

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE, LIFE SKILLS AND SELF-ESTEEM OF YOUTH LEAVING THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

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Abstract

The youth who leave the child protection system face multiple challenges, some of them due to insufficiently developed life skills, as well as some psychological peculiarities related to them. The particular context in which they grew up leaves its mark on the confidence they have in a good future. The present study aims to explore to what extent the future expectations of these young people are positive or negative, as well as the relationship of these expectations with the level of development of their life skills, with the young people's perception of self-efficacy, as well as with the level of their self-esteem, being used for the first time on the Romanian population, the Casey Life Skills Assessment scale, short form. The research had an exploratory, quantitative design, and involved the application of an online questionnaire to a number of 92 young people, aged 18-26, who benefit from a special child protection measure in Romania. The results of the study show that the optimistic perception of the future of young people who are about to leave the child protection system correlates positively with an increased level of self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy, as well as with the self-estimated level of development of life skills.

In conclusion, the preparation for independent life of the young people raised in the child protection system requires attention both for the formation of life skills and for the development of self-esteem and problem-solving skills, so that they can look with hope to their own future.

Keywords: young people, child protection system, life skills, self-efficacy, self-esteem, expectations from the future

Résumé

Les jeunes qui quittent le système de protection de l'enfance font face à de multiples défis, dont certains sont dus à des compétences de vie insuffisamment développées, ainsi qu'à certaines particularités psychologiques qui leur sont liées. Le contexte particulier dans lequel ils ont grandi marque de leur empreinte la confiance qu'ils ont en un bel avenir. Cette étude vise à explorer dans quelle mesure les attentes futures de ces jeunes sont positives ou négatives, ainsi que la relation de ces attentes avec le niveau de développement des compétences de vie, avec la perception des jeunes de l'auto-efficacité, ainsi que comme pour

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le niveau d'estime de soi, l'échelle Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment 3.0, forme abrégée, est utilisée pour la première fois sur la population roumaine. La recherche a eu conception exploratoire et quantitative et impliquait l'application d'un questionnaire en ligne à un certain nombre de 92 jeunes, âgés de 18 à 26 ans, qui bénéficient d'une mesure de protection spéciale en Roumanie. Les résultats de l'étude montrent que la perception optimiste de l'avenir des jeunes qui s'apprentent à quitter le système de protection de l'enfance est corrélée positivement avec un niveau accru d'estime de soi, d'auto-efficacité perçue, ainsi qu'avec le niveau auto-estimé de développement des compétences de vie. En conclusion, la préparation à la vie indépendante des jeunes élevés dans le système de protection de l'enfance nécessite une attention à la fois à la formation des compétences de vie et au développement de l'estime de soi et des capacités de résolution de problèmes, afin qu'ils puissent envisager avec espoir leur propre avenir.

Mots clés: jeunes, système de protection de l'enfance, compétences de vie, efficacité personnelle, estime de soi, attentes face à l'avenir

Rezumat

Tinerii care părăsesc sistemul de protecție a copilului se confruntă cu multiple provocări, parte dintre ele datorate abilităților de viață insuficient dezvoltate, precum și unor particularități psihologice aflate în legătură cu acestea. Contextul particular în care ei au crescut își pune amprenta asupra încrederii pe care ei o au într-un viitor bun.

Prezentul studiu își propune să exploreze în ce măsură așteptările de la viitor ale acestor tineri sunt pozitive sau negative, precum și relația acestor așteptări cu nivelul de dezvoltare al abilităților de viață, cu percepția tinerilor cu privire la propria eficacitate, precum și cu nivelul stimei de sine, fiind utilizată pentru prima dată pe populație românească scala Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment 3.0, forma scurtă. Cercetarea a avut un design exploratoriu, cantitativ, și a presupus aplicarea unui chestionar online la un număr de 92 de tineri, cu vârste între 18 și 26 de ani care beneficiază de măsură de protecție specială în România.

