The importance of the protagonism of children and young people in Residential Care: A case study portuguese

João Pedro Gaspar[1], Rachel Baptista[2], José António Coelho[3] and Maria Helena Zamora[4]

ABSTRACT

The PAJE Platform – Support for (Ex)sheltered Youth – Association carried out a project supported by Eurochild that involved eight Residential Shelters for children and young people at risk, in the Central region of Portugal, with the aim of giving a voice to users of the Residential Care system in Portugal, placing them in the place of social protagonism. A case study research was carried out where one hundred people between twelve and twenty-two years old, institutionalized during a period of one to ten years, were interviewed. The data were collected through residents' assemblies, without the presence of technicians or educators from the Shelters, and analyzed based on the content analysis methodology. The results revealed the importance of the reconstruction of plots, the rescue of identity and new possibilities of personal narratives of boys and girls. It is concluded that it is necessary to continue this type of work so that new public policies can be subsidized and rethink the way of serving this public.

Keywords: Residential care, Children and young people, Risk, Protagonism.

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[1] Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Coimbra
[2] Judicial Expertise Service of the Court of Justice of Rio de Janeiro (SEJUD/TJRJ)
[3] Support Platform for (Ex) Sheltered Youth (PAJE)
[4] Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ)

INTRODUCTION

Children and young people in foster care or removed from their biological family, knowing another family reality or even residential care, have often been exposed to situations of neglect, abuse and separation - which can lead to trauma, with lasting effects on their mental health. This finding may refer to the disruptive situations present in the lives of individuals, who had to go through experiences of judicial intervention and consequent parental separation. These components can be predictors of negative emotions and feelings that, according to the literature, should be treated with interventions at various levels (Burgin et al. 2022).

In this context, aggravated by the still recent pandemic situation, where social isolation was necessary, children and adolescents inserted in the protection system may develop or facilitate the outbreak of mental disorders (Chodura et al 2021; Whitt-Woosley et al., 2022; Bussières et al. 2021); In this sense, the consequences of staying in violative environments can have a persistent impact on physical and mental well-being throughout life (Naylor et al. 2019).

In this context, trauma presents itself differently for each person, and may even vary according to the stage of development. This form of reaction of the body is characterized as an experience in which one is not ready to react appropriately to a specific event, or to the repetition of uncomfortable situations, affecting the emotional balance of the individual and can lead to changes in brain circuits and networks (Hoppen & Morina, 2019) causing dysfunctions at different levels of life (APA, DSM-5, 2022; WHO, ICD-11, 2019).

Exposure to adverse experiences in childhood and youth can have negative consequences in biopsychosocial terms throughout life, leading to difficulty in regulating affects, as well as obstacles in interpersonal relationships and feelings of self-blame (Larkin, Shields & Anda, 2012; APA, DSM-5, 2022). The different forms of neglect suffered in foster care situations can cause what is called complex trauma: a type of disturbance that is installed through chronic exposure to disruptive situations, which can lead to extensive illness with different associated comorbidities (Ross et al 2020).

In this sense, one of the ways to deal with the issue is to assert the rights acquired constitutionally through active listening to these boys and girls so that they can be given a voice, empowered them, brought them to a truly welcoming environment, validated their demands, active participation in the decisions of their lives and enable them to be properly referred and treated by specialized professionals.

In this way, the voice of children and young people in foster care becomes increasingly relevant in a world where empathy, respect and solidarity are fundamental. In this line of thought, there is a need to assess the capacity of reception technicians to know how to listen and be present in the various situations of daily life so that they can be the agents of mediation of the needs and desires

of this public. Thus, listening to children, institutionalized or not, is a subject of great relevance and is a challenging and really necessary task (Guimarães, 2015; Bouma et al, 2018).

In this way, the *"From Voice to Action"* project, through the PAJE Platform – Support to (Ex)sheltered Youth – developed a project supported by Eurochild, which involved eight Residential Care Homes for children and young people at risk, in the Central region of Portugal, with the aim of ascertaining whether the System for the Promotion and Protection of Children and Young People in Danger (SPCJP), it gives them the possibility to have a voice in their daily experiences (at home and at school) and if their opinions/wishes are taken into account in the various decisions taken by the political and governing bodies of the various Shelters.

