

Theses of PhD dissertation

**SURVEY OF LIVING CONDITIONS OF CHILDREN PLACED IN CHILD
WELFARE INSTITUTIONS**

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1. The objective of the dissertation, identification of the subject

The objective of the dissertation is to present the process of transformation of the child welfare institutions, their situation and the living conditions of the 13-25 year old children living in these institutions in Hajdú-Bihar County. Our further goal is to uncover the differences in living conditions of children placed in residential homes and small group homes in the framework of a comparative research. Only a few research projects focus on the investigation of children in specific situation who are accommodated in institutions, however the scientific investigation of the living conditions of these children is not only a field of research of educational sociology but it raises wide ranging social political questions as well.

The choice of subject is explained by the fact that a comprehensive investigation of this kind among children living in residential homes and small group homes has not been carried out until now. A further explanation of the choice of subject is that institutional socialization, the living conditions of these children have great importance for the both the individuals and the society. From an individual perspective it is important that he or she must be able to prepare for independent living and the society is concerned that the social integration of the young persons growing up in the institutions should be as successful as possible.

The key question of the dissertation is how the situation of the children accommodated in residential homes and small group homes altered parallel to the change of accommodation possibilities, what kind of advantages/disadvantages do the placement in various types of institutions have. The topicality of these questions is granted by the fact that the law on Children's protection and legal guardian administration passed by the Hungarian Parliament in 1997 significantly transformed the institutional system of child welfare. By this law the accommodation possibilities of children also changed, what altered the everyday life of these children essentially.

Also the fact that the rate of children under the age of 18, who get into these institutions is higher in the Northern Great Plain region – and also in Hajdú-Bihar County – than in other regions and counties makes this subject a question of current interest. Accordingly the utilization of the room for accommodation in the residential homes is at high level in our county. It justifies the necessity of investigating the living conditions of children in various institutions. During the research of living conditions we investigate a group of children in a special situation from a special aspect: what kinds of conditions are ensured by the society to fill their needs? As objective condition we also investigate the financial and material conditions and the possibility of accommodation in an institution. As subjective condition we

take into consideration the inner organizing principle according to which the life of the children accommodated in an institution is organized within the specific conditions and we also investigate how they take part in the forming of their own living conditions.

Child welfare as subject can be investigated and interpreted from several aspects. For example it can be elaborated from the aspect of socialization, the history of childhood and child age, the sociology of organizations, lifestyle, values and norms. In the dissertation child welfare is considered as a specific scene of socialization, a system, which provides living conditions for children. Because of the special characteristics of the subject we also aimed for an interdisciplinary approach. We used the research findings of various areas of science: educational science, sociology, social policy and history to survey the research subject as complex as possible.

We started our research on the premise that a small group home with fewer inhabitants, which ensures intimate conditions, may provide better opportunities for the children and that the living conditions of children improved significantly in the past few years concerning not only accommodation but other factors as well.

2. Research methodology

We involved into our scientific investigation residential homes, small group homes in Hajdú-Bihar County and children, who were accommodated in these institutions. We investigated and analyzed the process of reorganization/transformation of these institutions, their actual situation and the factors, which determine the living condition of children living there. The research aimed the revelation of the situation as it reveals new information and problems in a field, which was less known until now. The survey of child welfare institutions and the questionnaire survey among children were carried out between November 2007 and June 2008.

The possibilities of accommodation in Hajdú-Bihar County determine the living conditions of children. We presented this factor by surveying data sheets and interviewing the heads of the institutions. During data collection we interviewed the leaders of six institutions and surveyed data sheets in the 39 operating small group homes in this county. The data sheets contain the most important information concerning the institutions, thus the presentation of the financial and material conditions, questions concerning the composition of the resident children and the most important parameters concerning the employees of the institutions. The data was processed by using SPSS 12.0 software. By the analysis of the data

sheets and the interviews we intended to give an overview of the actual condition of the child welfare institutions in this county.

