

LOOKING FOR ONE'S PLACE IN THE WORLD-YOUTH AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION SYSTEM**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26758/13.1.12>**

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Abstract

Objectives. This article describes the situation of young people aged 15-18 who, for various reasons, have found themselves outside the educational system and do not attend day schools. For the most part, these are people from backgrounds at risk of social exclusion due to deprivation of not only economic, but also psychological and social and culturally conditioned needs. The main reasons that these young people found themselves outside the basic education system were the lack of fulfillment of compulsory schooling (truancy, failure to be promoted to the next grade several times) and the threat of demoralization or criminal acts confirmed by the Family Court. The leading objectives were: to recognize the behavioral style of adolescents dropping out of the education system; the ways in which adolescents at risk of social exclusion respond to the surrounding reality and make life choices.

Material and methods. During the period 2020-2022, the authors conducted 47 interviews with young people to observe and assess the threat of risky behaviors, motivations and changes in attitudes of individuals. The authors' used a qualitative method of data acquisition.

Results. The social isolation during Covid 19 reinforced numerous negative effects on the behaviour of young people

Conclusions. The primary findings from the in-depth interviews pointed at many areas for educational and therapeutic work. The most common were: experiencing deprivation of emotional needs from one's care and upbringing environment (including experience of violence); use of immature coping mechanisms (self-aggressive behavior, projection of guilt onto the environment, denial, avoidance).

Keywords: risk of social exclusion, adolescence, risky behavior, education system.

Introduction

This article describes the situation of young people aged 15-18 who, for various reasons, have found themselves outside the educational system and do not attend day schools. For the most part, these are people from backgrounds at risk of social exclusion due to deprivation of not only economic, but also psychological and social and culturally conditioned needs.

The main reasons that these young people found themselves outside the basic education system were the lack of fulfillment of compulsory schooling (truancy, failure to be promoted to the next grade several times) and the threat of demoralization or criminal acts confirmed by the Family Court. In Poland, in accordance with the Education Act of Republic of Poland (Prawo Oświatowe Rzeczpospolitej Polski, 2016) there is compulsory schooling, which young people must fulfill by the age of 18, while compulsory school is primary school (8 years of education). Unfortunately, not all children are able to stay in compliance with the law and drop out of their education. Although this is not a huge percentage of the population, it is steadily increasing. Poland's compulsory school completion rate, Statistical Yearbook (Rocznik Statystyczny, 2022) shows that was 92.9 in 2008/09, and only 72.8 in 2020/21). The time of the pandemic has highlighted the problem and even though the official data for this period has not yet been published, messages from many schools are alarming.

During the COVID19 pandemic, day schools mostly operated remotely (online), while adolescents residing in institutions such as the Rehabilitation Center or the Youth Training and Education Center remained under the care and supervision of educators in boarding schools, where they also pursued vocational training and online lessons in general subjects. This typical situation facilitated a series of interviews with respondents rehabilitated in correctional centers, while, on the other hand, it closed the way to meetings with several individuals, breaking the research cycle. Nevertheless, the 47-person group of respondents gave a fairly clear picture of the educational situation of young people who have fallen out of the day school system and constitute a group of people at risk of social exclusion. The COVID19 pandemic has resulted in a growing number of students not completing compulsory schooling for reasons stemming from the unusual situation in which a student is left by a parent in front of a computer screen without special supervision from the family or a teacher. Many times young people did not have the right quality of electronic equipment or the right home conditions for focusing on online activities. Families, in which learning is not a high priority, not only did not support teenagers in motivating them to study, but actually hindered them by not trying to adjust their habits to the new reality. According to Patterson, Reid and Dishion (1992) parental risk factors such as lack of maternal involvement and inconsistent discipline are thought to be linked to childhood aggression and the development of antisocial behaviour in youth.

Noises occurring in the background, uncensorious remarks, clutter or apparent inadequacy caused children and teenagers to choose not to join classes rather than reveal the behind-the-scenes of family life. Repeatedly, while sitting in front of a screen students simultaneously were playing games or browsing social media, slowly falling into the trap of the Internet addiction.

