

Educational Integration Strategies for Children in Foster Care – Insights for Professionals

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Abstract

Foster children in residential care centers encounter significant barriers to socio-educational integration. This study investigates these challenges, identifies the services and resources necessary to improve academic outcomes, and integrate insights from professionals with evidence from international best practices. Employing a qualitative design - including interviews with seven specialists, analysis using the Atlas.ti software, and a systematic literature review - the research examines the professionals' perspective about educational experiences of students in foster care. Based on these findings, the study proposes targeted strategies to enhance their integration into the educational system and promote their long-term social inclusion.

Keywords:

students in foster care, foster care centers, integration strategies, school integration

1. Challenges and barriers to school integration for children in residential centers: a literature review

Research consistently shows that students living in foster care exhibit the highest levels of vulnerability regarding both social and educational integration (Zetlin, 2006; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012; Frerer et al. 2013; Morton, 2019; McDowall, 2018; Rădăcină, 2022). Based on the analysis of reviewed research, two main tendencies emerge in the research on educational difficulties that characterize the most significant challenges of school integration for children in residential care. The first approach explains these vulnerabilities in terms of individual and familial factors. These manifest in adverse situations like abuse, trauma, poverty, unmet needs, and attachment difficulties resulting from the absence of a consistent caregiver (Sebba et al., 2017; Berardi & Morton, 2017). A second line of interpretation links educational difficulties to contextual factors related to the broader educational and social environment. Studies emphasize that the circumstances leading to placement, as well as the frequent transfers between care facilities, profoundly affect these children's ability to concentrate, learn, and actively participate in classroom activities (Evans & McCann, 2020).

The literature repeatedly highlights the importance of understanding the educational trajectories of students in residential care, particularly in the context of their social histories, which are often marked by many instances of abuse, deprivation, and trauma. These factors have direct effects on the cognitive,

social, and emotional development of children (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Maté, 2011; Morton, 2019). Such effects frequently manifest as difficulties with school integration and, in various cases, academic failure (McDowall, 2018).

Difficulties in school integration are sustained not only by developmental issues rooted in the adversities these children have faced, but also by the lack of specialized socio-educational services and by stigmatization from peers and teachers. Stigmatization is strongly associated with low expectations. Caregivers and teachers often display a lack of confidence in the abilities of students in the child protection system, which in turn fosters low self-expectations and poor academic outcomes among this group of students (CREATE Foundation, 2017; Harvey et al., 2015).

Thus, many times the educational experiences of these students are characterized by low academic achievement, high levels of absenteeism, frequent school changes, deviant behaviors within the school environment, and low graduation rates (Cashmore et al., 2007; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; SOS Satele Copiilor, 2020; Frerer et al., 2013; Rădăcină, 2024). Their promotion and graduation rates are lower starting from middle school, and their scores on standardized assessments are generally lower than those of other students (Frerer et al., 2013).



These challenges manifest throughout the school years and give rise to difficulties related to academic skills, self-regulation, behavioral problems, and health conditions closely associated with the stress resulting from neglect and abuse. As a consequence, school failure is observed among a significant proportion of children in institutional care (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

However, research has also identified a group of students raised in residential care who have achieved outstanding academic results. Usually, these individuals are successful university graduates.

Supportive relationships with adults, resilience, consistency, and high aspirations are key factors that have contributed to their educational success. A stable place of residence and consistent school attendance during the final years of study are also important sources of support for their school integration (Lund & Stokes, 2020).

In the context where successful school integration serves as a foundation for future professional and social inclusion, it is evident that all necessary resources should be invested in understanding the barriers that hinder academic success and in ensuring the right to equitable education for students from residential care settings.

2. Research

2.1. Research scope and questions

2.1.1. Research scope

This study brings attention to the challenges that arise in the process of school integration and to identify methods that can enhance the chances of academic success for children living in residential foster care centers, from the perspective of professionals working within these institutions.

