Specific socio-educational dimensions of university students with an administrative protection measure

Dimensiones socioeducativas específicas del alumnado universitario con medida administrativa de protección

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Abstract

Youth living in protection system centers have specific social difficulties that negatively affect their process of school inclusion. The adolescents under the protection system present worse academic indicators than their peers. Prior research indicates that few of these young people attend university courses. The present study aimed to analyze which socio-educational dimensions affect the university trajectory of students from residential protection centers when they start their degrees. A qualitative investigation was organized in two phases according to the grounded theory. In phase one, 154 interviews were performed during four 36-month follow-ups. In phase two, 18 interviews were conducted to prepare six

life stories. Ten students participated in the research, seven females and three males. The participants studied at campuses that belong to Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña, and Vigo universities. The results indicate that the vulnerability of youth in care increases when they start the university. The coverage of the protection system disappears when the youngsters leave the residential protection centers. The absence of social and institutional support hinders the youths' integration process. Socio-educational deficits, related to the dimensions that favored achieving school goals, increase during university time. It is concluded that universities and the protection system must implement support mechanisms that favor these youths' academic trajectories. University corporate responsibility has yet to address the needs of vulnerable students due to social factors.

Keywords: universities, social exclusion, social inequality, educational strategies, inclusion, university students, foster care.

Resumen

La juventud que reside en centros del sistema de protección tiene dificultades sociales específicas que indicen negativamente en el proceso de inclusión escolar. La adolescencia tutelada presenta peores indicadores académicos que sus coetáneos. Las investigaciones previas indican que son excepcionales los casos en los que llegan a cursar estudios universitarios. El presente estudio se propuso analizar que dimensiones socioeducativas afectan al itinerario universitario del alumnado que, en el momento de inicio de los grados, proviene de centros residenciales de protección. Se diseñó una investigación cualitativa según el enfoque de la teoría fundamentada. En la fase uno, se realizaron 154 entrevistas durante cuatro seguimientos longitudinales de 36 meses de duración cada uno. En la fase dos, se realizaron 18 entrevistas para la elaboración de seis relatos de vida. Participaron 10 estudiantes, siete alumnas y tres alumnos. Las participantes estudiaron en campus pertenecientes a las universidades de Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña y Vigo. Los resultados indican que la situación de vulnerabilidad de la juventud tutelada se incrementa en el momento en el que acceden a la universidad. La cobertura del sistema de protección desaparece cuando abandonan los recursos residenciales. La ausencia de colchón social y de apoyo institucional condicionan el proceso de integración del colectivo. Durante la etapa universitaria se incrementan los déficits socioeducativos en las dimensiones que favorecieron la superación de las metas escolares. Se concluye que Universidades y sistema de protección deben implantar mecanismos de apoyo que favorezcan los itinerarios académicos de este colectivo. La responsabilidad corporativa universitaria tiene pendiente afrontar las necesidades del alumnado vulnerable por factor social.

Palabras clave: universidad, exclusión social, desigualdad social, estrategias educativas, igualdad de oportunidades, estudiante universitario, sistema de protección.

Introduction

The training students' trajectory conditions their possibilities of overcoming a situation of social exclusion during the transition to adulthood. Training adolescents in protection should be a priority in protective action. Students with an administrative guardianship record are practically invisible at school. In Spain, there are no official state statistics on the evolution of students living in residential centers (Montserrat & Casas, 2010), but the scientific literature indicates that they have specific social difficulties, which translate into a concerning situation of academic exclusion (Jariot et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020; Melendro et al., 2020; Montserrat & Casas, 2010). In the context of a lack of official information on this group's training trajectories, the statistics offered by the third sector entities accompanying this group are very valuable. In Galicia, the support program for the transition to adult life (Mentor) attends to young people who, having a protection file, need socio-educational support for their emancipation. The annual average number of active participants in the Mentor program between 2015 and 2020 was 539 (Table I). There was an average of 81.01% of young people without compulsory basic training (IGAXES, 2021) in the population attended to during this five-year period. This situation is genuinely concerning, considering that the program was accessed when the compulsory school age had already been exceeded (16 years).

