

## EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTHS AT RISK PLACED IN RESIDENTIAL-TYPE SOCIAL SERVICE CENTERS

Albena Kostadinova

*St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria)*

**Abstract.** The maintenance of sustainable, upward development and well-being for society at the national level is a consequence of the achievements of individuals. Acquiring an educational degree and becoming established in a profession are of great importance for the success of every person in life. The set of new knowledge, skills and competences necessary to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is constantly increasing, and finding a job in the conditions of serious competition requires not only appropriate qualifications, but also constant upgrading and personal improvement. The new educational policies focus on improving the teacher-parent interaction to reveal the potential and capabilities of each student. Children placed in residential care lack parental support and have more difficulties in learning, training and finding suitable work than their peers guided by their families. The proposed article presents the results of a survey regarding the opinion of specialists in relation to the situation of minors residing in family-type accommodation centers in educational and professional aspects. The purpose of the research is to establish the current state of affairs in this matter and to highlight some significant obstacles that limit the educational and professional success of young people. Based on the obtained results, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were given as a starting point for taking targeted actions at the level of responsible persons, public organizations and institutions.

**Keywords:** children at risk; educational inclusion; educational inequality; professional success; extracurricular activities; family-type placement center for children and youths

Acquiring education and subsequently integrating the acquired knowledge in a chosen professional field is of great importance for every person, especially in childhood, adolescence and youth. Individuals are carriers of various characteristics and features that are specific and unique to each one. This heterogeneity gives rise to the need to study groups created on the basis of different characteristics. The

present study focuses on the group of at-risk minors placed in residential social services, as the lack of a family environment is a serious risk factor that hinders personal development and increases individual vulnerability.

The problem of the premature dropping out of at-risk youths from the school education system is widely studied, primarily what are its causes. However, there is a lack of theoretical-applied research that, based on the established causes, provides guidelines for solving the problem through applying extracurricular measures of educational nature. Studying the problem and determining guidelines is important in both economic and socio-pedagogical terms, since this is a way to overcome the negative consequences for the individuals and society of dropping out of school and also of the lack of employment for young adults and who had to leave the residential social services.

Statistics annually reports the total number of children who left school for various reasons, without it being clear how many of those who left were placed in residential social services. This unclarity raises the issue of dealing with children at risk in and out of school, as well as their professional future, especially in cases of dropping out of the secondary education system. With this in mind and with a view to achieving a high objectivity based on practical experience, the present study explores the opinion of professionals involved in the daily work with at-risk youths.

The object of the study are the underage youths at risk without disabilities who do not rely on family care and support and are accommodated in centers providing residential-type social services.

The subject is related to researching the specifics of the problems and the need to implement measures that support the education and professional success of at-risk youths.

The objective of the study is to examine the possibilities and limitations of at-risk minors in educational and professional terms through the eyes of working in the practice professionals.

In connection with the set objective, the following main tasks have been formulated:

- To organize and conduct a survey among employees in family-type accommodation centers for children without disabilities on the territory of 13 regions of Bulgaria;
- To analyze and summarize the obtained data;
- To study strategic documents and specialized literature related to the characteristics and development of children at risk;
- To make terminological and normative clarifications;
- To compare data from scientific research with the results obtained from the conducted survey;
- To formulate findings, recommendations and conclusions.

Main methods used in the research are the partially standardized survey as an empirical evidence method and the theoretical study of scientific literature and expert reports.

In connection with the purpose of the research, a hypothesis was formulated, according to which the additional educational support of at-risk minors placed in the FTACCWD<sup>1</sup> is a significant resource for their educational and professional success in life after leaving these centers.

There are different opinions in the scientific literature regarding the definition of the concept for children at risk and the determination of the children's belonging to a relevant risk group. Researchers such as R. Kuzmanova-Kartalova, B. Kriviradeva, V. Borisova, E. Rangelova study the subject in depth and group the children at risk in accordance with criteria they had accepted. The authors define the groups on the basis of the pronounced influence of harmful factors that dominate for a given population, although in practice „moving“ of children from one group to another often occurs. In the present work, the division of groups is assumed to be conditional and will not be theoretically investigated. As a starting point, it is assumed that children who live in a non-family environment and are accommodated in residential-type social services provided by the state or private licensed providers fall into a generalized group - children at risk.

A central place in the report have two concepts - children (at risk) and youths (at risk). The definitions of „child“ and „youth“ are set out in the Child Protection Act<sup>2</sup> and the Act on Youth<sup>3</sup>. Due to the fact that children can be called youths after 15 years of age and youths at 15-18 years old are still children, the two concepts will be used in parallel as similar words with identical meaning, according to the needs of the context.

