

RESILIENCE OF GIFTED ADOLESCENTS. SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

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Abstract

Institutionalization is one difficult moment in anybody's life. This study has identified the protective factors manifested by gifted resilient adolescents after being institutionalized. The two-stage research was conducted in Iași (between November 2015 – June 2016) and had a quantitative component (based on questionnaire analysis) and a qualitative component (based on interview analyses).

The resilience of adolescents is the result of three types of factors: internal characteristics, family-related characteristics and social environment characteristics. This study has identified the following external protective factors: a supportive family, a school environment providing information according to the capacities and interests of the gifted adolescents and a residential environment providing opportunities for self-exploration and continuous development. Another important external factor is the group of friends, a source of affection, sympathy and moral guidance, a proper space to experiment and to gain autonomy and independence from parents.

The internal protective factors identified are: a good self-image, awareness of one's individual abilities and their valorisation, motivation, a high degree of emotional development, the ability to be aware and express their own emotions, as well as a high level of self-efficacy. All these factors were identified in adolescents that achieved high scores on the resilience scale.

In addition to internal and external factors, an important aspect is the perception of adolescents about these factors. The way adolescents relate to similar situations is different, so the consequences of the same event differ greatly from one adolescent to another.

Keywords: adolescents, resilience, giftedness, educational environment, institutionalization

Résumé

L'institutionnalisation est un moment difficile dans la vie de quiconque. Cette étude a identifié les facteurs de protection manifestés par les adolescents doués et résilients après leur placement en établissement. La recherche en deux étapes a été menée à Iași (entre novembre 2015 et juin 2016) et comportait une composante quantitative (basée sur l'analyse du questionnaire) et une composante qualitative (sur des analyses par entretien).

La résilience des adolescents est le résultat de trois types de facteurs: les caractéristiques internes, les caractéristiques liées à la famille et les caractéristiques de l'environnement social. Cette étude a identifié les facteurs de protection externes suivants: une famille solidaire, un environnement scolaire fournissant des informations en fonction des capacités et des intérêts des adolescents surdoués et un environnement résidentiel offrant des possibilités d'exploration de soi et de développement continu. Un autre facteur externe important est

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le groupe d'amis, source d'affection, de sympathie et d'orientation morale, un espace propice à l'expérimentation, à l'autonomie et à l'indépendance des parents.

Les facteurs de protection internes identifiés sont: une bonne image de soi, la conscience de ses capacités individuelles et de leur valorisation, la motivation, un degré élevé de développement affectif, la capacité à être conscient et à exprimer ses propres émotions, ainsi qu'un haut niveau de soi -efficacité. Tous ces facteurs ont été identifiés chez les adolescents ayant obtenu des scores élevés sur l'échelle de résilience.

Mots-clés: adolescents, résilience, dons, environnement éducatif, institutionnalisation

Rezumat

Instituționalizarea reprezintă un moment critic în viața oricărei persoane. Studiul urmărește identificarea factorilor protectivi pe care îi manifestă adolescenții înalt abilitați rezilienți din mediul rezidențial.

În vederea atingerii acestui scop, cercetarea este de tip mixt și cuprinde o etapă evaluativă și una exploratorie. Studiul a fost realizat în Iași, în perioada noiembrie 2015 - iunie 2016.

Reziliența de care adolescenții dau dovadă este rezultatul caracteristicilor interne, caracteristicilor familiei și caracteristicilor mediului social. Factorii protectivi externi identificați prin prezentul studiu fac referire la mediul familial suportiv, mediul școlar care să ofere informații adaptate capacităților și intereselor adolescenților înalt abilitați și mediul rezidențial care, de asemenea, să ofere adolescenților oportunități de auto-explorare și dezvoltare continuă. Un alt factor protectiv extern este grupul de prieteni, care reprezintă o sursă de afecțiune, înțelegere și îndrumare morală, un loc potrivit pentru experimentare și pentru dobândirea autonomiei și a independenței față de părinți. Factorii protectivi interni identificați au în vedere o bună imagine de sine, conștientizarea abilităților individuale și valorificarea acestora, motivația, un grad ridicat de dezvoltare emoțională, capacitatea de conștientizare și exprimare a propriilor emoții, precum și un nivel ridicat de auto-eficacitate. Toți acești factori au fost identificați la adolescenții care au obținut scoruri ridicate la scala rezilienței. Pe lângă factorii de tip intern și extern, un aspect important este percepția adolescenților cu privire la acești factori. Modul în care adolescenții se raportează la situații asemănătoare este diferit, astfel încât consecințele aceluiași eveniment diferă foarte mult de la un adolescent la altul.