In this study, we used the qualitative methodology of the case study with field visits, interviews and participatory observation. The instruments used in data collection were based on listening to the young people, after they were asked to participate, in a group, in a discussion/debate on issues related to the Reception system, the functioning of the Institutions where they live, not neglecting issues related to the School and the feelings and emotions that emerge from living in a residential context. The discussions/debates were spread over three sessions held in the Shelters of three districts of the Central zone, in which one hundred young people aged between twelve and twenty-two years participated. The project culminated with two final meetings, held in a pavilion in Coimbra, where children, young people and caregivers of the participating Houses met to carry out dynamics.

The data were collected, in an informal environment, in residents' assemblies, without the presence of technicians or educators from the Houses, where reflection on the aforementioned themes was promoted. For data collection, recording and subsequent transcription by the following professionals were used: social worker and psychologist and professor with a PhD in educational psychology. The study was authorized by all the directors of the Shelters and by Eurochild. The data were analyzed using the Content Analysis methodology (Bardin, 2012). "In choosing this methodology, we took into account that the starting point is the message, but the contextual conditions of its producers must be considered and it is based on the critical and dynamic conception of language" (Puglisi; Franco, 2005, p. 13). Not only the semantics of the language must be considered, but also the interpretation of the meaning that an individual attributes to the messages.

After the conclusion of the project, a Final Report was made with the compilation of the contents discussed in the Assemblies and, in some way, also in the final Meetings (Encounters), which was later delivered to Eurochild, as well as to those responsible for the Shelters and other *players* in this matter. The final results were delivered by Eurochild to two European Commissioners, to support legislative changes regarding the hearing of children and young people at risk.

It is therefore important to investigate the existence of more inclusive schools, addressing the importance of equity, empathy and awareness of teachers and other members of the educational community to the theme of welcoming, sometimes so unknown and even neglected, in moments of school interaction (Delgado & Gersão, 2018).

In this line of thought, it is imperative to provide the School with mechanisms that enable it to diagnose and raise awareness of childhood traumas (Spalletta et al. 2020), being fully aware of the meaning of "being in foster care". Martin and Jackson (2002) reflect on the importance of good communication between caregivers and the school, making it an essential element. According to these authors, the educational community should also be informed about the functioning of the host institution. Pecora *et al*. (2006, cited by Franz & Branica, 2013) adds the importance of alerting and guiding teachers and schools to the problems that these children and young people present, providing the students and their caregivers with detailed information about the new educational possibilities.

Addressing the reality of the Shelters and the School, the management of emotions could not be neglected. Proper management and recognition of emotions has positive consequences on interpersonal relationships, with repercussions, among others, on the improvement of quality of life.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

There are currently more than six thousand children in foster care in Portugal (CASA 2021 Report), having been mostly removed from their biological families, peers and communities and are left with conditioned access to a life that was familiar to them, with a series of unanswered questions and unhidden hopes for the future. A child's integration into the foster care system is usually associated with trauma, psychological distress, and feelings of isolation and loneliness. These children may doubt their abilities and feel inferior to their peers who come from more stable family environments and have not been exposed to a significant disruption of their home reality.

The negative impact on the self-esteem of children in foster care (Nsabimana et al., 2019) can implement the development of loss of self-confidence and guilt, generating mental illness, which can lead to the development of different conduct disorders (Mohamed et al., 2022) and mental disorders, such as generalized anxiety and depression (Pop-Jordanova, 2019) children between the ages of 6 and 12 begin to seek the approval of others by obtaining specific competencies that are valued by society (Koller et al. 2019; Lerner, 2018) and these are the main target of this research.

The tutelary intervention of promotion and protection, expressed in the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger [(LPCJP)(of Porto 2020)], is developed in relation to cases in which there is a threat to the essential rights (civil, social, economic and cultural) of the child or young person up to the age of 18 who, therefore, is in a situation of danger to their safety, health, training, education or development, thus requiring the action of the State.