Rezultatele studiului arată că percepția optimistă asupra propriului viitor a tinerilor care urmează să părăsească sistemul de protecție a copilului corelează pozitiv cu un nivel crescut al stimei de sine, al autoeficienței percepute, precum și cu al nivelului autoestimat de dezvoltare al abilităților de viață. În concluzie, pregătirea pentru viața independentă a tinerilor crescuți în sistemul de protecție a copilului necesită atenție atât pentru formarea abilităților de viață, cât și pe dezvoltare stimei de sine și a abilităților de rezolvare de probleme, astfel încât aceștia să privească cu speranță către propriul viitor.

Cuvinte cheie: tineri, sistem de protecție a copilului, abilități de viață, auto-efficacitate, stimă de sine, așteptări de la viitor

1. Introduction

The moment when they start their independent adult life is a challenge for any young person, most often it is a time as expected as it is full of uncertainties (Anton et al., 2020). In contrast to the youth who have a stable and supportive family, the youth who leave the child protection system may face more uncertainty, more challenges, and less support when they encounter difficulties (Irimescu, 2017). Actually, „youth who age out of care are often expected to live independently well before their peers” (University of Hawai'i, Center of the Family,

2012). Part of the difficulties they encounter is due to explosion at a lot of risk factors, but an important part is due to the insufficient acquisition of life skills (Kerman, 2009; Nollan, 2002). Moreover, as the research suggests, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviours and face difficulties across domains like: education (a higher part of them finished their studies, school failure), economic security (homelessness, unemployment, receiving social benefits), health (especially mental health issues caused by trauma, losses and lack of permanency, as PTSD, depression, anxiety, addictions), safety and risk behaviours (early parenthood, abandonment of their children, substance use, delinquency) (Courtney, 2009; Dworsky, 2009; Courtney, 2001; Freundlich, 2006; Leve, 2012; Medeleanu, Moron, 2022). In addition to these disadvantages, the young people lack often the interpersonal and life-success skills, so they have issues in connecting and relating to other people (Courtney, 2001; Dworsky, 2009; Courtney, 2009).

At the end of 2021, a number of 45212 children were cared in the Romanian child protection system. From the 12890 children from residential care, 2131 children are 18 years old and over (ANPDCA, 2022), and annually approximative 5000 young people are leaving the care. The statistics are incomplete, but in order to know the extent of the phenomenon, to estimate the costs of intervention and non-intervention, it would be very useful to develop statistics that include the number of children entering and leaving the system annually, their distribution by age, gender, ethnicity, the types of placements he is in, as well as the number of successive placements. In Romania, according the Law no. 272 on 2004 about the child rights protection, the vulnerable children can benefit from the special child protection measure until the age of 18, and if they continue their studies until the age of 26 (Parlamentul României, 2014). Also, even if they do not continue their studies, the law provides for the possibility for them to benefit from a period of transition to independent life. The child protection departments at county level have the obligation to support them to find a job and a place to stay in the last 6 months of staying, and also to monitor them during the first 2 years after they leave the system. On leaving care, these young people are given an allowance equal to three gross minimum wages per country (Guvernul României, 2022). These measures are necessary, but not sufficient. A research report of the World Bank affirms that if the institutional route not provide them with social housing or protected housing (supervised independent living arrangements) when these young people leave the protection system, they have no real chance to integrate and have a sustainable life (Stănculescu, 2017, p. 44).

To prepare the children for independent adult life is an important mission of the child protection system, and the minimum quality standards of social services intended for children and young people also include provisions on independent living skills (Corman, 2010; Ministerul Muncii și Justiției Sociale, 2019). The problem is that in Romania, in addition to being an understudied subject, there are no standardized tools for the assessment of these life skills, nor coherent and exhaustive programs and curricula to be implemented uniformly throughout

the system. In fact, curricula exist, but is very general, without concrete contents that would allow similar teaching to all young people in the care.

