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Young People with Complex Needs as a Particular Challenge for the Education System

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One of the phenomena that predicts poorer educational outcomes for young people, as well as poorer outcomes in other areas, is certainly the phenomenon of complex needs, i.e., challenges that cut across different domains, often combining psychosocial wellbeing, physical and mental health, socio-economic background, the burden of different challenges on the young persons' family, a non-dominant ethnic background, learning difficulties and other aspects. A key challenge with complex needs is the inability of systems (educational and others) to respond appropriately to them, resulting in young people being sent from door to door and being excluded, as well as other adverse responses for both parties (young people and services, educational and others). In order to understand the emergence of complex needs or multiple vulnerabilities, we need to analyse them using an intersectional perspective. In this paper, data from a national Slovenian study entitled Support Networks for Young People in Psychosocial Distress are analysed using a subsample of 32 young people from the overall sample of 203 interviewees. The subsample represents young people whose interviews show the greatest clustering of distress in various contexts of life. The interviews with the selected participants are qualitatively analysed using content analysis based on a scheme of key social systems: school/education, family, peer networks, local community and other (formal) support services. All of these systems are analysed in terms of being supportive or threatening according to the perception of the young person. In all of the systems, more threatening than supportive aspects were reported by young people with complex needs. An analysis of both kinds of factors can help us to think about the changes needed in educational and other systems in order to make them more responsive to the needs of particularly vulnerable young people.

Keywords: young people, psychosocial distress, complex needs, intersectionality, integrating services

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Mladi s kompleksnimi potrebami kot poseben izziv za vzgojno-izobraževalni sistem

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Eden izmed pojavov, ki napoveduje slabše rezultate mladih na področju izobraževanja pa tudi na drugih področjih, je gotovo pojav kompleksnih potreb, tj. izzivov, ki segajo na različna področja, pogosto pa združujejo psihosocialno počutje, telesno in duševno zdravje, socialno-ekonomsko ozadje, različna družinska bremena, nedominantno etnično ozadje, učne težave in morebitne druge vidike. Ključni izziv pri kompleksnih potrebah je nezmožnost sistemov (vzgojno-izobraževalnega in drugih), da bi se nanje ustrezno odzvali, zaradi česar se mlade pošilja od vrat do vrat, ter se jih na škodo obeh strani (mladih in tudi služb v podporo mladim) izključuje. Da bi razumeli nastanek kompleksnih potreb oz. večplastnih ranljivosti, jih moramo analizirati z medpresečne perspektive. V prispevku so analizirani podatki slovenske nacionalne raziskave z naslovom Podporne mreže mladih v psihosocialnih stiskah, ki je bila izvedena na podvzorcu 32 mladih iz skupnega vzorca 203 anketirancev. Podvzorec predstavlja mlade, pri katerih je v intervjujih razvidno največje kopičenje izzivov v različnih življenjskih kontekstih. Intervjuji z izbranimi udeleženci so kvalitativno analizirani z uporabo vsebinske analize na podlagi sheme ključnih družbenih sistemov: šola/izobraževanje, družina, vrstniške mreže, lokalna skupnost in druge (formalne) podporne službe. Vsi ti sistemi so analizirani glede na to, ali so po mladostnikovem dojemanju zanj odigrali podporno ali ogrožajočo vlogo. V vseh sistemih so mladi s kompleksnimi potrebami poročali o več ogrožajočih kot podpornih vidikih. Analiza obeh vrst dejavnikov nam lahko pomaga pri razmišljanju o potrebnih spremembah v vzgojno-izobraževalnih in drugih sistemih, da bi se ti bolj odzivali na potrebe posebej ranljivih mladih.

Ključne besede: mladi, psihosocialne stiske, kompleksne potrebe, medpresečnost, integriranje storitev

Introduction

In the last decade, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, issues related to mental health, especially of young people, have become a strongly salient topic in Slovenia, both in the public media and in professional discourse. The critical points highlighted are the poor availability of help for young people in psychosocial distress, the lack of appropriate professional staff, and partly also the adequacy of existing models of help (Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2017; Mikuš Kos, 2017; Dekleva et al., 2018). In this regard, several studies have been carried out and published recently, but they are almost all limited to analyses of official statistical data (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2018; Rupnik Vec & Silvar, 2019; Lavrič & Deželan, 2021). However, there have been no systematic attempts to investigate how young users experience the process and availability of formal help services, or how they deal with threatening and supporting factors in their life. This gap is filled by the present study, which, due to the relative novelty of the approach and the qualitative methodology, can be understood to be of an exploratory nature.