Within the framework of a quantitative survey we compared the living conditions of the 13-25 year old people, who lived in residential homes and small group homes. In the course of the selection of the sample the institutional background had an essential role. The children/young persons got into the sample from the residential home working within the traditional institutional framework in Komádi and from the “Hajdúsági small group homes” in Hajdúnánás. In Komádi the institution has not been reorganized. At the time of the survey 160 persons were placed there in an institution working within the traditional, old framework. The “Hajdúsági small group homes” were reorganized among the first institutions of this kind in Hungary. They have a great deal of experience with reference to the accommodation of pupils in small group homes. We chose these two institutions because in this way we had the opportunity to make a comparison of the living conditions of people living in the different types of institutions. The information we collected indicate tendencies in the first place, they cannot be generalized. We used a self-completed questionnaire for the survey. We composed this questionnaire based on the findings of the interviews with the heads of the institutions and the experiences that we collected in the institutions. We finalized it after a test survey. We distributed 160 questionnaires, received 130 back and 123 of them were usable. During the empirical analysis we compared demographic data, family connections, social network, spare time, education, relation to values, habits regarding alcohol, smoking and drug use, satisfaction and future prospects of the respondents living in residential homes and small group homes. Beside the presentation of the living conditions of the children our goal with the comparative analysis was to throw light on the advantages of placement in small group homes, which are smaller and provide more intimate accommodation. We used SPSS 12.0 software to process the data. We presented the analysed variables according to sex, ethnic group and placement. We applied statistical tests in compliance with the data, independent t-test, one sample t-test and χ^2 test in most of the cases. We compared the test results with the findings of other surveys, the results of other research projects in the scientific literature while focusing on comparative aspects. During the comparative analysis we used the surveys of Hanák, Vidra-Szabó, Örkényi et al, Murányi, Elekes and Paksi in the first place and the findings of the “Ifjúság 2004” research.

3. The findings of the dissertation

In the first part of the dissertation we attempt to develop a conceptual and interpretational framework, which is essential for the thesis and in the second part we present the results of the questionnaire survey that revealed the living conditions of young people living in residential homes and small group homes in Hajdú-Bihar County.

In the theoretical chapter we sum up the theories and research findings concerning this subject by using the international and Hungarian special literature. The starting point for the theoretical framework of the dissertation was the presentation of socialization and the child welfare institution as a special scene of socialization. After summing up the functions of the institutions from various aspects we pointed out that our main tasks are socialization, protection, compensation and preparation for an independent life. In the first chapter we present the characteristics of the socialization process in child welfare institutions by using the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner. Concerning residential homes and small group homes the model was first used by L. Palareti and C. Berti. The starting point of the model is that children and the environment that surrounds them constitute a system, which has four levels. These are the micro, mezo, exo and macro levels. This model assists to interpret the socialization process in the institutions, which is called “black box” phenomenon in the international literature. Another significant feature of it is that it makes the investigation of the children’s living conditions possible through the analysis of the different levels.

After clearing up the concepts we present the characteristics of child welfare in Western Europe and East Central Europe. During the comparative analysis we investigated what kind of living conditions are provided for the children placed in the institutions in certain countries. After looking over the child welfare system in the Western European countries it can be ascertained that – in comparison with the East Central European countries – the services, which aimed the assistance and help of the families were inaugurated earlier and more extensively there. This way they tried to prevent children to get out of the family. The transformation of the institutions, which serve for the placement of children from home started much earlier. It can also be stated that the Western European countries were the models for the East Central European countries when they reorganized their child welfare institutions. We used the findings of the international comparative surveys of Gottesman and Madge and the research result of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in the first place.

In the next chapter of the dissertation we looked over the history of Hungarian child welfare system considering the aspect how the living conditions of children without family

developed in various eras, what kind of placement possibilities were provided for them. It can be ascertained based on the works of among others Hanák, Gergely, Herczog, Csizmadia, Kerezsi and Volentics that the accommodation conditions of children in need of provision show significant disparities on the various periods. Communities and the Church carried out these tasks in the first place before the state assumed this role. After the passing of the child welfare Act in 1901 state care of children meant placement to foster parents. After 1945 the network of foster parents was wasted and the so called children's towns and foster homes played a primary role in the placement of children. In these homes the living conditions of the children were essentially determined by the fact that because of the isolated placement their social connections dwindled. The system of inner schools also increased the institutional isolation. After the passing of the Child welfare Act in 1997 the placement under more intimate circumstances became more important so the placement with foster parents and the establishment of residential homes rose in value.