Based on our own empirical observations and experiences in the evaluation of the social services, we found that at the level of some child protection departments, the young people are just waiting to start their lives as autonomous adults and feel ready for this, while in others, they remain as much possible under the special child protection measure, even if they have no interest in the study. As long as the legislation and the administrative organization are the same, in my opinion, what makes the difference in this case is the human resources involved and the organizational culture, but also the level of economic development and the local culture.

The importance of developing life skills is essential, but to define them is more complex. According to the World Health Organization (1994, p. 3) the life skills are „abilities for adaptive positive behaviour. that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life". The same report proposed five basic areas of life skills: decision making and problem solving, creative thinking and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, and coping with emotions and stress. In defining sport-based life skills, Gould and Carson (2008, p. 60) include „those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings". So the self-esteem is an important component of the life skills, or at least a concept related with them.

The positive expectations about future, the hope, as well as the self-efficacy, are corelated with the academic and professional success (Tomás, 2019; Snyder, 2000; Ciarrochi, 2007). Snyder and colleagues (1991, p. 580) found that the students with a higher level of hope set and attained higher grade goals, that their peers with a lower hope, and underline the tole of the hope in the self-regulation, that is an important prerequisite of the life skills. The same author considers hope as „emotions follow from one's causal analyses of goal pursuits (...) positive emotions reflecting perceived success in the pursuit of goals, and negative emotions reflecting perceived failures" (Snyder, 2000).

Self-esteem refers at an individual's assessment of his global self-worth. It is a controversial concept, there are no evidence that the self-esteem contributes at higher grades, or the good academic performances raised the self-esteem (Baumeister, 2003). There are studies that shows that it is positive corelate with the happiness, and negative with the sadness and depression (Ciarrochi, 2007).

According to Albert Bandura, „the perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments." (1997, p. 3). Jerusalem and Mittag (1995, p. 178), based on literature, underline that „in the context of stressful life transitions, general beliefs of efficacy may serve as a personal resource or vulnerability factor". A high level of perceived efficacy generates trust in their own capabilities to master different types of environmental demands and enables them to face stressful

demands with confidence. In the light of these theory, the youth who are living care will be helped in this transition by having this skill, and this is the reason for including the concept of self-efficacy in the present research. The children raised in child protection system can meet most of the conditions that lead to weak self-efficacy expectancies, as a history of failures, lack of supportive feedback, and an unfavourable attributional style of one's successes and failures by parents, teachers, and peers, which „may lead to the development of a tendency to scan the environment for potential dangers, to appraise demands as threatening, and to cope with problems in dysfunctional ways” (Jerusalem, 1995, p. 179). The authors mentioned that although general self-efficacy is conceived of as a trait, it is changeable, especially in response to critical life events by young adults whose sense of efficacy is not yet as elaborated and stabilized as in older persons.

Nollan and his colleagues underlined the influence of some protective factors in developing a higher level of self-sufficiency skill: the relative placement the relationship with the foster mother (as well as a good relationship with a significant adult), relationship with peers, relative placements, self-esteem, and vision for the future, but also employment opportunities, group involvement, cultural identification and volunteer experience (2002). Pecora et al. (2009) are listing no less than seven outcomes that are considered important for the youth in long-term care, among which the life skills development. The other outcomes are the reduction in the emotional trauma of child maltreatment, the healthy physical development through regular check-ups and adequate medical, dental, and vision care, the avoidance of teen pregnancy, the high school graduation, a healthy socialization and healthy adult relationships. Some studies confirm the connection between life-skills preparation and later adult success in two areas: educational attainment and employment, the impact of incomplete life skills preparation being underlined (Kessler, 2009; Pecora, 2009)

Based on these considerations, this study intends to bring a modest contribution to the vision about what needs youths to leave more prepared the foster care, paying attention to the life skills concept as well as some psychological aspects: self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy.

