

Academic Expectations: A Critical Analysis of Residential Care for Female Adolescents

Authors: Marília Favinha & Cláudia Chambel

Abstract

Residential care is a transitional life context, by nature protective and vital, in which the youth's superior interest must be guaranteed, following the current Portuguese legislation for the protection children and young people. According to (Muller et al., 2009 Nardi, 2010 Raffaelli & Koller, 2005 Robbins & Bryan, 2004), there are still few studies that have focused on the expectations of adolescents in institutional, residential care (Gonçalves Zappe et al., 2013). Residential care often generates less positive beliefs among children and young people, “(...) thus restricting the relationships of social acceptance that are reinforced by institutional stigma, which, according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, may constitute a source of change in the child's trajectory.” (Mota, 2008, p. 92). So, adolescents' experiences have influenced their development process, which implies responsibility for residential care professionals for constantly learning and questioning their intervention methodologies. Starting from the logic that academic expectations are directly related to the promotion of academic success, “The valence or relevance of the ‘future time perspective’ variable indicates the value of a certain object or life domain in the future.” (Peetsma, 2000, p. 178). In this sense, the academic component is a vital axis of the projection that adolescents can make of themselves in the future, and of the capacities and competences that will allow them to elaborate their life project, the premise of this study is to contribute to the accomplishment of critical analysis on the academic expectations. The investigation is a case study using a qualitative methodology as “ (...) case(s) under study, shedding light on the problem in which they fit and, even, producing new knowledge about them.” (Morgado, 2018, p. 63), in this case, the academic expectations of female adolescents in residential care. “The tradition of qualitative research in social sciences essentially consists of studying and interacting with people in their field, through their language, without resorting to a distance that would lead to the use of symbolic forms foreign to their environment (Gauthier, 1987, p.32).” (Lessard- Hébert et al., 2012, p. 47). For the completion of the study, residential care internal documents that reflect the typology and organisation of professional practices in the school area were analysed, and interviews were carried out with residential care professionals and adolescents to respond to the established objectives “That is why it uses a variety of information collection techniques (observations, interviews, documents)” (De Bruyne et al., 1975, p.211)” (Lessard-Hébert et al., 2012, p. 54). The objectives were to identify instruments for recognising and analysing academic expectations and interconnecting their use with the processes for promoting academic success developed in residential care. Also, to create among the professional teams a dynamic of critical and reflective analysis, search and sharing of good practices from the perspective of the ecology of human development. With the results obtained, it was concluded that, since the instruments for recognising academic expectations are not in use, they are measured with the adolescents through other systems, but only partially by some residential care professionals. Nevertheless, all professionals value academic expectations and describe the positive impact they have on the school process of adolescents, as well as the importance and potential of working collaboratively. Thus, in addition to the conclusions, it was possible to propose suggestions for improvement that may be implemented to achieve academic success.

Keywords: Academic Expectations, residential shelter care, adolescence, developmental ecology, academic success.

Introduction & Literature Review

Historically, the promotion and protection of children at risk were based on a restricted view of childhood, considered merely a preparatory phase for adult life, emphasising discipline and submission to adults, a charitable response focused on survival and neglecting integral development. According to (R. et al., 1998, p. 19), "Issues such as respect for individuality, personality formation, special needs, aspirations, motivations or interests were generally completely ignored."

With the implementation of the Republic, inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity), a new perspective emerged, with political and social concerns regarding the protection and promotion of children. At the beginning of the 20th century, Portugal experienced significant changes in child protection through the "Child Protection Law" in 1911, under the responsibility of Father António Oliveira (Poiares, 2010). In this context, the Tutoria Geral da Infância was also established, the first juvenile court, which introduced intervention measures such as internment in "houses of correction" and "reformatories", considered to be actual custodial sentences (R. et al., 1998).

In the 20th century, the social sciences, especially pedagogy and psychology, played a crucial role in changing the model of child development, broadening the perspective of intervention. The Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1959, outlined ten fundamental principles for the proper development of children in society (Varão Pereira, 2021). Despite its effectiveness in public policy, a significant milestone came later with the social and cultural dissemination that made effective societal changes operational (R. et al., 1998).