With regard to the object and subject of the research, it is necessary to make a clarification in relation to the legal requirements related to the rights, age and custody of children at risk until they come of age. Current legislation in the Republic of Bulgaria provides an opportunity for the adult citizens to express their consent or disagreement independently regarding their participation in polls and surveys. This right can also be exercised by minors, provided that, in addition to their consent, the approval of a parent or a guardian is obtained. Obtaining written consent from the responsible persons and institutions, in their capacity as bearers of delegated rights related to the care and protection of children at risk, may complicate or partially prevent the conduct of the survey. For this reason and in order to expand the territorial scale and the number of covered providers of specialized social services in Bulgaria, the research will seek the opinion of employees in family-type accommodation centers for children without disabilities who have direct impressions from working with minors at risk.

The empirical study was carried out in the period 21-30 November 2021 as a partially standardized online survey, conducted on the territory of 13 regions in Bulgaria: Blagoevgrad, Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Montana, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sliven, Smolyan, Sofia, Sofia-city and Haskovo. Of the received total of 36 survey cards, 34 valid surveys were subsequently analyzed and summarized.

The data them reflect the respondents' answers to substantive and demographic questions in connection with the educational and professional success of minors placed at FTACCWDs.

The responses received from the survey present the following results. At the beginning of the research (fig. 1), the respondents indicate their practical experience in working with minors placed in social care. The predominant number of employees (29%) have little practical experience of 0 – 2 years in working with youths at risk. The fact that 90 working in FTACCWDs % of all respondents practice in the field of social work is noted. 50% of the persons have a master's degree, and the remaining 50% have a completed bachelor's degree. All respondents with short experience are females. In terms of age, it is striking that the employees with short experience are representatives of 5 out of a total of 6 set age groups, namely: 4 employees are 18 – 25 years old, 2 persons for each of the age groups of 26 – 35 years old and 36 – 45 years old, one employee under the age of 55 and one over 60. This fact is interesting in terms of the employees' motivation for starting work in the social sphere at an age other than the young age, when education is usually acquired in a higher education institution.



**Figure 1**

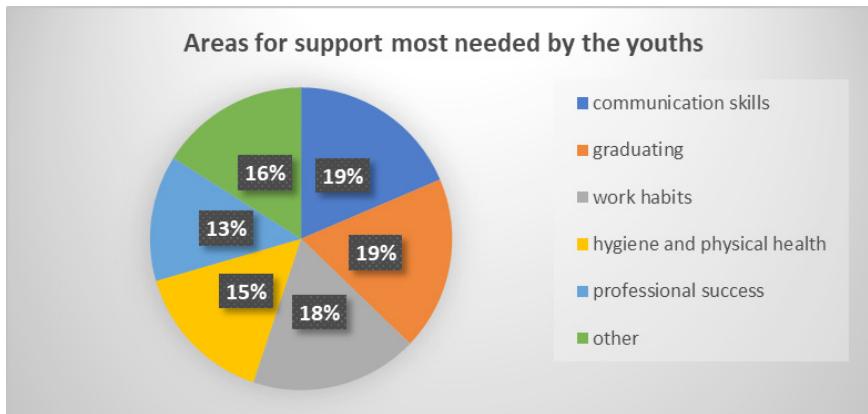
A further question explores practitioners' views on the significant skills, personal qualities and factors that are of particular importance to youths in the FTACCWDs and that they need to develop (fig. 2). With the greatest importance for young people, the respondents determined: persistence and will (16%), followed by patience (15%) and motivation (14%). Respondents ranked fourth and fifth in importance personal qualities such as tolerance and understanding (12% of votes) and honesty and sincerity (11%). In the present study, it is assumed that there is a direct relationship between the presence of greater professional experience and the probability of

obtaining more accurate answers from the respondents. For this reason, the answers to the question from employees with professional experience over 5 years, up to 15 years and over 15 years (47% or 16 people) are additionally considered. For 14 out of 16 people (87.5%) the leading qualities are persistence and will, followed by the need for motivation (12 people – 75%), honesty and sincerity (11 people – 69%), patience (9 people – 56%). Consistency and tolerance are qualities defined as significant for an equal number of respondents – 8 respondents (50%) for each of the qualities. Four of the respondents (25%) indicate less importance of the friendly relationships. Non-violent communication and positive attitude have an equal number of votes and are leading qualities with 12.5% each. The presented answers, both according to the employees with professional experience of more than 5 years and according to the total number of respondents, define as the most significant qualities for young people persistence and will, followed by the need for motivation and qualities such as honesty and patience.

**Figure 2**

The next question in the survey explores the areas of youth support in which it is extremely necessary (fig. 3). Respondents highlight communication skills and completing an educational degree as the most important ones. In the next place are work habits, followed by hygiene/physical health and the professional success of young people. When comparing the opinions of all respondents with those of specialists with more than 5 years of practical experience, similarity is reported in the areas marked as the most significant, namely: for 94% (15 out of 16 people) the most important are communication skills and completion of an educational degree. For 86% (14 people) it is work habits, 11 respondents (69%) indicate hygiene and physical health as a particularly important area, and for 10 people (63%) it is the professional success of young people. For 6 out of a total of 16 respondents (38%),

it is important that young people have useful information and practical knowledge in for everyday life.