In this context, social and judicial systems must respond to the identified danger by initiating actions that provide the appropriate conditions for the promotion of the rights and protection of victims of any form of exploitation or abuse, abandonment or negligent treatment, or when they are deprived of a family environment that guarantees their well-being and integral development (Guerra, 2004; Bolieiro and Guerra, 2009)

A CASE STUDY...

The From Voice to Action project took place in three sessions held in eight Shelters in three districts of Central Portugal, culminating with two final meetings, held in a pavilion in Coimbra, where children, young people and caregivers of the participating Houses came together.

1st Session: *Discussion on the functioning of the System for the Promotion and Protection of Children and Young People in Danger (e.g., the reception/withdrawal process; involvement of the child/young person about the reasons for their removal; the intervention at the time of arrival at the Shelter; the relationship between the Shelter and the family...).*

It is important to mention that most of the children/young people knew the reason for the reception, however, some did not know why they were being welcomed and there were even those who said that, even telling them, it did not make sense to them.

> "Yes. I thought coming here was my fault, but then they explained to me that it wasn't."

The permanence in foster care is another aspect that needs to be demystified, because, with some regularity, children and young people are informed that this situation is merely punctual and short-lived, when, in most cases, they remain for many months/years.

> "I was told I was going to stay for 3 months and I stayed much longer."

With regard to the operation of the Shelter, most of the young people said they liked certain things to change, so that they felt truly at home, for example, the rules regarding the use of the mobile phone, there were no collective punishments, the rules were adapted to the age of each young person.

> "On Fridays we go to bed at midnight and have to hand over our mobile phone at 9:30 pm, the same happens on Saturdays, where they can go to bed at 1:00 am.
> "What happens is that sometimes they're watching a show on TV and we all have to be watching, even if we don't like it, because we don't have our phone to watch our own shows."
> "I don't think there should be collective punishment – everyone paying for one."

- There are several different opinions about the perception they have of the Shelter, the rules and its human resources.

✔ *"Some people who work here have changed, I feel that some don't understand me, they are insensitive."*

✔ *"What makes it not feel like a house is not so much the rules, but the way we are treated, the affective atmosphere of the house."*

✔ *"They say that here there are no rules for everyone, there are rules for everyone, equally."*

✔ *"The regime here in the House makes some of our colleagues decide to flee."*

✔ *"We should be able to forget that we are in a CA, we should feel like we were at home."*

✔ *"Everything that is put on the plate has to be eaten. If it' s not, it's for the next meal."*

✔ *"We feel it's very easy to have a penalty here. Every day there is someone who gets penalized."*

✔ *"They mess with our things without permission, they mess with our room, they don't respect individuality and privacy. They put our things in the trash without consulting us, or they take our things to their office."*

✔ "Many have said that sometimes living here feels like living in a hospital or a prison."

✔ "They treat everyone equally, but each one is unique."

Another point focused on was the lack of sensitivity on the part of the caregivers who, despite being available, do not establish the fundamental relationship of empathy.

✔ *"They don't know how to wake us up in conditions. Today it was 7:30 a.m. when they woke us up and said "in a minute you have to get up, otherwise you will be penalized".*

✔ *"The way we are treated, with more respect and understanding that we are people. I feel like they need to trust us more."*

Staying in the Shelter presupposes an adaptation to a new reality, with the learning of new skills, which will confer a potential for growth until now focused on a process of autonomy. Although it is not shared by all young people in all the Houses, the general agree that it would be important to have positive discrimination after they leave.

✔ *"I know what I want to do and I know I have the skills to do it, but the technicians don't believe it and try to change my mind."*

✔ *"I think we needed more autonomy and for that you need more trust and respect."*

The day of arrival at the Shelter will remain forever in their minds...

✔ *"Sometimes I remember a lot the day I arrived, it was remarkable. But there was no cake, nothing that would actually signal my arrival. They just introduced me to people."*

✔ *"It was raining. I ordered ice cream and they gave me ice cream. I cried because I was so happy."*

✔ *"Our family is our home. Separating from the family is a very difficult thing. For me, being with my mother is unforgettable, even though bad things happen, I love it, she is in my heart."*

In general, a large proportion of young people consider it important for policy-makers to be aware of what is happening in ACs. However, some young people in some Houses do not think so.