So, we asked ourself: To what extent the trust in the own future (optimism towards the future) is based on a high level of life skills, problem-solving ability (perceived self-efficacy) and self-esteem. Which one is a better predictor of the confidence in a good future? How does the level of development of life skills, hope for a positive future, problem-solving ability and self-esteem vary according to gender? Have the girls more developed life skills than the boys? Is ACLSA 3.0 a good tool for research and assessment for Romanian youth? To what extent high level of the life and problem-solving skills predict high self-esteem?

2. Methodology

The research has a quantitative, exploratory, non-experimental, and correlational design, aiming to investigate the future expectations of the young people who leave the child protection system, more precisely to what extent their

future expectations are optimistic or pessimistic and to explore their relationship with the level of their life skills, problem-solving skills, and self-esteem. We would expect a high level of confidence in a good future to correlate positively with a high level of life skills, perceived self-efficacy, as well as self-esteem. Having in mind the differences between genders in developing life skills, we want to verify the hypothesis that the girls obtain higher scores at all the applied scales. Also, we want to see if the short form of the ACLSA 3.0 and the Looking Forward subscale of the ACLSA 3.0 standard form have internal consistency and construct validity, so that they can be used on the Romanian population as assessment and research tools.

The research sample consisted of 92 young people aged between 18 and 26 (50 female and 40 male), benefiting from a special protection measure such as family placement with relatives up to the fourth degree, placement with a maternal assistant (foster parent) or residential placement, in one of the counties of Dolj, Iasi, Botoşani and Olt.

All participants gave their voluntary consent to participate in this study. As a research procedure, after the translation of the unvalidated tools and the construction of the questionnaire, the link to the Google form was distributed to the management of some child protection services in five counties of Romania, with the request to distribute it to young people over 18 years old, in order to answer voluntarily. Answers were received only from four counties

We created a questionnaire with 63 items, which included socio-demographic data (age, gender, educational level, type of special child protection measure), questions about mental health status, the „Looking forward” subscale of Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA), Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment short form, General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) (Schwarzer, 1995) and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1991)

We chose to measure the level of confidence in a good future or the optimistic outlook on one's own future with the „Looking forward” subscale of the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, because we were interested not in optimism as a trait, but as state in the front of their concrete life situation. The subscale includes seven items of the Likert scale type, with five response steps, which we ordered in ascending order (1=No, 2 = Mostly no, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = Mostly yes, 5 = Yes), unlike the instrumental original, in order not to confuse the respondents by alternating in the questionnaire the ascending and descending order of the answers to the different subscales. The score for the assessment will range from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating high skill strength, the total scores can vary between 7 and 35. There are no standard scores, the instrument aims at the participatory evaluation of young people and constitutes a starting point for discussing what they feel and think about the areas in which they obtained higher or lower scores.

First built in 1998, Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) have now a third version (ACLSA 3.0), and, after our knowledge is first time used on Romanian population. This tool was created as a self-reporting instrument that gives youth and their caregivers the opportunity to assess their strengths and

challenges (Casey Family Programs, 2022, p. 4), and it is very appreciate (Nollan KA, 2000). Despite the fact that the authors did not create it as a test, it is used in research (Bressani, 2002), sometimes in a modified form (Wittevrongel, et al., 2022), even for disabled teenagers (Ihara, 2012). ACLSA 3.0 assess 8 functional areas or categories of life skills: daily living, self-care, housing and money management, relationships and communication, work and study, career and education planning, civic engagement, navigating the child welfare system, and looking forward. The ACLSA 3.0 standard form is a 126-items assessment measuring the nine categories mentioned above, but has and a short form, which is a 20-item assessment to be used for brief screenings or when youth, staff, or caregiver's time is limited, which we used in the present study. Being developed in USA, where the children can stay in foster care until the age of 21, the CLS assessment was designed for all youth ages 14 to 21 years old regardless of living circumstances (e.g., youth is living in foster care, with biological parents, in a group home, or other places), but we consider it an appropriate for Romanian children until the age of 25, when they leave the care. The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment short form was included in our questionnaire to measure the general level of life skills.