In 1962, the Juvenile Guardianship Services and Observation Centers linked to the Central Juvenile Courts were established in Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra. The Juvenile Guardianship Organization, initially published in 1962 and revised in 1978, marked the beginning of preventive interventions and highlighted the crucial role of the family in the intervention process (Cansado, 2008).

The revision of the Juvenile Guardianship Organization in 1978 further highlighted the importance of the family in protecting minors and implementing judicial measures (Cansado, 2008). In 1989, Portugal ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a "(...) decisive milestone in the recognition of the social category of childhood, the first international instrument adopted after the end of the Cold War that includes not only civil and political rights, but also economic, social and cultural rights (Fernandes, 2009; Tomás, 2011)." (Carvalho, 2013). One of the essential points to note is that, unlike the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child contains binding legal obligations rather than merely moral commitments, so its impact has made the direct intervention of state bodies and civil society entities more significant. The Convention establishes through the concept of universality, evident in Article 1, that all children, defined as all human beings under the age of eighteen, unless national law confers the age of majority earlier, must have their rights protected by the State, guaranteeing their healthy development and respect for the rights of caregivers (UNICEF, 2019). The state is obliged to protect children against discrimination and promote their rights. It is responsible for ensuring that all decisions about children are in their best interests, when necessary, in place of parents or other persons responsible for them. Children must be provided with all the conditions for healthy development. For this, it is necessary to respect the rights and responsibilities of the child's caregivers (parents and extended family). The fifty-four articles are divided into four categories: 1) Rights to survival, 2) Rights relating to development ; 3) Rights relating to protection; 4) Rights to participation (UNICEF, 2019).

It was therefore necessary to create regulatory structures, such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child or, in 1996, the Interministerial Commission, to strengthen cooperation between the Ministries of Justice and Social Solidarity, initiating a legislative reform that resulted in the Educational Guardianship Law (Law no. 166/99) and the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People at Risk (Law no. 147/99) (LPCJP). The Educational Guardianship Law aims to educate young people in the law. At the same time, the LPCJP regulates the protection of children or young people at risk, emphasising the duty of society and the state to protect the family and promote the integral development of children who are orphans, abandoned or in adverse family environments (Carvalho, 2013). The Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People (CPCJ), described by Alves (2007), are non-judicial entities with functional autonomy, made up of representatives from civil society, social security, health, and education, among other entities, which intervene to ensure the rights of children and young people at risk, and can adopt protective measures when necessary (Rodrigues, 2016).

The 1990s saw a consistent evolution in the regulation of foster care for children and young people in Portugal: the Organic Law of the Institute for Social Reintegration (1995), the creation of the National Commission for Children's Rights (1996), the implementation of the National Network of Temporary Foster Care Centers (1997), the regulation of the operation of Children and Young People's Homes (1998), which became obsolete in 1999 with the publication of the LPCJP. It was during this decade that foster care was renamed Temporary Reception Centres (CAT), Children and Youth Homes (LIJ), Autonomy Apartments (AA), Residential Homes, Life Support Centres and Support Homes. Law no. 147/99 also distinguished between short-term foster care (less than six months) and long-term foster care (more than six months); depending on the expected length of foster care, the institutions had different operating models and different types of intervention.

It was with Law 142/2015 that Institutional Foster Care was renamed Residential Care (RC), which reflects the paradigm shift in the same way that it was no longer called a Foster Care Institution but a Foster Home, even though they can be "(...) "specialised units", listing, by way of example, homes "to respond to emergencies", homes "to respond to specific problems" and "autonomy apartments". (Delgado & Gersão, 2018, p. 123).

The current child protection system is based on the LPCJP, as amended by Laws 31/2003 of August 22, 142/2015 of September 8, 23/2017 of May 23 and 26/2018 of July 5, and Ordinance no. 450/2023 of December 22.

In the latest Casa Report available, on November 1, 2021, 6,369 children or young people were living in RC at the time of this research. Still, this number represents less than half of the situations of danger signalled in the country on the same date: "On November 1, 2021, 14,495 situations of danger were identified that prove to be determining factors in entering the foster care system" (ISSIP, 2023, p. 43).