Conceptualisation of vulnerability

The heterogenised or complex picture of the multiple dimensions of exclusion is reflected in different areas of the daily lives of individuals, at the intersection of different disciplines or domains: educational, social welfare, health and others. We can speak of vulnerability as a concept to describe a population with accumulated distress. Even if vulnerability manifests itself in different ways, vulnerable families or individuals share certain characteristics, with the common denominator being the accumulation of challenges in different areas of life. The following factors are typically clustered in their stories: lack of material security and stable housing, the presence of somatic problems, psychosocial distress, social isolation, relationship problems within the family or community, and difficulties in engaging with different organisations, including counselling or support services (Turnšek, et al., 2016, p. 33). The problems faced by vulnerable families and individuals are often multidimensional and intertwined. De Vries and Bouwkamp (2002) describe this interconnectedness in terms of the concept of 'radiation', which refers to the process of problems in particular areas of life interacting in a mutually reinforcing and negative way. Mešl and Kodele (2016) use the term 'multi-challenged families' to emphasise a resource and power perspective, rather than a deficit view of these families or individuals. Shannon and Rogue (2009, p. 2) eloquently describe the

intersectionality of multiple challenges by describing it as “living at the dangerous intersections of white supremacy, capitalism, and oppressive institutional structures”, drawing our attention to the contingency of the complexity and accumulation of problems in broader societal factors and trends. It is impossible to understand individual difficulties outside the contexts of their emergence, which are broadly socially conditioned.

An intersectional approach to vulnerability

The concept of exclusion can, at this point, be linked to that of complex inequalities (Mladenović, 2016), complex needs (Grebenc & Kvaternik, 2008), intersections of exclusion (Razpotnik, 2004) and intersectionality (Kuhar, 2009). Inequalities are increasingly perceived in contemporary times as complex and disparate.

An important aspect of vulnerability is the involvement of individuals or families in diverse possible sources of support, which has led some authors to coin the term ‘multi-agency families’ (Sternad, 2012) or ‘families using multiple services’ (Demšar, 2021). Some authors also point out that unrealistic and misaligned expectations from the perspective of different institutions or services can result in withdrawal and avoidance of forms of assistance, rather than strengthening the process of finding solutions. Similarly, the bureaucratic and formalistic approach of institutions can lead to alienation from the very sources of help, precisely for those users who need the services the most. A common characteristic of vulnerable families or individuals is often the long history of failed attempts to establish support processes, where failure is frequently interpreted by different professions as an inability or unwillingness on the part of vulnerable individuals or families to seek and receive support (De Vries & Bouwkamp, 2002). The latter is particularly crucial for our research (Dekleva et al., 2021), which is one of the few studies in our field that is explicitly interested in the user aspect, and thus the potential failure to gain support is also highlighted from a different perspective than usual: on the side of the inadequately functioning support network rather than of the unsuccessful support seekers. The use of an intersectional approach could, according to Mladenović (2016), therefore be crucial for addressing complex inequalities, as it represents an attempt to go beyond understanding and consequently treating individual problems or vulnerabilities as individualised and particularised disabilities of individuals, and provides a framework for understanding inequalities as structurally contingent.

From individual towards shared responsibility

The relationship between users and the various services needs to be analysed and discussed in the context of the changing relationship between the individual and the state. Since the 1970s, theorists such as Rosanvallon (1995) have been analysing how the traditional welfare state is no longer able to cope with new social issues, such as the emergence of poverty and the increase in unemployment. In the European context, the last decades have witnessed the transformation of the welfare state into a 'social investment state' (Giddens, 1998; Vandebroek et al., 2009; Vandebroek & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). This means that the state no longer compensates for the individual's failures, but merely invests in the future success of its citizens, thus instrumentalising them more than before in terms of their profitability. The latter is also relevant to the educational sphere, which seems to have succumbed unreflectively to this trend. The tendency is to base social inclusion solely and primarily on employability and, consequently, on profitability and competitiveness. The changing construction of the welfare state implies the emergence of concepts such as individual responsibility and the discourse that there are no rights without duties (Beck, 2003; Giddens, 1998), which also implies that social rights are no longer taken for granted and guaranteed. Vandebroek et al. (2009) point out that this trend has not bypassed the relationship between vulnerable families, or parents within these families, and the state, whereby parents are increasingly seen as solely responsible for the future success of their children (Featherstone, 2006; Parton, 2006; Razpotnik, 2011).

