

SCHOOL AS AN ELEMENT OF THE WELL-BEING OF ADOLESCENTS IN FOSTER CARE: DISCRIMINATION AS A CHALLENGE

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to present the importance of school as an element of the well-being of adolescents who grow up in foster families, with a special emphasis on discrimination in the school environment. Experiencing discrimination in the school environment can be a serious obstacle to establishing the well-being of adolescents, which has also been confirmed by this research. Applying qualitative methodology, namely the focus group discussion, the data from 129 participants was collected. The research includes adults' perspectives, those of foster parents, case managers, fostering advisers, as well as the especially important perspectives of the adolescents themselves. Due to facing discrimination and other challenges in the school environment, these young people need support, which is sometimes absent. The warning result is that children sometimes suffer from discrimination by adults, who are supposed to be the source of support, is of special importance. The results obtained can provide the basis for creating and establishing cooperation between schools, foster families and professionals from the social protection system, as well as the advancement of teaching and non-teaching staff's competences. As the ultimate aim, the results could contribute to improving the position of adolescents in foster care in the school environment.*

Key words: *well-being, adolescents, foster care, school, discrimination*

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1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to well-being, its meaning is sometimes assumed and because of that we often miss a precise definition and clear indicators. Happiness, satisfaction and the quality of life are frequently used synonyms for well-being (Allin, 2007).

There are numerous challenges in defining and measuring well-being when it comes to both adults and children, and they are especially expressed in children and youth who due to the lack of parental, grow up in alternative care – in foster, kinship or in a kind of residential care. The greatest amount of research which has investigated this population tells us about objective indicators such as delinquent behaviours, juvenile pregnancy, level of education, employment after leaving the care, etc. UNICEF developed a set of 15 indicators for children in alternative care which could be applied all over the world and which include only three subjective indicators. Moreover, the data is mostly collected only from the adults from their environments, and rarely from the children and youth directly (Selwyn & Wood, 2015).

Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frones, & Korbin (2014) claim that it is a complex concept which includes: a) objective measures of the well-being and living conditions of children and adolescents, b) subjective experiencing the well-being of children and adolescents, their personal experiences, viewpoints, evaluations and aspirations, c) experiences, viewpoints, evaluations and aspirations of other relevant social agents (parents and/or other educators, social workers, teachers) in terms of the well-being of children and adolescents. The stated definition corresponds to the definition of well-being which will be used in this paper.

Although the initial aim of schooling was defined as ‘preserving the past and establishing the future of a particular society’, in the 20th century adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child, education has been moved from the domain of social importance towards the well-being of the individual (Hemelseoet, 2012). Consequently, the children’s right to education represents one of the basic rights that children have. Certain authors point out that schooling and education have to be in accordance with the following principles guaranteed by the Convention:

1. Non-discrimination (education and school should be easily accessible to all children and should enable the development of their potentials)
2. Safety (school should represent a safe place for the child, i.e. the child should be protected from any kind of danger at school)
3. Participation (school and education should teach the child how to participate, but they should also create an opportunity for the child’s rights to participation, socializing, freedom of speech and privacy protection to be respected) (Jiang, Kosher, Ben-Arieh, & Huebner, 2014).

As it has already been noted, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the leading act in the protection of children’s rights, the prohibition of discrimination represents not only the right of the child, but also one of the principles (art. 2). The importance of this topic has also been recognized in the national legislation. Therefore, the Constitution, as well as many other normative acts, guarantees the prohibition of discrimination. The anti-discrimination law defines discrimination as making an unjustified difference or unequal treatment of persons, groups or their family members on the basis of their personal characteristics. The same law states that personal characteristics are: race, skin color, ancestors, citizenship, nationality or ethnic origin, language, religious or political beliefs, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, financial status, birth, genetic traits, health condition, disability, marital and family status, conviction, age, appearance, membership in political, trade-union and other organizations (Anti-discrimination Law, art. 2). Discrimination can be indirect, direct, and structural and it can be presented in every sphere of social action.