Regarding the educational situation of children or young people in foster care, 92% were involved in educational and training responses, focusing on their school career and academic success. The distribution of the various educational and training reactions allows us to infer that most attended professional courses, followed by Regular Education - general/Scientific-Humanistic Courses (ISSIP, 2023).

According to Law No. 142/2015, the second amendment to the PCJR Law (147/99 of September 1), Article 50, RC takes place in Shelters (CA) and follows socio-educational intervention models appropriate to the children or young people. Article 4 of Decree-Law 164/2019 of 25 October presents the guiding principles of the RA measure: Individualization; Adequacy; Normalization; Participation and

listening; Privacy; Diligent intervention; Preservation of parental and fraternal bonds; Co-responsibility of the family of origin; Inter-institutional collaboration.

Following an ecological model of intervention in RC, the needs of children or young people include education, emotional and behavioural development, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation and the capacity for autonomy. Oliveira- Formosinho, Araújo and Sousa (2002) suggested that AR represents a change of context with ecological issues and evidence of impact on development (C. Mota, 2008). Proximal Factors are essential, as positive support during foster care improves attachment and self- efficacy. Institutionalisation can be a risk or protective factor, depending on protective factors that modify the response to hostile environments (C. Mota, 2008).

In RC, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is helpful for diagnosis, planning, intervention and evaluation. At a micro level, being welcomed corresponds to the child or young person's need to develop a sense of belonging to a new home and to integrate and appropriate the house as a familiar space "(...) which should be (...) a therapeutic environment (...), which promotes change towards secure attachment patterns." (Cairns, 2002 apud Delgado, 2009)." (Fi. Clemente, 2019, p. 19).

At the meso level, the relationship between RC teams and the family stands out. The Exo level deals with significant events that impact biological families and their social, economic, or cultural context to return them to their families of origin. At the macro level, "(...) the influential cultural and ideological patterns that identify values and beliefs about families and foster care (Delgado, 2009) are highlighted" (Fi. Clemente, 2019, p. 19).

Bruce Perry (2002), a well-known neurologist who has worked on the neurological impact of trauma on children who have been victims of abuse and neglect, says that in the educational field, the RC should develop practices that encourage children or young people to take an interest in teaching and learning processes and motivate them towards the future, from an academic perspective. In Portugal, there is not enough data to conclude school (in)success in the RC population, apart from the impact factors already identified in the educational literature, such as "(...) demographic variables, the individual's personality, learning difficulties, personality problems (achievement and disciplinary behaviour), school performance, disinterest and intelligence (Morgado & Silva, 1999; Amado et al., 2003; Dell'Aglio & Hutz, 2004; Zetlin et al., 2004; Silva & Duarte, 2012)". (Fi. Clemente, 2019, p. 24). This requires that interventions in the context of RA cover the educational area from an ecological perspective of development and a systemic model, bringing together the maximum number of agents in developing educational projects Abrantes & Veloso (2013), (Fi. Clemente, 2019). Burrell (2003) apud Zetlin et al. (2004) advocate intervention in four areas: Stability of educational placement (maintaining the educational establishment, if possible); Educational rights and opportunities: Informing children and young people about all the educational possibilities so that they can make decisions about their future; Support and links between systems: Providing children and young people with all the means of support to overcome any difficulties experienced during the teaching-learning process; Quality of the educational program: Curricular programs with diversified, contemporary and future-proof content (Fi. Clemente, 2019).

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by physical, psychological, and social transformations. According to Aberastury and Konobel (1981), this period begins around twelve for girls and fourteen for boys. It lasts until age twenty-one for women and twenty- five for men (Anjos, 2010).

This period is crucial for the development of personal identity and the adoption of moral values. This study adopts the ecological perspective of human development, considering changes throughout life as a complex process influenced by the dynamic interaction between the individual and the various

surrounding environments. Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (1998) bioecological model integrates the Time, Person, Process and Context (PPTC) dimensions, considering that development varies from individual to individual due to individual characteristics in a given time and context (Senna & Dessen, 2012). The model is based on Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development and was influenced by Kurt Lewin, Vygotsky and W. I. Thomas (Assis et al., 2021).