Cuvinte cheie: adolescenți, reziliență, înalt abilitare, mediu educațional, instituționalizare

1. Introduction

Giftedness is a complex phenomenon, which can be approached and defined from multiple perspectives. The definitions proposed for the notion of “giftedness” are numerous and diverse, and have evolved from the “premise of considering the IQ as defining parameter” (Stratilescu 2000, 24) to the notion that “the gifted is an individual with a level of intelligence far above the average, with notable cognitive differences both on a quantitative, and on a qualitative level, with a higher level of maturity in terms of information

processing (visual perception and memory), with an early development of the metacognitive ability (around the age of 6), skilfulness in problem solving, creative ability, intrinsic motivation for learning.” (Benito 2003; Crețu 1998; Marinca 2009; Roco 2004)

The concept of resilience can also be approached and evaluated from various perspectives (Berndt 2014; Ionescu 2013; Suniya and Cicchetti 2000). In this paper, resilience will be considered a process of development with the foundation laid in childhood, which continues for the rest of somebody’s life.

The aim of this study is to identify the protective factors manifested by the resilient high-ability institutionalized adolescents. Their institutionalization represents a traumatic event which drives them to adopt various strategies for adapting to their new situation.

In order to achieve this purpose, I have conducted a mixed-type research, consisting of a quantitative and a qualitative stage. The central thesis of my approach was that “by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods one can reach a better understanding of the research problems under investigation compared to the result of either approach taken separately” (Creswell and Clark *apud* Băban 2002, 20).

2. Distinctive Features of the Development of Gifted Adolescents

Although it is a relatively new discipline, the psychopedagogy of intellectually gifted individuals has registered various definitions of its research subject. The conceptualization of giftedness raises multiple difficulties because we are talking about a complex reality with multiple aspects.

The theoretical model this research is based on is the one proposed by Erika Landau, the interactive model of excellence. From this perspective, above-average giftedness is defined as “a system of correlative influences between the inner world of the child and their environment” (*apud* Crețu 1997, 45). The key elements of this model are, on the one hand, emotional development, intellectual development, individual abilities, and, on the other hand, self-image, environment and motivation. Accordingly, the environment challenges and amplifies the intelligence, creativity and specific talents. The interaction between the self of the gifted child and the external stimuli generates “the courage to take a chance” and the motivation to get involved and persevere.

Regarding the stage of development, I have chosen adolescence because it represents the change from childhood to maturity, an age that involves

various physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. In this stage an individual gains autonomy and builds their self-image, two essential processes for the eventual evolution of a person (Gherasim 2013; Papalia 2010; Șoitu 2004).

The analysis of the manner in which highly competent people go through adolescence, build their identity, interact with members of their family and with their group of friends represents a central point in understanding the phenomenon of giftedness.

Several psychosocial needs of adolescents to which the gifted teenagers respond in unique ways have been identified by Buescher (*apud* Stratilescu 1997, 239) as follows:

- the property of high-ability: the pressure exercised by peers, as well as the conformism, can lead to the negation of their own giftedness. The phenomenon is more prevalent in girls, stemming from the desire to be accepted by the others;

- dissonance: the tendency toward exaggerated expectations appears as a typical continuation of the image from childhood, the gifted person being often much more critical with themselves as compared to the criticism received from outside;

- risk taking: the gifted are much more aware of the repercussions of risky behaviour, manifesting the tendency to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of some activities, choosing the ones that involve a certain state of conflict when they try to satisfy someone else's expectations as opposed to their own. They feel some difficulty in answering to their parents, siblings, friends, relatives, teachers, and consider themselves affected by the "push" from others and "pull" toward their own expectations, which results in low tolerance to ambiguity and stress;

- identity: the tendency to acquire prematurely a sense of identity is obvious in gifted adolescents. As a result of this premature formation of identity, opportunities to develop to full potential are shut down and the ulterior stages of development in adolescence will be covered with considerable stress (Stratilescu 2000, 71-72). We must take into consideration the fact that, in the case of gifted adolescents, the need for friends, for close schoolmates, is strongly associated with a strong motivation for success, and the two needs might often come into conflict with each other.

It is therefore essential to consider the development of gifted adolescents from the perspective of their relationships with their family and group of friends. The sense of identity offered by the group at this age is at the same time unique and essential in the process of socialization, because it offers

the teenager feelings of stability and solidarity. The psychosocial development of gifted adolescents presupposes the development of an identity in relation, first of all, to their own abilities, values, desires and expectations, but also to the family group they originate from and the group of friends with whom they socialize. The high-ability teenagers can present several extra psychosocial needs, such as the property of being gifted, dissonance or risk taking.