**Figure 3**

The research also included questions about the impact on young people of: 1) life and behavioral problems regarding their pursuit of education; 2) the lack of family environment and parental support for their motivation for personal and professional progress and 3) the provision of individual support by a trusted person (social worker, teacher, mentor, psychologist, etc.).

1) For 27 respondents (80% of those who answered), life and behavioral problems have a strong impact or rather have an impact on the youths' pursuit of an appropriate education; four people indicate that the impact of these problems is weak, and three of the respondents cannot estimate the impact. This is also confirmed by a study carried out by the National Network for Children<sup>4</sup>, which found that: "the problem of children dropping out of school is inextricably linked to the problem of poverty – not so much due to the lack of material support with textbooks and electronic technical means for learning and doing online learning, as much as there is a lack of a life perspective in which education is seen as a long-term investment in the future" (National Network for Children 2021, 85).

2) In relation to the absence of a supportive family environment and the impact of this factor on the motivation of young people for personal and professional progress, 31 respondents (91%) stated that the lack of a family environment and parental support had a strong or rather strong impact on the motivation of young people for progress. Three people answered that the impact of this factor is rather weak. There are no respondents for whom the factor has no impact. The reliability of the obtained data is also confirmed by the results of the National Network for Children's survey, where 56% of respondents answered that: "Children from resi-

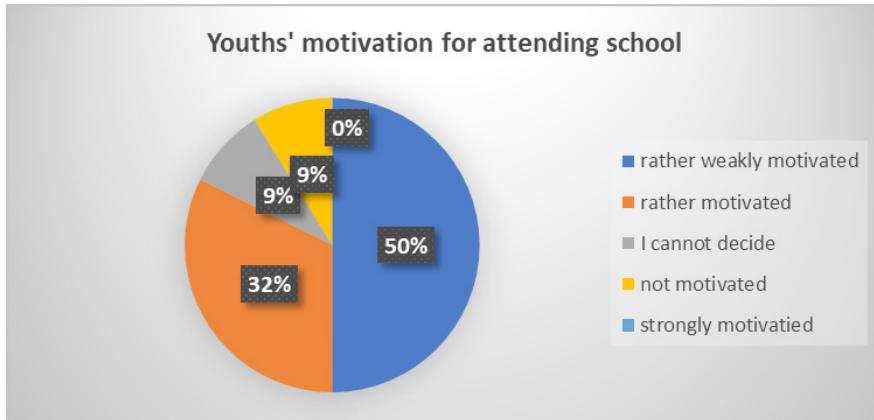
idential care homes homes need material, moral and spiritual support and care”, and 18% reported that: “Children in institutions need parental love” (National Network for children 2021, p. 30).

3) In response to the third sub-question, almost all respondents (33 out of a total of 34) stated that individual support from a trusted person has a strong or rather has an impact on young people. One respondent (with professional experience of less than 5 years) defines the impact of individual support from a trusted person as well as the impact of life and behavioral problems of young people to be rather weak. There are no answers that individual support has no impact on young people. The findings categorically give reason to identify that the provision of individual support to young people by a trusted person (social worker, teacher, mentor, psychologist, etc.) is an important additional resource for supporting children at risk. The received answers to the sub-question correspond to the of K. Zlatkova-Doncheva’s statements regarding the problems of children at risk and the mechanisms for solving them (Zlatkova-Doncheva 2018, p. 102).

A subsequent survey question explores respondents’ views on the importance of obtaining an educational degree for at-risk youths. More than half (56%) of the individuals say that acquiring secondary education is important to young people; for 32% it is rather important, and 12% are of the opinion that the completion of an educational degree is not important to young people. A detailed examination of the received negative answers shows that the relevant respondents are under the age of 45, and the educational degree of two out of three persons who answered negatively is a bachelor’s degree.