The bioecological model understands that the context interconnects four systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem. The microsystem is the immediate environment where the proximal processes supporting development occur, including behaviours, roles and interpersonal relationships (De Antoni, 2000). The mesosystem aggregates the interrelationships between microsystems, such as the relationship between family and school (Assis et al., 2021). The exosystem refers to environments that indirectly influence the individual, such as the parents' work environment. The macrosystem involves culture, beliefs, and ideologies that affect all the other systems. This interaction creates a systemic platform where development, called ecological transitions, is understood as a set of changes that require self-organisation throughout life.

Foster care is often synonymous with a family past marked by parental absence or neglect, representing a break with attachment figures. "It is not strange, therefore, that for them the institution is a symbol of a last resort, almost as if they were trapped in a place where they did not choose to be." (C. et al., 2008, p. 372). The child or adolescent is forced to experience a new reality stemming from a past of parental neglect or absenteeism, causing emotional, physical and psychological damage (C. et al., 2010). Siptz (1945) concluded that institutionalisation and separation from the mother triggered a regression in development, but not all individuals react similarly. An unstable relational base complicates the fostering process, but some young people reorganise themselves emotionally and create persistent emotional relationships with significant alternative figures.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (1979/1987) argues that undoing the adverse effects of foster care depends on adequate environmental and relational conditions, including a new attachment figure and the possibility of developing activities (Martins, 2004, p. 322).

Adolescents in care exhibit self-defence strategies in the face of suffering and are assessed by behaviours of isolation, insecurity, apathy, reactivity and aggressiveness.

According to Strecht (1999), it is essential that positive expectations are promoted in all areas of the adolescent's life during their stay in residential centres and that relationships in the CAR context are therapeutic, respectful of individuality, and value the context of origin (Martins, 2004). CAR professionals must have the skills to respond to adolescents' emotional states during foster care, integrating their expectations for the future into their life projects.

Various studies list expectations of the future as a protective element in adolescent development. Conjectures about what one wants to be in the future guide behaviour, punctuate choices, and encourage commitment to activities that foster idealisation of the future, according to Beal & Crockett (2010; Nurmi, 1991; Sunderberg et al., 1983), mentioned in Gonçalves Zappe et al. (2013).

The authors Locatelli, Bzuneck and Guimarães (2007) understand expectations about the future as a preview of goals decided in the present, to be achieved in the future "(...) referring to the degree and manner in which an individual's chronological future is integrated into the present living space using motivational processes." (Gonçalves Zappe et al., 2013, p. 92).

Notwithstanding the importance of intrinsic motivations, motivation is partially intertwined with goals, "Without goals and therefore without aspirations, the behaviour would not gain direction, it would plunge into inconsistency." (Veiga et al., 2006, p. 4154). Several studies attribute the setting of goals to a causal reason that conditions individual behaviour in search of the achievement of self-proposed goals, "The decision to set goals, and the method used to do so, is associated with the development of plans, the choice of strategies and resources, with implications for effectiveness, motivation and learning (Simmons et al., 2001)." (Veiga et al., 2006, p. 415). (Veiga et al., 2006, p. 4154). Bandura (1986) considers that from the reciprocity between individual and contextual factors, each person creates their own beliefs and expectations, "(...) social learning takes place due to continuous interactions involving cognitive, behavioural and contextual aspects." (Veiga et al., 2006, p. 4155). Each person observes and creates reference models to self-evaluate their actions in their context. This process is called "reciprocal determinism" by Bandura and is the basis of social learning theory (Veiga et al., 2006). In adolescence, it is yet to be expected that future aspirations will be very defined and stable. At this stage of development, social and family involvement allows them to have aspirations, but only with the development of self-knowledge will it be possible to have greater discernment to stipulate them, according to Beal & Crockett (2010) (Gonçalves Zappe et al., 2013).

