



Evaluation of an educational project for the development of the autonomy of life in young people leaving residential care

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ABSTRACT

One of the protection measures provided to at-risk children and young people in Portugal is residential care. Residential care facilities foster children and young people from unstructured families, providing them with conditions that may allow to enhance their full development, including their education, well-being and preparation for life autonomy. *Projet' Ar-te* is an intervention project developed at Casa do Canto, under the direction of the Portuguese Association for the Rights of Minors and the Family - CrescerSer, financed from 2012 to 2015 through the "Children and Youth at Risk" Program of Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian. The main objectives of this project were the creation of the Life Skills Development Program (PDCV) and the Support and Monitoring Structure (ESAAC) for the young people leaving residential care, in order to provide them with a close affective rear, helping to face the challenges and difficulties they encounter successively outside the residential care facility. Through ethnobiographic interviews with two young women experiencing the project for one year, the aim was to understand their perceptions regarding two moments: the residential care period and the experiences after leaving Casa do Canto through the support provided by the ESAAC Structure. The results showed that participation in the project activities provided significant moments during residential care, which seem to have an important impact on the autonomy strategies adopted by young women after leaving the facility.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics;**

KEYWORDS

Children and youth, residential care, skills, autonomy

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1 INTRODUCTION

Residential child and youth care meet specific needs and characteristics whose care constitutes a challenge in face of the demands of “[...] individualized care, multidisciplinary approaches and, often, the mobilization of additional resources and strategies[...]” [10].

It can be seen from the experience of residential host at Casa do Canto, a tendency for the presence of certain characteristics of young women in the initial residential host phase. Technical diagnoses reveal significant incidences of emotional deficiencies, emotional instability and inhibition, feelings of revolt, low self-esteem and self-confidence, aggressiveness, submission, feelings of guilt, feelings of loss and abandonment, opposition behaviors, distrust and intolerance to frustration.

To meet the identified needs, *Projet' Ar-te* was implemented, financed under the “Children and Youth at Risk” Program by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in the period between 2012 and 2015, presenting two central areas of intervention: The Program Development of Life Skills (PDCV); and ESAAC Structure (for those who leave the residential care).

The PDCV aims to improve and develop the emotional component of the foster young people, promoting the acceptance and integration of the foster care in their life stories. This emotionally regulated program is justified by the characteristics identified in the young women at the beginning of the reception in residential care home. In this sense, the domains worked are the recognition and expression of feelings, the promotion of self-esteem and self-confidence, the techniques of self-knowledge, the (re) construction of identity and the techniques of stress management and self-control. The strategies and mechanisms used include the implementation of the program Generate Social Paths (GPS) [12] and the Artistic Group (GART). On the other hand, this program includes the intervention aspect in the promotion of family and interpersonal relationship skills; personal care; risk behaviors; training and work; knowledge and use of services and other community resources; civic training; resource management; and home management.

Many young people in residential care situations grow in close contact with multiple risk factors, compromising the acquisition of personal and social skills necessary to promote their autonomy

[8]. These disadvantaged conditions are also a legacy of the very conditions of social disruption that they experienced in their natural environment and that justified their entry into the foster care residential system.

ESAAC aims to support and accompany young women after their departure from the host residence, with the aim of providing young women with a close emotional support, helping them to face the challenges and difficulties they encounter when they stop residing in the host house. Ensuring the continuity of significant support relationships is particular important for young people who have experienced prolonged periods in foster care institutions, given the scientific evidence of poor or non-existent conditions for leaving the residential environment [9, 11, 13, 14] the precipitation of the final exit for autonomy [13]; or the forced departure from the institution [11, 13].

The concept of care leavers is critically questioned by Fenton [5] when he interprets this process not as a way out, but as a loss - care losers - of a protection right that assists subjects up to a pre-determined age. In this perspective, it is not young people who leave a protection system, but it is the protection system itself that abandons those who no longer meet the requirements to be protected. Along this path, the ways of social exclusion and marginalization tend to reproduce according to family inheritance. In this sense, the implementation of strategies that aim to mitigate the negative effects of the transition to life outside the residential care context should assume special relevance.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This qualitative study aims to understand the perceptions of two young women regarding the intervention provided by Casa do Canto, during and after the residential host, through *Projet'Ar-te*. Ethnobiographical interviews were carried out with two young women - Sofia and Mariana (fictitious names), focused on their subjectivities and reflections on the educational strategies and experiences lived within the scope of the PDCV and ESAAC.