This paper will be aimed at discrimination at school since the educational process should be based on equal opportunities for everyone and it should represent the basis for the well-being of every individual. When speaking of discrimination at school, it is particularly important to emphasize that research has shown that students who have experienced discrimination often do not feel affiliated with school. They do not feel secure, but rejected, they rarely build peer relationships, they avoid school and thus they have poorer achievements (Hedin, Hojer, & Brunnberg 2010; Puhl & King, 2012). In the context of children who grow up in alternative care, all of this is vitally important and it should be taken into consideration when working with this population.

2. WELL-BEING AND EDUCATION

Regarding the fact that children and adolescents spend a significant amount of time at school, the question of the influence of various factors related to school on the well-being of children is certainly worth consideration. Moreover, the development phase which children mostly spend at school coincides with numerous changes in their physical, mental and social development. Therefore, this question is even more significant (Seilstrom & Bremberg, 2006).

When it comes to school, its effect on the future, the so-called 'well becoming', is often emphasized and due to that the significance of school for the current well-being of the child can be predicted (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Fronas, & Korbin, 2014). This could be of great importance for children and youth who grow up in the alternative care system. Adults often highlight education as something which is really important and which could introduce predictability in the period after leaving the care, so they can forget its significance for the duration of that period.

What school represents for children is not only the place where they obtain education, but the environment in which they build relationships and it should represent a stable environment, too. All of this is significant for every child, but it is of special significance for children who grow up in the alternative care system. Being separated from the parental, and often from biological family, changing the environment and school, involving a great number of adults who make decisions about the child's life are already sufficient preconditions for the child to develop a distrusting relationship towards new environments and the people they meet. In that context, school should not represent the continuation of a series of negative experiences.

In accordance with the fact that children from foster families have various forms of traumatic experience, the significance of school for them can be discussed from this aspect. Perceiving the complexity of the consequences of these traumatic experiences is manifested in the child's functioning in the school environment, both when it comes to achieving educational requirements and building peer and student-teacher relationships. Literature points out that these children are in a much more unfavorable position as soon as they enroll in school and inadequate support, as well as the lack of timely reactions, will keep the child in that position through primary, high school and college (Panlilio, Ferrara, and MacNeil, 2019). Some of the negative consequences of traumatic experiences are aggravated or inadequate social adaptability, as well as numerous physical and mental symptoms (Rigby, 2003), inadequate attention, difficulties in information processing (De Bellis, 2001), problems with behaviour, aggressiveness, bad peer relationships, inadequate emotion control (Lansford et al.,

2002), lowered self-esteem (Yanowitz, Monte, & Tribble, 2003). In addition, numerous studies have shown that these children, due to negative experiences during growing up, achieve significantly worse results, they need more time and support to acquire certain study materials, to adjust to changing schools, teachers, professors and build peer relationships (Carey & Bourbon, 2005; Martin and Jackson, 2002). In that context, school should represent a safe place for them and there should be adults with whom the children will build a trusting relationship so that they could overcome all the mentioned challenges (McAuley and Rose, 2010).

In the national context, we miss more complete data about school attendance, the kind of school and the school success of children and youth in foster care, as the dominant form of alternative care in the Republic of Serbia. According to available data from the Centers for Foster Care and Adoption, all the primary and secondary school children from foster families are included in the education system, whereas 60% of young users are included in the process of higher education (Republic Institute for Social Protection, 2019). There is no aggregated data about kinds of secondary schools that adolescents in foster care attend. However, it is known in practice that they often choose schools which require a lower score to enroll, i.e. less popular schools and weaker vocational schools. The quantitative part of this study has also confirmed this claim. Most adolescents from the sample attend secondary schools which, according to the score needed to enroll, are less desirable and these are mostly school programmes which last three years.

When it comes to studying, the data can be viewed not only from the point of the educational success of youth, but also regarding the way that further education can be a strategy to extend the right to family care for some youth. Children and young people up to 18 years old, or up to 26 if they are regular students, have the right to foster care (Family Law, art.121, p. 2). In 2018 eight children and thirteen adolescents left their education, but there is no data on the reasons (Republic Institute for Social Protection, 2018).

A research carried out in Serbia in 2013 shows that the records of children in alternative care lack a great number of data related to their education. Although school success is not the only, but it is one of the most important indicators of well-being, this data was missing for even 40% of school children (Žegarac, 2014). The quantitative part of the study Foster care and the well-being of adolescents; a study to improve politics and practice shows that adolescents in foster care have less success than students who live with either one or both parents (Žegarac and Krnjajić, 2019).