In the fifth chapter the comparative analysis of the possibilities of children's placement can be found. We revealed the changes in the everyday life of children in the periods before and after 1997, what sort of opportunities exist at present to place them. We used the data of the Central Statistical Office concerning the child welfare institutions and the children accommodated there. We made the determining factors of the children's living conditions (educational level, further studies, number of child groups, number of escapes etc.) more expressive by the analysis of statistical data. In the analysis we pointed to the dimensions where the improvement of children's situation was observed. The improvement appeared in several areas. During the placement process the provision of intimate conditions became a principal factor. We also stated during the analysis of statistical data that more children live in small group homes than in residential homes and the residential homes also aspired to form groups with smaller number of children. The establishment of new institutions also served for the improvement of the children's situation. The special and aftercare homes use more up-to-date methods than in the previous years. The fact that more children continue their studies in secondary education than in the previous years also makes a contribution to the improvement of children's living conditions.

In the final theoretical chapter we presented such Hungarian research projects as an introduction to our empirical survey, which dealt with the living conditions of children living in institutions. So we looked over the research findings concerning placement conditions, passing of leisure time, education and children's habits regarding alcohol, smoking and drug use based on the surveys of among others Vidra-Szabó, Hanák, Murányi, Örkényi et al.,

Elekes and Paksi, Herczog, Neményi, Messing, Rácz, Veres-Brezovszky, Zsámbéki, Hazai and Volentics. In a certain part of this chapter we presented international surveys, which thematically connected to our research and which revealed the problems of children living in institutions in various countries. (Meltzer et al., Ford et al., Petermann, Thiersch et al., Schmid, Madge). We analyzed the situation of children living in institutions based on the research findings.

In the followings we state the empirical result of the dissertation assorted according to the hypotheses, which were formulated during the preparation of the research plan.

According to our first hypothesis children living in small group homes have more plentiful social connections than their companions, who live in residential homes. This assumption was confirmed to a certain extent only. It can be ascertained based on our data that children in both types of institutions have plenty of social connections. There are more children among the inhabitants of small group homes, who have three or more friends and the inhabitants of the small group homes invite their friends to their home more typically. On the other hand the inhabitants of the residential homes spent more time with their friends than their companions in the small group homes. Earlier we thought that children living in the institutions find friends among the other inhabitants of the institution. But according to our findings more than the half of the children in both residential homes and small group homes have a friend, who lives in a family. It shows that these young people do not make friends exclusively with others from the institutions but also with children of the same age, who live in families. That may help them to become acquainted with family models. On the basis of the findings mentioned above it can be ascertained that as regards social connections, among the children/young persons in the survey friendships are just as important as connections with siblings. Friends are important actors of social support. That effects the development of the children's living conditions as most of them can talk about their problems with their friends easily or very easily and they play a significant role in passing their leisure time. The importance of friendly connections is supported by our ascertainment that family safety is in an emphasized place on the list of preferred values of children but friendly connections as an important value still ahead of it. The importance of friendship is justified by the examined age-group itself since in puberty connections with people of the same age become stronger and serve as a model for the children.

According to the second hypothesis smaller part of the young people living in the small group homes that we involved in the research tried and used drugs or alcohol and smoked than their companions in residential homes. We were able to verify this hypothesis. Regarding

the trying and using of alcohol we found that fewer children involved in the small group homes. The difference was even bigger when we examined the frequency of usage. The rate of the children, who drink alcohol every week was much lower among the inhabitants of the small group homes than the inhabitants of residential homes. We found the same result with trying and using of drugs. As compared to the findings of the national survey of Elekes-Paksi the rate of trying and using was lower among our respondents. It may be related to the regional differences that can be observed in use of drugs. According to the Ifjúság 2000 survey the rate of drug trying and using is the highest in the Central Hungarian region and the lowest is in the Northern Great Plain region.

