Type of experience: The experience that this article is referring to is the socio-professional integration of the youth who leave the child protection system.

2. Characteristics of the organization/of the activity presented: COTE Foundation – established in 1996, develops social and professional integration programmes and services for children and youth coming from the child protection system. COTE Foundation has a 15 years' experience in working with children and youth coming from the protection system, and has supported over 700 youth who have been offered services for social and professional integration.

3. New/positive aspects from this experience: The positive aspects highlighted by the experience described are: a holistic approach of the professional integration process, mentoring at the work place, dependence-independence dynamics, solving ethical dilemmas and the importance of learning through experience.

4. Potential questions: to what extent can the principles validated by this experience be successfully applied in the context of the integration on the labour market of other vulnerable groups?

Keywords: *experience, learning, mentoring, community*

1. Type of experience

After turning 18 and graduating a form of education, these youth leave the protection system and face the challenge of living an independent life, on their own. The social and professional integration

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signifies an immense challenge, not only for the youth, but also for the specialists that offer their support in this process.

2. Characteristics of the organization/of the activity presented

As part of the „Absolvent” project, during 1996-2011, COTE Foundation has supported, in the process of socio-professional integration, 165 youth from Iasi county, who had left the protection system. In „Absolvent”, the youth who leave the child protection system benefit from temporary accommodation in transition apartments and from appropriate counselling, developing life abilities programmes and support towards social and professional integration. The support period for the youth included in the project cannot exceed 10 months. In the first stage, COTE Foundation covers all the sustenance expenses (support, food, hygiene, transport) but also expenses of different nature (medical, allowing youth to stay in touch with their families etc.). This project has a dynamic evolution, which takes into account the legal, social and economic evolution and the real and actual situation of the youth who leave the foster homes. The intervention strategy and the offered services are being evaluated on a yearly basis. The youth are motivated to take responsibility of their own lives as soon as possible. They live and are supposed to manage the household by themselves. A social worker insures the supervision of independent habitation, provided in the intervention plan. The social worker visits them twice a week and supports them in the process of personal self-government consolidation and daily life abilities. A team comprised of case workers, a psychologist, and social worker insures the evaluation of needs and the elaboration and implementation of the life plans and a professional development plan, following the principles of case management and of supervision in social assistance. Besides the direct services offered to youth, there are also actions that lead to a greater involvement of all the social actors. Workshops and debates take place, on the topic of social

inclusion of the post-institutionalized youth, also actions for the sensitizing and involvement of the economic environment. In 2008-2009, 100 employers from Iasi were informed about the post-institutionalized youth potential and specific needs for professional integration, and about the legislative facilities available in this process of integration.

3. New/positive aspects from this experience

3.1. Holistic approach

The „Absolvent” project suggests a holistic approach of the socio-professional integration process of the youth that leave the protection system. The holistic approach has in mind, initially, a complex evaluation of the youth in the project, which includes the following domains of youth development:

- Education, vocational training and employment (basic abilities, professional abilities);
- Social support network (the relationship with family, friends);
- Identity (self-esteem, motivation);
- Emotions (emotional issues, anger management);
- Social abilities (self-presentation, assertive way of speaking, communication);
- Home-keeping and self-care abilities (physical aspect and body hygiene, home-keeping abilities);
- Finance (comprehending the financial problems, planning and managing personal budget);
- Health (current health state, concern towards health);
- Leisure (planning and spending leisure time).

Starting from this complex evaluation, the multi-disciplinary team creates and then implements an intervention plan which considers all these development domains. The youth's professional integration cannot be successful in the long run if all the enumerated development areas are not catered for. Frequently, losing a job can be determined by a dental infection left untreated, by the dishevelled aspect of the youth

or by the lack of creative ways of spending leisure time that should help bypass tensions accumulated at the workplace. One of the priorities is the development of social abilities, relation-making and solving interpersonal conflicts, and of the mechanism of managing their own emotions. Paradoxically, in many cases it's the youth that decides to quit the job, despite the fact that the employer desires to keep them in the company / firm. And frequently, this decision is determined by the frustration experienced by the youth as part of the relational conflicts and tension at the workplace. The intervention is holistic not only because it includes all the fundamental principles for the youth development, but also because it takes into account all the factors involved in the process and mobilizes a variety of resources. Thus, the actions of the multi-disciplinary team are not cut to the direct contact with the youth, but they are oriented towards the activation of any kind of resource that could be enhanced by: biological family, youth's friends, volunteers from the community, employer and co-workers, the host where the youth lives, etc.

3.2. Mentoring at the workplace

The involvement of the community members is a key factor in the integration of the youth from the protection system on the labour market. The integration in the work environment is usually the main reason of work abandonment. The most efficient way of supporting the post-institutionalized youths' integration on the labour market proved to be mentoring at the workplace. Through mentoring, the integration is faster, easier and more long-lasting. The case worker, together with the employer, aims to find, from the moment of the hiring, a person from the workplace that could, voluntarily, be a model for the youth. This mentor must show certain characteristics (being able to empathize, patient, talkative, with a certain authority in the community and to be willing to support the youth not only in understanding and assuming the specific job responsibilities, but also in the process of community integration process. The case worker trains the resource-person from

the community for the mentor role and keeps contact with them permanently.