3. Resilience and Protective Factors

The scientific literature treats resilience both as a process, and as a product. As a process, the definitions proposed for this concept are numerous: Masten refers to resilience as “successfully adapting in spite of risks and adversities” (*apud* Turliuc 2014, 192), Rutter defines it as “resistance to experiences which present a high psychosocial risk” (*apud* Turliuc 2014, 192), and Richardson brings forward “the processes of coping with adversity, which contribute to the development and enrichment of protective factors” (*apud* Turliuc 2014, 192). Understood as a dynamic process, resilience implies the fact that “people are not resilient all the time or in any situation, but also the fact that some people can be resilient when they answer to some stressors and less resilient when confronting other stressors” (Cicchetti *apud* Turliuc 2014, 191).

Understood as a product or feature, resilience concerns a person’s ability to regain the level of adjustment preceding the stressing experience, or reaching a higher level after a majorly stressful episode.

As anticipated in Introduction, in this paper I have considered resilience to be a process of development with the foundation laid in childhood, which continues for the rest of somebody’s life, while the person identifies and takes advantage of new inner and outer resources when confronting risk, uncertainty, adversity and stress. In other words, resilience represents „the interaction between the person and their specific history of growth, the complex environment in which they develop and the characteristic stressors” (Hrișuleac and Ceobanu 2015, 22; Șoitu 2015, 8-14). Therefore, resilience will not only be considered as a property, an essential characteristic or a set of personality features. Aside from the personality traits, the environment factors also play an essential role in the formation of psychological resistance.

Therefore, the internal protective factors I have considered are the following ones: self-image, emotional intelligence, coping style, cognitive

flexibility, optimism, self-efficacy and perceived control. The external protective factors I have referred to are the family climate, school environment and residential-institutional environment – an essential element in the development of gifted adolescents.

4. The Research

The research consists, first of all, of an evaluative part, accomplished by using several personality tests: the test measuring the degree of development of emotional intelligence, the test “How efficient are you as a person” – self-efficacy scale, as well as the test “How well do you face traumatic life events” – resilience scale (Janda 2012). This first part involves the objective evaluation of the aspects related to emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and resilience. I consider these tests useful because they measure several psychological factors manifested in the case of gifted adolescents.

The second part of the study is exploratory, and it is necessary because the only information offered by tests is quantitative, whereas my intention is to explore in depth the issue of gifted adolescents.

The purpose is to identify the protective factors which manifest themselves in the case of resilient high-ability institutionalized adolescents. Therefore, the study follows an in depth analysis of the feelings and experience of every teenager.

Considering the purpose of the paper, the specific questions to which my research has tried to find answers are the following ones:

1. What are the characteristics of gifted teenagers who show resilience?
2. What is their perception of the identified protective factors?

The participants have been selected using the following mixt criteria: falling under the category “gifted”, coming from a family who live in precarious conditions, beneficiary of the Centre of Excellence, aged between 15 and 18. Accordingly, I have interviewed 9 gifted teenagers, 6 girls and 3 boys, between the ages of 15 and 18, who are beneficiaries of the Residential Centre of Excellence for high-ability children coming from a rural area.

The investigation took place between November 2015 and June 2016 and comprises the theoretical inquiry stage, as well as the data collecting stage. The data collection has been carried out between May and June 2016, in Iasi.

In the first stage of data collection I applied standardized tests and then I interviewed the adolescents. Filling in the forms was done collectively, by

all the adolescents in the same time frame. The interviews were taken individually, but not before preparing the participants.

The resulting data were analysed with the thematic method. Data analysis was facilitated by the following themes: Internal Characteristics (with the sub-themes Motivation, Self-Image, Individual Abilities) and External Characteristics (with the sub-themes Family Environment, School Environment, Residential Environment).

5. Results

One of the important protective factors identified is the family environment. In spite of the fact that leaving home and becoming institutionalized represent risk factors, family support is still an important constituent of resilience. A close, sincere, based on trust and help relationship with the members of the family facilitates the teenagers' acceptance of the challenges they have to face. If the family members are themselves in a state of conflict, the adolescents feel unsure of themselves and present a low level of self-efficacy and resilience.

Another protective factor is represented by the group of friends. An essential aspect is the teenagers' perception of their relationships with other people, the way in which they position themselves with regard to their group of friends. If for some adolescents the schoolmates and fellow residents of the Centre constitute the group of friends, for other teenagers they represent a source of difficult situations. The group of friends represents an essential protective factor for gifted adolescents. Therefore, the lack of friends associates itself with a low level of resilience.