2.1.2. Research questions

1. What challenges are encountered in the school integration process of children from foster care centers?
2. What methods increase academic achievement for children in foster care?

2.2. Description of the sample and research methods

To address the research questions, an initial literature review was undertaken to examine the fundamental characteristics and internationally recognized approaches relevant to the topic.

Subsequently, 36 interviews were conducted with children and young people aged 7 to 21 from four residential foster care centers in Transylvania, along with seven professionals employed in these institutions. The present study focuses only on the 7 interviews with professionals. All ethical procedures approved by the General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection were observed throughout the data collection process. Data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. A coding system was applied whereby each interview was labeled with the prefix "I" followed by the interview number and an identification code assigned to each participant. The analysis was conducted using *Atlas.ti* software.

2.3. Sampling

The respondents were selected using both convenience and purposive sampling, based on availability and willingness to be interviewed. The professionals - social workers, educators, and directors - were between 25 and 55 years of age and had at least five years of experience in the field.

3. Research results

3.1. Insight from professionals: school integration for children in foster care centers and socio-educational approaches

In the course of the research, seven professionals (social workers, educators, and center directors) working in residential foster care centers were interviewed. They emphasized the importance of investing in the school education of children in care and provided an overview of the children's current educational situation.

Depending on the type of residential center, professionals highlighted the children's academic performance as well as the difficulties they face in the school environment.

"The school performance of children from the center is generally in the medium to low range. They experience difficulties in acquiring new knowledge, sometimes struggle with adapting to school tasks, integrating into the group, and expressing their own opinions, ideas, or information in front of their peers." (I1)

"When they attend school, they often disrupt the class and may be sent back to the center. They frequently offend teachers, disturb lessons, and are unable to tolerate having attention drawn to them, which often leads to situations escalating in other directions." (I3)

According to professionals working in residential care centers, the academic performance of

institutionalized students varies depending on the type of center and from student to student. In public centers in particular, low academic performance is predominant. As noted by the students themselves, there are instances of absenteeism, failing grades, and, more rarely, grade repetition.

From the professionals' perspective, the factors contributing to school failure are diverse. They range from peer influence and other personal interests, to aspects related to the low quality of educational provision, the need to work to obtain financial resources, and dysfunctional behavioral patterns such as aggression or involvement in criminal activities.

"The frequency of school absenteeism is high among adolescents exhibiting behavioral disorders and risk behaviors, such as criminal activity, aggression, and oppositional conduct" (I1).

"Although they are sent to school, many prefer to wander around the school, citing various reasons, such as having mathematics first period, the class teacher not arriving, or simply disliking the teacher" (I2).

"They miss classes because they spend extended time during breaks, refuse to attend certain lessons, go to other students' classes, or remain in the schoolyard" (I3).

Professionals noted that there are cases in which students from residential care centers are victims of bullying at school and that they have, at times, intervened to stop such forms of abuse. They also observed that some aggressive behaviors displayed by institutionalized children toward their peers may serve as a form of self-defense, arising in response to insults or mistreatment experienced in the educational environment. Younger students are the primary victims.

"...the most frequent situations involve discrimination, labeling, and subsequently the passing of judgments, insults, and exclusion from the school community. There have been cases when children returned from school upset, telling me that one of their classmates had made fun of them. I discussed the matter with the class teacher/form tutor." (I1)

"Given that these children are educated alongside peers from family environments, there have been instances of bullying, including criticism directed at them." (I5)

"Children from the center have been victims of bullying, with the younger ones particularly subjected to verbal harassment, where peers have said things like, 'You don't have parents' or 'You are from the center'" (I7).

Unfortunately, instances of discrimination and aggression towards institutionalized students are still evident in the educational environment. There is an urgent need for school-based programs aimed at preventing bullying, as well as for counseling and support services for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who remain the primary targets of such aggression.

The accompanying diagrams, generated using the qualitative data analysis software atlas.ti, succinctly illustrate the findings discussed. The first diagram highlights the factors that characterize foster care students' school integration and the interrelationships among the core concepts.

