

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN
IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM
IN THE SOUTHERN ALFÖLD AND THE NORTHERN ALFÖLD REGIONS**

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I. Research goals, problem statement

Based on the results of international and national research on educational progress, dropout as well as failure in school can be predicted in the case of the children in the child protection system. Because of their disadvantaged position, biological families, characterized by dysfunctional operation endanger children's healthy physical, mental, intellectual and moral development. In the system of social inequalities the successful social integration of children coming from disadvantaged, deficient, deprived families becomes impeded. Bearing the theories on the cultural determination of poverty in mind, deprivations transmitted from generation to generation determine the place of the children in the child protection system on the lower levels of social structures. Due to the aforementioned background characteristics of origin, schools as social institutions represent the main potential channel for mobility in their lives. According to international research results, the proportion of children who live in the child protection system and succeed in spite of their endangerment is around 30% in the world. Besides the estimates of local ratios, the aim of our research was to investigate the overall resilience of the children between the ages of 12 and 18 in the child protection system. The term *resilience* (reziliencia) means 'flexibility' in Hungarian; in the social scientific interpretation it is a characteristic that enables a person to become successfully integrated despite long-term difficulties and severe traumatic efforts. Applying Chicetti and Cohen's definition in the thesis we monitor the individual's successful adaptability and forward-looking behaviour despite of long-term adverse internal or external influences. In the international academic literature - since the middle of the last century - resilience research has been conducted in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, psychopathology. In the interrelated system of social backgrounds representing risk factors (poverty, homelessness, various deviances, mental illnesses) the sociological aspect of such research is also emphasized, as in the first and second waves of resilience-research, the authors focus on the responsibility of social institutions (schools) and negative social consequences, burdens of deviance stemming from uprootedness and the lack of safety and stability. They also describe the risk factors which can result in adaptation difficulties among individuals; and also highlight the protective factors with the help of which - despite negative influences - a positive adaptation can be induced.

In our research on child protection resilience we start from the theoretical components identified in the second stage of international research, presented in the thesis. The

components published in Ann Masten's 2007 work indicate the levels of resilience. Regarding the minors in the child protection service in Hungary there have been no analyses that go beyond school success and take into consideration both the environmental-contextual effects and the internal factors of resilience. In the comparative analysis of endangered children who are supported by the child-protection system and of the teenagers who have already been taken out of their families and are living at a care facility (children's homes, foster parents) we carried out the examination of the components related to children's relationships (family, school, social support network) and internal resources (self-efficiency, trust in the meaning of life). In the case of the children under care we followed the development of resilience factors in connection with their school success. We studied how their relationships developed with competent adults who represent protection; the dominance of the resilience factor represented by living, supportive relationship with parents despite the children's endangerment; whether despite of their socio-economic disadvantages they can still be characterized with a higher level of school social capital; whether the supportive teachers, professional helpers, fellow students (bench mates and peers) are present with whom they can experience social community and belonging. We aimed to identify the protective factors that can be detected among children in child protection, which can improve their school success despite the risk factors characterizing their current living situation. Due to the system theory approach in professional child protection interventions, and taking into consideration the fact that the external and internal factors of the analysed resilience phenomenon can result in overcoming childhood difficulties only by forming a system together, gives the theoretical and empirical framework of the thesis as a modern, system theory model. Using Welch's 1987 theoretical and practical human ecosystem model based on a system theory approach of social work, society (nation, state), culture, local communities, family, interpersonal, intrapersonal and physical levels were assigned the analysed resilience components, and the following hypotheses were formulated: 1-2. On the levels of society and culture it is identifiable that the quality and quantity of recreational social and family relations are related to the components of resilience that determine school success as well.