Processes of intervention within education, social care and healthcare therefore take place in complex and heterogeneous social contexts. All of these processes involving support cannot be conceived as reciprocal, where individuals and communities mutually shape each other. In this respect, Vandebroek et al. (2009) suggest that we can draw on the concept of the 'rich child', the 'rich adolescent' and the 'rich parent'. This concept carries the assumption that children, adolescents and their parents are resourceful and potentially powerful social actors from the perspective of practitioners. All action, whether embedded in educational contexts, social welfare or informal networks, is enacted through lived interaction with others. The neoliberal concept of individual responsibility (which implies that the individual is responsible for his/her own choices and, consequently, for success or failure, independently of, for example, different starting points, complex needs, intergenerational transmissions of disadvantage and intersections of deprivation) is also too narrow, in the sense that it leaves insufficient room for interconnectedness and interdependence, and obscures the assumption

that human development is fundamentally embedded in relationships with others (Razpotnik, 2011). Accordingly, Vandenbroeck et al. (2009) offer the concept of shared responsibility instead of the increasingly popular discourse of individual responsibility. Within the concept of shared responsibility, accountability is understood as something that emerges in a dialogical interaction between the actors involved. The knowledge and solutions that emerge in this interspace are necessarily contextual, provisional and micro-political (Mozère, 2007). In contrast to the neoliberal conception of citizenship, relational citizenship should not be seen as the property of individuals, but rather as an apparatus of reflection and a starting point for the design of new educational and other relational practices. Furthermore, it is not a static category, something that can be achieved once and for all, but rather a nomadic process of becoming and in-betweenness (Razpotnik, 2011). Vandenbroeck et al. (2009) inevitably associate respect for diversity with relational citizenship. However, not diversity as a demand for tolerance towards those who deviate from the dominant norms, but reflection on the dominant norms that create deviation and exclusion. In the fields of social welfare, education and health, the concept of relational citizenship does not lead us to create programmes, interventions or forms of work that increase autonomy and add power, but rather to develop programmes where people can simply try out and live reciprocity, interdependence and adding power (Ramaekers, 2010). In terms of policymaking, the concept of relational citizenship does not necessarily require building entirely new spaces and models of working in the field of vulnerability, but rather establishing reflection and the already raised open questions of intentions of action in existing approaches of work and support. The concept of relationality is seen as aligned with the prism of intersectionality, as it involves a broader interplay of relationships in which both challenges and solutions emerge.

Research problem

In 2017, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Slovenia responded to the recognised problem of increasing psychosocial distress among young people by commissioning a preliminary study entitled *Evaluating Accessibility of Services for Young People with Psychosocial and Mental Health Problems* (Dekleva et al., 2018), and later, in 2021, by further deepening this research with its continuation under the title *Support Networks for Young People in Psychosocial Distress* (Dekleva et al., 2021). This was a complex and multifaceted study that attempted to address the issue from different perspectives. The most extensive part of the empirical research covered information obtained from young people who had experienced different types of psychosocial distress.

Researching the first-person perspective of users of mental health services is very rare on a global scale, and it has never previously been undertaken in Slovenia. However, without this perspective, we cannot understand the problem of children and young people with complex difficulties, nor can we propose appropriate solutions. The present paper is devoted to getting to know the experiences of young service users through an analysis of their perception of what supported them in times of distress and what additionally burdened them.

Research questions

The research questions of the present paper are:

1. How do young people experiencing psychosocial distress evaluate support mechanisms in relation to family, school, peers, the local community and other organisations and services?
2. How do young people perceive threatening factors in relation to family, school, peers, the local community and other organisations and services?

Method

In this paper, we draw on a small part of a previously unpublished qualitative analysis of data from the two studies mentioned in the paragraph Research problem. Qualitative research is characterised by a focus on identifying processes and understanding the contexts of people's experiences (Silverman, 2001). The chosen approach, using thematic analysis, allowed us to identify different dilemmas, highlighting relevant themes and topics identified as such by the young people involved in the research.