Students who undergo a trajectory of formative exclusion suffer negative impacts that primarily affect groups in a situation of greater social vulnerability (Tabarini et al., 2018), whose consequences are prolonged

TABLE I. Participants in the Mentor program without compulsory basic studies

Year	Participants	Percentage without compulsory basic education
2015	513	81.48%
2016	534	81.7%
2017	519	80.40%
2018	545	80.47%
2019	560	82.37%
2020	566	79.64%

Source: IGAXES3 (2021). Compiled by the authors.

throughout the life pathway in dimensions such as subjective well-being (Montserrat et al., 2019). Knowledge of the conditions of students in protection is relevant to adapting the actions of the education system to the group's needs. Previous research shows how specific pedagogical actions of the school can affect the school integration of adolescents in protection. For example, the results indicate that the relationship between students and teachers has a particular impact when students come from a vulnerable social context (Wanders et al., 2020). Relational dynamics are a determining dimension in the school inclusion of adolescents in protection (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021). Adolescents in protection perceive the academic environment according to the behavioral repertoire they observe in the teaching staff. Along these lines, the students' perception of the social involvement of the teaching staff affects the improvement of their own social competence (Sincer et al., 2022). The above highlights the importance of pedagogical practices in school inclusion processes.

The vulnerable situation of students in protection during the school trajectory makes it difficult for them to pursue higher education. Various studies indicate that adolescents living in residential protection centers have fewer options to carry out post-compulsory training trajectories than their peers (Day et al., 2013; García-Molosa et al., 2021). The group's situation of academic exclusion is especially notable in their access to university (Jackson & Cameron, 2012), with exceptional cases in which they manage to pursue a university education (Miguelena et al., 2018), although they present worse academic evolution when they manage to access the university (Day et al., 2013). Students in protection suffer from the typical difficulties of social exclusion, which condition the expectations with which they plan their formation in their life trajectory. These are deficits of institutional support and the experiences undergone during the school trajectory, which affect their possibilities of access to higher education. Students in protection aspire to pursue post-compulsory studies just like their peers (Geiger et al., 2018), but the dimensions presented limit their possibilities of achieving it. Young people with protective measures know that obtaining a university degree is an exceptional opportunity to overcome social exclusion (Gairal-Casadó et al., 2021; Kirk et al., 2013).

The literature on the subject focuses on the school trajectories of childhood and adolescence in protection. The conditions under which

the few cases that successfully access the university should be studied. Information on the transition processes to university life is of great value for designing professional practices to support institutional policies. According to Johnson (2019), delving into the intervention processes with students who are studying at university and have a protection file is still pending. The present research studied the transition to university of young people from residential centers of the protection system. We set the following goal: to analyze which socio-educational dimensions impact the academic integration of students in protection when they begin university activity.

Method

Design

A qualitative investigation was designed following the grounded theory approach. The experience at university was analyzed as part of a holistic approach to life in a situation of social exclusion during the transition to adult life. We examined the significance of the experience undergone (Martínez, 1996) through the essential reflection of acts and practices. The investigation of the processes of school inclusion of young people in residential care requires analyses focused on subjective experience (García-Molosa et al., 2021). During the interviews, the participants identified the dimensions they perceived in their university experiences in a situation of social vulnerability. Phase one began in September 2012 with the first longitudinal follow-up. The follow-ups continued until September 2021. It should be noted that it was difficult to access the sample due to the small number of young people who started university studies with a previously opened protection file. Each follow-up lasted 36 months. A monthly interview was established, which was carried out both during the academic year and in the non-teaching periods between courses. The research team considered it appropriate to maintain the investigation active during the months without academic activity. The aim was to analyze the experiences as integral phenomena that are not paralyzed during non-school days. An initial and a final interview were conducted with all participants. A total of 170 interviews were conducted, 152 in phase one and 18 in phase two. The interviews of the second phase were

oriented to the configuration of life stories with which we intended to analyze the participating youths' consideration of their inclusion process in the university and their previous academic trajectory. In the stories, data were obtained on the aspects that affected their trajectory and those they observed during their stay in the protection system concerning the peers with whom they lived.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used according to our access to young people in protection who were starting university studies. The duration of the data collection process was conditioned by the sample's availability. All participating youths were 18 years of age or older and had had an open protection file for a minimum of 12 months. The sample in phase one had spent an average of 81.5 months as minors with protective measures, and in phase two, 59.8 months. The mean age of the participants in the longitudinal follow-ups was 18.5 years, and 20 years in the life histories.