3. On the level of *local communities* it is identifiable that the supportive school and child protective environment as well as the inter-professional collaborations have a positive effect on the components of children's resilience enhancing self- and social efficacy. 4. Despite of the particular situation of the studied population we assumed that the family structure and the characteristics of relationships influence children's personal efficacy and the improvement of

school achievements. 5. On the *interpersonal* level despite of family dysfunctions we assume that childhood social capital, the ability to experience positive social interaction is not independent of families' social capital, which has a measureable influence on school effectiveness and the related components. 6. On the *intrapersonal* level we assumed correlations between the factors determining personal efficiency: social internal control, self-acceptance, expressing feelings, experiencing the support of adults. 7. On the physical level - based on Sahoo's conceptions - we assumed that in order to facilitate healthy physical, spiritual and mental development as well as the resilience of the children in the child protection system there is a need for complementary and corrective effects of the analysed components. Along the proven protective factors the correlations can be outlined, based on which an individual child protection resilience model can be traced, in which - with the measurement of the given dimensions - the resilience level of each child can be identified and thus the areas of improvements can be revealed.

II. Applied research methods, research design and implementation

The thesis presents the results and the theoretical background of the child protection survey carried out in the years 2012-2013. We carried out a questionnaire survey (N=371) among the children in the primary care of child welfare programs of the most disadvantaged 13 sub-regions of Hungary's Southern Alföld and Northern Alföld regions, supported by complex programmes, as well as among the children in the custody of the Regional Child Protection Service of 6 counties of the region. We also performed a document analysis regarding the related schools' pedagogical programmes and images. Due to the special characteristics of the sample, in the resilience analysis of the adolescents in the child protection system we could not fully adapt the internationally validated resilience scales, nevertheless the reliability of our custom scales measuring resilience components was verified by calculating Cronbach's alpha levels. The first block of both the questionnaires for children in child protection as well as children taken out from their families included general demographic questions (gender, age, nationality, language, school status). The next section of measurement instruments involved the representation of early childhood experiences and the perception and memory of the quality of family relationships, using the method of scales and metaphor-analysis. Questions regarding the date and circumstances of placement in the child protecting service were included, together with some on family structure and stability. In mapping family resources, indicators measuring parents' social status were used. Questions on qualification, employment, place of residence, type of residence, properties, consumption of goods and

cultural assets were also included. For respondents living in care facilities these questions were extended to the place of care, foster parents, children's homes and dwelling homes as well. Besides family resources, school resources were measured using Likert scales. We also included the subjective assessment and objective indicator of school performance as well as children's self-evaluation regarding their performance. As for their school work and psychological, mental health, questions were asked about the range of supporters, the need for professional help, and thus traumatizing life-events were revealed.

We also analysed the system of recreational extracurricular activities, the motivating factors for respondents, the frequency and characteristics of deviances in their everyday lives ranging from smoking to crime.

In the subsequent part of the questionnaire we aimed at exploring children's social capital and network by the qualitative and quantitative assessment of Moreno's 1967 social nucleus and social network. We also asked the children in the child protection system to display the space of relations around them by placing themselves in a so-called forest of hearts, which was followed by indicating the people important to them, close to their hearts. In measuring the resilience components of trust in their future and in life general, we applied a validated scale of a 2005 research carried out by the author.

As an additional method we obtained qualitative data on the characteristics of school environment by analysing documents, the encoding of which resulted in quantitative data. The schools characterized by an endeavour to consciously develop the school and educational environment, to create opportunities, equal chances, to improve individual skills and abilities, to help spending free time efficiently, to facilitate mentoring and self-awareness - as presented in the theoretical part - were qualified as supportive and cooperative with other professions. The characteristics of the environment were identified along the following dimensions: the size and openness of classes, the forms of education and types of situations (cooperative work in small groups of same-age children) as well as the amount of time spent on individual studying. Furthermore, individual treatment as a central principle appears, together with the learner-centred approach. The schools in which it is important to provide possibilities of belonging to certain subcultures, social communities and groups, possibilities of integration into such groups, and in the school programs they seek to facilitate the experience of happiness and success were qualified as supportive environments. The online presence and the frequency of their appearance in pedagogical programs were examined by the analysis of the documents as well.