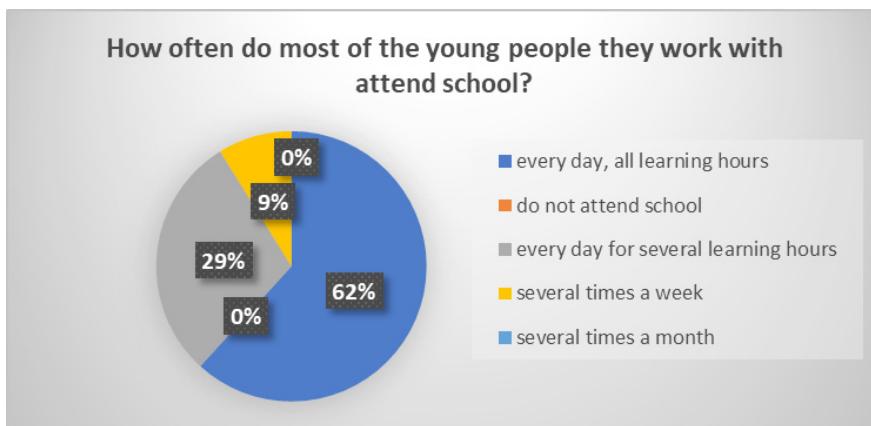
Conducted expert research found that socio-economic inequalities have a strong impact on the achievements of Bulgarian students at school<sup>5</sup>. The National strategy for reducing poverty states that as a result of inequalities, students who belong to risk groups are easily demotivated, and refuse to do academic work or even attend school (Velitchkova 2021, p. 160). K. Zlatkova-Doncheva notes that the reasons for children’s failure at school can be sought in three main directions: general pedagogical, psychophysiological and socioeconomic (Zlatkova-Doncheva 2017, p. 85). For this reason, a question related to the motivation of young people for attending school was asked in the survey (fig. 4). Answering it, 17 of the respondents (50%) express the opinion that minors are rather poorly motivated to attend school, 3 persons (9%) note that there is a lack of motivation. Eleven people (32%) stated that youths are rather motivated to go to school, but there were no responses that at-risk youths were highly motivated. The obtained data correspond to the data from a study conducted by K. Doncheva in relation to the problems of children at risk, raised in a non-family environment, where the main deficiency among children is identified to be the low motivation for learning (Zlatkova-Doncheva 2018, 130). In psychology, motivation is clarified with the help of concepts like: direction, beginning, desire, readiness (to perform a certain activity), etc. It is

assumed that motivation stimulates the individual in achieving his desired goals. In summarizing the data obtained from the examined question, it becomes clear that there is a possibility that young people do not see any particular meaning or benefit from schooling, since they do not associate making efforts to obtain an educational degree with increasing the opportunities for life and professional success.



**Figure 4**

The following question aims to explore the learning activity in the daily life of young people. Respondents were asked: "How often do most of the young people they work with attend school?" (fig. 5). The majority of respondents (62%) shared that young people attend school every day, all classes, and 29% of them noted that the attendance to school is every day, but for several classes. 9% answered that young people attend school only several times a week. Based on the opinions expressed and if it is assumed that more than 60% of the young people regularly attend classes, then in the presence of low motivation for learning (in relation to the results obtained from the previous question) the quality of the learning process and its effectiveness for the young people at risk, residing in FTACCWDs, are likely to be unsatisfactory. The answers to this question serve as a guideline, which can be further refined by comparing the answers to the same question, but asked to the youths' school teachers.

**Figure 5**

The identification of problems and challenges in the lives of at-risk youths residing in social services is a starting point for searching for appropriate solutions. For this reason, the present study examines the opinion of the respondents who are the people who can impact on enhancing the motivation of young people for improvement and development. Seven options are offered: social workers, psychologist, people who are in management in residential care, other staff in residential care, school teachers, mentors and consultants, volunteers and employees from non-governmental organizations. A leading place for the most significant persons is given by the respondents to the managers who have a great influence on the youths in residential care (for 94% of the respondents). The respondents put mentors and consultants in next place (84%), and social workers in third place (82% of respondents). An approximately equal number of votes are received by: school teachers (67%), other employees in residential care (62%) and the center's psychologist (60% of respondents), who occupy the 6<sup>th</sup> place in the impact ranking. Volunteers and employees of non-governmental organizations, who have an impact on young people's motivation, receive the least votes (50%), but their impact is not great. The penultimate place was assigned by respondents to psychologists. This fact raises the question of the effectiveness of providing psychological support – whether it is available, whether it is sufficient, whether it is sought after and whether there are other reasons why psychologists are not the main trusted persons for supporting young people. It is interesting that 28% of the respondents, who commented on the degree of psychologists' impact on the motivation of young people, indicated an answer "I cannot decide", and 6% did not indicate an answer at all. The obtained results do not coincide with the preliminary expectations psychologists to have the main part in the process of motivating young people. The leading place assigned by the respondents to the management can be attributed

to: the authority and personal qualities of the managers; their personal example; their tangible presence in the children's lives or another reason of an individual nature. Given that social service managers spend enough time with young people, know the children well and make efforts for their well-being, instilling respect, it can be assumed that the factors of time and attention, adequate care and personal authority have a beneficial effect on increasing the motivation of young people for improvement and development.

In parallel with researching the challenges for the development of young people in family-type centers, in the current study, options are being sought for additional support for young people both outside it, and outside the school institution. The subsystem of additional education includes extracurricular activities, which together with school activities (formal education subsystem) form the educational system in Bulgaria (Velitchkova 2021, p. 161). Extracurricular activities take place outside of school time and in an out-of-school environment, engaging the youths' free time. In the context of the need for additional support for at-risk youths, the survey asked about attendance to extracurricular activities and the types of extracurricular activities in which youths participate. To this question, 76% of the respondents answered affirmatively that young people attend additional classes, and 24% answered negatively. According to the opinion of the respondents, most young people participate in sports activities (34%), followed by visits to cultural events (theatre, concerts – 25%), activities in applied and artistic activities (18%), driving courses (13%), language training (8%), study courses (2%). The presented results show a low percentage of attendance to activities that directly contribute to the educational and future professional success of young people (learning and driving courses, language training). It is indicated that sports and recreational activities predominate – sports and applied activities, which, in the presence of relevant gifts and abilities, should be further improved professionally. Visits to cultural events enrich young people and bring variety to their lives, but they do not have a direct impact on increasing youths' educational level and opportunities for professional success.

