

CHILDREN IN CARE: AN ANALYSIS OF FORMER RESIDENTS' EXPERIENCES FROM THEIR OUTLOOK AS ADULTS.

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Summary

The present research aims to analyse the current situation of a group of minors who lived at children's cares -in this case within the Region of Madrid- under official care within the period 1994-98, as well as discovering their own and their families' opinions regarding the experience.

1.- Purpose

This research seeks to help evaluate services offered at children's cares. The purpose is to provide valuable information about the Government and professional working in the field regarding the degree of social integration achieved by these children.

We believe that, in spite of the fact that several years have passed since the last former resident covered by this study left his care home and various population changes have been witnessed at the centres based on an influx of immigrants of many different origins, the results of this research study are still valid. Furthermore, we would welcome ongoing research in this respect so that we might be able to compare the results of this original research with those of a study into the population that came out of the centres between 1998 and 2003. The main objective would be to improve the services provided vis-à-vis this new group of residents.

In order to achieve the goals, former residents as well as their families' opinions, suggests and proposals have been gathered. In many cases, residents have been surprised when we have asked them for their participation and, they have even shown their gratitude for having someone who worries about the impressions they have about the already overcome residential experience. Overall, they seemed to be satisfied to collaborate from the beginning, sometimes within exceptional schedules and places. We have also received refusals and resistances.

2.- Modus Operandi

2.1.- *Population as a research purpose*

The population that is the subject of research consists of former residents that fulfilled the following requirements:

- They were under protection –under a guardianship¹ or tutelage regime²– at Children and Teenagers Attention Residential Centres of the Region of Madrid.
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¹ “When parents or guardians, due to serious circumstances, cannot look after the minor, they will be able to ask the public entity concerned to assume his guardianship as long as necessary” (Civil Code, art. 172,3). “Likewise, the public entity will do so when the Judge agrees so if the case legally warrants it” (Civil Code, art. 172,4). The guardianship entails for whom is in charge the obligation of looking after the minor, feeding him and giving him a complete education.

² “The public entity has as a main task the tutelage of those who are in need of shelter. As shelter is considered the one produced due to the failure to comply, the impossible or inappropriate exercise of the duties of protection established by law regarding the minors’ guardianship when these are deprived of the necessary moral or material assistance” (Civil Code, art. 172, 2).

- Their stay at a children’s cares spread over a continued period of two or more years.
- They were out at the age of sixteen or over.
- They left a vacancy within the protection system between 1994 and 1998, both years included.

This group shows having been at residences for a period of time long enough for the institutional intervention to have had a significant repercussion on them. The requirement of admission for at least two years have been taken into account for the selection, since this period of time is according to Jones (1987: 62), Knorth (1992), Schaffer (1993) and Sánchez Redondo (1996), the maximum advised period of time that a minor should remain within an institution. D.W. Winnicott (1988) describes how lengthy breakups generate distortions within the mutual perception of a child and his family, and subsequently, clashes in the process of reunification.

The fact of bearing in mind the age of sixteen or more for them to come out of the centre is due to the fact that they may have started being independent within the institution, since at this age they were capable to start a job and manage themselves in life in a relatively autonomous manner.

The time restriction between 1994 and 1998, both years included, is due to the fact that until 1994 there was no record-registering computerized system in the Minor Tutelage Commission’ file. The revision of non-computerized records would have made much more difficult the research. The time restriction when it comes to the year 1998 is because by the time the research was designed (September 2001) the year 1998 was the last one that could make possible the research about minors who had been a minimum of three years out of the institution and, therefore, who had had enough time to face life, making use of their own resources and not under the influence of the residential protection.

In order to carry out the research the number of minors, who met the due requirements and resigned during that period of time, was checked.

According to the computerized database of the Minor and Family Institute of Madrid from 1994 to 1998, 2515 minors who had previously been given tutelage or guardianship were resigned. Altogether, out of all these cases, 692 minors fulfilled the due requirements for this research and 350 minors were chosen, proportionally every year, as they appeared on the database. From all them, six were ruled out during the

verification of their records and, as a result, 344 remained as potential candidates for the research. Real information was collected from 130 minors out of the previous 344, on behalf of relatives, friends, teachers and some other professionals. Likewise, 49 former residents and 45 relatives were interviewed.

To sum up, the information acquired comes from 130 questionnaires that were answered by former residents and 94 interviews (49 to former residents and 45 to relatives). These people's residential experience starts when in 1979 the first one was admitted and finishes when the last one came out in 1998.