The temporary nature of the pandemic situation also resulted, in many cases, in parents, teachers, educators or pedagogues not discovering early enough the dysfunctional implementation of compulsory schooling, or the total or partial failure to implement it. Nevertheless, when the situation lasted too long, legal guardians or probation officers referred socially neglected, non-compliant adolescents to School and Educational Centers. These adolescents usually attend two

types of schools: elementary school and vocational school. Education also includes practical vocational training and apprenticeships for professions, such as gardeners, construction workers, cooks. Studying in this type of institution is the last chance for them to continue their education and improve their start in life already disrupted at the very beginning.

Material and methods

During the period 2020 - 2022, the authors conducted 47 interviews with young people, which allowed them to identify and assess the threats of developing risky behaviors, motivations and changing attitudes of individuals. The authors' long experience shows that questionnaires are not a good tool for studying this target group. The choice of research method was not accidental because, as Babbie (2003, p. 49) notes: "Both qualitative and quantitative methods are useful in and legitimate in social research. Some research questions and situations lend themselves better to quantitative methods, others to qualitative methods". Young people communicate directly that they do not like to fill out surveys, and the answers are not always relevant to the situation and the facts. This target group presents a very low level of trust in adults and is reluctant to provide information about their lives that adults would like to obtain, but social research is an attempt to understand social life(...) Babbie (2003, p. 538) said: "We want to understand the world and we want to be at least somewhat able to predict future events. Ultimately, we would like to have some idea of the consequences of our various possible decisions".

A young person functioning on the edge of the law will almost never answer completely honestly, because they do not know who will read it and whether the police will show up if they discover too much. For them, the rule "nothing about us to the police and adults" is one of the basic rules of functioning in the environment. Paradoxically, the situation resulting from the restrictions arising from the COVID19 pandemic favored the research.

During this period, day schools mostly operated remotely (online), while young people residing in institutions such as the Educational Center or the Youth Training and Education Center remained under the care and supervision of teachers in boarding schools, where they also pursued vocational training and attended online lessons in general subjects. This unusual situation facilitated a series of interviews with respondents, while, on the other hand, it closed the way to meetings with several people, breaking the research cycle. Several of the Center's wards, explaining the epidemiological threat, did not participate in many activities or even gave up coming to the boarding school, waiting to enter the adulthood and thus legally leave the educational system. In accordance with the principle of non-interference of the researcher in the trajectory of the respondent's life, the authors could not complete the data collection in the case of three respondents. Nevertheless, the 47-person group of respondents gave a fairly clear picture of the educational situation of young people who have dropped out of the day school system and constitute a group of people at risk of social exclusion. "Although there may be differences in detail depending on what the research object is, in any research scheme you will face two main tasks. Firstly, you need to identify as precisely as possible what you want to find out. Secondly, you need to determine how best to do it." It is this indication by Babbie (2003, p. 110) that has made it possible to explore the essence of the problem investigated in this publication.

Youth at risk of social exclusion

Growing up adolescents usually take actions when something interests them. Some adolescents were more willing to speak up in interviews, speaking out on specific issues that are important to them. Adolescents also flagged the biased nature of the questions in various surveys addressed to them by many institutions and the focus of their content only on addiction. They also note that it is only through this prism that they are viewed by society, and each successive survey affirms this in them.

A big difficulty is always questions about family, especially for young people who are in foster care, raised in single-parent or reconstituted families, or whose family situation is complicated. Questions about parents' or guardians' education and whether guardians talk to them or spend time with them arouse their irritation.

The situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and isolation from peers has meant that adolescents' communicative and social competencies have been significantly diminished, which is now most often reflected in respondents' reluctance to talk to therapists, crisis interveners or investigators. They often treat individual consultations with great reserve and try to "test" the researcher through provocative behavior or remarks. Using active methods and building an atmosphere of trust often allows young people to break the ice and actively participate in the research. Choosing qualitative methods is the right decision to achieve the goals and collect research material. Interviews and observations allow to capture all the important aspects of human functioning that often cannot be recorded in surveys. Nothing can replace the researcher, who personally talks and observes the behavior of the respondents. This is of vital importance, since adolescents are a group that can ostentatiously manifest their attitude towards their surroundings, adults, educators, etc., and any study is valuable information about them in the context of the observed behavior. Znaniecki (2001, p. 303) said "We must always remember, however, that the environment is a passive, not an active, condition of development and that its boundaries are fluid: for on the one hand, it is gradually incorporated into the growing sphere of action of the individual, although not completely, since not all developmental possibilities are currently being realised; on the other hand, it expands, since further developmental possibilities increase as development has already taken place".

The most valuable thing is that the young people opened up to contact with an adult. Working with their own emotions and discussions with the researchers made young people themselves eager to talk about their experiences, school, teachers, difficult relationships with family and peers. They brought up topics that they rarely talk about with adults on a daily basis, discussed them freely and without restraint.

Observation of the emotional and social development of adolescents provided a lot of relevant information in the area of risky behavior.

According to the Ostaszewski (2003) definition, risky behaviors are various activities of a person that carry a high risk of negative consequences both for his physical and mental health, as well as for his social environment.

Risky behavior is included in the broad area of social risks, which can include the following forms:

- crime (theft, burglary, murder) and economic crimes;
- pathological behavior and social conflicts;
- aggressive and self-aggressive behavior (alcoholism, drug addiction, self-harm, suicide);

- other social activities that exacerbate social conflicts.

Kazdin's (2000) observations are also worth taking into account. He is of the opinion that risky and criminal acts overlap with mental disorders and problem behaviours. Indeed, it is also not always possible to draw a clear line between criminality and individuals can easily meet the criteria for both on the basis of the same behaviours (e.g. conduct disorder symptoms).

Considering the group of the teens surveyed, the highest risk rate was for smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol and using psychoactive drugs. This is still a way of coping with stress and forms of addiction that respondents were not afraid to talk about. Their environment of their origin accepts the above addictions, and it is extremely rare for parents, grandparents and friends to point out the harmfulness of these addictions to their health and environment. Habits developed by successive generations (smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol) are supplemented by available marijuana, the smoking of which is relatively common among young people. According to Loeber (1990, pp. 1 - 42), poor child-rearing practices contribute to the development of child aggression, and then established behavioural patterns lead to the development of substance abuse and conduct disorders.

During the interviews, many respondents do not separate tobacco and marijuana smoking. In their view, both are equally harmless in their consequences, which the teens completely fail to foresee as they seem to be so distant in time.

The researchers also observed during the interviews cognitive deficits affecting young people: a lack of understanding of the world around them, a lack of readiness to change, low levels of motivation to learn and set goals, and a false picture of understanding the threats of risky behavior. Their world is dominated by virtual reality and detachment from reality, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote (online) learning.

In individual interviews, young people often brought up "difficult" topics, asking questions that, on the one hand, showed their knowledge in this area drawn mainly from the Internet and their peers, and, on the other hand, showed a picture of ambivalent behavior towards potential threats. The interview indicates that young people do not want to learn about the consequences of such behavior and the real dangers it entails. They also do not accept information about the real consequences of these dangers, downplaying them and citing false information found on the Internet. All this happens when most of them come from dysfunctional families or are at risk of social exclusion due to psychoactive substance abuse. Perhaps "conjuring up reality" is one of their defense mechanisms.

The cognitive deficits affecting young people stem from a lack of understanding of the world around them, a lack of readiness for changes, low levels of motivation to learn (not only the school one, but also "life in general") and set goals, and a misunderstanding of the dangers of risky behavior. Their world is dominated by virtual reality and disconnected from reality, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning. A huge influence on young people today is social media. However, already Znaniecki (2001, p. 140), in his sociological analysis of the influence of the media on the development of this age group at the beginning of the 21st century, noted that: "...the social upbringing of the younger generation implements unreflectively, often even reflexively and plannedly, their participation in social life and in social opinion, not allowing them to seclude themselves and condemning their lack of interest in what constitutes the subject of opinion, unless it is a matter considered illicit".

