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Strengthening Mental Resilience (Mental Immunity) as Part of the Self-empowerment Process for Individuals in Foster Care Institutions as a Form of Social Maladjustment* Prevention

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the practical application of well-known, empirically validated theories and models of building resilience resources (mental immunity) during the empowerment process, as an element of preventing inadequacy among the wards of care and educational institutions (foster care). The article characterizes the specifics of the

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* Maladjustment, as understood by J. Konopnicki, is “a complex psychological and social phenomenon expressed through behavior that causes significant problems and difficulties for the individual and their environment, while simultaneously leading to a subjective sense of unhappiness” (Konopnicki 1971). Given the definitional challenges and terminological ambiguity, I adopted K. Pospiszyl’s broadly accepted definition of social maladjustment, commonly used in psychological and pedagogical literature. This definition corresponds with common understanding, recognizing social maladjustment as all manifestations of faulty relationships with others, demonstrated by an inability to participate skillfully in social life (Pospiszyl 1976). In literature on social rehabilitation, a distinction is made between maladaptation and social maladjustment as different intensities of the same phenomenon. “Maladaptation is a lighter form of behavioral disorder. It may be relatively temporary and not affect the entire personality structure, and the individual’s interactions with their environment are not completely disrupted. In contrast, maladjustment is a more severe, advanced phase of the disorder, characterized by a stronger and more lasting degree of disturbed interpersonal relationships. [...] The most characteristic feature of social maladjustment is significant difficulties or a complete lack of ability to establish emotional connections with others” (Zmichrowska 2012, p. 166).

process of becoming independent within the framework of institutional foster care, highlights the preventive potential of this process, and presents theoretical inspirations that may influence its effectiveness and efficiency in counteracting the risk of social maladjustment and marginalization. The presented reflection is the result of the author's professional experiences, theoretical studies, and empirical verifications conducted within the reality of institutional foster care. The indicated ideas can serve as inspirations for undertaking significant remedial actions in the characterized area and are also extremely important due to their practical-preventive role in counteracting the risk of marginalization and demoralization of youths leaving care and educational institutions.

Key words: foster care wards, risky behaviors, prevention of social maladjustment, mental immunity.

Working on Resources – Advantages of the Solution for the Foster Care Wards

The justification for focusing on the individual resilience resources¹ of foster care wards is rooted in their extremely challenging situations across various domains (family, relationships, school, and work), which should be considered a significant risk factor for engaging in risky behaviors. Such behaviors may lead to social maladjustment and potentially even social marginalization (Leżańska, Pilch 2018). These challenges are often a consequence of disorders and dysfunctions present in the wards' family environments, which can be exacerbated by the institutional environment of the care facility. This may manifest as learned helplessness, entitlement attitudes, dependency on institutional assistance, external locus of control, or (self-)stigmatization (Kolankiewicz, Iwański 2021; Golczyńska-Grondas 2015; Ryan et al. 2008). Maria Grzegorzewska's perspective on social maladjustment supports this thesis, stating that it encompasses children and adolescents with

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¹ By resilience resources, I mean the available assets that enable an individual or community – in this case, a resident of a care and educational institution – to effectively cope with stressors, thus promoting their functioning. These resources include all the individual's and environment's properties and cultural characteristics of the society. Resources can be both material and immaterial. An individual's characteristics primarily include their biological traits (e.g., genetic, constitutional, immunological, biochemical), psychological traits (e.g., knowledge, intelligence, attitudes), and personality traits (e.g., sense of control, sense of identity, agency, self-esteem, learned coping strategies). The resources available in the individual's environment include the characteristics of their social, economic, and physical surroundings (e.g., close relationships, social support, influences, experiences, education, money, property) (Piotrowicz, Cianciara 2011, p. 523). As Ryś and Trzęsowska-Greszta note, "in social sciences (psychology, pedagogy), psychological resilience is most often understood as an individual's ability to achieve positive development and good psychosocial functioning despite objectively adverse life conditions" (Borucka, Ostaszewski 2012; Grzegorzewska 2011, 2013; Opora 2009 as cited in: Ryś, Trzęsowska-Greszta 2018, pp. 164–165). The concept of psychological resilience "explains a person's positive adaptation despite adverse life conditions or trauma. It focuses on explaining the significance of protective factors and the mechanisms involved" (Luthar et al. 2000, cf. also: Grzegorzewska 2013, p. 42; Borucka, Pisarska 2012, p. 82 as cited in: Ryś, Trzęsowska-Greszta 2018, pp. 164–165).