3.3. Dependence versus independence

A trait of the youth that leaves the child protection system is an accentuated tendency to depend on social services. This characteristic is accompanied by the fear of taking responsibility in new contexts and by a low tolerance towards frustration. Because of this, the support offered to the youth can become a demotivating factor for them, when faced with the responsibility of assuming an independent life. Supporting the youth in making the step towards independence can have a boomerang effect and accentuate, eventually, the dependence state. On the other hand, the youth that has just left the protection institutions is usually not prepared for an independent life. Therefore, the youth needs support, but this very support can compromise the aim of the integration. Project „Absolvent” suggests solving this dilemma through a period of transition from the life depending on the social services offered by the state to an independent life in the community, period of transition where the support is:

- customized according to each youth's needs;
- conditioned by respecting the rules of the programme;
- limited;
- reduced progressively.

The support cannot be identical for all youth. The level of preparation for living an independent life is evaluated for all youth and starting from this evaluation, the team of specialists decide the type of support appropriate for each youth. This support has to be big enough to help the youth progress, but at the same time, small enough in order to not accentuate his dependence to the social services. Also, the programme has certain precise rules and responsibilities for each young beneficiary (participation to all project activities, keeping clean the apartment, respecting the apartment colleagues, making certain saving form the first salaries, the interdiction to have in apartment guests over night

etc.). Receiving the support is conditioned by the abidance by to these rules and responsibilities, of which the youth is informed before they enter the programme. The support is limited. The temporal limitation of the support is essential in preventing the accentuation of the dependence. At the beginning of the programme the youth is informed about the type of support they will be getting and for how long. These limits will be constantly reminded to the youth, and the specialists will strictly respect the deadlines. Failure to comply to these terms by the specialists usually represents a cause of failure of some socio-professional integration programmes. It is recommended that the entire support period not exceed 10-12 months. Also, the support is not interrupted abruptly, but is reduced progressively. The progressive reduction of the support prepares the youth ahead of time for the final of the programme. Also, this is a clear sign for them that the cease of the support will become reality. The message that the youth needs to receive constantly is: the organization that develops the integration programme is not the old institution that had to cover the basic needs, regardless of the type of their behaviour.

3.4. Ethical dilemmas

The consistency towards the conditionality, limitation and reduction of support principle is the main challenge for the specialists involved in such an integration process. The principle of giving a second chance is always brought into discussion. But how many second chances? And on what background can a second chance be given? In theory, things may seem simple and clear, but in practice, the ethical dilemmas of the specialists are real. After ceasing youth's financial support, they can soon get into the situation of being homeless and not having what to eat. They got into this position by repeatedly quitting jobs, but what will happen to them? His physical life can be in danger. „Absolvent” programme draws attention towards these ethical problems and suggests the following principles that can lead to realistic solutions:

- analysing carefully each and every situation and avoiding a simple, inflexible and linear solution.
- teamwork: the entire team is involved in analysing the situation.
- the allotment of roles in the team must take into account the different capacity of empathy of the team members. In „Absolvent” programme the following model is proved to be successful: the people that appeal the principle of a second chance to be more empathetic, and the person with role of decision should adopt a decision-making style based more on ration and less on feelings and emotions.

3.5. Learning through experience

The practical reality shows that during the professional integration process, a youth quits (or loses) at first 4-5 jobs, and then manages to remain employed for a longer period of time. Therefore, the specialists have realistic expectancies from the youth in this first phase. They take care that their realism does not generate low expectancies that become a prophecy which will self-fulfil in the youth's life. However, they are prepared in case the youth quits his first jobs easily and do not limit to ascertaining a failure, but are capable to transform these experiences in learning opportunities. Through these, the youth can learn how to keep their job. It appears that some youth need to experience several jobs before they can get used to the reality from the work field, to adapt to the requirements of a job and to develop defence mechanisms to be able to deal with stress specific to a job. Certainly, this learning process does not happen spontaneously. A youth can experience the loss of 10 jobs without gaining anything significant for themselves that would help keeping their place in the company / firm. The specialist is the one that helps the youth to turn the loss of a job into a learning opportunity.

4. Potential questions for future experiences

– The experience gained from the „Absolvent” project is valuable but also limited. It suggests certain potential answers to certain questions but it also raises new questions:

– What could one do for the preparation of institutionalized youth before the moment they leave the protection institutions?

– What new, innovative solutions can be found for the aforementioned ethical dilemmas?

– To what extent can the principles proven as efficient in the process of post-institutionalized youth integration on the labour market be translated successfully in the context of professional integration of other vulnerable groups?

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