This paper is part of the study Foster care and the well-being of adolescents: a study to improve politics and practice, and its aim is to establish the importance of school as an element of the well-being of adolescents in foster care, i.e. in what ways discrimination at school can be a challenge to these young people in the process of achieving well-being. While it is a “qualitative part of the research focused on comparing different aspects of well-being between adolescents in foster care and in the general population and identifying the main obstacles to a positive and thriving development, the qualitative part of the research focused on the well-being of adolescents in foster care” (Žegarac and Krnjajić, 2019, p. 30). This paper is part of the qualitative results related to school, discrimination and its impact on well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data was collected in 2019, using the focus group interview method, within the study Foster care and the well-being of adolescents; a study to improve politics and practice. The research involved relevant adult actors who were directly and indirectly responsible for every-day care and the well-being of adolescents in foster care: case managers from centres for social work, fostering advisers from Centers for Foster Care and Adoption, as well as adolescents' foster parents. Adolescents aged from 11 to 19 (according to UNICEF classification, Santelli, Balvin, 2017) also took part in the study. The sample included: 51 adolescents in foster care (27 aged 13–15, 15 aged 16–19 and 9 aged 16–23, who had previous experience of living in foster care), 34 foster parents, 24 case managers and 20 fostering advisers. Both male and female respondents were present in all the focus groups.

There were 21 focus groups focus group discussion in total (10 with adolescents, 4 with foster parents, 4 with case managers, 3 with fostering advisers). The research was conducted in 4 cities in Serbia (Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad and Leskovac), and it included participants from 15 municipalities. "In order to ensure the inclusion of all sub-sets of the population, the sample of all groups of respondents was purposive and venue-based. It is a sampling method of recruiting participants with specific characteristics within a population" (Žegarac and Krnjajić, 2019, p. 36)

All the participants gave a written informed consent about their participation. In accordance with the right of adolescents to participate and the research team's belief that children are able to express their views as early as from the age of 10 and give their consent to participating in the research, the adolescents themselves made the final decision to participate. Prior to that, each of them was provided with a written consent of the guardian (professional workers from the centres for social work or foster parents). The ethical procedure of this research was reviewed and approved by Ethics Review Board, passed as 077ECEP18.

With the participants' consent, the conversation was recorded and transcribed and then the data was processed through thematic analysis by two of the researchers who independently analyzed the transcribed material (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4. RESULTS

The results of the study show that all the participants, both adolescents and adults, recognize the importance of school for the well-being of adolescents. The main topics which are singled out in the students' narratives are: adolescents' relationships with peers and adults, discrimination in the school environment, support to adolescents in the process of learning and overcoming challenges in the school environment, the role and cooperation of relevant adult actors.

4.1. Adolescents' relationships with peers and adults

All the participants in the study recognize the significance of relationships and school events for the well-being of adolescents in foster care. Some of the adolescents place this topic immediately after relationships and events in the foster family by its significance.

'I do think that it is somehow really really important, especially from the age of 10 to 19. Somehow, the family comes first and then the other. I don't know, I wouldn't feel well if I didn't have good friends and if everything at school didn't go well.' (Ivana, 16)

Adolescents' experiences with their peers and teachers, as well as the degree of support that they get in the school environment, are different. Some of them point out that they have not had any issues with peer relationships so far and they see their peers as supportive. Besides peers, adolescents sometimes also see adults at school as trustworthy, role models and sources of support. They illustrate it with the examples of some teachers who understand their feelings and who give them support and protection when needed.

All of this is particularly important if we take into consideration the point of view of some authors who emphasize that school, as one of the socialization agents, should have a positive influence on the child's overall development, especially on those who have experienced a negative influence of some other agents (e.g. family) (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frones, & Korbin, 2014).

When it comes to the time context, children at this age spend much more time in the school environment with their peers than in the foster family. Therefore, the importance of the influence of this environment is even more significant.