The use of biographical techniques has been adopted by several areas of knowledge, giving the possibility to know the individual and his social context, allowing to open the way for subjective perceptions about the personal, social, residential and professional contexts, and to understand the influences that they exert on each other and on the young women themselves: *"It is an option that is based on a deep skepticism about the possibility that the question and answer scheme of the traditional interview, even when used flexibly, captures in depth subjective experiences"* [6].

The interviews as conversations [3] offered testimonies that allowed to understand the perceptions about experiences lived during the residential host period and after leaving Casa do Canto, within the scope of the ESAAC monitoring. The content analysis of the interviews with the young women made it possible to perceive contributions from the different areas of intervention of *Projet'Ar-te*.

The interviewees are of legal age, left the residential care institution with the application of a measure for life autonomy, being monitored by ESAAC, at the time of the interviews. Sofia left Casa do Canto in 2012, experiencing there three months of the project,

and Mariana left in 2014, going through the various phases / levels of the project, since its beginning.

The transcription and thematic analysis of the interviews were performed using the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Learning Life Skills

Regarding the promotion of emotional regulation, with regard to the recognition and expression of feelings, Mariana identifies the dynamics established with the educators of Casa do Canto as a key factor to develop a relationship of trust and, thus, the ability and willingness to talk about themselves, about their feelings and moods. The feeling of trust is the starting point for young women to be able to share feelings: *"[...] it depends on people, the environment, the moment (...) Also on my first impression of people, of thinking 'Ah, can I speak ...? Maybe I can'"* (Mariana).

Several discursive references refer to an improvement in the dimensions of communication and interpersonal relationships in the young women interviewed. Mariana was very introverted when she joined *Projet'Ar-te*, recognizing that participation in theater activities had an influence on the improvement of her communication and interpersonal skills: *"Ah, I completely changed inside. I was the quietest person in the world. I didn't know how to speak. [...] [laughs]. It is really not knowing how to speak, not knowing how to explain, and there my language has developed a lot"* (Mariana).

The demonstration of attitudes of empathy and acceptance on the part of the educators are requirements for the young women to progressively develop the capacity for communication and self-confidence: *"[...] even if we only said nonsense or if we were children talking, they listened to us and they tried to help us develop our connection better [...] ... They never criticized us for not knowing how to do anything"* (Mariana).

The interviewee identifies clear changes that have occurred in her way of being and being during her experience at Casa do Canto. At the time of host in residential care, she is characterized herself as "Unconscious, childlike ..., stupid ... I thought I knew what life was out there, and in general. . . Ui. . . I really thought I knew everything! (...), and after a while I realized that I didn't know everything after all. . .". Mariana mentions the importance of having learned to relativize the relevance of certain situations, of stopping *"worrying about things that, perhaps, are not so important"* (Mariana). On the other hand, when asked to comment on the personal aspects she values most, she says: *"I am proud of myself. . . for not being a 'pancake person'. . .! And what is a 'pancake person' [rhetoric]. . .? It is. . . to find everything that other people think. . . [...] The lack of an opinion. And I think I have my own opinion [laughs]"*. In addition to appreciating the fact that I have my own opinion, I also value the fact that I am a perfectionist: *"If something goes wrong, I don't like it [laughs]. . . It has to come out, at least, as I like. It doesn't have to come out perfect, but it has to come out to my taste [laughs]"*. In addition, she also values the fact that she is a perfectionist: *"If something goes wrong, I don't like it [laughs]. . . It has to come out, at least, as I like. It doesn't have to come out perfect, but it has to come out to my taste [laughs]"*.