Data analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Constant comparative analyses of the transcripts were performed by repeating the readings to generate patterns and codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In the first phase, the categories were eventually identified considering the results of the previous literature on the subject. Monserrat et al. (2011) presented a study, framed in the European project "Young people from a public care background: Pathways to education in Europe" (YIPPEE), in which the academic evolution of young people in care in Catalonia was analyzed. The results indicated that the following dimensions facilitate the educational trajectory: the prioritization of school during foster care, participation in decision-making about their training trajectory, stability in both residential and educational centers, the presence of adult role models involved in the school issue, and the possibility of participating in leisure activities that take place outside the protection resources with peers who are not in residential care. The identification of key coding

categories allowed the analysis of the data to be carried out within the framework of the research objectives. The categories are not limited to what has been presented in the previous literature but are open enough to accommodate emerging data not contemplated in prior research. The process promoted the consideration of all the units of meaning of the data through constant comparison and theoretical sampling, concluding the analysis with evidence of theoretical saturation (San Martín, 2014). The final analytical codes for this phase were validated by two experts foreign to the research team and with the approval of the participants in the longitudinal follow-ups. A final interview was conducted in which the young women validated the categories. The results of this phase were the basis on which the scripts for the Phase 2 interviews were constructed. The new data allowed us to take up the substantive coding again, showing that no new dimensions were obtained and confirming the theoretical saturation (Monge, 2015).

Results

The results indicate that the academic trajectory was a priority during the protective action. "The educators kept an eye on how I was doing in high school and helped me whenever I had a problem" (RV3), says one participant. "In my case, they always encouraged me and insisted that the first thing was to get through high school; the educators insisted that I could not quit. It was very difficult to pass second grade" (RV5), argued one young man. The academic environment shares prominence with other necessities of life with social difficulties when leaving the protection center to access the university. Getting a job during non-school periods becomes a priority to have the financial resources to continue studying. "I have to get a job in the summer. I need the money to make sure I can continue with my career" (SL2), says one participant. "Those of us who don't have anyone to help must fend for ourselves. We can't afford to get distracted and run out of income. We have to work no matter what, and reconcile work and studies" (RV2), argues a young man.

During the protection trajectory, they have stable professional referents. "Carmen was always there ever since I arrived at the family home, and she was the one who supported me in everything" (RV3), argues one participant, referring to an educator. "At the center, they were always very attentive

to me, but when you leave, things change, and you must face life alone"
(SL3), says a young woman. The reduced presence of professional figures
as the students progress through the university stage was generalized in the
trajectories we analyzed. "When I entered the faculty, I realized that I was
all alone" (RV2), says one participant. Another university student says that
"I often felt like I had no one I could call, and that is very hard" (RV6). "The
educators do their job well and support you in any way they can... They
cared a lot about me, but I'm not with them anymore. They have to take care
of the kids they're with…. I talk with them on the phone once in a while,
but I know that their work with me is over" (SL4), argues one participant.

Residential stability is another frequent factor in the sample (see Table
II). "I've always been in the same center" (RV5), says a young man. "Since
they took me away from home, I've only been in two centers, although
the first one was only for a few weeks. I can say that I was actually
in one center until I left to come to the university (RV3), explains one
participant. The university stage unfolds with housing uncertainty. Pub-
lic university residences are designed for students with family support
who go home during non-teaching periods. Young people without fam-
ily referents need to improvise solutions for these weeks in which they
are not allowed to stay in the residences. "I have come to the residence
because it is free, but the problem is at Christmas, Easter, and August.