The professionals interviewed also put forward a series of suggestions aimed at improving the school integration of institutionalized children and young people. These measures include psychological and educational counseling sessions, visits to higher education institutions, educational activities, discussions with individuals who have succeeded in their academic and professional paths, as well as visits to - and ongoing collaboration with - potential employers. Other useful activities proposed by the specialists were "skills development activities" (I1, I2) and extracurricular activities such as competitions and excursions. For students with disabilities, the importance of reducing study hours was emphasized in order to prevent fatigue and to help them meet educational requirements more effectively.

Other measures were mentioned that could support the school integration of institutionalized children, such as "providing financial incentives for those who attend school, consulting children about the school's extracurricular activities, organizing interactive classes on the importance of school lessons" (I1, I4, I6), and maintaining constant communication and cooperation between educational institutions and child protection services.

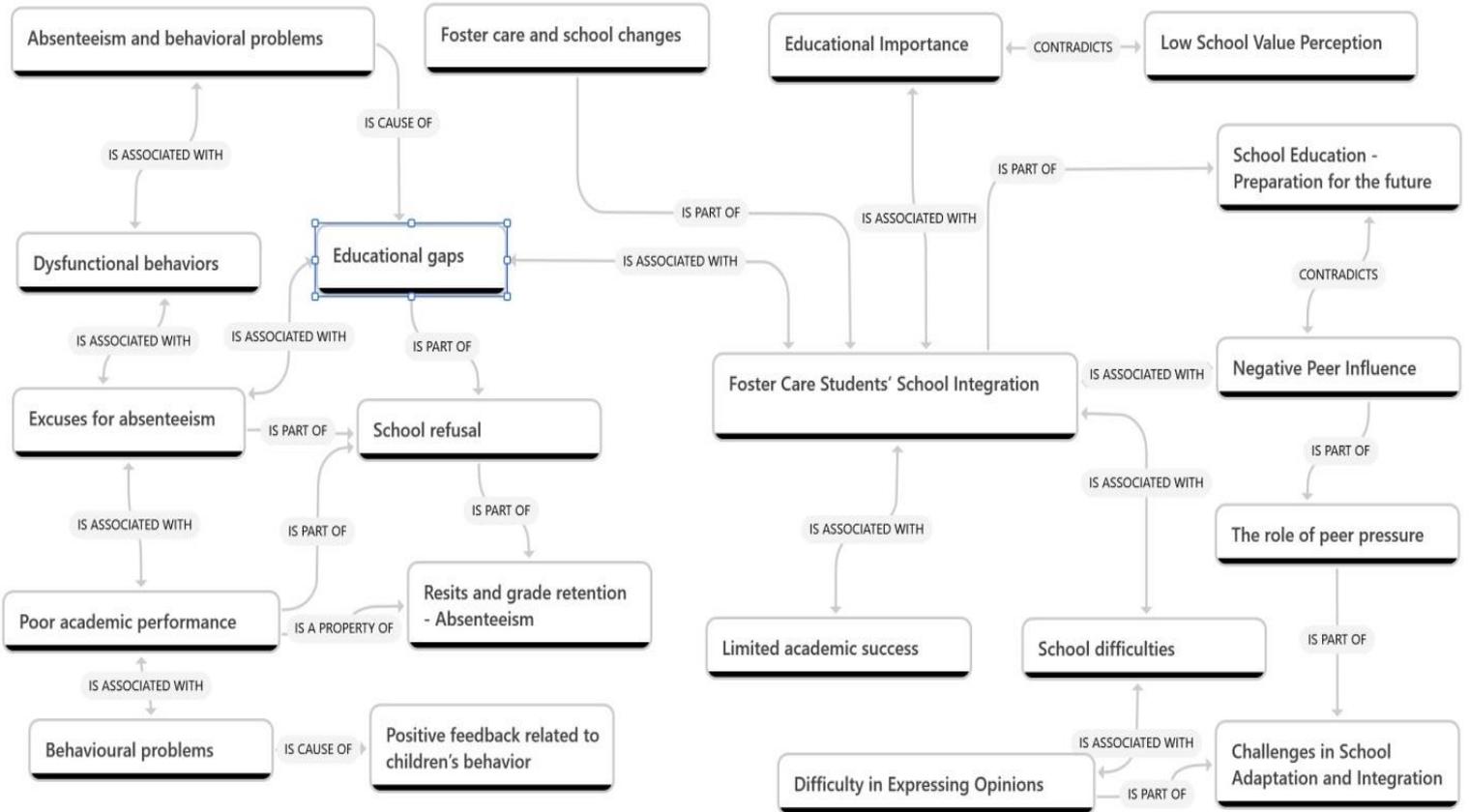
In the context of private family-type residential centers, where children consistently achieve good or very good academic results, it is noteworthy that they benefit from both educational and vocational counseling, as well as supplementary remedial instruction. Such measures demonstrate that targeted resources can play a decisive role in supporting the successful school integration of institutionalized children and adolescents.