4.2. Discrimination in the school environment

Adolescents generally consider that they do not have preferential treatment at school which would result from the fact that they grow up in foster families. They emphasize that they do not even want anything like that, but only comprehension and the diminishment of their diversity. Moreover, their peers' acceptance is significant, and any difference can often be an obstacle to that. That could exactly be the reason why children emphasize it. Other research has also shown that children who grow in alternative care believe that is the reason they have different treatment (positive at times, negative at others) from children who grow up in their biological families (Morgan, 2006).

As it has been stated, relationships and school events contribute to the well-being of some adolescents, whereas a significant number of adolescents and adult participants give examples of stigmatization and discrimination at school by both peers and teachers.

Negative attitudes towards adolescents in foster care and even labeling them tactlessly as children who are not taken care of by their biological parents are common and widespread. The children are affected when they feel that others pity them or that they are inappropriately curious about their status, that is if they single them out in the circumstances when they want to feel 'normal' themselves:

'She shouted (the teacher) so that the whole school would hear: 'I'm calling your caregiver now!'. Why that way? She shouldn't have done it.' (Milan, 14)

The adolescents said that they had the experience of being depreciated, excluded from a peer group, insulted on the basis of not living with their parents and even physically attacked in the school environment. They were reluctant to speak about these experiences in detail.

It is noticed that regarding the same behaviours of pupils at school, there are often different reactions. When it comes to adolescents in foster care, they *'pop out far more often than other children'* (II_Case manager 3), and teachers and associates in schools often blame them for exaggerating the severity of the incidents in which these adolescents are involved.

'If they have a behavioral problem, and other children also have them, the child is singled out and discriminated. They are often referred to a psychologist, it boosts the reputation of the school, but there is no essential support in order for the child to solve the problem.' (II_Fostering adviser 5)

Adolescents clearly recognize most forms of discrimination and violence, they consider them inadmissible and they expect a more adequate reaction from adults, but they can notice that the reaction is often missing.

'Discrimination is hardly ever punished at school. I think that schools should tighten the criteria and when a child comes to complain, since I have been in such situations, they are like –well, I don't know what else to do, his grade in behaviour has already been lowered'. (Sanja, 16)

School treatment (acts and behaviour) towards adolescents in foster care leads to either stigmatizing discrimination or overprotection, while there are few examples where we could recognize 'adequate' school treatment, i.e. reacting in accordance with the needs (e.g. for additional support).

'The homeroom teacher was acquainted with the fact that she was a child in care, a new environment and then the child is in a sensitive period, 5th grade, the girl had suffered that kind of trauma, she had moved from her home to a foster family, and she was all sensitive and vulnerable and then the teacher asked her to tell her personal life story in front of the whole class. Imagine that from an educator! Instead of protecting the girl, she exposes her to it, not being aware of what she is doing.' (II_fostering adviser 1)

The results of the research indicate that one of the basic children's rights, the right to non-discrimination, is violated and that school, contrary to the idea of the safe environment, represents an obstacle to the well-being of some adolescents. When the consequences of the traumatic experience that these adolescents have during growing up are associated with negative experiences from school, we can assume how many negative consequences it could have on the further development and functioning of adolescents. Accordingly, it is not surprising that some adolescents in this research said that when given the opportunity to choose, they opt for not 'revealing' their foster status so that they would spare themselves the nasty experiences. Moreover, other research has also recognized the children's concern when others find out about their status, because it is mostly viewed negatively (Morgan, 2006).

4.3. Support to adolescents in the learning process and overcoming the challenges in the school environment

This topic stands out in the adolescents' narratives, but not in those of the adult participants. The young singled out the importance of the role of adults in supporting and encouraging them to progress in the field of education. When it comes to adults encouraging them to have better achievements in the field of education, some adolescents spoke about it in a positive context, emphasizing the importance of this topic:

"They are supposed to encourage us to succeed in life somehow. I mean, if they are older, they have already been through all of that. I mean, in my case, everybody is older than me, and they somehow encourage me to succeed as much as I can and to be more successful than they are. I mean, I don't want to say that they are a failure, but, generally, they haven't really been successful in life". (laughter). (Ana, 16)

The adolescents particularly emphasized the negative consequences of the lack of that kind of relationship and getting encouragement from foster parents. The quantitative part of this study has come to a similar finding. Namely, the results show that adolescents' foster parents are mostly people who have lower level of education compared to students' parents in their respective schools. Hardly any of them have a university degree, whereas in some areas most foster parents did not even finish primary school (Žegarac and Krnjajić, 2019). Authors,

who have also done research on this topic, point out that the cause of this kind of relationship of foster parents might be their own low level of education and not recognizing the significance of education (Martin and Jackson, 2002).