Over time, Mariana developed strategies to manage criticism and began to be more concerned with the representation that others

have of her: “Now I understand people a lot more ... they talked to me, they called my attention, and I tried. . . First, I was more or less a week silent, listening to what people said, how they spoke ... Then, I started to respond to people, then people would say: ‘Ah, ... you are more friendly!’, they said ‘Ah, ... you’re improving! Very good!’, Ready, good [laughs]” (Mariana)

On the other hand, the importance of knowing how to make relational choices is demonstrated: “I really like. . . always being on the back foot with people, because. . . I understand a lot! [laughs] [...] people, sometimes, are not what they seem and always have that dark side, that nobody will ever know” (Mariana).

Sofia builds a certain mirror, in the institution, of the outside world: “There were good people and bad people. Like outside. Outside, there are good people and bad people, and yes, I learned from some experiences I had, to recognize something that I didn’t want for my life, a person that I didn’t want for my life” (Sofia).

Stress management and self-control is another dimension of intervention in which Mariana shows transformations: “Now I am not rude to teachers [laughs]. . . [Before I was rude] For everyone. . .! [...] And now I am able to be calmer, to speak properly, so that people do not misunderstand me, because. . . I am very ironic to speak” (Mariana).

In the cases of both young women, the family network is weak, limited to one or two reference persons with whom they felt the need to maintain closer relationships: “My sister is the only person with whom I speak about my entire family” (Mariana). In the case of Sofia, the reference person is not part of the biological family, being someone who has followed her growth since early childhood: “My mother left me [when] I was little, I was months old. My father was unable, my grandmother was unable, and a lady took me in” (Sofia).

Despite the existence of external constraints, the continuity of relationships and the approach of young women to their personal networks was the focus of attention by the professionals at Casa do Canto: “[...] they always tried to keep me in touch with my father and my mother ... My mother, it was needless. My father never answered the phone” (Mariana). The importance of promoting conditions for maintaining links with the reference person outside the home, during weekends and school holidays, is evident in Sofia’s speech: “[...] my technique from the host house she let me go, other times, if I had misbehaved, I would go with a warning ... But she also noticed that it was important for me to go home. Because I was much calmer than if I wasn’t. If I didn’t, I would cry all week. . .” (Sofia).

Regarding personal care, entry into Casa do Canto allowed significant improvements in the lives of young women. Both reported effective monitoring by health professionals, namely in consultations of various specialties: psychology, neurology and nutrition. In relation to food, Mariana reported that she was accompanied in the search for solutions for physical conditions that worried her and, in addition to medical monitoring, she was provided with a different treatment at home. In this case, the change in eating habits was seen as positive, it was gradual and is still maintained today.

In terms of risky behaviors, Mariana reveals that she does not maintain this type of behavior, despite having consumed psychoactive substances during her stay at Casa do Canto, mentioning the reasons that led her to these experiences: “It was never due to influence. It was more, I don’t know, out of sadness ... For thinking that my life sucked ... That stupid closet phase [laughs]...”. Professional

intervention in education for healthy living habits is understood as a regular institutional concern: “. . . there was a SICÓ gentleman there to talk about sexuality several times. . . and that’s it. . . Other lectures, by chance, were also technical from there” (Mariana). However, despite the strong incidence of preventive actions for risky behaviors, it is not always possible to achieve the desired results on the part of all young women: “[. . .] so many training courses we had! This [alcohol, tobacco] and contraceptive methods, these things [...] It is important! But that, later, are actions that we must control. We have the base ... now the rest ...” (Sofia). In her speech, Sofia shows that, despite these actions, she continues to maintain some risky behaviors.

Mariana, in terms of training and work activities, experienced retention in the 10th year in a course in the management area, having the support of professionals to follow the path that most motivated her: “They were the ones who helped me to change my school. They never stopped me, they never questioned that, too. They said ‘If you want to go, go, and we’ll help you change schools. As long as you are well, if that’s what you want’ . . .” (Mariana). Casa do Canto followed the reorientation of the training objectives of this young woman, who currently continues her training in the arts.

Sofia had a course of education in a professional aspect: she attended an Education and Training Course, which was followed by a course in Tourism at a professional school, which corresponded to her taste for table and bar service. In this sense, she reveals that she has always been supported by the professionals at Casa do Canto, having completed the course two years after leaving the house. Despite having had some professional experiences, the recent experience of motherhood brought significant changes: “[...] I was at a barbecue here, then it closed, when she reopened, now, they invited me to go there, but as I was pregnant, I didn’t go, so I continued to work where I was [...]. And so, it was. And now, look, I’m a mother. Profession: mother! [laughs]”.