2.2.- Stages

The research disposes of two phases. During the first one candidates were chosen and their records were examined to obtain the intended information. During the second one the former residents were tracked down to know about their situation and carry out their personal and family interviews, when possible.

Several registering-data means were used during the first stage:

- Minor identity information.
- Registering and resigning date.
- Reason to register.
- Reason to resign.
- Institution from which the minor resigns.
- A reference of the home and social services the minor goes into after resigning.

An interview guideline was used during the second stage:

a) Towards former residents

An closed questionnaire:

- Full description of the minor's current situation: home, studies, job, economic situation.

An opened questionnaire:

- Examination of admission, stay and departure from the institution.
- Proposals of performance for teachers and suggests for current residents.

b) Towards relatives

This mean includes important questions related to the relative's impression in connection with the minor and it is similar to the previous one, with closed and opened questions:

- Information about the person interviewed and his relation with the minor.
- Information related to the current situation of the minor.
- Evaluation of admission, stay and departure from the institution.
- Suggests about teacher's and relatives' performance from relatives' point of view.

Tracking down the former residents has been very complicated. In most cases the information obtained from the records did not help much since the addresses did not

exist anymore. This is why a complementary task of tracking down was carried out by asking and requesting other people who could have some information about them.

3. Some conclusions

3.1.- Characteristics of the chosen former residents

Regarding the age, the higher percentage of admission is produced between 12 and 15 and the average of our research is between 12 and 14. The stay average length within the institution is 5.18 years. However, a percentage somewhat above half of them has remained within the institution over four 4 years. Regarding sex, it has been noticed that males register slightly more than females. Nevertheless, from 16 years old on, this tendency turns over, and females register more than males. (Graph 1)

The chosen former residents were between 20 and 34 years old on January 2004, and the average was 24.81.

Regarding the regime the minors had when they were admitted, we notice that the 82% was under tutelage and the 17.4% under guardianship. (Graph 2).

When it comes to a guardianship regime (Graph 3), among the most significant problems: family disputes (35%), lack of resources (16.7%) and the minor unrest (13.3%) stand out. There are some other problems related to the previous ones as well.

When we talk about a tutelage regime (Graph 4), the impossibility of performing parents' role (for different reasons) (35.5%), orphan situations, parents or guardian's disease, abandonment, parents' imprisonment and lack of resources are to be highlighted amongst the most significant ones. Parents addicted to drugs and parents ill-treating and battering are also considered causes.

3.2- Current situation

The information obtained is different, in terms of quality and quantity. Regarding some aspects there is detailed information and regarding some others there is not much.

In order to evaluate former residents' degree of social integration the following pieces of information have been regarded: the job situation, type of job and wage, type and regime of the current home, person or persons he lives with, the fact of having children, having been imprisoned and other situations the former residents are in.

When it has been possible, this information has been compared to the information corresponding to the general young population. In order to do so, we have used the reports *INJUVE* (the Youngsters Institute from the Ministry of Equality): *Juventud en Cifras 2000-2001* and *Informe Juventud en España 2004*, (INE, NSI in English, Censo de Población y Viviendas 2001-2004).

The former residents and the general young population are almost in the same situation when referring to the job aspect. Unstable jobs are to be highlighted, specially for women. (Graph 5)

When comparing these data, we can see differences among both groups regarding home and the people living together. The former residents live independently out of their family homes as well as in couples. They also have children in higher proportion than the general young population. (Graph 6-7)

Another known piece of information has to do with those former residents that have been or were imprisoned or outlawed during the research. Out of the 344 cases from the total, the 11.4%, 39 cases, have been imprisoned at some point after leaving the residence. It is to be emphasized that at least 22 cases, the 56.41%, these youngsters had two or more experiences of imprisonment. During the research only 15 of them were in prison, the 4.4%. Among these, 14 were male and 1 female. The information given in relation with imprisonment between both groups reveals that a higher percentage was found in the former residents, the 4.38% against the general young population 0.23%. Male groups are always superior to female ones.

3.3.- Interviewed former residents' opinions

This section gathers the opinions obtained directly from the former residents' interviews, carried out mainly through personal contact or by telephone.

The encounters were intended to be made ahead of time, in a quiet and trustworthy environment and our being aware of how difficult could result for some interviewed former residents the evocation of some of the matters posed.

The outline of the interview starts, firstly, by gathering easiest questions to answer, those related to the current social situation and, secondly, the evocation of the past, a more delicate matter and sometimes not very elaborate.