To measure the self-esteem, we used the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale. The 10 items of the RES scale are answered using a four-point Likert scale format ranging from „Strongly disagree” to „Strongly agree”. Originally published in 1965 (Rosenberg, 1965) and designed to measure the self-esteem in teenagers, now the scale is also used for adults, becoming the most well-known tool of its kind. It was also validated on the Romanian population (Robu, 2013).

Based on Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) was elaborated by Jerusalem and Schwarzer in 1986 (Schwarzer, 1995) to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy with the aim in mind to predict coping with daily hassles as well as adaptation after experiencing all kinds of stressful life events. This is a self-administered scale having 10 Likert scale items, with four choices from 1 = „Not at all true”, to 4 = „Exactly true”, respondents having to indicate the extent to which each statement applies to them. The scale GSE was translated and validated for Romanian population (Vasiliu & Pascal-Marinescu, 2015).

The mentioned self-report instruments were included in a Google forms questionnaire, with a completion time of 20 minutes.

The form was distributed online, in the period September – October 2022, collecting a number of N=92 respondents aged between 18 and 26 years, the average age being 19.2 years (SE=.2), median age of 19 years (SD=1.5), 42 percent being 18 years old. Regarding gender distribution, male was 44.6 percent and female, 55.4 percent. Respondents are living almost equal in rural (52.2 percent) and urban areas (47.8 percent), but the majority is living in Dolj county (n=57, 62 percent). 92.4 percent are declaring their Romanian ethnicity, and 7.6 percent are of Rroma ethnicity. As for education level, n=19 people graduated from general school (20.7 percent), n=53 subjects have high school studies (57.6 percent), n=4, bachelor studies (4.3 percent), n=16 graduated a professional school (17.4 percent).

A small part of them (15.1 percent) affirm they had psychiatric diagnosis: n=8 have learning disabilities or mental retardation, n=1 sleep disturbance, n=1 has behavioural disorders, n=1 has ADHD, n=2 don't know their diagnosis. A consistent part of these young people is living in residential care (n=42, 45.7 percent), n=36 children (39.1 percent) are in foster care (at maternal assistant) and n=14 (15.2 percent) in relative placement.

The data was anonymized, every participant having a code, and the data processing was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26, 64-bit.

3. Results

Simple descriptive analyse of demographic data were performed to describe the group of respondents, as well as of the total scores.

The total score at „Looking Forward” (LF) subscale of the ACLSA could be in the interval 7 and 35, but for our sample were between minimum of 10 and maximum of 35 and, with a mean $M=30.5$ ($SE=.5$). The scores at ACLSA 3.0 were between 36 and 100 (the possible interval: 20-100), with mean $M=92.18$ ($SE = 1.08$). GSE total scores are situated between 17 and 40, with mean $M=35.4$ ($SE=.5$). At Rosenberg scale, the obtained scores are in the interval 22-40, the mean $M=33.38$ ($SE=.5$), as is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for study variables

	Gender	M	SD	SE	95% CI	
					LL	UL
LF	Female	31.5	4.1	0.6	30.3	32.6
	Male	29.2	5.4	0.8	27.5	30.9
	N	30.5	4.8	0.5	29.5	31.5
ACLSA	Female	94.0	7.4	1.0	91.9	96.1
	Male	90.0	12.8	2.0	85.9	94.0
	N	92.2	10.3	1.1	90.1	94.3
GSE	Female	36.5	4.3	0.6	35.3	37.7
	Male	34.1	5.5	0.9	32.3	35.8
	N	35.4	5.0	0.5	34.4	36.5
RES	Female	33.3	4.9	0.7	31.9	34.6
	Male	33.5	4.5	0.7	32.1	35.0
	N	33	4.7	0.5	32.4	34.4

Note: N = 92, n1 = 51, n2 = 41, M = mean; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; CI – confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; LF=Looking Forwards scale, ACLSA=Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, GSE= General Self-Efficacy Scale, RES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Skewness and Kurtosis indices of the total scores at the four scales was calculated. Like the histograms, these indices show a non-homogenous and asymmetric distribution for the scores. For LF subscale, the skewness was -1.5 (SE = .3) showing that the distribution was left skewed, and Kurtosis was 3.0 (SE = .5), indicating that the distribution was more heavy-tailed than the normal distribution.