In the scope of acquiring knowledge skills of services and the community, as well as in terms of civic training, the interviewees point out differences in relation to the past. Sofia recognizes a knowledge of community services and institutions that were previously unknown to them: “We know other institutions; we know other realities. [...] Going to the bank, because I didn’t go to the bank, nor did I have a bank account. . . [...] going to the supermarket [...] These little things, it was at the host home that I learned” (Sofia). Mariana reports a similar experience: “[...] working with the ATM, I didn’t know either. . . Having a bank card, making a bank card. . . Everything from abroad. . . like this, public institutions. . . I never went anywhere. . . They were who helped me in everything” (Mariana).

Casa do Canto allowed the progressive autonomy of young women and their opening to unknown situations. Asked about the way she proceeds in contact with human resources in the community, the young woman explains about the strategies she uses: “I don’t know where the address changes, can you help me?” [Laughs] Because before I don’t even help myself asked...” (Mariana). This need appears to be more urgent in the period before leaving the institution: “In the past few weeks, I just asked ‘Please take me to the Health Center to find out how I ask for an appointment, how it is that I do this’ . . .” (Mariana).

In her speech, Mariana positions herself in relation to the management of monetary resources. At Casa do Canto, she tried to

maximize the pocket money she received: *“It was twenty euros a month. Because I didn’t spend anything ...! [...] I saw my friends buying bread and cakes at the bar, and I didn’t think it was necessary, because I could bring them from home. So, I was going to save five euros in a week, maybe.”*

Sofia recognizes the difficulty of money management that characterizes her. As a savings strategy, she describes the role of Casa do Canto in education for the management of monetary resources: *“[...] we had savings, and that was it, they taught me how to spend it here, there. . . [...] and I still managed to buy some pieces, because I loved to buy clothes. . . I still like to buy clothes today; I like to go shopping. . .”* (Sofia).

Some of the strategies used in the implementation of the *Projet’Ar-te* activities are differentiated by the motivating dynamics in the acquisition of skills. When encouraged to think about an activity in which she participated in order to create skills for home management, Mariana readily identifies:

“[...] the [activity] ‘housewives not desperate’ [laughs] [in] that [the young women] had to go, as little time as possible, iron an ironed sweater as it should be, or a shirt, some pants ... then they had to run to the bedroom to make the bed ... with the cover, the sheets, everything ... Then, run to the kitchen, to wash a glass, a plate and cutlery ... And then I had orders, first it’s the glass, then it’s the cutlery and the plate, because of the fat [. . .]” (Mariana).

This activity included informative sessions on the respective know-how: *“[...] we had lectures on how to wash the dishes, what is the order [for washing the pieces], how to make a bed and how to iron a shirt”* (Mariana) and the awarding of prizes to the winners, which motivated the young women to fulfill the proposed tasks.

About tidying and cleaning the home, Sofia says that all the skills she has developed at Casa do Canto: *“[Before going to the House] I didn’t even make the bed. . . [...] I started making the bed, put it the washing machine ... cleaned the bathrooms and the salon, which I did at home ... [I didn’t do]”* (Sofia).

The clothes treatment was learned in a gradual way, with greater responsibility for young women in preparation for autonomy of life outside the home: *“[...] we put our clothes in the wash, and that’s it, we were always careful to putting black and white [clothes] separately, we also always had a monitor there to see what we were doing ...”* (Mariana). These skills have an echo in the autonomous life that begins after leaving the institution: *“Since that talk about clothes that every time, I put clothes to wash, I hang my shirts on a hanger. The marks were always all ugly, and now I always put them on a hanger”* (Mariana).

The skills of preparing meals were promoted individually and taking into account the previous skills of the young women who, at the same time, had the responsibility of preparing the meal for themselves and for the other young people welcomed in their group: *“We had to cook a meal. We also had the monitor there to see, from time to time, and helped those who didn’t know the least, because I didn’t know anything [laughs], [...] I know more than what I knew, but it was also there that I learned the that it was a stew”* (Mariana). The preparation of these meals was guided by the institution’s menu, whereby the young women accompanied the exits to make the necessary purchases at the supermarket: *“We had a table, and we had the menu, so we had to cook what was on the menu. But I*

liked to cook, I loved it. I liked cooking more than washing up! That, even today...” (Sofia).