behavioral disorders caused by negative environmental conditions. According to Grzegorzewska and Janina Doroszevska, a socially maladjusted person is one who, due to negative environmental conditions or pathological disorders (e.g., of the nervous or hormonal systems), has persistent difficulties in adhering to commonly accepted social, ethical, cultural, and legal norms (Doroszevska 1989; Grzegorzewska 1964). On the other hand, it is crucial to highlight the potential of the often undiscovered or unconscious individual resources that can be identified and strengthened during preventive and educational work in the care institution as part of the empowerment process.² Taking appropriate action is extremely important for the future prospects of foster care wards as it can help break the cycle of socio-cultural reproduction or the “vicious cycle of parental pathology” (Nowak 2016, p. 25), which occurs through the socialization process in their families of origin. Youth in care institutions often experience negative phenomena across various dimensions of socialization and upbringing in their natural families, which is often the reason for their placement in these facilities. Effectively leveraging the preventive potential of the empowerment process for this group is especially crucial, given that initial difficulties, such as the deprivation of needs in the family environment, impair the ability to positively resolve developmental crises and satisfy needs in socially acceptable ways. This hampers the integration of subsequent experiences, leading to increasing difficulties in psychosocial functioning (Słaboń-Duda 2011, p. 17, as cited in: Opora 2016, p. 135), which can further complicate the already challenging situations of care institution wards. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore various models of developing resilience resources to undertake the most appropriate preventive and educational actions aimed at minimizing the risk of antisocial behavior among this group of youth.

The Process of Empowering the Foster Care Wards – Theoretical and Practical Reflections

Theoretical and empirical reports that provide operationalized definitions that clarify the expected outcomes of the empowerment process are still scarce. Available data typically describe the empowerment of youth at the individual, interrelational, and community levels, treating it as a long-term process. Most often, this term refers to a young person who can more effectively achieve developmental goals by overcoming and coping with specific life events through acquiring relevant competencies, skills, and knowledge from both individual and social perspectives

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² By the process of empowerment, I mean actions aimed at ensuring that the individuals involved achieve independence and can participate in social and professional life after leaving the care and educational institution.

(Kolankiewicz, Poncyliusz 2016; Kwak (ed.) 2006; Giermanowska, Raćław-Mar-kowska 2007; Golczyńska-Grondas 2015).

Currently, the basis for discussing measures in the field of assistance to the family and child placed in foster care is the Act of 9 June 2011, on Supporting Family and Foster Care System (Journal of Laws No. 149, item 887, as amended). These regulations, as pointed out by Kolankiewicz and Iwański, express concern for the harmonious development and future independence of this group of adolescents. They aim to ensure “the protection of their rights and freedoms, [...] a stable educational environment, and assistance in preparing for independent life” (Kolankiewicz, Iwański 2021, p. 60). The process of preparing for adulthood, focused on acquiring the skills to balance personal life goals with societal expectations, is specific in many respects. In this context, it is carried out within institutional conditions, based on applicable legal acts. During its implementation, the wards which are about to become independent can (usually) count on limited support from the members of the family of origin. Given that wards of foster care institutions are a high-risk group for engaging in risky behaviors to meet important needs, and the often negative consequences resulting from these behaviors, they are vulnerable to perpetuating behaviors associated with helplessness, passivity in everyday matters, or dependence on institutionalized, professional, and non-institutionalized, non-professional assistance. Preparing youth leaving orphanages for independent life is one of the most important tasks facing the foster care system (Doyle 2007; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016, pp. 116–127).

When planning and implementing the process of empowerment, which aims to address risky behaviors undertaken by youth and their consequences that may lead to the threat of social maladjustment (Zajder, Wawryk 2022; Grzelak 2009, 2015; Ryan et al. 2008; Kozak 2007), it is crucial to consider the essence of the social assistance system, including foster care, characterized by its inherent temporariness. “Placing a child in a family or institutional form of foster care is – to a lesser or greater extent – temporary and should serve the child’s return to their family. Foster care supplements parental care, rather than permanently replacing it” (Andrzejewski 2012, p. 107). In light of these indications, preventive interventions should include appropriate education for the child’s family of origin. The measures undertaken should adhere to the principle of individualization, which involves tailoring assistance or care to the specific needs, resources, and potential of the individuals requiring it (Kowalska-Kantyka, Kantyka 2011, p. 22). The principle of personalism shifts the responsibility for the child, adolescent, and family from an anonymous group of decision-makers to specific professionals (team) (Kaczmarek 2006, pp. 3–11), which in this context, should promote the individualization of preventive and developmental offerings. The obligation to collaborate derives from the principle of cooperation among individuals and families receiving assistance or care in resolving their difficult situations (Kowalska-Kantyka, Kantyka 2011, p. 22). When designing educational interventions within

