

UNIVERSITY OF ZIELONA GÓRA

Faculty of Social Sciences

Scientific field: social sciences

Scientific discipline: pedagogy

MA Paweł Zapeński

**DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY**

**EMPOWERMENT AND INDEPENDENT LIVING OF FORMER FOSTER  
CARE PUPILS IN BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES**

Doctoral thesis written under the supervision of  
Prof. Dr. Grażyna Genowefa Gajewska UZ  
Associate Promoter / Associate Promoter  
Dr Edyta Bartkowiak

Zielona Góra 2022

## DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

Every year, almost six thousand children placed in institutional and family foster care reach adulthood and thus face the need to build an independent life (Supreme Audit Office, 2015). These persons have a much more difficult start to adulthood because their development and the process of becoming independent took place outside the natural family, which, as long as it is capable of fulfilling its care and upbringing functions, is the best living environment. In the case of those placed in foster care, the natural family has not only failed to fulfil its tasks but has also exposed the children to a series of traumatising experiences with which, unless they receive effective therapeutic assistance, they will enter adulthood. Life in foster care is the least similar to family conditions, so making their wards independent is the most challenging. It takes place within the legal framework, the most important of which is the Act of 9 June 2011 on family support and the foster care system (Act, 2011). By its provisions, foster care in Poland has been deinstitutionalised since 2012, guided by the idea of creating living conditions for children in need of care that are as close to family as possible. By its provisions, no more than 14 wards should reside in a single care institution. The Act also regulates the principles related to the process of becoming independent, the financial and material benefits due to the wards, as well as the conditions for organising the process itself and its course, in which the guardian of becoming independent and the Individual Independence Programme created together with the ward play significant roles.

An audit by the Supreme Audit Office (2014) found that, out of a sample of 1,000 foster homes who attempted to become independent, 23% used social assistance benefits, 31% registered with county labour offices, 14% interrupted the process of becoming independent and 14% returned to the pathological environment from which they had previously been placed in foster care. Former foster care pupils are more likely to become homeless, unemployed, or in conflict with the law. The legislator's ideas fail in practice. They do not prove effective enough to actually help young people coming out of foster care to build an independent life.

The research I carried out into the process of becoming independent and into the life independence gained by former foster care facility pupils was aimed at answering questions about the reasons for such an unfavourable state of affairs and looking for factors that enhance success, as many people manage to become independent and lead fulfilling lives.

In order to search for the factors that condition the process of becoming independent for former alumni, I conducted qualitative research using a narrative interview. Seven respon-

dents, former alumni of socialisation-type institutions operating in the two districts of Nowa Sól and Zielona Góra told me stories of their lives. Their autobiographical stories served me to analyse the factors influencing the process of becoming independent and the quality of independence gained by the narrators. The possibility for them to tell their whole lives opened the way to information not available through other methods. Limiting the questions to the process of independence itself would not have brought to light many of the mechanisms responsible for the narrators' behaviour and the way they perceived the social reality in which they had to live and become independent. The form of the narrative interview implies the least possible interference of the researcher in the participants' statements, which allows them to focus the story on relevant things from their perspective. And it was precisely understanding the perspective of those affected by the empowerment process that my research was concerned with. It gave voice to a group of people involved in gaining independence amid the trajectory of suffering they are experiencing and who, despite their direct participation, are the least decisive people, having to operate within a top-down imposed framework. The analysis of their statements made it possible to draw conclusions as well as recommendations and corrective demands appropriate to the current state of affairs. Among these, the call for subjectivity, emotional support, for a little heart, a good word and kindness seem to come to the fore. The narrators showed immense gratitude for every manifestation of care and genuine interest in their fate, and uniquely recalled kind-hearted caregivers: *She was the only one who took the time for me as much as she could, and you could go to her for a coffee with milk, of course, when the headmaster didn't see, because they chased us away from her. And she secretly gave me some money one day, so I could have what I wanted at school. She was super, and I'll remember her (Ala) fondly.* They distinguished them from those who brutally did their duties: *But yes, nobody was even interested in the future of the alumni. You came, then you'll go - oh, that's the rule, I would say (Ala).*