130 former residents were tracked down, out of this number only 57 were personally contacted and suggested to be interviewed. The reasons were various but we only had the chance to interview 49 of them all. These were between 21 and 33 years old but the group aged 26 was the majority. 30 of them were female and 19 male. Now, we will be presenting the most relevant aspects of their opinions.

3.3.1.- Admission evaluation

Generally speaking, the former residents stated that, at the time of admission, they did not know the reason why they were admitted in the institution. In many cases, they put the blame on their young age. Among those who knew the reasons of admission were those who were old enough to be aware of the situation or because their families told them. There is not a single case that affirms having been informed by the institution.

-“I did not know the reason. I only asked the teacher and the doorman about when I was going to go home. I did not see my parents for 2 months. Then, when they could they came. When the situation was regularized, I went out on the weekends”.

-“I knew my mother could not take care of me and that I had to go not to hinder”.

Another question they were asked was if they considered that something else could have been done. In this respect, the majority does not think that another option to the children's care could have been feasible.

-“I don't know. In this situation I find difficult that something else could have been done”.

However, an important group considers that they could have remained within the biological or the host family with different means of support such as economic, information, guidance and psychologic support towards the family as well as towards the minors themselves.

-“To help the family and to keep it together”.

In reference to the feelings experienced as a result of the admission, a great deal of them state that they felt bad due to them being separated from their family, to the fact that they could not be with their brothers-and-sisters, loneliness and lack of affection, the fear to the unknown as well as the difficulties of living together with many children, some of them with serious problems. Some remember the experience of the admission as particularly traumatic and for some others this is an experience that can be lived through with marginalization and (self)stigmatization feelings.

-“I felt very bad. Parents’ love is everything. I came in scared although they told me I was going to be fine”.

This discomfort is specially intense when brothers and sister are separated because they either go to different residences or they are taking in by different families.

-“Bad, because I was alone. My sister was three years older than me and was on another group. I couldn’t cope being without her. I fell sick (because I wasn’t with my sister). In the end they moved to me next to her”.

Those who affirm having felt well when they were admitted, talk about the relief of having come out of a troubled situation within his/her family. Others mention the welfare of having food, clothes and games.

-“Fine. Changing to a more quiet situation was like a release”.

3.3.2.- Stay evaluation

Most of the former residents consider their stay in the residence as positive. This evaluation has to do with the support and good treatment given by the teachers as well as for being next their brothers and sisters. It is also due to the education received.

-“Very positive. I was lucky concerning the flats I stayed in and the teachers I was with. They were 24 hours with us and their personal involvement was great”.

The positive evaluation also covers the living together environment in the residence and the professionals’ evaluation. Amongst the negative aspects, they find lack of autonomy, unrest among mates, loneliness and lack of personalized attention.

About living together, they consider very positive the good relationship with mates and teachers, as well as the good organization and the similarity between the residence environment and an ideal family environment. They also appreciate the existence of a structured environment with a clear guideline and customized spaces.

Those who consider that the environment was not good attribute this fact, specially, to the tension, fear of hostility among mates and problems with living together as a whole. In addition, they claim a lack of attention on behalf of teachers, a feeling of loneliness, as well as a discriminatory treatment. In general, they highly appreciate the relationship among mates and they stress certain positive aspects such as camaraderie, support and friendship, although they acknowledge the difficulties of living together with boys, often, with problems. When they point out negative aspects within the relationship, they highlight the living together with children of different ages and with different problems.

The high number of boys in the group, the tension that was generated and, sometimes, the aggressions were some others negative aspects.

They highly appreciate too the professionals' involvement, the affection received and the educational attention. Teachers with whom they have had a permanent bond over time are to be appreciated as well. The negative aspects have to do with the lack of attention and interest towards the job, as well as the telling-offs and punishments that are considered unfair. The lack of support, attention, comprehension, personal interest towards minors and demand on behalf of the professionals are negative likewise.

3.3.3.- Departure evaluation

Although slightly more than half of the former residents remained over 4 years in the residence, a great majority declared that they had a place to go to when they came out of the institution. They mainly went either to their parents' (father's or mother's in case of them being living separately), grandparent's, aunts and uncles' or other relatives' house. Only a low percentage were on under a public or private tutelage regime.

The majority states that they were helped to organize their lives by different means of support with a view to the future from the residence. Overall, this help was about a personal guidance to face an autonomous life, save up and manage money, look for a job and a flat, run a house or get scholarships for their studies. In other cases, in addition, they were supplied with resources for their autonomy, such as a job or a house. Some emphasize and appreciate that this support continued on behalf of the teachers they had ties with after they came out of the residence.