The Network Diagram No. 2 presents the aspects describing the measures proposed by experts to

facilitate the school integration of students in the child protection system.

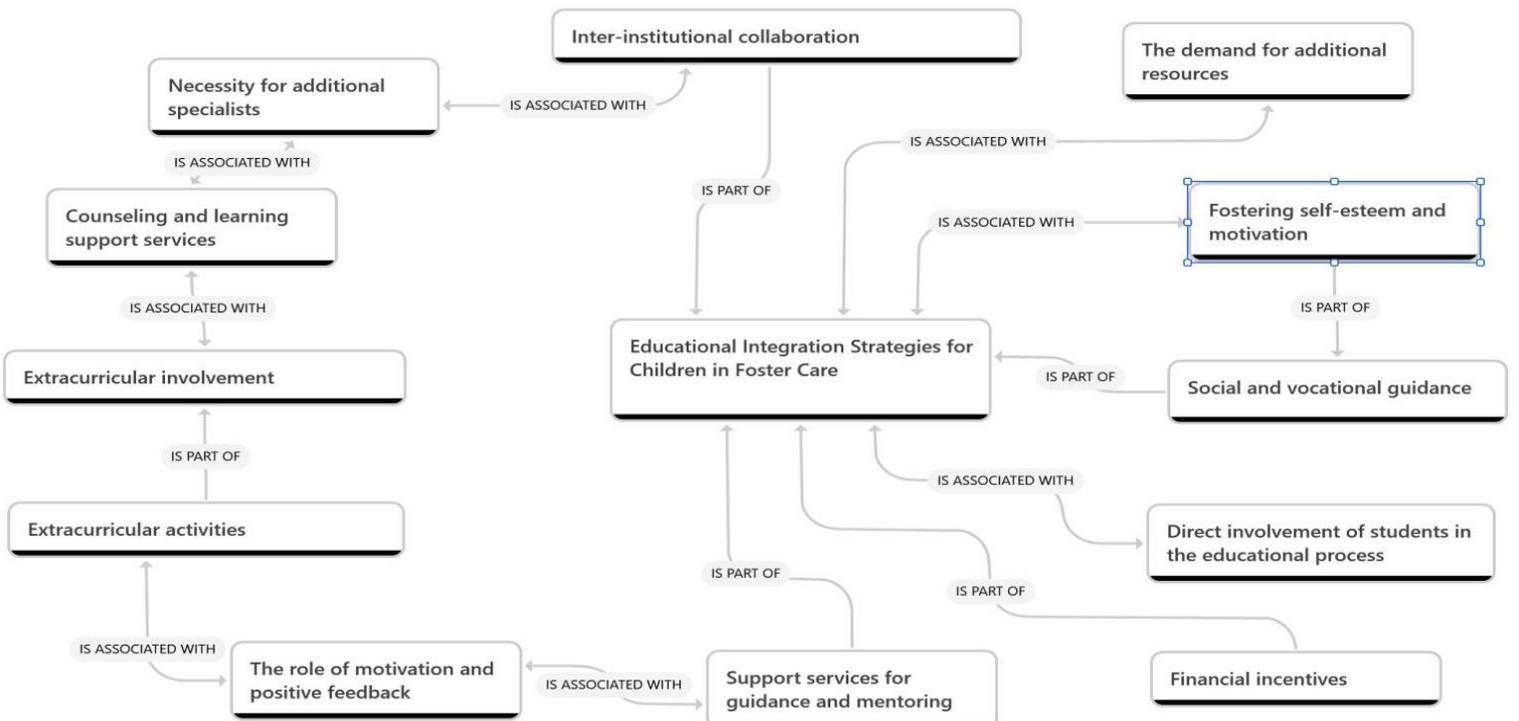
Network Diagram No. 1

Foster Care Students' School Integration



Network Diagram No. 2

Educational Integration Strategies for Children in Foster Care



3.2. Factors that support school integration: international research findings

Why do we address the importance of school education, particularly for children in the child protection system? Studies indicate that strong academic achievement is closely linked to health, well-being, and social inclusion (Smith et al., 2015). For children in residential care, access to education is essential, as it promotes social connections, a sense of belonging, and the development of social capital. Schools also provide stability and safety, serving as a key source of support (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

Several factors can enhance the school integration of children in the special protection system. First, it is important to ensure that children are integrated from kindergarten into educational settings that include peers from diverse social backgrounds. Integrative learning environments can provide social and academic benefits, contributing to the development of an equitable and inclusive society (Plasencia & Melnick, 2024). Secondly, it is essential to invest in socio-educational programs and in the educational development of children, as these can have a positive impact on the life trajectories of institutionalized youth. Continued participation in school can also support the development of coping mechanisms, enabling these children to manage situations of vulnerability they have experienced. Institutionalized students require tailored and individualized programs to address their specific needs (Pirttimaa & Väliavaara, 2017).

In designing effective interventions, it is essential to support teachers and school staff in developing a thorough understanding of the relationship between trauma and its impact on cognitive, social, and emotional development, through targeted professional learning on trauma and its effects. Examples of trauma-informed strategies for school personnel include fostering curiosity and compassion toward each student's life circumstances; accepting every child regardless of academic success or failure; implementing disciplinary practices that promote safety and acknowledge each student's strengths; and building partnerships among teachers, parents, and the community that address the needs of every student (Berardi & Morton, 2017).

In addition, it is necessary to provide training for caregivers and teachers on the impact of stigmatization on children in the child protection system (Lund & Stokes, 2020). Furthermore, improved placement management in residential care centers is required to

minimize changes in educational institutions, alongside providing additional support to facilitate the adjustment of children who transfer to a new school (Lund & Stokes, 2020).

On the whole, children need strong and close relationships with adults (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). An important objective in supporting socio-educational integration is the facilitation of supportive relationships with key adult figures - such as social workers, educators, and teachers - alongside fostering resilience and promoting higher expectations (Lund & Stokes, 2020). Students in the child protection system perceive social workers as important allies. Social workers' involvement in their education provides these young people with a sense of being valued and appreciated, and with the assurance that someone believes in their abilities and advocates for their right to education (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

A reconfiguration of legislation and the development of socio-educational policies are necessary in order to provide support and individualized or specialized programs for children from the moment they enter the child protection system (Evans & McCann, 2020). At the international level, several initiatives of this kind have been developed, such as the Fair Futures program and the Graham SLAM program implemented in New York. These programs are designed to provide long-term support for youth in residential care, offering a range of services including counseling, academic support, and the development of independent living skills. Evidence shows that participation in these programs leads to significant improvements in the educational outcomes of the beneficiaries.