The school and residential environments are two further factors which play an important role in building adolescent resilience. The behaviour of teachers, educators and peers is the one factor which contributes to the harmonious development of teenagers, according to the abilities, capacities or talents they exhibit. Living in the residential environment can be seen both as a risk factor for the adolescents' evolution, and as a protective factor with an essential contribution to the development of otherwise unused abilities and capacities.

As a consequence of the fact that they are beneficiaries of the Centre of Excellence, adolescents have acquired a certain degree of independence which they wouldn't have developed otherwise. The close relationship and care manifested by their educator has contributed to them reaching good results, both in school and on a personal level. The core factor of these

young people's evolution is given by going to schools with well-prepared teachers, who are focused on the success of their pupils, but also by the attention granted by the personnel of the Centre to every single teenager, in order to discover and exercise the abilities and talents they have and may put to use.

Aside from studying the external factors, I have also considered as appropriate the study of the personal characteristics of every adolescent, in order to better observe the interaction between the external and internal environments specific to every young person.

Adolescence presupposes the stage of identity formation. The answers given by adolescents suggest, in agreement with Erikson's remark (*apud* Papalia 2010, 390), that having an identity presupposes "solving several large problems, among which choosing one's profession and adopting one's reference values". Depending on the age of the adolescent, the problem of picking an occupation is more or less acute. While the preoccupation for choosing a field of work is obvious for 18 year olds who finish high school and need to pick a college, for 15 year olds this issue is less widespread.

The principles and values young people embrace are also in the process of being assembled. One can note again a discrepancy between the situation of 17-18 year olds and that of 15-16 year olds. 18 year old teenagers have a rather clear notion of the principles they will follow in life, while 15 year old people don't have yet a distinctive set of reference values.

The motivation of young people is given by the thought of a better future. The difficulties they encounter, starting with their arrival in the Centre and ending with their current problems, are overcome by their projections of a favourable future, of a success directly proportional with their work investment.

In terms of the adaptive strategies employed, most adolescents have the capacity to build long-term purposes and elaborate plans to achieve them. Another strategy is to minimise the importance of problematic situations. Difficult situations are regarded as common, solvable, surmountable situations. Negative events are evaluated realistically and positively, and regarded as temporary instead of being generalised. Teenagers also use the strategy of positive re-evaluation of painful events, having the capacity to rework them into acceptable events, consistent with their own point of view.

Self-efficacy materializes in the way adolescents refer to the results of their work and represents an important factor in the development of their self-image. If the accomplishments are regarded as the result of their work, their self-efficacy will be high and will have an essential contribution to the

development of resilience. Resilience is directly proportional with self-efficacy: the higher the degree of resilience, the higher the degree of self-efficacy.

Young people who have obtained a high score on the scale of self-efficacy have an internal locus of control, are self-motivated, control the context, manifest responsibility, do not conform unwittingly, resist to external pressures, ascribe failure (for instance) to “insufficient work”, and motivate themselves after a breakdown.

The perception of control also plays an important role in teenage resilience, so that even if young people go through failures, they don't fall apart. On the contrary, they see the good side of the situation they are in and are motivated to make even more effort to reach their purpose.

In the case of the emotional intelligence test, the capacity to be aware of personal emotions, to observe a situation from an affective angle and to give adequate and balanced answers to unusual, critical or stressful situations was noted for all teenagers who completed the test. One dimension present in 6 of the 9 adolescents was self-control – the ability to work out a plan to overcome obstacles, frustrations, and the capacity to follow a purpose. Another dimension was related to one's own, intrinsic motivation and to the high degree of optimism which helps adolescents move over obstacles, continue, persevere without blaming themselves or becoming demoralized. A final dimension was related to empathy and social skills and required the involvement of shy people in novel situations, progressively drawing them in interpersonal relations.

These were the dimensions of emotional intelligence manifested in 6 of the 9 interviewed young people, as seen in the way they chose the best answers in the proposed scenarios. Teenagers with high scores in the emotional intelligence test have shown that they could analyse their own emotional problems and could discover the best strategies to face them. They have also shown a healthy sense of humour, self-control, and a much more controlled expression of aggressiveness or fear than the participants with minimal scores and difficulties in expressing their own emotions or the relations with other people.

In the end, the scores obtained on the scale of resilience have coincided with the results obtained from interviews. The teenagers who had shown a positive attitude toward difficult past events, who had expressed hope for a better future through their own effort, have also obtained high scores on the scale of resilience.