Participants

The qualitative part of the research involved 203 young people, recruited based on previously having sought contacts with support systems, services and institutions offering help in cases of psychosocial distress (e.g., social work centres, counsellors, health workers, social welfare institutions). Recruitment was done opportunistically, utilising a snowball approach. The interviewees were from different parts of Slovenia. The interviews were conducted with the youngsters alone if they were over 18 or, in a very small number of cases, in the presence of their parents if they were between 16 and 18 years old. In both cases, the interviewees were informed of the research goals and procedures and signed a letter of consent. They were also offered the option of consultation with the senior researchers and had an opportunity to obtain further information on

accessing providers of psychosocial help. In all stages of the research, the ethical standards of sociopedagogical research and the University of Ljubljana's Code of Ethics for Researchers were observed. In accordance with the Code, each participant had the possibility of withdrawing at any time.

The average age of the interviewees at the time of the interview was 20.7 years, and 77.6 % of the sample were female. From the broader pool of 203 young people, interviews with 32 of the participants were selected for the purpose of the present paper, based on the criterion of the clustering of distress in multiple domains of the young people's lives, i.e., the selected participants reported difficulties linked to the family context, the educational context, the peer context, contexts of other organisations and services, and community contexts. The interviewees were selected on the basis of the consent of three independent evaluators/senior researchers.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, thus allowing interviewers to focus on the topic of interest while still giving them the autonomy to explore relevant ideas that may come up during the interview. The semi-structured interview covered topics such as the nature or type of psychosocial and other problems, coping and first help-seeking, informal sources of support, formal forms of support, the response of formal organisations to help-seeking, etc. The interviews were conducted either by trained upper-year students of social pedagogy or by the researchers who are the authors of this paper. The young people interviewed took a retrospective view of their difficulties and their search for support in psychosocial distress while they were growing up. The data therefore focus on the user's perspective, based on the assumption that a person who has experienced distress and support-seeking themselves can best assess the adequacy, quality and accessibility of such support (Bjønness et al., 2020).

Verbatim transcripts of the 32 selected interviews were qualitatively analysed using a mixed deductive-inductive coding approach. The scheme of five codes/categories was chosen deductively, naming the five main contexts of the possible existence of threatening or supportive factors: school/education, family, peer networks, local community, and other (formal) support services. The interviews were then analysed thematically, using an inductive coding approach, looking for specific kinds of either supportive or threatening factors/situations as perceived by the young people. After a process of free coding, the selected parts of the interviews that indicate the presence of the listed factors were, grouped into what we call 'content categories'. The coding of separate parts (e.g., statements) of the interviews was done also taking into account the context of the selected sentences and the whole interview.

Results

Table 1 shows the classification of supportive and threatening factors, found by inductive coding within the framework of five deductively chosen contexts. The factors are classified as supportive or threatening according to the perceptions of the young people and taking into account the whole context of the interviews. The table also rates each factor according to how often it appears in the 32 conversations, whereby ‘very frequent’ means that it appears in more than 23 interviews, ‘frequent’ means that it appears in 16–22 cases, ‘less frequent’ means that the factor appears in 6–15 interviews, and ‘rarely’ means that it appears in 1–5 cases. Some statements from the interviews could not be classified unequivocally as protective or threatening because they were ambivalent, which is also marked in the table (by an asterisk next to name of the content category).

Table 1

Classification of supportive and threatening factors reported by the young people

Context	Supportive/ threatening factors	Content categories identified from the young people's responses	Frequency of occurrence
School	Supportive	Strong personal involvement of a teacher or counsellor	Frequent
		Adaptability of the school to individual needs	Rarely
	Threatening	Feeling of being judged, blamed for the young person's distress	Frequent
		Mistrust, disbelief and denial of the young person's distress	Frequent
		Disinterest of school staff in the young person's distress	Frequent
		School focus on achievement alone	Frequent
		Peer bullying and the school's inadequate response to it	Frequent
		Distrust of school services	Frequent
		Exclusion from school programmes or threat of exclusion	Less frequent
		Indiscretion and abuse of trust by the teacher in relation to problems entrusted to him/her	Rarely
		Insulting and belittling attitudes of some teachers	Rarely