TABLE II. Sampling and timing

Phase	Code	Age	Gender	Campus	Timing			
					Beginning		Ending	
					Month	Year	Month	Year
1	SL1	19	Female	Ourense	09	2012	09	2015
	SL2	18	Female	Pontevedra	07	2013	07	2016
	SL3	18	Female	A Coruña	06	2015	06	2018
	SL4	19	Female	Ourense	09	2018	09	2021
2	RV1	21	Male	Santiago	10	2021	01	2022
	RV2	19	Female	Lugo	11	2021	12	2022
	RV3	20	Female	Ourense	12	2021	01	2022
	RV4	22	Female	Ourense	01	2022	02	2022
	RV5	19	Male	Ourense	01	2022	02	2022
	RV6	19	Male	Santiago	01	2022	02	2022

In those weeks when it closes, I have to make a living" (SL1), says a young woman. Another participant, who lives in a shared flat, says that "there are months when you feel very bad about paying the expenses" (RV4). Leaving the protection center is conditioned by the uncertainty of not having economic resources for daily life. "When you leave, you have to take care of all the expenses, and you don't know if you will have the money" (SL4), says a young man. "One of the differences you notice when you leave is the need to pay all the expenses. When you're in the center, you don't worry about that. You start to get overwhelmed when you leave" (RV5), says one participant. "I have to figure out how I'm going to make ends meet. These things don't bother my university classmates" (SL3), argues one participant, highlighting the difference in the situation of students who have social support.

Referenciado pro académico "It helped me a lot to meet girls who played soccer with me. I spent many hours with them, and that motivated me to study... I saw that they were studying, and I wanted to be like them, but none of them were from the center" (SL2), argues a young woman. Participation in community activities is valued as positive for engagement in school dynamics. The results indicate that the participants

TABLE III. Comparison of dimensions with an impact on the training trajectory between the residential stage in protection and the university stage

Academic trajectory in residential care	Frequencies	Academic trajectory at the university	Frequencies
Presence of stable professional referents	8	Leading professional figures significantly reduce their presence	6
Prioritizing the academic in daily activity	8	Compatibility of academic activity with work	7
Permanence in the same residential resource	9	Housing uncertainty conditioned by economic difficulties	8
Coverage of daily living expenses by protection resources	10	Lack of financial support to cover the expenses of daily living	9
Friendships without a record in the protection system who act as reinforcers of schooling	9	Deficits in social support with a lack of referents to turn to in case of personal problems	7
Participation in activities with peers in community contexts	6	Does not participate in community activities organized by the university	7

Source: Compiled by the authors.

in the research do not attend community activities organized by the university. Arguments were collected indicating that the conditions of a vulnerable social life force them to prioritize issues such as work. "Between studying and working, you have little time left to get involved in other activities. The little free time you have left you want to dedicate simply to partying and disconnecting" (RV6), says a young man. "I think some of the activities they do on campus are good, but I don't have the time and I don't feel comfortable. I once went to one that was free. I don't even consider the paid ones... I have a lot of expenses, and the little I have left for leisure I want to spend on other things" (SL3), says one participant. The social support network is not reinforced during the university stage. "I have a good relationship with my classmates, but it's not very intense. We get along well, but I don't consider them close friends. We have different life problems" (SL4), says a young woman. "People our age don't have as many problems as we girls who come from centers..., I have other things to worry about" (SL1), argues one participant. The participants highlight the difference between the protection stage and the university stage in terms of having a safe space from which to deal with personal problems. "You could talk to the educators when you needed to. At university, you interact with your classmates, but it's superficial, and you really feel lonely" (RV3), says a young woman.

Discussion and conclusions

Students who access the university from a residential protection center tackle the transition process with personal uncertainty and a lack of support. The beginning of the academic year is a leap into the void in which they combine academic challenges with those of a life with social difficulties. The protection system does not facilitate a process of gradual adaptability. In the cases analyzed, the break with the support of residential resources is abrupt. Young people in protection do not control all the dimensions that affect the transition process, so they do not have the autonomy to manage their time (De-Juanas et al., 2020b). Their limited control over the time dimension negatively impacts the academic trajectory (Hollingworth & Jackson, 2016). The bureaucratic organization of residential resources does not contemplate mechanisms to provide support by educational teams to be regulated according to students' adaptability to university life. Students in protection have deficits in their

knowledge of academic dynamics and their abilities to perform autono-
mously at university (Gairal-Casadó et al., 2021). The results indicated
that the beginning of the school year was experienced with high stress,
not only due to the changes derived from the new formative stage, but
primarily due to the difficulties inherent in the situation of social exclu-
sion, which have a negative impact on their inclusion in post-compulsory
studies (Randolph & Thompson, 2017).