The frequency of after-school attendance by at-risk youths is largely dependent on the availability and discretion of the family-type placement center management. In this sense, the children residing in these centers comply with the current situation, which may hinder their participation in extracurricular activities. The question: „How often do at-risk youths attend extracurricular activities?“ was answered by 76% of respondents. They put in the first three places: visits once a week (marked by 42% of respondents), visits several times a week (27% of respondents) and visits several times a month (15% of respondents). For 16%, extracurricular activities and events are not regular, but rather occasional - from time to time within the month, from time to time within the school term, from time to time within the school year.

The survey continues with the question about the opinion of the participants regarding the desires of young people: 1) to acquire secondary education degree; 2) to continue their education; 3) to have long-term employment.

1) The predominant answers to the first sub-question are the presence of a moderate desire to complete education (57% of the respondents), 15% mark that the desire as high, and 28% - as low. There are no respondents who consider that such aspiration is lacking, nor respondents who cannot decide.

3) In connection with a survey of the intentions of at-risk youths to continue their education after graduating from secondary school, the responses received rather reject the existence of such a possibility. The majority of respondents share that the aspirations of young people are low – 53%, for 15% there is no ambition, and 32% define it as moderate. There is a lack of persons who answer that the aspirations of the youths are high. In summary of the presented results, a low or absent desire of young people to continue higher education is reported. This statement may be due to the following reasons: poor awareness of the opportunities that higher education provides to graduates; insufficient or missing confidence and faith in one's own abilities; undeveloped study habits; lack of motivation, lack of support, lack of financial security, etc.

3) To the sub-question about the young people's desire to have long-term employment, 94% of the respondents definitely state that the aspiration of young people to be employed in the long-term is high and moderate, and 6% consider it to be low. As a result of the obtained data, it is suggested that at-risk youths are aware of the need to obtain income in the long term, but do not associate obtaining a better education with the probability of obtaining a higher income and having a greater choice of opportunities for professional and career success.

A main goal of the present study, on the one hand, is to obtain information about the educational status and attitudes of young people in relation to their professional development, and on the other hand, to study the opinion of the respondents about the measures that can increase the success rate and motivation of young people at risk in educational and professional aspects. On the basis of the stated reasons, is raised the question about the need to include minors in a practically oriented training program that will prepare them for life after leaving the Center and assist their participation in appropriate professional internships. 74% of the respondents are adamant that young people need to get involved in such trainings, 24% share that the measure is rather necessary, and 3% cannot decide how much such trainings are necessary. There are no responses that completely reject the usefulness of inclusion in additional training programs. The presented data confirm the assumption that there is a need to create a program for additional training and it is advisable to take specific steps in this direction.

In addition to the usefulness of additional practical trainings, respondents also commented on the likelihood that minors would be interested in participating in

such trainings. The majority of respondents (76%) answered that there is a high probability or that there is such a probability (for 21% the probability is high, and for 55% – there is a probability). 15% express the opinion that it is unlikely that young people will show interest, and 9% cannot decide whether young people would show interest. The received affirmative answers support the thesis that given opportunities adapted to the educational level, interests and individual utility of the participating young people at risk, youths tend to engage in additional trainings.

In order to specify the needs of at-risk youths and to specify the content parameters of the proposed additional trainings, the survey formulated a question about the presence or absence of difficulties in the young adults' integration into society after leaving the Center. In response to this question, 82% of respondents shared that young people encounter or rather encounter difficulties in their integration into society. 6% believe that young people rather have no difficulties, and 12% of respondents cannot decide whether young people face difficulties after leaving residential care. The answers received correspond to K. Zlatkova-Doncheva's opinion that the characteristics of children at risk, raised in a non-family environment, imply the application of a specific approach, which will prepare them for independent life and successful integration into the community, the labor market and in society (Zlatkova-Doncheva 2018, p. 229).

Mentoring support is defined as an additional measure to help young people, which has been precisely studied by authors like K. Zlatkova-Doncheva, D. Ilieva-Koleva, etc. K. Zlatkova-Doncheva defines mentoring as a process of guiding, instructing and advising persons who have decided to develop certain skills and acquire knowledge to help them in their personal development (Zlatkova-Doncheva 2018, p. 94). In this regard, the survey asked a question about the expediency of providing regular, individual support to minors by mentors outside of the Center. The answers received support the implementation of such a measure, as: 32% of respondents fully support, 41% of respondents rather support the provision of regular mentoring support, 18% cannot decide and 9% consider that the measure is rather not expedient. There were no responses that did not recommend mentoring support as an additional mechanism.