Nearly half of the interviewed former residents considered that the teachers prepared them to leave the residence the best way possible. Some point out that if nothing else could not be done was because of institution and social difficulties that exceeded teacher's possibilities.

A significant group considers that the departure's preparation could have been done best from the residence. Part of this group points out the need of having received resources to organize their lives in an autonomous manner, without having to rely on the family that was already needy. Among these resources we find economic subsidies and support to look for a job and a house. Others say that they did not have enough attention and support. In particular cases, they miss both types of support, material resources and psychological help to assume the past and be able to face the future.

There is an important group that states to have received no or not enough help from the Civil Service or any other private bodies when they left the minors protection system. This occurred either because they certainly did not received it or because the Civil Service or any private body had no option since the former residents left on their own because of their insatisfaction in the residence. They are specific about the lack of assistance when there was no information nor economic support for them and their families or about the lack of resources for their autonomy. They also point out the sensation of having been neglected when comparing the abundance of resources and the feeling of protection they had inside the residence and the shortages and lacks of preparation they had outside. Some states that the stay in the residence was just a

parenthesis to come up against the same family situation when coming out, but this time without any type of help.

In some cases, they asked for an economic or accommodation help they did not get, or they occasionally received help from their teachers or the staff to access a job. Most of them had to get along with their own resources, sometimes going through many difficulties. Only a small group received some economic help from the Civil Service or private associations and, in some other cases, they were granted a flat from IVIMA (Madrid Housing Institute) over time.

The task of the teachers represent one of the most important when dealing with this population. They are specially expected to be patient and affective, give support, have a listening and empathetic ability, as well as a positive implication towards the children. In order to achieve so, the teacher's preparation and professionalism are considered above all. It is thought that their task is to focus on the particular attention and support to the needs and situations of each child, so as to help them with their problems and guide and prepare them for the future.

Amongst the children priority needs, keeping the relationship with the families is to be emphasized.

3.4.-Family members' opinions

The family members interviewed in this research have not been previously selected, however, they have been chosen randomly during the former residents search process.

45 phone interviews have been driven to former residents' different family members or close friends, out of whom 21 are former residents' family members that have also been interviewed, and 24 are non-interviewed former residents' family members.

All these people are more or less directly involved in the processes of the former residents' admission. Their opinions let us consider the evaluation of the minor children's care from a different outlook. 16 interviews were made to parents (10 mothers and 6 fathers), 12 to grandparents (11 grandmothers and 1 grandfather), 11 to aunts and uncles (9 aunts and 2 uncles), 2 to brothers and sisters and 4 to other relatives or close friends.

3.4.1- Admission evaluation

A majority of the families consider that they were counted on since it was one of their members who had the initiative to apply the Civil Service for the admission. Therefore, they agree with the adopted measure because they thought that this would improve the minor situation although in some cases they would have rather taken a different path to the one offered to them. The rest believes that the Civil Service took them away without taking them into account during the foster care process and evaluation, although most also maintain that a different kind of alternatives could have been found.

More than half of the interviewed family members considers that different alternatives to the admission measure could have been found and that they could have gotten the children along. They could have done so either with the help of their own means, by

being personally guided/advised or with another type of resources. Amongst the alternatives proposed by the families, the minors staying with their biological or adoptive families, in some cases with some support, prevails.

Those who believe that another alternative was not possible consider that the family's problem or the minor's problem itself would have made difficult the right care.

When evaluating in the present whether the admission was a good measure or not, slightly more than half of the interviewed family members consider it certainly was because the children were more protected and controlled than they were with their own families. The group that considers that it was a negative measure and that it varies depending on the centre the child was in, also thinks that it was either unnecessary since the family could have taken care of the child, or clearly detrimental since the situation there was negative and so were the influences.

3.4.2- Stay evaluation

More than half of the interviewed family members' opinions regarding the former residents experience in the residence were positive. This evaluation has to do with aspects such as the education, affection as well as the care and physical attention materials received. Moreover, the control exerted on them, the worries about studying, and the sense of responsibility instilled into them are to be added.

However, a very important group reckons that the stay was negative or changeable because of reasons that have to do with not having found a job nor support after leaving the institution. Some other reasons are the fact of leaving worse than they were at the time they entered, not having received the care needed or the residence not fulfilling the families' expectations along with the absence of control and bad companies.