✔ *"I think adults know what we need."*

✔ *"It's our life, they should listen to us, but it's up to the adults to decide."*

✔ *"The Court will let me go home and the Shelter will not."*

In general, the young people reported that when they entered the House, they were explained all the way it works (rules, schedules, etc.).

"Everything that is put on the plate has to be eaten. If it's not, it's for the next meal."
"If they explained it, they explained it badly."

Several young people believe that more could have been done to prevent them from coming to the House.

"Sometimes I feel like there are too many people building my life project for me."
"Sometimes the life project doesn't always add up."

For a long time, institutional care saw the school dimension as a neglected issue, perhaps because it was thought that these children and young people could not succeed in school (Berridge, 2012). However, Brodie (2009, cited by Berridge, 2012) through the various studies carried out indicate that there is currently a greater awareness of the need to prioritize educational experiences in children and young people in foster care.

2nd Session: *Discussion around issues reported at school.*

We intend to create more inclusive schools, involving them in the theme of the Assembly (i.e., school approach, the importance of equity and empathy, awareness of teachers and the rest of the school community on the theme of welcoming, among others), with the presence and/or participation of two or three teachers.)

While some (ex)fostered young people consider school or college to be a safe haven, for others it can be more of a place of reluctance, where they struggle to be understood and respected. In these circumstances, it is important to build schools that are more aware of childhood trauma and schools that understand what it means to be in foster care, in order to provide a welcoming environment for all and allow them to fully develop their abilities.

In this session, some young people reported feeling that they were treated differently (either positively or negatively) by classmates or teachers, because they lived in a Foster Home.

Both the young people and the teachers present consider that it is important that those who work in the school have knowledge about the consequences of adverse experiences in childhood and the implication that this may or may not have on a young person's behavior. They also believe that school teachers, assistants and technicians should know and be prepared for what it means to live in foster care (Delgado & Baptista, 2020).

Some young people reported that, because they were sheltered, they sometimes had to miss classes to go to the CPCJ, or to the Court, or to an appointment, and that the teachers stigmatized them, considering their absences as a consequence of their experience in foster care and possible "maladjusted behavior".

The conversations with the young people allowed them to reflect on their opinions on this subject, concluding that they are heterogeneous and some diametrically opposed.

As an example, there were those who valued the school and perceived it as a support for their integral development.

"It's a key to life."
"School for me is a refuge, a learning experience."
"School for me is like a second home."
"The school as a whole is welcoming."

Within the school, the role of teachers is unique, sometimes overlapping with that of colleagues, perhaps because they need an adult figure of reference.

✓ *"The teachers understand the difficulties I feel for living in the Shelter."*

✓ *"I like the people, they are welcoming, especially the adults, they are always helping (my class director for example). I also enjoy my class and studying."*

✓ *"I think it's only my class principal who understands what it's like to grow up outside of the family. I consider my Class Director like family."*

Many of these young people sometimes feel negatively discriminated against compared to their peers.

✓ *"There was a teacher who said to me, 'It's a good thing to be in the foster home!'"*

✓ *"My classmates stare at the van when I get to school... I'm embarrassed to be here and that the van has those things written on it."*

✓ *"I don't like it when they take me to school, the van is marked and full of boys and girls. Although no one makes fun of it, I don't like it!"*

✓ *"Sometimes they make fun of me, but in jest. I don't take it the wrong way."*

✔ *"The more they judge, the worse the person does. There are people who don't understand, they think this is a house of correction, they ask me right away what I did to come here."*

✔ *"There's a guy there who, when he found out I lived here, is always making jokes about family and parents."*

✔ *"I feel like I'm treated differently and even with some contempt."*

✔ *"I don't like it when they say I live in an institution. I live in a House, this is a normal House."*

Listening to these young people allowed us to identify situations of feeling of school inclusion.

✔ *"There are no poor people at school, they are all the same."*

✔ *"I think it's important for them to know. It can help them understand situations and not judge right away."*

✔ *"I feel like everyone treats me equally."*

Not all young people see school as a support for their lives, reporting discriminatory experiences of their condition.