Academic expectations predict successful school results, and likewise, adolescents with a future orientation exhibit less risk-taking behaviour, as various studies have shown (Gonçalves Zappe et al., 2013).

Marjoribanks' research (2002, 2003) examined adolescents' academic aspirations and young adults' educational skills according to personal characteristics, family background, and school results. They concluded that these three variables correlate with adolescents' expectations according to the ethnic group they grew up in (Veiga et al., 2006).

The development of a study on the problem of the expectations of adolescents in residential care is relevant given that the majority of studies carried out on the future expectations of children or young people do not discriminate about the sociocultural context of the origin of the subjects, which is an essential indicator of physical and psychological development, it is necessary to carry out research aimed at young people who are in foster care (Varão Pereira, 2021). Considering the contemporary paradigm of AR, which goes far beyond caring and has established a therapeutic and stimulating culture, the general objective was to contribute to the process of promoting school success by analysing the strategies developed based on knowledge about the academic expectations of adolescents sheltered in a CAR for female adolescents. To fulfil this general objective, specific objectives guided the theoretical framework and methodological procedures.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are to identify and analyse instruments: To recognise and evaluate the instruments used in the CAR to capture the academic expectations of adolescents at the time of reception and during their stay, Knowledge of the Teams To determine the degree of knowledge that the CAR teams have about the data obtained and how this influences their professional practices; Perception of the Adolescents: To assess adolescents' perceptions of the CAR teams' knowledge of their academic expectations; Adolescents' Involvement: To verify the degree of involvement of the adolescents in the processes of promoting their academic success; Critical Analysis Dynamic: To create, together with the CAR teams, a critical and reflective analysis dynamic for the search and sharing of good practices that benefit the academic future of the adolescents.

Methodology

This empirical research uses case study methodology to understand the institutional, personal and contextual dynamics related to the academic expectations of female adolescents in RC. According to (Morgado, 2018), this approach allows us to shed light on the issues surrounding the cases studied and produce new knowledge about them. The case study methodology was chosen for analysing, describing and interpreting a specific RC context, eschewing comprehensiveness in favour of an in-depth study of that context. This study is characterised as an interpretive case study, following the typification of Anal et al. (1994), cited by (Morgado, 2018). It is a community case study focusing on a specific group - female adolescents in a CAR.

Discussion

The professional connection of one of the researchers to the context under study is a common practice in research in the Social Sciences of Education. According to (Torres & Palhares, 2014, p. 20), this choice stems from concerns experienced directly in the workplace, seeking more in-depth knowledge. In a qualitative study, different data collection techniques are commonly used, which enables a robust and multifaceted approach; in this research, two methodologies were used, one of which was documentary analysis, "Saint-Georges (1997, p.30) assures that documentary analysis is "(...) a method of collecting and verifying data that allows access to relevant sources and is therefore "an integral part of the research heuristic". " (Morgado, 2018, p. 86). The following were analysed: Portuguese legislation and statistics; internal CAR documents regulating the functioning and intervention of the CAR (regulations, guides, instruments used by psychologists); documents recording events (observation and recording documents, PSEI.

Based on the characteristics and type of data that can result from each type of interview, semi-structured interviews could best provide data for interpretation for this study. Differentiated semi-structured interviews were constructed for the technical Coordinator of the Association responsible for CAR, the Technical team, the Educational Psychologist, Social Educators, and Teenagers. To prepare the interviews, prior document analysis and literature review were used, which allowed an understanding of the specific objectives and the questions that should be asked to each participant or group of participants. This diversity postulates, "In a qualitative interview project, information is cumulative, that is, each interview determines and links to the next. What counts is what is taken from the complete study." (Lessard-Hébert et al., 2012, p. 144).

All data were subjected to content analysis because "(...) it is a technique that often has a complementary function in qualitative research, that is, it is used to «triangulate» the data obtained through one or two other techniques." (Lessard-Hébert et al., 2012, p. 144). The content analysis of the semi-structured interviews was carried out using the WebQDA computer software, with appropriate coding carried out by the previously mentioned premises.