Table 2. Skewness and Kurtosis

	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	SE	Statistic	SE
LF	-1.5	0.3	3.0	0.5
ACLSA	-2.9	0.3	11.2	0.5
GSE	-1.3	0.3	1.8	0.5
RES	-0.6	0.3	-0.9	0.5

Note: N=92; LF=Looking Forwards scale; ACLSA=Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment; GSE= General Self-Efficacy Scale; RES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

The skewness of the ACLSA was -2.9 (SE=0.1), also left skewed, and the kurtosis was 11.2 (SE = .5). The skewness of the GES scores was -1.3 (SE = .3), left skewed distribution, and the kurtosis 1.8 (SE = .5) indicating a light-tailed distribution. The RES scores have a skewness of -.6 (SE = .3) and a kurtosis of -.9 (SE = .5), that shows to be a normal distribution (See Table 2). The same result indicates the Shapiro-Wilk's normality test, for LS: W (92) =.9, p=.0, p<.001, for ANCLSA: W (92) =.7, p=.0, p<.001, for GES: W (92) =.8, p=.0, p<.001, and for RES: W (92) =.0, p=.0, p<.001, that indicating neither for RES the distribution is not normal (See Table 3). For these reasons was preferred nonparametric tests.

Table 3. Test of normality Shapiro-Wilk

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
LF	0.846	92	0.000
ACLSA	0.700	92	0.000
GES	0.843	92	0.000
RES	0.896	92	0.000

Note: p<.001, N=92; LF=Looking Forward scale, ACLSA=Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, GSE= General Self-Efficacy Scale, RES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

For verifying the hypothesis that girls obtain higher scores than the boys at the all the scales, we perform the non-parametric test Mann-Whitney (Table 4) and obtained the next values for every scale: for Looking Forward, $U = 760.5$, $n_1=51$, $n_2=41$, $Z=-2.3$, $p < .02$ (2-tailed), for ACLSA, $U = 831.5$, $n_1=51$, $n_2=41$, $Z=-1.7$, $p < .1$ (2-tailed), for GSE, $U = 768.5$, $n_1=51$, $n_2=41$, $Z=-2.2$, $p < .03$ (2-tailed), and for RES, $U = 1003.5$, $n_1=51$, $n_2=41$, $Z=-0.3$, $p < .07$ (2-tailed). These results reject the null hypothesis both for Looking Forward and GSE (There are no differences between the female and the male subjects scores at the scale LF / GSE.), indicating the existing of significant differences between girls and boys at these scales, but the null hypothesis is kept for the other two scales: ACLSA and RES.

Table 4. Test Statistics Mann-Whitney U^a

	LF	ACLSA	GSE	RES
Mann-Whitney U	760.5	831.5	768.5	1003.5
Wilcoxon W	1621.5	1692.5	1629.5	2329.5
Z	-2.3	-1.7	-2.2	-0.3
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.02	0.1	0.03	0.7

Note: a. Grouping Variable: Gender

$p < .05$, $n_1=51$, $n_2=41$

LF=Looking Forward scale, ACLSA=Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, GSE= General Self-Efficacy Scale, RES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

In order to highlight how big are the differences between girls and boys in the scores obtained for the confidence with which they look to the future and the perceived self-efficacy, we calculated the Cohen effect size: $d = .5$ for Looking Forward scale, $d = .5$ for GSE, that is a medium effect, meaning that 50 percent of the girls have higher scores than the boys at these traits.

Because the ACLSA 3.0 is not yet validated on Romanian population, Cronbach's Alpha indices was calculated and indicates a very good internal consistency both for the ACLSA short form ($\alpha=.92$), and Looking Forward subscale ($\alpha=.88$).