the empowerment process, it is also important to consider the bipolar nature of this process, “suspended” between the institutional environment of the facility (with all its advantages and disadvantages (Andrzejewski 2008)) and the open environment to which the foster care wards will return after leaving the facility. Those involved in the preventive and educational process should work with both the ward and their family in such a way as to enable the ward’s return to their natural social environment, which is their family of origin, as quickly as possible. This stems from the principle of respecting the child’s right to live in a family, which is expressed through the commitment of all participants in foster care to undertake all possible actions that support the child’s return to their natural family. The implementation of this principle is reflected in the obligation to enable the child to maintain emotional bonds with their family and to carry out actions aimed at the child’s return to the family (cf. Andrzejewski 2001, p. 26), as well as involving families in preventive and optimizing measures.

The provisions of the Polish Act on Supporting the Family and the Foster Care System state that an individual undergoing the educational and caregiving process, whether within family-based or institutional forms of foster care, should acquire social skills important from the perspective of the demands of independent living. This includes, for example, ethical ways of overcoming life’s difficulties and expanding support networks by establishing and maintaining contacts with family and peers. Further, responsibilities related to meeting subsistence needs are emphasized, as well as the necessity of taking actions aimed at compensating for emotional, educational, health, and cultural needs (Journal of Laws No. 149, item 887, as amended). There is no doubt that meeting these needs is crucial for the proper functioning of an individual. Unmet needs, which, as researchers indicate, are not uncommon in the lives of youth from dysfunctional families, negatively affect an individual’s daily functioning (Deci, Ryan 2000; Sęk 2014; Wójcik 2018). When young people are unable to cope with a sense of lack, they subconsciously motivate themselves to fill the void, as evidenced by various motives for engaging in problem behaviors. The way of meeting the need can, in this case, take the form of risky behaviors, which may result in a risk of social maladjustment. In the process of empowerment, it is therefore important to identify and build a hierarchy of needs. This process should take a different form for each child, as what each individual lacks depends on their socialization, school, and peer experiences, and the characteristics of their cultural, social, and educational environment, which, as research indicates, are very diverse (Kolankiewicz, Iwański 2021; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016, pp. 138–171; Kolankiewicz, Poncyliusz 2016; Ryan et al. 2008) in the case of children from foster care institutions.

The Preventive Potential of the Process of Empowerment Carried out in a Foster Care Facility

Prevention can be viewed as a form of psychological prevention, which is a set of actions “using psychological methods and means to reduce the likelihood of disturbances in somatic, psychological, and social functioning” (Sęk 2006, p. 73). According to H. Sęk, this goal can be achieved by counteracting risk factors (in this case, through temporary separation from a dysfunctional family and negative peer influences by placing the individual in a foster care facility) and by strengthening resources (in this case, by implementing an intentional process of independence that meets the needs of the foster care wards and includes elements of positive prevention). Since both health and pathology result from the interaction of risk factors and resources, “both negative and positive strategies can be used in prevention” (Sęk 2006, p. 73). I consider preventive actions those that provide individuals with an opportunity for active, engaged participation in accumulating experiences that lead to an increase in the ability to cope with potentially difficult situations related to everyday life (cf. Śliwa 2015), which seems particularly relevant for the wards of foster care facilities. The pedagogical approach to prevention emphasizes the role of a system of educational measures aimed at young people to develop their psychosocial skills, interests, and self-esteem to prevent risky behaviors and their consequences, including the risk of social maladjustment and marginalization. According to Śliwa, its primary goal is to strengthen protective factors. Preventive measures should focus on shaping and developing interpersonal skills, developing skills to choose positive lifestyles, developing and maintaining positive relationships with the social group, and developing mature responsibility, primarily carried out in cooperation with the family environment (Springer as cited in: Głupczyk 2020), which is particularly important for the wards in the foster care system. The full implementation of preventive measures should be preceded by a thorough analysis of the individual’s situation, along with a diagnosis of “the surrounding phenomena and social conditions, considering prognostic aspects” (Głupczyk 2020, p. 44). Preventive actions carried out during the independence process for residents of care facilities should include teaching adaptive coping methods that promote the optimization of future functioning (even in the case of returning to their family of origin, where the situation has not improved) based on the resources, strengths, and individual potential of the foster care ward. Maximizing the potential inherent in the foster care wards, by creating situations facilitating their identification and multiplication, should become an essential element of daily work with the wards (cf. Konopczyński 2014). Such an approach to the process of empowerment would offer a chance for a deeper transformation that is “based on identifying and developing one’s

potentials, rather than, as previously thought, the educational compulsion to change faulty attitudes and social behaviors” (Konopczyński 2014, p. 23).