The sample participating in the research experienced the beginning
of the university stage with skepticism. Their previous life experiences
are marked by suspicion of some administrative actions and distrust of
their relationships from their personal context (De-Juanas et al., 2020a).
The data indicated that they observed the unfamiliar academic dynamics
with some trepidation in their first contact with their classroom group.
They did not establish a referral relationship with the teaching staff of
the first year. In specific cases, their attendance at tutorials was recorded,
where they received individualized attention, an aspect that stood out
positively in the face of classroom heterogeneity (Martínez et al., 2019).
The contents of the tutorials are limited to curricular issues, and the topics
discussed do not include issues related to the social and personal dimen-
sions. Students from residential centers are accustomed to having profes-
sional figures who compensate for the referential deficits of their natural
context. The university tutorial action did not cover this dimension.

University students who have left the protection system need profes-
sional socio-educational support (Geiger et al., 2018; Watt et al., 2019),
especially during the first months of life outside residential resources
(Ruff & Harrison, 2020). The results indicated that the sample intended
to maintain the relationship with an educational figure who had accom-
panied them during their previous trajectory (Gairal-Casadó et al., 2021).
In all cases, the support of the social educators of the protection centers
was punctual. The students excuse the educators' lack of availability,
acknowledging that they have to take care of the new residents. The
search for this support is due to the absence of reference figures in
this new stage. The transition process takes place without the necessary
resources for emancipation (Fernández-Simo et al., 2021). The results
indicated that access to university was planned considering the circum-
stances of precarious support. Therefore, it is not that the difficulties
experienced during the process resulted from professional malpractice
but that the absence of support mechanisms forced the transitions to be
made in a context of social vulnerability.

Participants in the study had some opportunities—albeit limited—for community relationships during their stay in residential care. The educational teams had considered the community dimension as an educational resource (Trull-Oliva et al., 2022). In this group, the relational network is usually comprised of peers who are familiar with the protection system and have difficulties establishing new networks (Díaz-Esterri et al., 2021). This is not the case for our sample, which related to contemporaries outside the residential resources, a dimension that favors engagement in school activity (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). During the process of transition to university, the relational network was weakened, and difficulties were observed in establishing new links with other university students. Good relational dynamics were observed with the classroom group, but no deep relationships were established. Professional support should be established to configure security scenarios on which to rely to create new relational dynamics. Socio-educational action can improve the possibilities of adolescents in protection to develop support networks and links with personal referents (De-Juanas et al., 2022), which are not only decisive during the academic trajectory but also in the success of the post-university life trajectory (Salazar & Schelbe, 2021).

Students in protection do not have the financial support to cover daily living expenses during their post-compulsory studies (Gairal-Casadó et al., 2021; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). This situation forces them to reconcile academic activity with work. We detected some cases in which they not only had to meet their own expenses but also had to help their biological family, immersed in a situation of social vulnerability (Rodríguez et al., 2016). Difficulties in accessing and maintaining a stable housing option were observed during the studies (Salazar et al., 2016). University residences do not have options adapted to the needs of students without family support. They appreciate that the residences are free but they are not allowed to stay in them during the non-teaching periods.

The results indicate a deficit of specific support for university students from residential protection centers. The precariousness of the resources available during the previous formative stages (García-Molosa et al., 2021) increases in the University, when the accompaniment of the child and adolescent care system is abolished. The entire Spanish university system programs should be generalized with a social perspective that promotes socio-educational accompaniment for the inclusion

of students in protection, such as the program for University Academic Success Arrakasta or Ikaslagun, carried out between the University of the Basque Country and the Basque Provincial Councils (Miguelena et al., 2020), which attempts to create the necessary conditions for this group to successfully complete their university studies. It would be essential for the program targeting university students in protection to have the resources and economic means to compensate for the shortcomings presented (Geiger et al., 2018). University corporate responsibility has yet to address the needs of students who are vulnerable due to social factors. The protection system and universities have yet to establish collaboration mechanisms that favor the performance of academic trajectories. Training is the main factor that will enable students in protection to break the chain of social exclusion.

Acknowledgments

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