✔ *"School is a terrible place, I don't like school."*

✔ *"I don't like the school, I don't like the people there. I don't like anything."*

✔ *"One time I couldn't hand over a signed paper that the teacher had asked me to bring and she told me 'it's not my fault if you don't have parents, now get out of trouble.'"*

✔ *"At a certain point in my life I started cutting off my arms. And at some point I decided to stop hiding my arms... One day, in a class, the teacher said that whoever did this was to get attention. And all my colleagues stared at me. I felt humiliated."*

✔ *"I was in 3rd grade or 4th. I didn't want to be taking classes and I slept the whole class. The teacher didn't like it and wanted to send me away. I got very nervous and started to put everything down, throwing the notebooks and material (mine and my colleagues') on the floor. I felt a lot of shame because I didn't want it to happen in front of everyone and I really didn't want to hurt anyone with my behavior."*

We have heard reports of young people who are able to differentiate the human mass from the school, from the institution itself.

✔ *"I don't like the school, but I like the people there better."*

✔ *"I trust the teachers, the adults, but some colleagues don't. We trust adults because they are very affectionate and really care about us."*

✔ *"Over time, I realized that I couldn't tell everything to young people my age, unlike adults."*

Positive discrimination at school due to the reception situation was also felt.

✔ *"Between the school and the institution, I prefer the school, there is more to do. I signed up for all the support so I could stay late at school."*

✔ *"Everyone in my class knows that I live in a CA, because the teachers talk about it in front of everyone."*

✔ *"It's not treating me differently, but since they know I'm here, they're careful how they talk. For example, instead of saying 'my father, my mother', they say 'my guardian'."*

✔ *"I have a colleague who one day told me that she was jealous of me, because she felt that I was very loved here. This colleague is in a situation where she can't afford it at home, and she has a lot of problems (financial, relationship...)."*

3rd session: *Discussion around the theme "Emotion Management".*

Considering childhood and adolescence a period where vulnerability prevails, some factors may increase situations of risk and danger, such as: anxiety, family breakdown, violence, mistreatment, abandonment, among others (Sapienza & Pedromônico, 2005).

The issue of rapid and expressive learning is inherent to children and young people. This learning also involves the acquisition and development of emotions, which are essential for their development (Souza, Ferreira & Souza, 2021). Emotions are part of the growth of the human being, following the evolution of children. Otherwise, human development would be chaotic "and the learning of children and adolescents would be an indescribable drama, emotions would take over cognitive functions and human beings would only know how to act in an impulsive, excitable, euphoric, episodic and unplanned way" (Fonseca, 2016).

Proper management and recognition of emotions has positive consequences on interpersonal relationships, with repercussions, among others, on the improvement of quality of life. The past of the children and young people in foster care and ex-foster care is, for the most part, full of adverse situations, and these children/young people are early victims of situations of neglect, domestic violence and abuse, which serves as a lever (age, resilience and the approach of the technicians in the foster home can, in themselves, be risk or protective factors) to a maladjusted and emotionally suffering life.

Emotions, being personal, can be transmissible and living in a Foster Home, it becomes more difficult to share what you feel inside the walls, which are not always welcoming (Dobbertin et al. 2024; Fernández-García et al. 2023)tag. In addition, the separation trauma experienced by these children and young people can be a major driver of various difficulties in their lives (Ismayilova et al. 2023). Thus, it has proved to be extremely important to create dynamics that help young people

recognize emotions and identify them in themselves and others (Mérida-López et al. 2024; Israelachvili et al. 2019; Lionetti et al. 2015), in order to provide a present and future where they could have happier and more meaningful life experiences.

Through dynamics adapted to the age groups in question and taking advantage of the relationship that the interactions in previous sessions allowed, we were able to release expressions and verbalize thoughts, such as:

FEELING OF LOSS

"Losing people costs a lot, but then you get used to it and become desensitized."
"All of us who have been welcomed know well the meaning of loss."

Loneliness

"We can't count on anyone, it's every man for himself."
"I read, I listen to music, I try to remember good things or even jokes, to laugh at myself."
"We can feel it in the AC as well as in the family."
"I don't have anyone in the world... I feel it often. I was born and I'm going to die alone."