An important variable in the current research is the age of the participants. Consequently, although the age difference between the interviewed teenagers was only three years, between a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 18 years of age, one could note a major discrepancy in the development of the young people. If some 15 year olds had encountered major difficulties in describing themselves or fixing long term goals, the 18 year olds took into account various possibilities for their future, projected long-term goals and considered ways to reach those goals. Self-image becomes better outlined as one ages, and awareness of one's abilities and capacities becomes more obvious.

Another variable taken into account was the time interval since they have been beneficiaries of the Centre. Although initially it seemed that the longer they had been institutionalized, the higher their resilience, I didn't find a direct connection between these two aspects. The adolescent who got the highest score on the scale of resilience had been institutionalised for 7 years, and the adolescent who got the lowest score on the same scale had been institutionalised for 6 years. Also, the teenager who had been a beneficiary of the Centre for 11 years obtained a 70 percentile score, not entirely different from two other adolescents who had lived in the Centre for one month, respectively one year, and scored at the 50th percentile.

In conclusion, although the external environment has an important role in the teenagers' expression of resilience, the internal environment of every young person is the defining factor in the way they relate to traumatic events.

6. Limits and Benefits of the Research

The present research has several methodological limits. The main difficulty was earning the trust of the participants, in order for them to answer every question with sincerity. A part of the adolescents did not manifest willingness to talk to me and participate in my inquiry. Although, scientifically speaking, the research subject has not been explored very often, the adolescents have manifested explicit resistance to inquiry because of mass-media representatives who had interviewed them multiple times "only looking for sensational elements from their experience, as opposed to reality itself". For this reason, it is not certain that their answers were honest or contextual.

While the flexibility of my research was not absolute, during the semi-structured interviews I have allowed the conversation to take any course as long as it followed the general purpose of the study, and the analysis has

followed the concepts and themes resulting from the investigation of the interview transcripts.

The benefit of the research consists in the novelty of my theme. The association of the concepts “resilience” and “giftedness” constitutes a new research path which should be expanded. By better understanding the perspective of gifted adolescents on life and the ideal way to overcome difficulties, they can be supported more efficiently to fully develop their potential.

7. Conclusions

The phenomenon of giftedness is a complex one, presenting multiple perspectives. The present study started with the goal of identifying the protective factors active in the resilient gifted institutionalised adolescents.

According to the interactive theory of excellence, giftedness represents the correlative influences between the inner world of the child and their environment. At the same time, resilience results from the inner characteristics of young people and the characteristics of the social environment where they grow. Accordingly, gifted adolescents who have shown resilience after institutionalisation had a high level of social support, provided by their families, friends, teachers, but also by Centre caretakers.

The external protective factors identified refer to a supportive family environment, with caring parents who communicate effectively; a school environment which offers information adapted to the capacities and interests of gifted teenagers; a residential environment which, in turn, offers the adolescents opportunities for self-exploring and continuous development; and a group of friends, representing a source of affection, compassion, understanding and moral guidance, an adequate space for experimenting and acquiring autonomy and independence from parents.

The internal protective factors identified include a good self-image, awareness and valorisation of individual abilities, motivation, a high degree of emotional development (which presupposes relational abilities and the capacity to be acquainted with, and able to express one’s own emotions), as well as a high level of self-efficacy and the internal perception of control. All these factors have been identified in adolescents who got high scores on the resilience scale.

The adolescents’ perception of these factors differs from one person to another. While the teenager with above-average resilience considers that their institutionalisation has influenced positively their evolution and has

granted them major opportunities to grow and know themselves, the teenager with a lower score on the resilience scale considers that the Centre of Excellence has had a negative influence, affecting their social and relational abilities. Another aspect in which the two categories differ is the pressure they sense to obtain better results in school. In the first case, the pressure exercised by the personnel of the Centre is perceived as beneficial, while in the second case it is seen as suffocating and inhibiting.

As a conclusion, aside from the internal and external factors themselves, an important aspect is given by the adolescents' perception of these factors. The manner in which teenagers relate to similar situations may be entirely different, so that the consequences of the same event may differ very much from one teenager to another.

In consequence, I consider that, in the future, it would be necessary to pay more attention to this complex of problems. Gifted adolescents possess special talents and capacities, but they cannot live up to their potential in the absence of an environment adequate to their needs and interests. Therefore, I would appreciate as highly beneficial the development of a large number of programs specialised in the formal and non-formal education of teenagers, offering them multiple opportunities to evolve and capitalize on their talents and abilities.

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