The survey continues with a clarifying question about the degree of impact of the measures mentioned below, which can support the successful integration of young people into society after leaving social service. The following options are offered:

a) Individual consultations with a psychologist. For 24% of respondents, individual consultations with a psychologist can support the integration of young adults to a high degree; for 55%, this measure supports young people to an average degree; 12% define individual consultations as a measure that supports young people to a low degree, and 9% consider that such a measure does not support the successful integration of young adults. The presented data show a certain parallel

with the answers received to a previous question, regarding the psychologist's role in increasing the motivation of young people for improvement and development. In summary of the mentioned two questions, it is found that psychologists in residential care are not leading persons who mainly contribute to the integration of young people in society and their motivation for improvement and development.

b) Individual support by a mentor – unlike counseling with a psychologist, which respondents did not mention as a leading measure of support for young people, individual support by a mentor for 91% of respondents can facilitate to a high and medium degree the integration of young people into society after reaching adulthood. 3% define the impact of individual mentoring support as low, and 6% cannot decide. There are no answers that individual mentoring support does not help young people. The obtained results convincingly confirm the significant role of the mentor in the process of supporting the integration of young people in society. K. Zlatkova-Doncheva defines mentoring programs as an effective, preferred and accessible approach for friendly interaction between an experienced mentor and a young person (Zlatkova-Doncheva 2018, p. 95).

c) Another measure is the possibility of including young people in additional courses and trainings in relation to their interests. To this question, 72% share that participation in additional courses and trainings can greatly help young people; 25% rated the degree as average, and 3% considered that the additional activities helped them to a small degree. There are no respondents who reject the statement, or who cannot decide. When comparing the answers to this and previous questions, the thesis is confirmed that additional external educational support (in the form of courses, trainings, programs) can help young people in their personal development and subsequent integration into society.

d) Professional experience – this measure was proposed as a possible answer in the survey in connection with the fact that the acquisition of professional experience increases the professional qualification of employed persons. In the process of working and performing assigned tasks, young people form work habits, acquire new knowledge and practical skills, while simultaneously revealing their interests and preferences. 97% of respondents share that professional internships are essential for young people and can support their integration to a high and medium level; 3% of respondents could not decide on the impact of professional internships.

e) Participation in projects organized by socially engaged non-governmental organizations. The opinions of the respondents on this question are not definitive – 30% of the respondents share that participation in projects can help young people to a high degree, 55% assess the degree as average, and 9% cannot decide. 6% of the respondents shared that such participation contributes to a weak degree to the successful integration of young people.

f) Another measure is the inclusion of at-risk youths in volunteer initiatives. This practice is relatively unpopular and rare in Bulgaria, but it has significant

educational and training potential. In response to the question, an equal number of votes were received - 19% of the respondents confirm to a high degree the benefit of involving young people in voluntary initiatives and 19% note that such initiatives have a weak impact on the successful integration of young people into society. Almost half of the respondents share (47%) that the mentioned measure affects young people to an average degree. 15% of respondents cannot decide. There are no answers that reject the benefits of involving youth in volunteering activities. From the obtained results, relatively weak interest in the mentioned measure was found. Nevertheless, volunteering on a global scale represents a serious socio-pedagogical resource, which in Bulgaria is yet to be studied and appropriately used.

g) Ensuring suitable employment. Ensuring employment emerges as the most preferred measure of the listed, together with the participation of young people in professional internships. 97% of the respondents noted that the provision of appropriate employment supports the integration of young people in society to a high and medium degree. The same number of respondents (97%) support the inclusion of young people in professional internships. 3% cannot decide to what extent the provision of employment contributes to the successful integration of young people. There are no respondents who claim that the mentioned measure does not help young people at all or helps them to a low extent.

The received answers to the demographic questions included in the survey are presented in summary in order to extract additional information about the profile of the respondents. Respondents noted that they practice in the fields of: social work (70%), social pedagogy (13%), pedagogy (11%), social service management (3%), general care (child sitter – 3%). The professional experience of the majority of them (26%) is 0 – 2 years, followed by practitioners with 2 – 5 years of experience (21%), 10 – 15 years – (21%), 5 – 10 years (18%), 15+ years (15%). The professional experience of the respondents is more evenly distributed – 47% have relatively little experience – up to 2 and up to 5 years, and 53% have professional experience over 5, over 10 and over 15 years. Despite the numerical advantage of the more experienced employees who participated in the study, it was found that the surveyed persons practice on the territory of 13 regions in the country and the number of more experienced and less experienced employees is unevenly distributed. 59% of respondents have a master's degree, 32% have a bachelor's degree, 6% have completed secondary education, and 3% of employees have a PhD degree. 91% of respondents are women. 76% of the respondents say that they have undergone additional training to increase their professional qualifications, 6% are currently undergoing training, and 18% have not undergone specialized training. The fact that almost ¼ of the respondents did not receive additional training is a cause for concern, as working with children at risk is something specific and requires high level of professionalism in dealing with children's peculiarities and deficits.