In addition, the responsibility that professionals have in the process of encouraging adolescents in this respect is emphasized, as well:

'I think that in general social workers should change the perspective when it comes to those young girls who get married as soon as they turn 18 or finish school. I think they should help them a little because I think they are not informed enough that they can continue their education and they can attend it regularly. It isn't all about marriage, kids and nothing else. I think they could do it.' (Jana, 19)

Adolescents often recognize and emphasize the need for support in overcoming different challenges in the school environment and they are ready to accept it, but in a way which does not include pity and which enable them to feel 'normal' and equal to their peers, which coincides with the findings of previous research (Martin and Jackson, 2002). Adolescents recognize that when they have a problem in the school environment, it is the foster parents, professional associates, homeroom teachers and peers who are supposed to give them support depending on the situation.

„You know, I think that the foster parent has that crucial role. If the foster parent cannot see what is happening at school...Children, for example, try to hide violence no matter how often it happened at school. I believe that every parent can notice a change in their child and it is really important, especially for children in such conditions. But the support from peers, teachers and the rest is also very important.' (Milica, 18)

Adolescents emphasize the importance of the role of adults in the process of protecting them against different forms of violence and discrimination. However, when a large number of adults care and make decisions about the life of the child in foster care, coordination and information exchange can fail, so the child could be left without adequate support and a built relationship of trust. Consequently, the child might not have a person who they can inform that they fall victim to violence and a person who would protect them (Ben-Arieh, 2009). Another research on a similar topic, conducted in Serbia as well, showed that children in the process of facing discrimination and some forms of violence, face them primarily on their own creating a 'heroic script' which helps them maintain and boost their self-confidence, but which is not sustainable without adequate support (Burgund, 2017).

4.4. The role and cooperation of relevant adult actors

This topic stands out in adults' narratives (those of foster parents, case managers, fostering advisers). All of them recognize the significance of their role in the field of education. Like the parental role, the role of a foster parent implies that they are quite often in contact with the school. Foster parents recognize their role when it comes to facilitating adolescents' adaptation and functioning at school, but also reacting when there are difficulties and when their role is protective.

'Well, I can say, my child is a child with autism and he has made really good contact with his classmates. In the first week, I went to school with him, one class after another, for a week, until I got to know the teachers first, and then the children, of course. I wanted to see how they treated him because he stands out in a way, he is different...' (I-foster parent 1)

Case managers and fostering advisers usually make contact with the school when there are difficulties in adaptation and functioning, hence they recognize their role as representative and mediating.

'Sometimes there is a conflict, just because of misunderstanding, which also affects the foster parent – when they feel that they don't have enough support from the school when it comes to the child's behaviour or studying, so they get angry with the homeroom teacher or primary school teacher and then a conflict breaks out, so it is important to have mediation between these groups and to find cooperation which is constructive enough.' (II_case manager_2)

Adult participants in the research (foster parents, case managers, fostering advisers) emphasize cooperation with schools as essential, especially the segment of being informed about the child's important characteristics which would help all the agents in care to understand their emotions and behaviour better:

'So, team work. The teacher has to be informed about the problems the child has or that the child is in foster care...in order to approach them and tell their colleagues what to pay attention to.' (II_foster parent 2)

Professional associates who participated in the quantitative part of this research also recognize the importance of cooperation between teachers and the competent social services. They believe that teachers need this cooperation and support at work so that they could give a better response to these adolescents' needs (Žegarac and Krnjajić, 2019).

However, even though all of them recognize the significance of this cooperation, the experiences of cooperation with schools attended by adolescents in foster care are different, ranging from schools open to diversity to those which are said to stigmatize, single out and isolate children in foster care. Some of the factors which influence the cooperation are the following: the number of children in foster care attending the school, the number of children in foster care in comparison with the total number of children, informing the teaching and non-teaching staff, the sensitivity of the teaching and non-teaching staff.