Depending on the objectives of the study, it was considered that the RC universe is made up of the human resources assigned to it and the young people welcomed, so it was decided that the study participants should be all elements of the CAR context, so the sample coincides with the universe of the study: Technical Coordinator of the Association; the Technical Team (5 members: 1 Social Worker/Technical Director, 2 Clinical Psychologists; 1 Educational Psychologist; 1 Psychomotricity Technician); Educational Team (10 Social Educators); Team of Assistants (2 General Service Assistants); Adolescents welcomed at CAR, aged between 14 and 18 (9 adolescents).

Ethical concerns were always present, and we sought to respect the guidelines proposed by Bogdan and Biklen (1991). To guarantee the participants' anonymity, the teenagers are designated by letters (A to H), and the teams are defined by the functions and numbers they perform.

The CAR under study is part of an Association with the nature of a Private Social Solidarity Institution through a cooperation agreement with the Social Security Institute. It is a social response of a Residential Shelter for Young Women since 2008, governed by applicable legislation, Law 147/99 of 1 September. The maximum capacity is 15 young people welcomed.

Conclusion

After analysing the results, the following conclusions were reached. Currently, CAR does not use instruments to recognise academic expectations, but the objective is to implement them in the short term. Therefore, it is impossible to assess the teams' level of knowledge about these instruments. Raising awareness among professionals about the systematic use of the PSEI is advantageous, as it adds important information and can become a priority means of communication by introducing these instruments. Furthermore, academic expectations have already been worked on by the educational psychologist and some social educators with the teenagers, and all information must be registered and consulted in the PSEI. It is suggested that the work already carried out in academic expectations be considered in the choice/construction of future instruments. Still, it cannot be said that, at this moment, teams connect knowledge of academic expectations to professional practices.

After analysing the professionals' responses, it was found that they consider knowledge about the academic expectations of young women as a determining factor in conducting their intervention in the educational area. The teenagers realise that the Technical Team knows their academic expectations, while they believe the other teams only partially realise them. Given that the existing information is not recorded and consulted by all professionals, even if collected informally, the adolescents' perception is consistent with reality. This reinforces the need to use instruments aimed at academic expectations and share and consult information on the PSEI.

The work correlating the promotion of academic success and expectations is centred on the Educational Psychologist and involves all adolescents. However, the psychologist states that this work should be collaborative with all teams. The remaining teams feel excluded from educational processes, justifying this by immersion in daily routines and basic needs. Furthermore, management between the different teams only sometimes allows meetings to discuss cases.

In CAR, no assessment system allows for the correlation of academic expectations, processes for promoting academic success, and school results. Implementing such a system could systematise interventions in the area of educational expectations, promoting academic success with the collaboration of all teams. All professionals recognise the positive impact of knowledge about young people's academic expectations on their professional practices and the need to carry out interventions for adolescents' self-esteem, self-concept and self-efficacy.

Implementing a system covering all teams can standardise interventions, giving adolescents the perception of the involvement of all professionals in their school journey. All teams state that working under an extended team is essential. Although this has yet to happen, the predisposition to create a work dynamic in the school area is a fundamental initial motivating element. The Association's Coordination aims to introduce an intervention model in CAR, which includes actions aimed at academic expectations and involves all CAR teams.

There is a good relationship between the teenagers and professionals from the different teams, which is essential for joint intervention in the school area to involve everyone. All professionals have vast knowledge about the life contexts of the adolescents in care and the possible impact on the academic area, making them an asset in helping to determine future expectations, educational expectations, processes to promote academic success and support daily school, given the diverse training of CAR professionals. The PSEI is a structural and unifying document for young people's lives, allowing them to include and consult essential information. Its priority use is crucial to establish more efficient and cohesive communication dynamics.

In summary, the investigation provided incisive answers that allow teams and the Association's Coordination to analyse their practices and explore possibilities to improve the promotion of academic success in CAR. The implication of all professionals regarding the educational expectations of young people is to allow them to "be agents of themselves", which is, ultimately, the primary objective of RC: the Principle of the Best Interests of Children or Young People.

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LEGISLATION CONSULTED

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