The results obtained from the survey can be specified in the following areas:

The most significant qualities and factors in the lives of young people that they need to develop are persistence and will in the first place, followed by patience, motivation, tolerance and honesty;

Major areas of deficit where young people need the most support are communication and obtaining an education degree. Work habits, hygiene and physical health and the professional success of young people follow;

Life and behavioral problems as well as the absence of a supportive family environment have a significant impact on the young people's desire to graduate according to the answers of 85% of the respondents;

The provision of individual support by a trusted person is reported as a leading measure to encourage young people to complete a degree;

Attending classes at school is not a regular practice for the majority of young people housed in the FTACCWDs;

The young people's motivation to attend school is reported to be unsatisfactorily low;

Significant individuals who can impact on increasing the motivation of young people for improvement and development are graded by importance in the following sequence: managers in social care service, mentors and consultants, social workers, school teachers, other employees in residential care, psychologists in the centers, volunteers and employees in non-governmental organizations;

According to respondents, ¼ of at-risk youths placed in social services do not attend extracurricular activities;

The prevailing answers given by the respondents state that the youths who attend extracurricular activities carry out this activity once a week;

It is indicated that the most visited additional activities and events are: sports activities and cultural events (theatre, concerts). A small part of the children attend classes on applied and artistic activities and driving courses, and the attendance of educational and language courses is carried out rarely in isolated cases.

As a result of the obtained data, low or symbolic attendance of driving courses, additional language and study courses is reported;

There is a moderate to low aspiration of young people to complete secondary education, and in terms of continuing to higher education, young people have low or no aspiration according to 2/3 of respondents.

In contrast to the weak interest in obtaining a secondary education degree is the young people's intention to have employment in the long term. Over 90% of respondents rated this aspiration as high and moderate;

The participation of minors in a practical, out-of-school training programs that contribute to their integration into society and the labor market is defined as a necessary measure to support youth development by more than 2/3 of the respondents;

There is a probability or a high probability that young people will show interest in participating in additional training programs implemented in an informal environment according to 2/3 of the respondents;

The expediency of providing regular support by a mentor external to the Center for minors is confirmed by over 70% of the respondents;

The measures that can support the successful integration of young people into society after leaving social services are summarized according to their degree of influence, reported by the respondents. Three measures stand out with the highest support (3 x 97% of respondents) – provision of work experience, provision of appropriate employment and inclusion of young people in additional courses and trainings. They are followed by individual mentoring support, regardless of whether it is provided by a person external to the Center or implemented within the service (91% of respondents); participation in projects organized by socially engaged non-governmental organizations (85% of respondents rated the degree as high or medium); individual support by a psychologist helps young people to a high and medium degree (for 79% of respondents). The least number of votes goes to the involvement of young people in voluntary initiatives – a measure that can help to a high and medium degree young people at risk – 66% of respondents.

Based on the results of the survey, the following findings were made:

– The lack of a family environment and parental support is a risk factor that has a negative impact on the motivation of young people for personal and professional progress.

– Motivation is a significant factor in the development of young people, which supports the completion of an educational degree and their professional and personal success.

– Encouragement to achieve a higher level of education can be an important compensatory mechanism to overcome problems of a personal nature in young people's lives. It becomes clear that the insufficient attendance of extracurricular activities reduces the opportunities for the development of young people in educational and professional terms.

– Despite the young people's educational problems, some of which are related to their study habits and low motivation to attend school, children at risk hardly attend training and educational courses, programs and events to support the identified deficits.

– Taking measures to integrate young people into the labor market, including ensuring work experience or suitable employment support their development and active inclusion in society.

– The participation of young people from vulnerable groups in voluntary initiatives is an additional socio-pedagogical measure with an educational orientation, which forms: work habits, practical skills, social skills, communication

skills, moral qualities, an example of behavior, positive attitude, a sense of personal significance and personal contribution, sense of togetherness and belonging, sense of community, utility, etc.

- Given the particularities and specifics of working with children at risk, it is appropriate to apply an individual approach to youth support measures;
- The research found that psychologists in the social service were not identified by the respondents as the main trusted person to support young people.

The evidence for the hypothesis raised in the study can be mainly presented in the following aspects:

- The data obtained from the present survey are confirmed with the results of researches by other authors in relation to the problems of young people in educational aspect;
- Young people are poorly motivated to attend school and complete secondary education, which hinders their educational and professional success;
- The low attendance of additional courses, programs and events with an educational focus does not have a significant impact on the acquisition of new knowledge, the formation of skills and competences among young people;
- The psychological support for young people is not effective enough in terms of their aspiration for development and success in life after coming of age;
- Young people are in a great need of mentoring support – mentors who can individually guide, advise, consult them in a friendly and informal environment;
- It is necessary to build work habits that will support young people's successful participation in professional internships and in the acquisition of employment in the long term.

