

As a teacher in VIZ Višnja gora I have often wondered how our pupils who are categorised as children with E/B problems function outside the school environment or after the institutional care ends. The school represents a safe haven, where pupils are understood, where appropriate help is offered together with numerous adjustments. However, each one of them must step into the “real world”, where problems they have are not as tolerated as here. With this article I wish to present what problems our youngsters are facing, what kind of environments they derive from, what kind of cultural capital they carry with them on the one hand, and on the other hand what have we offered them in the past and what we strive to provide in the future, which skills are necessary for functioning in the modern society, how to raise society’s awareness of the presence of individuals who do not comply with the valid social model of an adult but significantly differ from it and which practices have proven to be successful (past and present).

Our institution is focused on youngsters between the age 15 and 20 with behaviour and emotional problems. During this age we classify them as adolescents. Adolescence period is challenging for every youngster, no matter how “normal” he or she is. It is a period in which we expect a child/youngster to become responsible, independent, educated. Alone, of course. After all, we all had to do it. And our parents had to bare with us. Majority of us were more or less successful, found employment, started our own families, contributed to the local community. The process seems fairly easy, however, we had sufficient and adequate support from adults (e.g. parents, teachers, friends, other community members).

Firstly, let me categorise our population in terms of symptoms, biological factors, social background and early school experience:

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Emotional disturbance in teens is most frequently realised in the school environment, some signs and symptoms including:

- Difficulty learning that cannot be explained by intellectual challenges or any other health issue
- An inability to develop healthy, interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers
- Inappropriate thoughts, emotions, or actions under normal circumstances
- Frequent unhappiness, depression, fear, or anxiety about life or school

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Chemical imbalances in the brain and body of your teen can make managing emotions a challenge. Here are some biological factors that can contribute to emotional disturbance:

- Prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol
- A physical illness or disability
- An undernourished or malnourished lifestyle
- Brain damage
- Hereditary factors

HOME LIFE

Trouble at home can be the #1 cause of stress or anxiety for a youngster. Home life issues that have been correlated to emotional disturbance include:

- Family income below the poverty level
- Stress in the family unit because of divorce or some other emotional upset
- Inconsistent rules or expectations as well as inconsistent and unhealthy discipline
- Parents have a lack of interest or concern for the teen, which leads to a lack of supervision or neglect
- Family members are poor role models, perhaps violent, perhaps getting in trouble with the law
- Parents or siblings physically abuse the teen
- There is an overall low rate of positive interactions and high rate of negative interactions in the family
- The family has a poor attitude toward school or education

SCHOOL

Sometimes situations at school can be the cause of emotional disturbance in children, such as:

- Teachers aren't capable of managing the classroom, creating a negative environment
- The school is insensitive to student differences or cultural issues
- Rules are inconsistent
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Most importantly, they are not understood, detected, offered adequate help, therefore they resort to inappropriate behaviour patterns (crime, substance abuse, conflicts, they change schools, etc.)

Instead of dealing with developmental tasks of adolescence, they get stuck in childlike behaviour, testing the boundaries set by adults.

With the inclusion in an institution the youngster is given a complete "service package" to overcome this demanding period. Thus, I believe that institutionalisation is not completely negative. Some children need to be institutionalised so that they are protected and provided for. I see nothing wrong with that. The problem arises after the institutional care ends and a child/youngster is thrown back into the society without the necessary skills for life outside the institution and on top of that he or she has to deal with the stigma of spending some part of their life in an institution.

Our aim is to encourage development of competencies and practical which we believe can benefit the youngster further in life.

What can we offer them?

SCHOOL

- three vocational programmes (lower vocational programme 2 years, assistant of biotechnology and care, 3 vocational programmes 3 years gastronome, clothes manufacturer, administrator)
- provide standard school education (general subjects like Slovene, English, Maths... and also practice subjects specific for their educational programme); each programme includes internship in restaurants or companies outside our institution: duration varies from 2-5 weeks in the first two years to 4 months in the final, third year.
- our goal is for the youngsters to complete vocational education (How do we achieve that? since most of our youngsters have combined disorders (learning disabilities + behaviour and emotional problems) we adapt the programmes to suit individual needs, most lessons are designed in a way that enables the youngster to actively participate in the classroom and by doing that he or she repeats and memorises the lessons, we focus on their strengths, for example if a pupil dislikes written assignments, he or she can have an oral presentation, most importantly we try to do our best to invite them into the classroom and to keep them there, we focus on acquiring practical skills and knowledge).
- we also focus on including the youngsters into the community: internship outside the institution (cooperation with the employers, mentor visits at internship places, problem management); school events (always invite members of the local community); participation in a competition of secondary schools More knowledge for more tourism (pupils have to prepare a tourist product, promotion video and other materials, present the product at a tourist fair. We have received multiple gold and silver awards), catering for other public institutions.
- participation in international project Erasmus+ (sending our pupils to a 3 week internship abroad: we have been in Italy, France, Spain, etc., pupils are selected based on the following criteria: drug tests, active participation at school, active participation in educational groups, internal motivation. Each year 7 pupils accompanied by 2 educators/teachers spend three weeks abroad where they work in local restaurants and hotels. After the end they receive a certificate which can be an important document for future employment)
- provide a broad spectrum of various social situations (theatre, opera, competitions, internship)

EDUCATIONAL GROUPS

- have a strict schedule (youngsters have a very structured timetable)
- a lot of time is devoted to social learning (for some it is a challenge to go to a cafe and have a cup of coffee and converse normally with others - without using their phone all the time)
- social learning includes: visits to the library, presentations, art exhibitions, monuments, sightseeing (exploring our heritage), pupils gradually learn how to be more and more independent (buying a train ticket, going to the supermarket, planning money spending, prioritising)
- programme PAS for drug abuse treatment (4 steps)

INTENSIVE HOUSING GROUP - intended for pupils who are not ready to reside in educational groups with other youngsters (due to severe drug abuse, vulnerability etc. More Milan)

POST DISCHARGE GROUP - intended for pupils who have completed educational programme in our institution but still need support (pupils who cannot return home because of different reasons. My colleague Tea will tell you more about the concept a bit later)

But we do not only focus on pupils, but also on professional workers

- preventive measures (educating school professionals(teachers, counsellors); we know that early detection is the key to success. Most of our youngsters come to our institution during adolescence period, a lot of damage has already been done, thus, we encourage and provide training programmes, seminars which help teachers in primary schools and even in kindergartens to detect children with predispositions to develop E/B problems, give strategies for future work)
- we cooperate with social service centres (organising events once a year, where we exchange knowledge and experience in order to ensure the youngsters receive help as soon as possible)

Are we successful? I believe we are because we try to provide a broad spectrum of services and the youngster is at least given a variety of options from which he or she can chose the ones they like or can relate to.

Thank you for your attention