The pandemic has also increased aggression and self-aggression behavior.

The lack of support in a remote teaching situation has increased young people's emotional problems significantly. The lack of direct contact with peers and teachers has disrupted feelings of security and loosened interpersonal relationships.

Young people feel relegated to the margins of life, many have lost their self-confidence, and no longer find enough strength and motivation to take on the challenges of education and vocational training in particular. The role of the school, which was not fully prepared for the pandemic situation, plays a big role here. Remote learning exposed the weakness of the system and acted as a demotivator for young people. In the remote mode of learning, it was not possible to fully prepare and carry out preventive measures in the vulnerable groups. Kazdin and Weisz (2006) reached similar conclusions. In their view, 1. Children and adolescents face many different types of problems, 2. They often experience many different problems simultaneously (e.g. co-occurring disorders, multiple problem behaviours, school and learning problems). 3. these problems may manifest themselves at different stages of development.

The young people, in the course of their conversations, drew conclusions that in overcoming various problems they often need the help of others, but do not know how to ask for it. They pointed out that it is often difficult for them to work in a group and they do not always succeed. Lack of teamwork skills can result in the fact that even the best-planned individual goals will not be realized, and the young person will lose their opportunity. In today's labor market, the ability to communicate, make decisions, resolve conflicts and other competences, related to group work, are as important as the substantive preparation for the job.

Young people do not feel the need to recognize their own interests, abilities and limitations, to acquire various practical skills that build their sense of self-confidence and acceptance. They don't know how to do this, or they are embarrassed to ask adults, especially in the presence of peers. The family environment of these young people most often does not pay attention to their abilities and predispositions, and their interests are treated as frills rather than potential that is worth developing and supporting.

Young people lack good role models, they grow out of an atmosphere of frustration of their parents. Unemployment, failures in life, criminal acts, alcohol problems, educational inefficiency and low education are often the cause of exclusion of young people and often the entire families. Patterson et al. (1992) hypothesised that aggressive behaviour in children is caused by early, contextual experiences of parents using harsh and annoying discipline, poor problem solving, unclear instructions and poor monitoring of children's antisocial behaviour. Unfortunately, all difficulties are blamed on politicians, socio-political situations, other people and now the COVID-19 pandemic. Stereotypes present in families, where the division of social roles is based on a patriarchal style, make the concept of gender equality a completely abstract notion in these families. Alcohol, drugs or other addictions of parents, guardians and older siblings frame the behavior of young people growing up in dysfunctional families. The rhythm of life resulting from addictions, which is often chaos, becomes the norm in their future lives and results in the perpetuation of negative habits and patterns of behavior and problem-solving that are not conducive to harmonious development.

Unfortunately, young people are often victims of violence, but also perpetrators. They learn that only force and aggression give them an advantage in life. They do not feel the need to take responsibility for their behavior, and the argument of force prevails in situations where conflicts and difficulties arise. Communication in families is mainly based on brief exchanges of information, without maintaining stable family relationships. According to Lohman, Barry and Pardini (2006, p. 297) the early display of hostility has received considerable attention also because

the most persistent, challenging and violent antisocial behaviour found in adolescents most often begins in childhood rather than adolescence. In fact, childhood aggression is recognised as a much broader syndrome, manifesting itself in various forms of norm violation. Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of aggressive behaviour, different theories include gossiping, rejecting others, arguing, violence against the weak, using strong-arm tactics, giving in anger and getting into fights.

The weak link here is the cooperation of probation officers with educators and educators from childcare centers and legal guardians. Social welfare supports minors in their basic needs, but on the other hand, many times it teaches a passive attitude to life and a demanding attitude towards others. It gives the feeling that the outside world is responsible for everything that befalls a person in life. The registered lack of motivation has strong roots in this. The wards of the Educational Centers are offered a wide range of opportunities to develop their own interests, but many times it is treated as just another duty to be fulfilled. This may mean that a wide range of social and cultural needs were not born during childhood. It happens to be satisfied at a low level, most often offered by social media, supported by habits that lead to Internet addiction.