The rate of the children, who have tried smoking and smoke each day is lower among the inhabitants of the small group homes. The rate of those, who never smoked is higher among the inhabitants of the small group homes than the residential homes. To sum it up we can say that the drug using habits of those, who live in small group homes are more favourable in comparison with the habits of the inhabitants of the residential homes. It is probably thanks to the fact that in the small group homes there are more opportunities to build up personal connections and the everyday life of the children is easier to survey because of the lower number of them. Beside other factors the living conditions of children may also have an effect on the drug using habits of them.

The present day and expected living conditions of children are significantly influenced by their educational level. We assumed that more inhabitants of the small group homes attend grammar schools and vocational secondary schools than inhabitants of residential homes. We were able to verify this assumption. Most of our respondents in both types of institutions continued their studies in vocational schools, they planned to learn a profession. Nevertheless the rate of those children, who intended to continue their studied in grammar schools and vocational secondary schools was significantly higher in the small group homes. It was especially true in case of attending vocational secondary schools; four times more of them attend this type of school than the inhabitants of residential homes. Among the children living in institutions repeating of a year is a common thing. We can find differences between the two types of institutions in this field as well. The rate of those pupils, who attend the class that comply with their age is much lower among the inhabitants of the residential homes than among the inhabitants of the small group homes. The better results according to education in the small group homes may be connected to the amount of time that pupils spend with learning. According to our data inhabitants of small group homes spend more time with learning than the inhabitants of residential homes. On the other hand it is a thought-provoking

result that education is not mentioned among the future plans by the inhabitants of these institutions.

Regarding the satisfaction of children we assumed that the inhabitants of the small group homes that we involved in our research are more satisfied with the manner of treatment and a larger part of them are able to talk about their problems to their fosters than children living in residential homes. We were able to verify these assumptions as well. We examined the satisfaction of the inhabitants of the small group homes and the residential homes from various aspects and had the following results. The inhabitants of the small group homes are more satisfied with their homes and the material conditions of the homes. More respondents gave mark five during the evaluation of their homes than the inhabitants of the residential homes. A higher rate of children living in small group homes – as compared to the inhabitants of the residential homes – reported that they were involved in the decisions that concerned them and that they were not treated worse than their companions. The fact that the number of escapes is lower among the inhabitants of the small group homes than the inhabitants of the residential homes also reflects the contentment of them. This conclusion was confirmed by the interviews with the heads of the institutions. The living conditions of children are significantly influenced by their connections to the experts working with them and to the other children. Children living in small group homes consider both their companions and their fosters as helpful and open minded more often than children living in residential homes. The inhabitants of small group homes can easily talk to their problems about their problems, however the situation is the same for the inhabitants of residential homes. Earlier we thought that in the residential homes there are not so many opportunities to discuss problems because of the larger number of inhabitants but we did not find significant differences between the institutions from this aspect. The rate of completely satisfied young persons in small group homes is three times higher than the rate of completely satisfied inhabitants in the residential homes.

Regarding the spending of leisure time we assumed that children in small group homes spend a larger part of their free time with intellectual activities (theatre, movies, concerts, museums etc.) than their companions in residential homes. This hypothesis was verified to a certain extent only. By examining the frequency of visiting such cultural institutions we found significant differences between the inhabitants of small group homes and residential homes in visiting theatres, cinemas, libraries, concerts and pubs. According to our findings the inhabitants of small group homes visited theatre plays, movies and concerts more often. Among the inhabitants of the residential homes the visits in libraries and pubs were more

frequent. However in general we can say that our respondents visit cultural institutions rarely. Children in both types of the institutions spend most of their time with watching TV and listening to music. We could not find significant differences between the institutions in spending leisure time. In this respect the circumstances of children living in small group homes were not considerably better.