Longing

"Nostalgia never goes away."
"I miss my colleagues, even the smells of the place where I lived with my family."
"I miss my mom... of my family."

Anger

"I feel more angry about being in the Shelter."
"I often feel angry – I bang my head against the wall."
"When people think they know what I feel, but they don't know anything."
"To get through, I scream, I go to my cell phone, I get hit badly with people."

Revolt

"A lot at the beginning of the reception... Now it doesn't make sense anymore. I used "my inner weapons and I feel more emotionally grown."
"I walk away to my room."

Frustration

"When I'm frustrated, I'm angry, I hit, I throw my slippers and I swear."
"In those moments I get angry, but then I calm down."
"Since I don't expect much anymore... I don't feel frustrated."
"I keep it to myself."
"I don't feel frustrated anymore about being in a foster home."

Sadness

"Inside (at the AC) it's almost always."
"It's frequent, very frequent."
"When I'm sad, I turn to my friends at C.A."
"When I'm sad, I cry, I listen to music, I count to 100, I exhale hard."

Shame

"I feel it, from some colleagues here at the C.A."
"I'm more ashamed here than in my family."
"So much being alone and listening to music. I need it... I don't want anyone to tell me to calm down."
"I'm going to Nature."

Anxiety

"I feel anxious at night."
"I cry and then it's over."
"I fall asleep to get rid of the anxiety."
"I feel it before a test..."
"I feel it and often! It starts with a very strong grip on the heart."
"My nails show my anxiety."

Fear

"Fear of some colleagues in the house."
"I'm scared when Bea hits me."
"When I'm scared, I ask the adults at the AC for help."
"What sparked the fear were the nightmares."

Euphoria

"When I get good grades."
"When I win something I really want."

Joy

"When I'm with my friends."
"When I visit my family."

Kindness

"Be kind to others."
"Don't upset others."

Affection

"There is affection here at the Shelter."
"There could be more... but there is."

"Vivi doesn't like to give or receive hugs."
"We can't count on anyone, it's every man for himself."

Love

"Love kills."
"Here at home, we need more love."
"There's more love out there."
"There's more love here than my house."

MEETINGS WITH THE VARIOUS PARTICIPATING SHELTERS

The project was crowned with a final Mega Meeting, divided into two moments, where about 50 children and young people could be present in each one, with the presence of professionals from the Shelters involved. Various dynamics were provided, workshops of music, aesthetics, sports, painting, good music, good food and moments of reflection. There were sharing in small groups and in the large group, where the young people were able to expose their certainties, fears and anxieties, but above all, the hope that tomorrow will be a better day.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The main objective of the From Voice To Action Project was to listen to the views of those who are experts in this area – the boys and girls living in residential care. After the conclusion of the project, a Final Report was made with the compilation of the contents discussed in the Assemblies and, in some way, also in the final Meetings (Encounters), which was later delivered to Eurochild, as well as to those responsible for the Shelters and other *players* in this matter. We hope that this document can bring about changes in the eight participating Host Houses. Through the implementation and/or affirmation of youth assemblies as a constant practice, so that in a collaborative spirit children and their caregivers can better understand each other, as well as their motivations. Also for the conclusions that are delivered to those responsible for each House involved in the project, so that this reflection on aspects to be improved in the Promotion and Protection System, but also in each residential structure, can lead to a better service provided.

It is intended that the voices of the participating children and young people – one hundred – can influence changes in the policies and practices of the Reception System in Portugal.

Together, we will contribute to the quality of Reception in Portugal, through the suggestions, proposals and recommendations of young people in reception.

In a foster care setting, the official stories of these children cannot always be accurately narrated, and there are many discontinuities in their life stories. Thus, the listening provided by the institution's professionals could even be a useful tool in the sense of filling these biographical gaps, seeking in the active listening of the child an opportunity to reconstruct plots, promoting an identity

rescue and, from this, opening possibilities for the writing of new narratives, including about the reception period. Empathy, evoking the humanistic assumptions that underlie the concept of active listening, should allow this experience, but preserving the ability of the listener to return to his or her role, being able to reflect on these different positions and the feelings experienced in each one.

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