Context	Supportive/ threatening factors	Content categories identified from the young people's responses	Frequency of occurrence
Family	Supportive	Support from one or both grandparents	Frequent
		Mutual support, alliance or care for sibling,	Frequent
		Intervention by a relative*	Rarely
	Threatening	Domestic violence (by one parent towards the other parent and/or the child)	Very frequent
		Longstanding quarrels between parents	Very frequent
		Conflicts between parents over custody after divorce	Frequent
		Reorganisation of the family after parental separation	Frequent
		Financial support or denial of support by parents after divorce	Frequent
		Poverty and deprivation	Frequent
		Child neglect	Frequent
		Alcohol and/or psychoactive substance abuse by a family member	Frequent
		Feeling of guilt because of parental conflicts	Less frequent
		Psychiatric diagnosis or hospitalisation of a parent	Less frequent
Peers and partnerships	Supportive	Partners*	Frequent
		Peer network, friend, confidant	Frequent
	Threatening	Involvement in a group where everyone has complex needs*	Rarely
Local community, neighbourhood	Threatening	Defamation	Frequent
		Resistance to the local environment because of its judgmental attitude	Rarely
Other forms of support (social work centres, NGO sector, psychiatry, justice, paid forms of support such as therapy, etc.)	Supportive	Counselling based on relational work, respect, dialogue, being heard	Frequent
		Attempt to coordinate and/or integrate different forms of support	Less frequent
		Non-governmental, less formal or self-help forms of support	Rarely
		Advocacy by an adult in the case of inadequate treatment	Rarely
		Placement in extra-familial or residential care*	Rarely
	Threatening	Inconsistency of information and timeliness of support	Frequent
		Psychiatric treatment, hierarchical, no dialogue, no sense of being heard	Frequent
		Judgemental rather than supportive	Frequent
		Control over support	Frequent
		Locally inaccessible support	Frequent

Context	Supportive/ threatening factors	Content categories identified from the young people's responses	Frequency of occurrence
		Fear of controlling role of some services (e.g., social work centre)	Frequent
		Fear that trying to seek support will bring negative changes	Frequent
		Minimising distress, lack of interest, and/or abusive attitudes of staff when reporting violence	Frequent
		Mismatch between different sources of support	Frequent
		Failure to protect by competent institutions in the case of threat, violence or abuse	Less frequent
		Narrowly targeted support	Rarely

* The factor appeared in the young people's statements as both protective and threatening (the interviewees were ambivalent about the nature of the factor).

The table shows that the most important of the highlighted aspects, especially the threatening factors, are related to the family. The perception of domestic violence, which was highlighted as a very frequent threatening factor in the young people's statements, is described by one adolescent in the following words: "The constant quarrels and conflicts were not clear to me as a six-year-old child, I didn't know why my father had to start a quarrel with my mother every day after work, and he often beat her up" (Interviewee 1). Another adolescent, who was often exposed to neglect, describes it in the following way: "I wanted to live with my father just because he was not at home, he was passive and he didn't care about anything, even when he knew about my cutting, he never said anything, just a couple of times he said something" (Interviewee 2).

Different and frequently exposed risk factors also stand out in the school context. Among the supportive factors in school, the personal involvement of teachers and counsellors is often highlighted, which one interviewee described by saying: "My Slovenian teacher used to be my mother. When I was absent, I said I would bring an excuse; she said, just leave it because I know how it is. I don't know in what ways she defended me in front of all the teachers. I think she put half her soul into it. Now when I meet her, we hug like that, she always asks how I'm doing" (Interviewee 3). On the other hand, teachers' mistrust towards young people in need appears among the common threatening factors, as indicated by the following interviewee statement: "My parents had to come to school and say that they were getting divorced, and that what I was saying was true, so that they would believe me" (Interviewee 4).

Other areas combine different contexts and sources. There are more negative than positive evaluations attached to the healthcare aspect, and the

same applies to the social welfare field. The following statements illustrate this observation. One interviewee describes the experience of going to the psychiatrist by saying: "It's like once a month you go there for half an hour and she keeps looking at her watch, so it's obvious how fucking redundant you are to her. And it's just pills, pills, pills" (Interviewee 5). Another interviewee had the following experience when she visited the social care centre: "We asked the social worker, because we lived in the same house, how to actually live normally if it's not working. This social worker told my dad very rudely that yes, if you can't take care of your children yourselves, we'll put them in a crisis centre. When we heard those words, it was terrible. We were scared of what a crisis centre even is. We thought that only some helpless kids were going there" (Interviewee 6).