According to our other assumption regarding leisure time we assumed that our respondents, who live in small group homes participate in more leisure time activities and more actively than their companions in residential homes. Again, we could verify this hypothesis to a certain extent only. Both in small group homes and residential homes young people spend their free time with their friends in the institutions in the first place. So the “stay-at-home” type of activities are characteristic of them. We could find differences between the small group homes and the residential homes in the field of sport activities and participation in excursions. Inhabitants of the small group homes spend more time with sport and organize their own leisure time programmes more actively. We are driven to the conclusion that they live a more independent life, receive more opportunities to organize their independent life and this way they directly participate in the improvement of their living conditions.

In this survey we did not intend to deal separately with the situation of Roma children living in residential homes and small group homes. Yet we had to do that as almost half of the respondent children declared themselves as Romas. We consider it important to mention that according to our observations the results of the Roma children living in residential homes and small group homes were worse in almost every field that we examined than the results of the non-Roma children. More Roma children live in the residential homes that provide worse living conditions than in the small group homes. As regards their social connections they have more friends and they are more capable to talk to them about their problems than their non-Roma companions. Nevertheless it is an important characteristic of their social connections that most of their friends are their companions, who live in the residential homes and they have less friends, who live in family than their non-Roma companions. They spend most of their leisure time inside the institutions, among their friends and that strengthens their more exclusive network of connections. By examining their habits of using drugs we observed that both using alcohol and drugs and smoking are more widespread among them than among their non-Roma companions. Their results at school show that there are more over-age pupils among them. A much smaller rate of them attend grammar schools and vocational secondary school as the non-Roma children in the institutions. As regards their plans for further studies,

more of them intend to graduate from primary school only than their non-Roma companions. It can be ascertained based on our research that the situation of the Roma children living in institutions is worse in comparison with their non-Roma companions. All children, who are placed in an institution are in a disadvantaged situation but our findings show that the child welfare institutions are unable to terminate these disadvantages. These findings raise a lot of questions, which could be answered by further research.

It can be ascertained on the basis of both the data sheets filled in by the heads of institutions and the interviews with them and also the results of the questionnaire survey with the children that placement in small group homes provides better living conditions for children than placement in residential homes. Children placed in small group homes live in better material conditions than their companions in the residential homes. Leisure time activities are similar in both types of institutions, that means that the reorganization of the institutions had no significant effect on the leisure time activities. On the other hand children in the small group homes organize their leisure time activities more actively so they take part in the improvement of their own living conditions. As regards their education it can be ascertained that more children living in small group homes attend grammar schools and vocational secondary school than children living in residential homes. Their results at school are also better considering that there are less over-age pupils among them and they spend more time with learning. After examining their choice of values we can see that for those, who live in small group homes material values are less important than for those, who live in residential homes. The rate of those who tried and use drugs and alcohol or smoke is smaller in the small group homes than in the residential homes. The advantages of the small group homes can be observed by examining the satisfaction of children. There are three times more children in the small group homes than in the residential homes, who are completely satisfied with the accommodation.

As a summary we can ascertain that the situation of children living in institutions improved as a result of the changes in the past few years but even these child welfare institutions cannot provide equal opportunities for the most defenceless groups of children. Child welfare problems can be traced back to social reasons that is why the solutions must be searched there in the first place, the institutions can have a mediatory role at most

The findings of the dissertation can serve as starting points for further research. One of the possible directions of research is to examine if the small group homes can effectively support the young persons to start an independent life. One of the most important factors of rise in social position is education. As follow-up research we plan interviews with those young

people, who participated in our questionnaire survey and are successful at school, attend grammar schools or vocational secondary school or graduated already. We are looking for the answer for the question what factors helped their success at school and how could the institution, in which they lived contribute to this success. By the spatial extension of the survey to regional or national level the situation of child welfare institutions and the living conditions of the children in these institutions could be recognised better. It could make further comparative surveys possible between the Hungarian regions, what is especially justified if we consider the significant socio-economic disparities between the regions. These disparities make their influence felt in child welfare as well. It would be worthwhile to repeat this research in the framework of a longitudinal survey in a few years and focus on the changes of the children's living conditions in comparison with the previous years and what new elements will be involved into child welfare thank to the continuous development of the regulation framework.

4. Publications of the author on the subject of the dissertation

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