Jealousy is often the beginning of aggressive behavior toward others who are better off. Young people feel less valuable than their better-off peers, which adds to their frustration and paradoxically reinforces them in the mistaken belief that their parents are right, because the world is to blame for their problems. They often commit criminal acts (e.g., theft, robbery, burglary) in order to get funds for their dream phone, clothes, gadgets. Such behavior often leads to conflicts with the law, which end in family court rulings and the assignment of a probation officer until the age of 18.

The lack of specific interests and life plans results in a perception of the future in a small time frame, limited to the next vacation or the moment of obtaining the document of adulthood, after which "everything will be fine". They often say that they are perceived as "inferior people". Unfortunately, in many situations, by behaving inconsistently with social rules, they perpetuate this image of themselves in the environment (school, center). Adolescents build their self-image on the basis of façade external attributes, such as clothes, phone, strong peer group, use of psychoactive drugs, while rarely working on themselves in terms of personal potential, abilities, skills and stable self-esteem. The environment has taught them to develop negative potential at the expense of positive resources. It takes a lot of work to build self-esteem in them and to encourage their positive behavior, but it is possible.

Results

Findings from the in-depth interviews identified many areas for educational and therapeutic work. The most common were: 1) experiences of deprivation of emotional needs on the part of one's care and upbringing environment (including experience of violence), which results in seeking satisfaction of these needs through available means, and is expressed in a high tendency to draw attention to oneself, aggressive behavior, impulsiveness, difficulty taking into account the opinion and needs of others, accepting help; 2) the use of immature coping mechanisms to deal with situations perceived as subjectively difficult (self-injurious behavior, projection of guilt onto the environment, denial, denial, avoidance, escape from challenges and responsibility); 3) little interest in other people, their emotions and needs. Establishing peer relationships, but without closer friendships, preferring to spend time alone (resulting from repeated rejections by loved ones); 4) little insight into the causes of experienced irritation and anger in relationships with

people and the possibilities of dealing with experienced feelings in a safe way; 5) psychomotor agitation, chaotic manner of speech; 6) negativism in thinking, an expressed sense of the meaninglessness of the world, passivity and lack of a sense of agency, and little insight into the reasons for one's behavior; 7) in relationships lack of ability to set boundaries, a failure to isolate or overlook one's own needs, and an inability to ask for help (which may be conditioned by the experience of family and peer violence and the resulting low self-esteem); 8) sensitivity to social approval, a tendency to make one's opinions and views conform to what others think, and consequently an inability to communicate one's own needs and opinions; 9) little awareness and ability to express anger in a safe manner; 10) anxious affect, high irritability. Low or exaggerated levels of criticism of one's behavior; 11) trouble expressing anger, setting limits, confrontation, as well as difficulty focusing attention; 12) lack of special interests and life plans.

The lists of risk factors are sometimes quite long and varied. Their hierarchy of "importance" also varies. These factors are subject to dynamics, depending on human decisions. If there is a lack of good decisions, risk factors begin to act "automatically." Preventive practitioners have observed that the effects of these factors are cumulative. In addition, the likelihood of risky behavior is greater the more risk factors there are and the more harmful they are and the longer they last. The role of factors also depends on the child's age, developmental stage, environmental and situational conditions. Research on risk and protective factors shows that the goal of prevention should be to affect both at the same time.

When working with young people, it is worth using a variety of strategies recommended by specialists in the field of prevention in the broadest sense.

Educational strategies to help develop important psychological and social skills (ability to relate to people, deal with stress, resolve conflicts, resist pressure

from the environment, etc.). Underlying these strategies is the belief that people, even with adequate knowledge, engage in risky behavior because they lack many of the skills necessary for social life. These deficits prevent them from building deeper, satisfying relationships with people, from being successful, e.g. professionally. So they look for chemical, substitute ways to cope with their difficulties.

Alternative activity strategies that aim to help people meet important needs (e.g., success, belonging) and achieve life satisfaction by providing opportunities to engage in positive activities (artistic, social, sports, etc.). Underlying these strategies is the assumption that many people do not have the opportunity to realize their need to be active, to raise their self-esteem through success, or to develop their interests. This is especially true for educationally neglected children and adolescents.