Empowerment Process Aimed at Identifying and Multiplying Resources – Theoretical Inspiration

How to best to prepare the foster care wards for independent living? How can the experiences that often reinforce the belief that changing the trajectory of life is impossible be utilized? How can this be achieved when stigma becomes a part of identity (cf. Sajkowska 1999), limiting the activity of the foster care ward, depriving them of independence, agency, and making them dependent on others?

The characteristics of the family environment of foster care wards (Skowrońska-Pućka 2016, Kolankiewicz, Poncyliusz 2016, Kolankiewicz, Iwański 2021) that deserve special attention and needs that must be identified and met in the empowerment process if it is to mitigate the negative consequences associated with risky behaviors undertaken by young people, as indicated by researchers (Grzelak 2015; Szymańska 2012), and their consequences in the form of the threat of social maladjustment or marginalization.

A primary principle of the empowerment process should be the activation of good in the foster care ward, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of their functioning (Mudrecka 2012, p. 273). As Konopczyński notes, even though his reflection concerns the process of social rehabilitation, “in every person, regardless of their biographical experiences and their past or current functioning, there are developmental and creative potentials. These potentials can be developed and shaped using specific forms and methods of methodological interactions. Developmental and creative potentials should be understood as personal and social resources and predispositions that enable innovative problem-solving, meeting needs, and maintaining interpersonal relationships” (Konopczyński 2014, p. 23). In working with foster care wards, numerous opportunities should be created to identify and strengthen their awareness of these potentials as a kind of antidote to the phenomenon of (self)stigmatization (Sajkowska 1999). By enhancing the positive forces inherent in each individual, the process of preparing for independent living would create opportunities to activate significant protective factors against risky behaviors and their associated consequences.

Given the serious consequences of risky behaviors, it is worthwhile to refer to well-known and empirically confirmed theories and concepts when constructing empowerment programs. This includes, among others, the assumptions of social influence theory, including the “social inoculation” theory, which posits that a significant factor influencing adolescents’ decisions is the attitudes of their peers, and therefore they need to be equipped with competencies that make them resistant to environmental pressure (McGuire 1964 as cited in: Grzelak 2009). It is

worth ensuring the formation of internal attribution of causality and shaping the subjectivity of foster care wards, which fosters making independent decisions and engaging in independent activities. Following Konopczyński's practical guidelines, concerning creative social rehabilitation, it is possible to correct or eliminate distorted attributions "in the course of properly conducted reinterpretation of social situations, both through pedagogically created self-presentation (staging of the self in interactions) and visualization of corrected identity parameters (attributive self-presentation)" (Konopczyński 2018, p. 74). The theory of social and cognitive skills provides valuable directives, indicating that foster care wards, besides knowledge, should possess skills such as critical thinking, assertiveness, effective communication, and responsibility (Schinke et al. 1981; Gilchrist, Schinke 1983 as cited in: Grzelak 2009). The goal of the process, following the guidance of Hans Jonas (as cited in: Mudrecka 2012, p. 276) should be to develop formal responsibility (responsibility for committed offenses) and to evoke substantive (material) responsibility, i.e., responsibility for what lies ahead for the youth, thus for their future in various dimensions (educational, professional, relational, etc.). Important suggestions conducive to making effective interventions related to the independence of youth are also provided by theories of benefit assessment, including social learning theory – focusing the attention of those implementing the independence process on the importance of recognizing how foster care wards perceive the benefits and costs of their behaviors, including risky behaviors (cf. Bandura 2007). Further inspiration can be drawn from the conclusions of the theory of the influence of developmental factors, and according to them, take into account the knowledge of vulnerability to risky behavior resulting from developmental deficits that need to be addressed (cf. Erikson 2000) in the discussed case within the framework of intensive care, educational, and compensatory work intensively undertaken during the child's stay in a foster care institution. When designing the empowerment process, it is worthwhile to consider the guidelines from the theory of risk tendency, indicating that the risk factors for various problem behaviors are similar and, therefore, the primary focus should be on strengthening the social and personal competencies of wards in foster care institutions (Jessor 1987 as cited in: Grzelak 2009). Shape in foster care wards the ability to change perspective – to see the world through the eyes of others, encourage them to engage in interactions with other people by creating opportunities for this, and teach them how to establish, maintain, and nurture social relationships. Invaluable inspiration for the practice of empowerment is provided by theories of the interactive system of influences. The social development model assumes that risky behaviors (and their consequences in the form of threats of maladjustment or social marginalization) are the result of a combination of risk factors and protective factors, whose impact should be intensified in the institutional environment. This can be achieved through, for example, developing psychosocial competencies, demonstrating the role and importance of education