A great majority of the families that were interviewed stayed in touch with the former residents during their stay in the residences. This contact took place mainly when they went out over the weekends and on holidays to their homes and, in some cases, when the families visited them in the centre. Only a very small percentage of the families did not have any contact with the minors after the admission. In addition, this contact has been kept after their departures.

3.4.3- Departure evaluation

Both the family members and the former residents declare that they mainly came back home when they left the residence. These houses generally were their parents', father's or mothers' houses. In other cases, the grand-mothers and aunts were an important support at the time of their departure.

Most of the families did not feel having taken part in the departure process and, in general, they reckon not to have counted on the social services support when the former residents came back with them. Nevertheless, they believe that when we say that the former residents came out enough prepared we refer to aspects such as being able to get by more or less easily in a daily difficult situation, getting and keeping a job and, in some particular case, having achieved a basic level of studies to manage in life.

The families, specially, evaluate the professionals' qualities that have to do with attitudes related to the good treatment and interest that these professionals showed to them and the former residents.

The interviewed families suggest with special emphasis the teachers who are currently working in these residences to give the children affection, attention and support so that they trust them. They must be comprehensive as well as very patient. They also must exert control and put limits since they are children with a lot of problems. They must involve the families as in a teamwork and they also must take their opinions into account. They must guide and prepare them to study and get a job in the future. The families ask for more qualified teachers and, in some cases, they are grateful for the good job of the professionals they have dealt with.

They expect attitudes of comprehension, patience, interest and implication on the job on behalf of the professionals. The suggestions and proposals that the families would make to the teachers are basically about aspects related to both the human and professional qualities linked to their role as educators and the necessary collaboration between the residence and the family. On this respect, some of the answers are the following:

- Qualities related to the attention and affection: "They must give them all the affection they can because they need it", "they must pay significant attention to the children"...
- Qualities related to the comprehension and patience: "They must learn to treat these people. They have the right to learn from mistakes", "patience, be careful so that they do not escape, beware of them"...
- Qualities related to the guidance and educational references: "They must guide them to find a job, help them", they must teach them to be able to manage on their own. To treat them better"...
- Qualities related to the control and limits: "They must not grant them too much freedom, they must teach them a bit of discipline, and always with the right measure", "be careful with these children when they say they go to one place and they become corrupted", they must be responsible, they must be respectful with the children's way of being and they must be a little bit harsh"...
- Suggestions based on the collaboration with the family: "They have to look for support in the rest of the family. They do not have to count exclusively on the parents", "they have to study and differentiate the person and listen to the family", "they must count on the parents and not only on the children. They must work together with the parents. They must have a closer contact"...
- Suggestions based on the teachers' professionalism: "They behaved very well and they have to keep it up", " We have to congratulate them. Patience is necessary", "There is a need of more qualified teachers"...

3.5.- Bad and good practices on the intervention

Amongst these practices we have selected those that, from the interviewers' perception, have had a traumatic impact or that, on the contrary, have been recidivist in the minor and have remained in their mind over time. The described practices are not general and they have been selected so that the possible repercussions that dealing with children entails are taken into account.

3.5.1.- Bad identified practices

Here, there some practices that have negatively affected the minors' lives from their and their families' experiences. They are related to:

- The family division process
- Unstability due to centres or situations often changes
- Brothers and sisters division
- Lack of information about the situations changes
- Staffs' unstability
- Punishments in the institution
- Teachers' negative attitudes
- Lack of preparation or guidance when leaving the residence

3.5.2.-Good identified practices

In this section, we mention the conditions and procedures that have contributed for a best emotional and social integration, thanks to the obtained declarations. They are related to:

- Small groups and spaces
- Teachers' stability
- Teachers' availability and support
- Comprehension, affection and empathy towards the children and their families
- To respect and maintain the bond between the child and the family
- Control and time organization
- Demands on studying and on academic training
- Good preparation before leaving the institution and good guidance thereof afterwards

4. Final conclusion

This research stresses that the former residents that have been contacted, generally speaking, have a positive degree of social integration. Furthermore, both the youngsters interviewed and their families evaluate the stay process as a whole positively. Concerning the residence job, they point out aspects that have been particularly positive, aspects that have not been as positive and aspects that have been negative. Without having intended to exploit this matter, different paths for different researches on this matter have been given free way. The children's care institutions are considered, still now and in our Community, a quite important social resource in terms of disadvantaged children caregiving. Therefore, it is necessary to keep on searching and providing evaluations that allow us advance towards the most suitable high standards possible to the population we are working with.

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