III. Research results, analysis and interpretation of results

Our hypotheses and findings refer to the different features of the children in special care and in child protection on the one hand, and on the other to the differences between the ones who can integrate successfully in schools as well as those who have problems in this area. In the following we wish to present our most important findings in the order of hypotheses.

1. The first hypothesis aimed at identifying the relationships between the quality and quantity of recreational community and family relations as well as the components of resilience which determine school success as well. In exploring the correspondences between the respondents' social, cultural interactions and relationships with Masten's resilience factors, we identified the correlation of the quality dimension of interactions and the factors of self-assessment, independence, as well as problem solving, which determine the level of children's autonomy as well. The effect of positively represented early childhood can be traced in self-esteem that determines the level of adolescent autonomy, as it has a considerable effect on social support. The children who have positive early family experiences will have more positive family, school and social support in their adolescence, despite of their current endangerment and their status as subjects of child protection. Similarly we found a correlation between religious faith, faith in the meaning of life as well as social support. The more a person is characterized by faith, the more positive his/her trust in life is, the more extensive a network the respondent adolescent in the child protection system will have.

We found a significant difference based on the status as subject of child protection between the indicators of school success and the level of social support. The quality and quantity of family interactions of the children living with their families but supported by a welfare program is more favourable, which is not surprising if we think of family gaps as a result of taking the children out of their families. There is an interesting difference regarding school success though. The more time the children living in the care system spend at the place of foster care (children's care homes, foster families), the more successful they are in schools as opposed to the children coming to school from disrupted families - using Newman's term, who are taken into care. Using the Lazarsfeld paradigm method we specified the correlations between school success and the development of institutional membership between the two studied subgroups. While in the case of children in the child protection system there is no significant correlation between institutional membership and school success, this correlation is valid among the children in specialized care facilities. The more successful the child is in school, the more positive his/her academic achievement and social support (teacher-student;

student-student) within the school is, the more likely he/she will become part of a school leisure community, expanding his/her social network.

In the case of children characterized by school success, self-esteem, independence and problem solving ability considered as internal factors in Masten's theory develop more positively than in among less successful children, similarly to the correlations of religion, the ability to experience positive family and community events and school success.

2. In our second hypothesis we examined the positive effects of the supportive school and child protective environment as well as those of the inter-professional collaborations on the components of the child's resilience enhancing self- and social efficacy, as well as school success. According to our findings the supportive attitude of the teachers working at the school, the presence of competent adult in learning or during spending free time efficiently, accepted with child-minded confidence, can facilitate school success. In schools where - based on the analysis of school documents - inter-professional cooperation between the school and the representatives of the related professions belonging to child protection institutions can be identified, the individual social networks of children with successful school careers feature helping adults such as psychologists, educators, teachers, guardians, family caregivers more frequently, whose support the child experiences.

3. According to the third hypothesis we analysed the way in which family structure and the characteristics of relationships influence children's personal efficacy and the improvement of school achievements. Based on our data it appears that family disruptions before the age of seven have no significant effects on later school efficiency in the case of adolescents living in child protection facilities. Regarding the group of children living in child protection facilities we assumed that in the cases when they were taken out of their families before elementary school, this is a break in the family structure that occurred in this early sensitive period, and as a result of the trauma the children will be less successful, regardless of the time elapsed than the children where the stability of the family structure was unaltered up to the age of seven. It can be stated that the unduly prolonging of taking into custody can have a negative effect on children's later school effectiveness, preventing successful social interaction. We wish to emphasize the above finding because both among the children living in care facilities and among the child protection professionals it is a frequently experienced and formulated question for how long the child can be left to live with the endangering family on the one hand, while on the other why the child had to be kept in the endangering family for

so long. The above questions are also part of the dilemmas of social work described by Compton and Galaway, representing the dilemma of intervention.