Intervention strategies that aim to help people with difficulties identify and solve their problems and support them in crisis situations. Intervention involves accompanying people at critical moments in their lives. Basic intervention techniques include counseling, helplines, intervention sessions, and counseling. Informational, educational and alternative strategies are used at all three levels of prevention. Intervention strategies, as deeper and more individualized activities, are basically reserved for levels two and three.

The most important thing for a young person who is lost in reality and sometimes even marginalized is to strive for identity, to promote his own "I", that "I am someone". If a person does not have his own sense of identity, they will never become socially mature, and it will be difficult for them to find themselves in a society that requires readiness, flexibility and constant development. It is important in educational work to support and strengthen the self-esteem of

mentees and through the search for strengths to foster a sense of agency, which builds stable self-esteem.

Discussions

The problem described by the researchers in this publication has been pointed out repeatedly in research carried out by universities and research centres in EU countries and in international projects carried out under European programmes such as ERASMUS +.

The research was carried out using qualitative research methodology with the FGI (Focus Group Interviews) technique, i.e. a focus group interview. The research involved 3 focus groups of representatives of social inclusion institutions and 3 focus groups of young people at risk of social exclusion in the project partners' countries: Poland, Spain and Germany.

The Research Report (2016) covered the research group (15-25 years old) by age group. In the 15-18 age group, the findings are consistent with the villages presented by the researchers of this article. In the chapter entitled: Problems, the authors of the report write:

"The problems of young people at risk of social exclusion are derived from their experiences of functioning in family, school and peer environments. In addition, there are also reasons inherent in the social environment and individual personality traits of young people. Problems identified by survey participants include the use of psychoactive substances (alcohol, tobacco, drugs, substitute drugs, e.g. legal highs), the incidence of domestic violence against young people, aggression and peer violence, unequal access to medical care, developmental deficits, environmental neglect, adaptation difficulties due to cultural differences, learning difficulties and early school leaving. A new problem identified especially by German respondents is the problem of addiction to computer games and gambling..."

"...As reasons for the vulnerability of young people at risk of social exclusion, respondents of international surveys pointed to causes in the family environment, the school environment, the peer environment, the society and support system and in the sphere of personal functioning."

Conclusions

The COVID19 pandemic uncovered a number of phenomena that had hitherto been under the cover of routine behavior by both the Ministries of Education and all sorts of educational institutions. Teachers, caregivers, professional skills trainers, as well as parents followed the beaten path expecting proven, often enforced, ways of doing things from teenagers. Online learning, social isolation and educational neglect have shown that many ways of functioning have already become obsolete. They were already so before 2020, which "closed" the entire world to computer screens. However, it did not see an evolutionary process bringing even revolutionary changes in the way young people act and perceive the world. Values that lasted for hundreds of years have collapsed exchanging places with new ones. After a period of strong social activity and a focus on the success of the individual, there is a move toward individualizing learning and educating young people with respect for their differences. Depressive episodes, silent addictions, dysfunctions of the neuronal or personality system lead to changing methods of educational work. Never before has so much been said about the loneliness of children and adolescents. This has always been the most sociable age group, today much has changed due to the forced isolation. Nothing will be the same anymore, the world has changed and we have changed by being part of it. It would be foolish to overlook this phenomenon and pretend that it is just 2 years ripped from

the resume. Nothing could be further from the truth. Suicide attempts and self-harm are a topic and phenomenon that is becoming more and more common among teenagers. Seeking a way out with the help of psychoactive substances and adrenaline is the path not only of students raised in dysfunctional families. Increasingly, young people from schools and environments where the educational process is at a more conscious level are reaching for these solutions. The increasing number of children with special educational needs evaluations each year indicates that it will be increasingly difficult to look for patterns where they once were. The time for big changes in education has taken off, but are we ready for them?

The conducted research indicates that the problem of students who may be at risk of dropping out of the education system is becoming more and more serious, and the phenomena and mechanisms that emerge and operate in this group spread more widely on adolescents in the broader sense.

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