Asked about the application of these skills in autonomous life, the young women show their maintenance differently: *“[...] I have to know how to cook for myself! [...] I’ve made stewed chicken ... [...] pasta, I’ve made rice, I’ve done steaks with mushrooms and chips [...] Beans with tuna, those quick salads ... peas, sausages . . . Cooked fish, salmon”* (Mariana).

Sofia says that, in this aspect, she is faced with the difficulty or lack of motivation to cook only for herself, using a small network of friends who have helped her overcome this challenge: *“[...] sometimes, I don’t cook so much, why? [...] Because it is only one person, then it becomes boring. It is often just for you. So, eat alone ...”* (Sofia). One of the difficulties felt by Sofia when she left Casa do Canto was the adequacy of the skills developed at Casa, where she had to take into account the quantities needed to cook meals for a large number of young people, compared to the new context of life autonomy, where he started to cook just for himself: *“[. . .] I knew how to make a shopping list, but I didn’t know how to guide the quantity I would need. . . just for me. Because there, they make quantities for many people and ... [...] I had to learn”* (Sofia). The lack of motivation in cooking just for you may be related to the need, felt by Sofia, to be surrounded by other individuals, which contrasts sharply with being only characteristic of her new family context. For this young woman, it seems to us that mealtime is an hour of sharing and it does not make sense that it is not so. Mariana, who does not transmit special dedication to the act of cooking, continues to prepare her meals, seeming to attribute a different meaning to it, more compatible with the simple need to eat.

3.2 Support and Monitoring in Autonomy

The final phase of residential care host was felt by both young women as a period of great anxiety, with both the desire to leave the house and the uncertainty of what autonomous life would be. In this regard, Sofia says: *“And I felt prepared! And everyone said to me, even those who were closest to me, but I even said: ‘But am I not ready?’”*

The young women interviewed joined ESAAC before turning 18 and before leaving the host home. In the period of preparation for life autonomy, both had support to find accommodation close to the training and work areas in which they were inserted. When she left the host home, Sofia attended a professional training course and worked part-time in the restaurant business, while Mariana attended the 12th year of schooling. Both left with the application of a measure of Support for Life Autonomy.

In order to mark her departure from the house, Sofia referred to the preparation of a farewell dinner that was a very significant milestone for the young woman:

“So, I asked Dr. . . to make a dinner as I liked, with everything I liked! It was lasagna, it was my favorite dessert, and on that day ... do you think we all left there crying ...? All. Almost all ... those who did not cry ... little was missing. Because ... And I said, ‘I left here, it wasn’t with technicians or monitors: I left here with friends’. And this is very important ... that you leave there with a bond of friendship. And that, for me, was very good”.

Regarding the ESAAC follow-up process, the young women mentioned the existence of contacts with the reference person chosen from the institution's team. In the case of Mariana, contacts are maintained with the reference technique and with a monitor with whom she has an excellent relationship: *"[...] there was that thing [...] of being professional and not being there directly to me, but I was always curious to know her better. He is really a very good person and did an excellent job with me and with all those who passed through her hands"*. In this sense, it seems clear to the young woman that contacts can occur whenever she wants, stating that their periodicity *"It's free: when I need it, I call, when they need it, call me"* (Mariana).

Despite losing contact with the chosen reference person, Sofia maintains contact with three professionals and reports some established contacts and a certain security due to the availability expressed by a professional:

"[...] sometimes Dr. ... calls to see if everything is fine, if I need anything [...] She has my number, I have her personal number. . . When I was at the house, I didn't have one. (. . .) Now, when I left the house, she gave me her personal contact. . . , she said: 'If you need anything, you have my personal contact. . . ' She asked for my contact and I gave it to her. And later she called me so we could talk for a little while, there, there is no one. . . cut the connection" (Sofia).