Another important resource is represented by community schools. These institutions adopt a holistic approach to addressing the needs of all students, offering integrated support and stability, particularly for those experiencing various forms of vulnerability. Community schools provide educational, health, and social services, while fostering community, development and active participation. They are often regarded as hubs within the community, serving both students and their families by facilitating access to education, support, and broader social connections. Such schools are especially relevant for children in residential care centers, given their potential to deliver socio-educational support and promote long-term inclusion (Evans & McCann, 2020).

Internationally, various programs support children and adolescents in the child protection system, with

evidence showing positive outcomes (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012). In Sweden, the Skolfam program provides individualized support for at least two years (Pirttimaa & Väliivaara, 2017). It assesses each child's strengths and needs to design tailored interventions, aiming to promote well-being, manage behavior, and enhance academic skills. Innovative methods, such as socio-drama and ongoing academic monitoring, are used to support psycho-social development. Research shows that participants' school performance improves, and the program has been adapted in other Nordic countries (Oraluoma & Väliivaara, 2016, as cited in Pirttimaa & Väliivaara, 2017).

Table 1

Steps for Achieving Better School Integration (Adapted from Rădăcină, 2023)

| Steps in achieving better school integration for student in foster care center |
|--|
| ✓ Assessment of cognitive development upon enrollment in residential centers (skills, knowledge acquisition, and their alignment with the appropriate school level); |
| ✓ Development of an individualized plan addressing developmental gaps identified in each subject area; |
| ✓ Providing weekly psychological, social and education counseling services; |
| ✓ Facilitating children's and adolescents' participation in after-school activities; |
| ✓ Organizing support groups for children at risk of school dropout; |
| ✓ Developing interinstitutional relationships (to secure resources for institutionalized children) and collaborating with associations, companies, and universities; |
| ✓ Organizing extracurricular activities, with a focus on knowledge acquisition and the development of skills and talents |
| ✓ Establishing clear norms in each residential center, implemented through educational support activities, with rewards for participating children and adolescents |
| ✓ Involving children in evidence-based programs that provide support through creative methods, such as music, theater, or other forms of art |
| ✓ Promoting a non-judgmental attitude toward children in residential care, based on appreciation and encouragement |

Drawn from the research presented and the intervention programs discussed previously, the Table 1 outlines several steps that could support children and adolescents in achieving better school integration (Evans & McCann, 2020; Lund & Stokes, 2020; Pirttimaa & Väliivaara, 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

In Romania, evidence-based programs aimed at promoting school integration for children in the child protection system are scarce and are typically implemented by NGOs or at a local level. More commonly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to various types of socio-educational services (Save The Children Romania, 2024; UNICEF, 2017). Given the increasing number of children in the child protection system who face difficulties with school integration, there is an urgent need to develop evidence-based programs that offer these students genuine opportunities for successful educational inclusion (Rădăcină, 2022). Building on international programs, recommendations from interviewed specialists, and the previously outlined steps, the following elements are crucial in designing such programs in Romania:

- Conducting rigorous assessments of each child's needs and developmental level within the residential center;
- Providing support and education to ensure adherence to clear rules established in each center;
- Reinforcing learning and compliance with established norms;
- Teaching empathy and compassion;
- Implementing art-based interventions (e.g., music, theatre, dance, painting);
- Providing academic support;
- Monitoring students' educational progress;
- Establishing partnerships and promoting inter-institutional collaboration;
- Offering counseling and personal development services.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The main limitation of this study lies in the small and geographically restricted sample, which limits generalization. However, the findings align with international research and highlight patterns relevant for designing intervention programs.

The novelty of this study is its focus on the Romanian child protection system, foster care children who faced a variety of challenges in schools and on the measures that could be implemented nationally to address their educational needs. Proposed directions include developing individualized socio-educational services, fostering empathetic and non-judgmental attitudes toward institutionalized students, introducing

practical subjects aligned with their interests, and diversifying teaching methods. Collaboration among state institutions, child protection agencies, and schools, supported by training and resources for staff, is essential.

Preventive and intervention measures, particularly in school preparation and socio-educational inclusion, are crucial to securing the right to equitable education and strengthening the social integration of children in foster care.

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