Spearman's Correlations was perform to illustrate the relationship between the study variables (Table 5). We found that the scores of the subjects at the subscale Looking Forward is positive and significant correlated with the scores at the other three scales, stronger with the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA 3.0): $r_s(90) = .6$, $p < .001$, and with the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE): $r_s(90) = .7$, $p < .001$, and fewer, but also significant with Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RES): $r_s(90) = .4$, $p < .001$. A strong significant positive correlation we found between ACLSA 3.0 and GSE: $r_s(90) = .7$, $p < .001$, and a medium positive significant correlation between ACLSA 3.0 and RES: $r_s(90) = .3$, $p < .001$, and GSE and RES: $r_s(90) = .3$, $p < .001$.

Table 5. Correlations for study variables

	LF	ACLSA	GSE	RES
LF	—			
ACLSA	.6**	—		
GSE	.7**	.7**	—	
RES	.4**	.3**	.3**	—

Note: LF=Looking Forward scale, ACLSA=Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, GSE= General Self-Efficacy Scale, RES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale
p<.05*; *p*<.001**. N=92

Inferential statistics were performed to explore if there are a relationship between the age of the participants and their scores, between the type of placement and the same scores at the tests, but no significant correlations were obtained.

4. Discussion

The main aim of the research was to investigate the trust in a good future of the young people who leave the child protection system, and to explore its relationship with the level of their life skills, perceived self-efficacy, and self-esteem, to explore the proprieties of the ACLSA short form on Romanian population and to explore the gender differences of the scores at the four applied scale: Looking Forward (subscale of ACLSA), ACLSA short form, GSE and RES, chosen for measuring the mentioned variable.

Applying ACLSA for the first time on a Romanian sample of young people being in care, our intention was to validate an instrument for measuring the life skill of this category of population. My professional background and experience as a social worker, as well as the higher level of vulnerability of this group motivated this choice. The ACLSA 3.0 is a validated tool for assessing American youth being in the care of the state, which has a good internal consistency, both for the standard form, Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients ranged 0.83 to 0.91 (Nollan KA, 2000, p. 169), and for the short form, $\alpha=0.86$ (Nollan, 2002, p. 47) , and all the subscales have good reliability coefficients (Nollan KA, 2000; Nollan, 2002). We used the short form of ACLSA 3.0 and the scale showed an excellent internal consistency on our Romanian sample: $\alpha=0.92$, even higher than in the original study. The significant correlation between the scores at the ACLSA short form and the scores at GSE obtained by this sample ($r_s(90) = .7, p<.001$) suggests a good validity of construct, having in mind that they are measuring two related concepts: the life skills and perceived self-efficiency.

According to the self-efficacy theory, the past mastery experiences are powerful determinants of self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1997), but the alternative interpretation would be that pre-existing self-efficacy expectations led to the successes, is also consistent with this theory (Sherer, 1982). So the social child protection services should offer a secure environment, with sufficient opportunities for children to have significant relationships with adults and peer,

with adults capable to give them supportive feedback, as well as a role model of favourable attributional style of one's successes and failure, to provide conditions for the development of a good perception of self-efficacy, reversing the risk factors mentioned by Jerusalem and Mittag (1995, p. 179). In other words, it is necessary to offer simultaneous safety, stimulation for the development of skills, as well as a style of thinking that highlights the role of effort and assuming responsibility in success.

Starting from the assumption that the independent life is in the same time exciting and frightening for a child who cannot rely on a family and support system to help him effectively, and who lacks an acceptable level of life skills, we looked at the construct of expectations from future synonymous with hope for a good future, with the confidence that he will manage when he leaves the care. This construct is seen rather as a state, similar with the hope, than as a personality trait like the optimism. We were interested first in having an adapted instrument to the need to assess children and young people who are in special child protection, and this was the reason for choosing the Looking Forward subscale for this objective. The obtained data suggest that the positive expectations of the own future after exiting from the child protection system are significant correlated with the level of the life skill, the perceived self-efficacy and, although somewhat less, but still significant, with the level of the self-esteem.