'There are schools which are well-informed, all the teachers and pupils are acquainted well. The situation is good in those schools where there are a lot of children from foster families. However, in those schools which have a smaller number of such children, the problems are bigger.' (II_Fostering adviser 5)

5. CONCLUSION

This research has provided insight and a better understanding of different agents' perspectives about school as an element of the well-being of adolescents in foster care. A special significance is given to including the adolescents themselves in the research. The results have shown that, for a few of adolescents, the school contributes to the well-being through supportive peer relationships, as well as relationships with adults, and adequate support which is in accordance with their needs. However, more than half of adolescents, school represents a threat to well-being because support and supportive relationships are absent, and discrimination is unequivocally present.

Based on this research, what causes a special concern is the fact that different types of discrimination (labeling, segregation, pity) is sometimes practiced by adults (teachers and other employees) at school whose role is to provide a safe and secure school environment for all pupils. Although such behaviours can emerge not from the intention to hurt the adolescent, but from lack of information, knowledge and skills or 'increased concern', that does not reduce the harm or the negative effect it has on adolescents. On the other hand, it is encouraging that there is understanding and an adequate system of support to adolescents in

foster care in some schools, but it seems to be an ‘individual factor’, that is the enthusiasm and competences of an individual.

In order to equalize the opportunities for the school to contribute to the well-being of adolescents in foster care, it is necessary to sensitize all the actors in school environments with regard to the specifics and needs of adolescents in foster care. This would contribute to preventing inadequate behaviours and equalizing adequate treatment regarding adolescents in foster care. One of the ways to do it is to educate the teaching and non-teaching staff in schools. Professional associates from schools attended by adolescents from the sample also emphasized that teachers need education and specific training so that they could recognize the needs of these young people and support them in satisfying these needs in the most competent way possible (Žegarac and Krnjajić, 2019). This training could become part of regular education within the professional development of school employees. Browsing the catalog of available training, it has been confirmed that there is no training concerning children in alternative care (<https://zuov-katalog.rs/index.php?action=page/catalog>).

The findings of this research show that the prompt cooperation of all the agents involved in care for adolescents is often absent. Acquainting the teachers and the professional service with particular facts from the adolescent’s life with the aim of understanding the child’s behaviour and reacting appropriately if there is a challenge is also absent. The results obtained can be the basis for creating strategies for establishing cooperation between schools, foster families and professionals from the social protection system, and the basis for advancing the competences of the teaching and non-teaching staff, the final aim of which would be improving the position of adolescents in foster care in the school environment.

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ŠKOLA KAO ELEMENT DOBROBITI ADOLESCNATA NA HRANITELJTVU: DISKRIMINACIJA KAO IZAZOV

Rad ima za cilj predstavljanje važnosti škole kao elementa dobrobiti adolescenata koji odrastaju u hraniteljskim porodicama, sa posebnim naglaskom na diskriminaciju u školskoj sredini. Iskustvo diskriminacije u školskoj sredini može biti ozbiljna prepreka ka dostizanju dobrobiti adolescenata, što se potvrdilo i ovim istraživanjem. Primenom kvalitativne metodologije, tačnije metodom fokus grupe prikupljeni su podaci od 129 učesnika . Istraživanjem su obuhvaćene perspektive odraslih i to hranitelja, voditelja slučaja i savetnika za hraniteljstvo, ali i posebno važne perspektive samih adolescenata. Usled suočavanja sa diskriminacijom i drugim izazovima u školskoj sredini, ovim mladima je potrebna podrška, koja ponekad izostaje. Posebno je važan i opominjući rezultat da deca ponekad trpe diskriminaciju i od odraslih koji treba da budu izvor podrške. Dobijeni rezultati mogu predstavljati osnovu za kreiranje i uspostavljanje saradnje između škola, hraniteljskih porodica i profesionalaca iz sistema socijalne zaštite, unapređenje komeptencija nastavnog i nenastavnog osoblja. Kao krajnji cilj, rezultati bi mogli doprineti poboljšanju položaja adolescenata na hraniteljstvu u školskoj sredini.

Ključne reči: *dobrobit, adolescenti, hraniteljstvo, škola, diskriminacija*