Remote contacts are made by mobile phone, e-mail and social networks. Although they have access to the official channels of the host institutions care, the young women seem to prefer to use private contact channels, generating greater privacy and trust in the relationship with the people of reference: *"[...] at the time I was with that thing: 'Ah, be friends da Casa [on Facebook], this is ridiculous, of course I will not accept the request, you will stay here aside', but I do not know if I later accepted it"* (Mariana). From the Casa do Canto Facebook page, the young women do not know who, in fact, is communicating and who has access to the messages exchanged.

Regarding face-to-face contacts, both interviewees revealed that they had face-to-face meetings exclusively in the residential context. Sofia went to the house only once, as part of Youth Day activities. In this regard, he says: *"We haven't been together for a long time, because I was also working, in the summer. . . and then [his son's name] was also born, but. . . we called, sent messages via Facebook"*. Mariana says she was at Casa do Canto recently, having been invited to a party through ESAAC. He said that he had fun, but he missed other young women who have already left the House, advancing possible interpretations for that absence: *"I think transportation is not a problem. [...] If there is anyone who really wants to go, because the Casa do Canto House could perfectly come and pick them up from Pombal or Leiria ..."*.

Regarding the support provided by ESAAC, importance is given in helping to find accommodation, and both young women reported moments when the psychosocial support provided seems to have been relevant to their well-being after being welcomed: *"[I seek support for] Unburden. I love talking to her"* (Mariana); *"[...] call to find out if everything is fine, if I need anything. . . Now, when they heard that I was pregnant. . . they were always very dear, they gave me a lot of support"* (Sofia). For her birthday, Sofia said she received a message from the person of reference, but Mariana showed some discontent at not having received any contact from the House

and reveals some difficulty in asking for help but points out that the House has supported her in articulating with certain services (Health, Social Security, School, among others).

In general, the young women interviewed seem to be satisfied with the monitoring provided by ESAAC. It appears, however, that Sofia seems to have had a more difficult adaptation to life outside the House, due to the feeling of being alone: *"[...] when we come out [...] . . . how can I to explain ...? [...] When we come out, we are alone ... and there are certain things that, perhaps, we could have learned a little more"*.

4 CONCLUSION

Young people who leave foster homes face more challenges in their autonomous life processes than those who have never experienced residential care [12]. These challenges are linked, at the outset, with the reasons that led them to enter the promotion and protection system and to residential shelters. Even if it is more prolonged, residential care cannot be constituted as an alternative way of life, being a provisional response until a definitive solution is found [8].

There is no single way to promote autonomy in residential care settings. However, there is recognition of the importance of investing in support and monitoring programs for life autonomy [2, 7], as they can translate into real gains for young people, in terms of personal and social skills, after leaving the host houses. The importance of developing personal and social skills is also related to the reconfiguration of the host houses and their approach to family models as spaces where the participation of young people is considered in the activities of daily living.

These skills, as well as the stability of the residential context in which the young women are inserted [4], the understanding of their own life trajectories, training and professionalization and the promotion of community participation are important intervention dimensions for the success of their successful autonomous paths.

There is a whole work as a gradual process, which takes place over time, which must be done, in various dimensions of young people's lives, until real autonomy of life is possible [1]. In this sense, emotional regulation is the basis for building a process of autonomy. Proje't Ar-te integrates this component as a vital dimension, since self-esteem, trust, interpersonal relationships and the management of stress and self-control are highlighted, in the voices of the interviewees, as significant acquisitions during their stay in the institution and after they leave.

From this study, more focused on the subjectivities and reflexivity of young women, there seems to be a need for the young women to be freed from the reception system, which coexists with feelings of helplessness and loneliness. The implementation of Proje't Ar-te seems to empower young women in terms of life skills and transition to autonomous life and guarantee them the support provided by ESAAC, increasing the chances of opportunities for a safe exit from home. In this sense, it will be relevant to guarantee the continuity of the monitoring and proximity work provided by structures such as ESAAC, which is configured as a psychosocial support response to mitigate the risks associated with the critical transition periods between residential care and life autonomy.

It would be worth thinking about promoting a specific study where it was investigated how residential care practices influence life trajectories and identity changes of the subjects being hosted.

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