The correlation of the variables of the trust in own future, the perceived self-efficacy and the life skills with the self-esteem were not so strong ($r_s(90) = .3$, $p < .001$, for ACLSA and RES, and $r_s(90) = .3$, $p < .001$, for GSE and RES), so maybe other personality traits will be more adequate to analyse in link with the life skills and the confidence in a good future. Some contemporaneous authors (Neff, 2009; Donald, 2017) argues for focusing assessments, research and education on the self-compassion rather than the self-esteem, for being associated with more stable feelings of self-worth that were less contingent on particular outcomes, than the self-esteem. Sometimes, a high level of Self-esteem may lead at narcissism and antisocial behaviour. For these reasons, we consider that will be useful to validate on Romanian population instruments for assessing this personality trait, and move the focus in the preparing the children for the independent adult life from raising the self-esteem to boost the self-compassion, from growing the self-evaluation to cultivate the self-acceptance.

The Mann-Whitney's test pointed out that exist significant differences between girls and boys at the score of the confidence in their future after leaving the care, and at the scores at the GES scale, the perceived self-efficiency. In both cases exists a medium effect size, suggested by Cohen's d index of .5, that means in 50 percent of cases, girls are more confident in their future after leaving child protection system, and have a better perceived self-efficacy, confirming the results of other research. According the literature, the girls often score higher in terms of social, moral and educational development (knowledge and behaviours) (Bressani, 2002, p. 461), decision making, critical thinking, communication, goal setting, problem solving (Haas, 2015), as well as self-esteem, self-efficacy and

optimism towards the future (Bartoszuk, 2011). However, the level of the life skills measured with ACLSA short form didn't indicate significant differences between girls and boys. It worth to further investigate with the standard form of assessment of ACLSA and see if there are differences. In the social services, the tool is used in a combined way, both as self-reported instrument, and as a questionnaire for the carers about the children.

Our study is limited by the small size (N=92) and lack of representativeness of the sample. The sample was small, statistically unrepresentative neither from the point of view of the counties, nor of the type of protection measure, nor of the ages of the subjects. Regarding the age, we preferred only children who are 18 years old and over, for the reason that they could express their consent for participating in the research. One other limitation of the research could be the use of few instruments to observe the construct validity of the ACSLA short form and Looking Forward subscale.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the level of trust in their own future are significant correlated with the level of perceived self-efficacy, as well as with the level of the life skills, but fewer with the level of the self-esteem. The girls from our sample obtained higher scores at trust in the future and perceived self-efficacy, than the boys. Remain to observe in a longitudinal study if these differences will have an impact on their integration. The ACLSA 3.0 short form proved an excellent internal consistency on Romanian sample.

As future perspectives, ACLSA 3.0 standard form should be validated on the Romanian population and the research replicated using the long form of this instrument, on a representative sample of adolescents from the protection system, keeping between the instruments and the GES scale and adding other validated measurements for related concepts with the level of development of the life skills of young people who leave the protection system, such as the empathy, the self-compassion or the optimism as a trait. It would be interesting to explore to what extent the Looking Forward subscale has convergent validity with some instruments measuring hope.

Despite that our study is focused on psychological concepts, the practical, educational, developmental, health, economical and political aspects are in the same measure important when we talk about the children who are living the care, such that only an integrative, holist approach could be efficient. The things are complex and needs attention for a lot of details.

We think that the programs for life skills will have success only if they will be based on clear definitions and good operationalization of the concept and on standardized assessment tools. In this sense, we hope that ACLSA 3.0 form will be used in Romanian child protection services. For having the expecting outcomes, it is need to have an integrative approach of the preparation of the youth for independent living, combining the good policy and practical support, with a scientific perspective on development of the life skills, paying attention to the

increase of protective factors and the elimination of risk factors that can influence the level of equipping of these young people for adult life.

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