4. In our fourth hypothesis despite of family dysfunctions we assume that childhood social capital has a measureable influence on school effectiveness and the related components. We have presented a strong correlation between school success and positive attitudes to life; the direction of the correlation was examined with linear regression method. According to our findings the effect of positive attitudes to life are substantially greater on school success than in the case when the dependent variable is the positive attitude to life, as school success has a weaker effect introduced in the regression model. The effect of positive attitudes to life however is not independent of family social capital. The quality dimension of family social capital, that is, positive parent communication and attitudes - as Pusztai's 2009 results show - have a more powerful effect than the experiences of common activities. The result - besides the importance of quality time - stresses the importance of positive, affirmative communication. Positive parent communication, understanding attention, positive reinforcement and feedback seems to be more important than "chasing experiences and piling up programs", characteristic to postmodern consumer societies. We emphasize the aforementioned result despite the fact that these phenomena can be defined as being the problems of middle-class families mainly. As a result of comparisons based on child protection status we found that from the point of view of the quantity of everyday interactions and common activities the children in the professional welfare system are in a significantly more favourable situation, be they living in children's homes or in foster families, this can be confirmed regardless of the type of place of care. If we compare the quality, positive parent/educator communication using the above variable, there is a significant difference in the compared means based on the child protection status. In the case of children living in children's homes - although the quantity and contents of the programs offered are aligned with the practices of postmodern societies - reinforcing, positive feedback communication by adults is considerably less favourable than in the case of children living in foster families or even in their endangering biological families, in the system of child protection. Regardless of child protection status, the children experiencing spiritual, communicational support from adults are characterized by higher levels of school success. Among the children with successful school careers one in four children has received the help of professionals mainly because of family events, traumas caused by taking them out of their families, problems in integration.

5. Our fifth hypothesis was aimed at finding correspondences between the factors determining personal efficiency: social internal control, self-acceptance, expressing feelings, experiencing the support of adults. If we take into consideration the results related to the first hypothesis on psychological support, the level of internal social control - belonging to the notion of personal efficacy investigated on the intrapersonal level-, as well as the use of psychologist support are correlated. Social internal control is connected to self-assessment, the development of positive attitudes to life, the ability to articulate negative feelings and experiences, the correlation of which with school success is supported by our results. In our interpretation therefore school success can be facilitated regardless of the child protection status with the targeted development of subjects' social inner control.

6. On the physical level - based on Sahoo's conceptions - we assumed that in order to facilitate healthy physical, spiritual and mental development as well as the resilience of the children in the child protection system there is a need for the complementary effects of the analysed components. Along the proven protective factors resilience patterns can be outlined, based on which an individual child protection resilience model can be traced, in which - with measuring certain dimensions - the resilience level of each child can be identified and thus the areas of improvements can be revealed. The correlations demonstrated on the previous levels of the human ecosystem support the multidimensional character of the resilience phenomenon. According to our results resilience cannot be restricted to school success. In children's lives flexible coping and success were found despite difficulties, which can be interpreted as diffuse phenomena changing in space and time. We agree with Sahoo's findings from 2011 according to which the resilience factors which facilitate children's success the most in their everyday lives can vary continuously due to children's age and specific life situations. According to our hypothesis, among adolescents in the child protection system the grouping of resilience factors proven to facilitate school success, we can form a child protection resilience model based on network connections and individual internal space. The variables analysed on the levels of the human ecosystem that correlated with school success were grouped according to the areas of family, school and social support, self-efficacy and trust in the meaning of life. The classification was performed by cluster analysis; the respondents who belonged to groups with the best indicators in at least two areas were qualified as resilient. According to our results in the investigated regions in Hungary the ratio of resilient children in the child protection system is around 26%.

Based on the model outlined with the variable groups related to external contact networks and internal, individual resources, it is possible to develop an individual scale measuring the

resilience of subjects in the child protection system in the future, while the presented resilience model can be also used in future longitudinal research to determine the dynamics of the dominant elements in different ages.

IV. List of publications related to the thesis

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V. Other publications:

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