The findings of the empirical research express the need to include additional training support for young people to “fill in the gaps” and to assist in the formation of new qualities and skills necessary for the success of young people in modern society. The important role of out-of-school activities of educational nature, which can complement knowledge in school, is defined, provided that young people attend classes regularly. The weak motivation to attend and finish school can be compensated with additional trainings adapted to the interests and needs, which will best meet the individual characteristics and needs of at-risk youths. The informal environment of extracurricular activities and the lack of assessment contribute to the youths' psychological comfort. This helps them feel accepted and free to discover and express their strengths.

In connection with the presented summarized results of the empirical research and the theoretical review of scientific literature, the following recommendations have been formulated, which can serve as a guide in further work with minors from vulnerable groups:

- From an educational point of view, it is appropriate to include children from vulnerable groups in voluntary initiatives corresponding to their capabilities with

the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills, integrating into society and forming personal qualities.

– Youth development and motivation can be stimulated by various persons involved in the care, education, job guidance and support for children at risk.

– Further research into the views of teachers teaching young people placed in a residential service on the extent to which children actually attend school is recommended.

– In order to increase the effectiveness of the psychological support for children at risk, it is recommended to study the reasons why psychologists in the social service are not indicated as the young people's main confidants.

– It is assumed expedient the establishing of mentoring programs for at-risk children following the example of ABLE mentor volunteer program for students in the upper secondary stage of education.

In conclusion, it can be noted that the academic achievements of students is a variable value, dependent on various factors such as: presence of supportive social, family and educational environment, access to digital educational resources, equal access to education, equality of educational opportunities, educational integration, etc. The absence or weak manifestation of some of these factors adversely affects the students' success at school, their motivation for learning and professional development. In the context of the challenges facing the modern educational reality, there are significant problems related to the inclusion of all children in the learning process and reducing the number of drop-out students in the long term. Children raised in a non-family environment have greater difficulties in learning at school, in professional success and integration in society than their peers, supported by their families. In relation to these circumstances, it is essential to provide additional support for children at risk. The conducted research contributes in this direction by empirically establishing some opportunities and limitations for at-risk minors housed in residential-type social centers. Based on the obtained results and the conclusions drawn from the research, specific measures and guidelines have been proposed for overcoming the limitations and for using the opportunities for young people in educational and professional aspect.

## NOTES

1. COUNCIL OF MINISTERS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA. National strategy for poverty reduction and promotion of social inclusion 2030. 31 December 2020. Available from: <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1345> [Viewed 2022-09-20].

2. FTACCWD – Family-type accommodation center for children without disabilities
3. NATIONAL NETWORK FOR CHILDREN. Notebook 2021. What is the average score of state's care for children? ISSN 1314-9970.
4. STATE GAZETTE. Child protection act. Issue 48 of 13 June 2020. Available from: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/35/sv/zakon-za-zakrila-na-deteto.pdf> [Viewed 2022-09-03].
5. STATE GAZETTE. Act on youth. Issue 31 of 20 April 2012. Available from: <https://lex.bg/bg/laws/lidoc/2135786802> [Viewed 2022-09-07].
6. STATE GAZETTE. Social services act. Issue 24 of 22 March 2019. Available from: <https://lex.bg/bg/laws/lidoc/2137191914> [Viewed 2022-09-03].

## REFERENCES

KRIVIRADEVA, B., et al., 2012. *Working with children at risk*. Gabrovo: Eks press [in Bulgarian]. ISBN 978-954-490-364-0.

POPOVA, L., 2012. *Role of motivation in learning activity*. Veliko Tarnovo: Abagar [in Bulgarian]. ISBN 978-954-427-974-5.

RADEV, Pl., 2013. *Encyclopedia of educational sciences*. Plovdiv: Paisii Hilendarski University press [in Bulgarian]. ISBN 978-954-423-820-9.

VELITCHKOVA, A., 2021. Importance of extracurricular activities for the development of children at risk. *Scientific doctoral session*, vol. 7, pp. 155 – 169. Veliko Tarnovo: St. Cyril and St. Methodius University press. ISSN 2603-0367.

ZLATKOVA-DONCHEVA, K., 2018. *Mentorship and children at risk*. Burgas: Libra scorp [in Bulgarian]. ISBN: 978-954-471-438-3.

ZLATKOVA-DONCHEVA, K., 2017. Factors and causes for low academic achievements at school. *Pedagogical almanac*, vol. 1, pp. 84 – 92 [in Bulgarian]. ISSN 2367-9360.

✉ **Mrs. Albena Kostadinova, PhD student**

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8125-7008

Faculty of Education

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo

Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

E-mail: [allbena@gmail.com](mailto:allbena@gmail.com)