in an individual's life, promoting prosocial behaviors, etc. (Hawkins et al. 1992 as cited in: Grzelak 2009; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016). Youth who are confident in their value, proud of themselves and their achievements, and set educational and professional goals are likely to be more motivated to avoid risky behaviors (Grzelak 2015; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016, p. 120). It is extremely important, as derived from the idea of foster care and its fundamental principles, to consider the assumptions of the dynamic systems model (Klitzner 1993 as cited in Grzelak 2009) in educational work. It is essential to remember that risky behaviors in youth are influenced by a dynamic set of individual, social, and environmental factors. Efforts should be made to strengthen the ward's bond with their family of origin, work on improving the family's situation, encourage the establishment and maintenance of relationships with positive peer groups, and collaborate with the school and local community (Skowrońska-Pućka 2016). When creating preventive and developmental programs as part of the empowerment process, it is necessary to take into account the links between the determinants of various risk behaviors (sexual behaviors, violence, psychoactive substances). By taking into account the achievements of the concept of positive youth development, protective factors can be activated within the institutional environment. These include strengthening healthy standards of social behavior (through modeling, personal educational example), fostering bonds (between foster care wards, foster care ward and parents, new classmates, school, institution), creating opportunities for pro-social behavior and reinforcing them (for example, through the organization of various community events). This will also make it possible to support the sense of efficacy and competence, leading to the development of a positive identity, thus destigmatization, and strengthening the belief in the future and self-determination (cf. Grzelak 2009; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016; Konopczyński 2018).

In Lieu of a Summary – Some Arguments in Favor of Intensification of Preventive Measures in the Group of Wards of Foster Care Institutions

Engaging in risky behaviors (and their consequences) by youth in foster care institutions, due to their number (scale) and the range of difficulties associated with them, requires the interest of theorists and practitioners. It also necessitates actions aimed at providing assistance and strengthening the potential of individuals within the framework of the empowerment process pursued by the wards before leaving the institution (Newton et al. 2000). Youth, as Grzelak points out, “are the future of society” (Grzelak 2015, p. 19). Adolescence is a difficult time. Whether a young person succumbs to the pressure of tensions, and these are particularly numerous in the experiences of foster care wards, thus straying onto the path of problematic behaviors, social maladjustment, and marginalization, or overcomes

these difficulties, “largely depends on the support provided by the surrounding adults” (Grzelak 2015, p. 19), thereby exhausting the developmental argument. It seems that undertaking effective preventive and optimization measures as part of the empowerment process is also an important social need. The interest in and undertaking effective preventive measures is an extremely necessary and justified task if we analyze current statistics on the use of alcohol and other psychoactive substances by adolescents (not just those in foster care), look at data on their sexual activity, acts of aggression, crime, or the destruction of their academic careers, which is also evident through daily observations on the streets and neighborhoods of our cities, and increasingly drastic media reports. Taking effective measures that meet the needs of foster care wards is particularly important given the mechanism of socio-cultural reproduction they are subject to, as confirmed by the biographies of the wards and their ancestors, noted by social workers, and available research findings on the subject (cf. Bunio-Mroczek, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2010; Kolankiewicz, Iwański 2021).

Moreover, the diagnosis and awareness of various forms of neglect in their families of origin are crucial, as they define the space for preventive and supportive actions, which should be an essential element of the empowerment process. The measures taken have the potential to prevent further deprivation of needs and thus exclusion, and in the long run, the resulting risky behavior undertaken by young people from disadvantaged groups to meet unmet needs, which can lead to social maladjustment and marginalization. A well-thought-out preventive strategy implemented as part of the empowerment process, can optimize the emotional and social development of youth from dysfunctional environments. This becomes possible through the acquisition of skills in dealing with difficulties, developing healthy interpersonal relationships, and building positive self-esteem. It will become possible to improve life competencies such as stress management, conflict resolution, educational and career path planning, active job searching. Undertaking preventive measures as part of the empowerment process will foster the formation of positive behavior patterns, which can counteract the negative patterns acquired during upbringing and socialization in a dysfunctional family environment. Preventive measures should promote social integration, supporting the participation of wards of the foster care system in the local community and building positive relationships with the community.

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