There are exceptions in all of these areas. Based on our interviews, the adults referred to are mostly individual professionals from very different fields (most often class teachers, frequently social workers, in a few cases also judges or psychologists), who did more than was strictly necessary in a given situation, who took on additional professional (and often personal) involvement, and who probably went beyond what they should have done in their official capacity or what they were competent to do in a given case. This extra commitment was observed and described in different ways, often as a warm and enthusiastic attitude, sometimes even as a motherly attitude, and in some cases also mentioning how a particular professional opened a door for the young person that was previously closed, or made something possible that would otherwise have seemed impossible. Professional work based on respect, dialogue and being heard is one of the supporting factors frequently highlighted by the interviewees. One of them described her experience of the relationship with the therapist as follows: "[The psychotherapist] was the only person who didn't judge me for drinking too much, who didn't judge me for rolling a joint, who didn't judge me if I took drugs. He always tried to help me in some alternative way. I told him things that I didn't tell anybody" (Interviewee 7).

The results of the analysis of the interviews with the young people show that threatening factors and their intersections are clearly predominant over protective or supportive factors. However, more detailed analysis provides very interesting insights and opens further reflections, relevant not only to the cases identified as 'particularly vulnerable', but to the whole system of support, from informal, family, kinship and neighbourhood support, through school, to social care, healthcare and the non-governmental sector of different professional fields.

Discussion

In the interviews with adolescents, the research focused mainly on the aspect of accessibility to different sources of support. Judging from the interviews, the set of problems that could be described by the phrase 'burdensome family situation' is largely unaddressed by the various institutions or services.

Our results also show that adolescents are more likely to report a lack of support from schools and social work centres. As a result, they often take the burden of the problem upon themselves and deal with it as best they can. In some cases, they share the burden with siblings or another family member, e.g., grandparents, who sometimes, but not always, serve a buffer. Even if grandparents are a supportive and protective link, the illness or death of one or both grandparents often occurs in the course of the young person's life, resulting in the loss of a rare but important support.

In cases where there was no adequate support person within the extended family, interviewees reported an early start to running away from home and, in connection with this, an early turn to psychoactive substances as a means of escape. Sometimes it is a combination of both, running away from home and returning to an at least partly supportive person in the (extended) family. Family support remains crucial in most cases, even if it is very partial and inadequate, and even if the family is also a source of abuse, neglect and violence.

The analysis shows that, in most cases, our interlocutors are dealing with a sequence of difficult family circumstances and burdens (often present in the family even before the birth of the child) and various threatening behaviours, which in this context can be understood as a consequence of continuously experienced distress.

The fact of such frequent distress related to the school context can be interpreted as an issue of the maladjustment of the system to people with cumulative difficulties. In several narratives, it was this circumstance (maladjustment of the school system, which is reframed as maladjustment of the young person to the system), in conjunction with other difficulties, that led to premature exclusion from school.

The combination of various learning difficulties is an increasing challenge for educational environments, as can be seen from the frequent experience of young people who, when they encounter difficulties, often experience exclusion or the threat of exclusion as early as in primary school. Exclusion often continues to deepen distress, to make problems chronic, and to diminish visions of how complex problems could be resolved.

The set of interviews of young people with complex vulnerability provides a final picture that is a confluence of multiple and diverse threatening factors, on the one hand, and a lack of accessible, integrated and continuous support, on the other. While individuals have in fact sought and received support, it has largely been unconnected, fragmented and not centred on the individuals themselves or tailored in dialogue with them, as suggested by contemporary professional visions (in the broadest sense, we can mention here UNESCO's new vision for the education system (UNESCO, 2021)), which prioritise dialogue, cooperation and networking, and see educators as agents of building caring and trusting relationships within educational environments.

The involvement of relatives is often mentioned in the interviews, but the involvement of other members of the neighbourhood, such as neighbours or family friends, is very rarely mentioned. The general impression is that the families of our interviewees are relatively isolated in their often generations-long challenges, which the present environment (including school) does not help to solve, instead stigmatising and further marginalising the families. The stigma attached to the family environment is often passed on to the children. The local environment cannot, unfortunately, be assessed as a source of support based on our cases, with a few exceptions.

Another important aspect of family non-support is the refusal of parents to provide financial support to their children, which very often becomes a problem after the parents' divorce (as reflected in the content category 'financial support or denial of support by parents after divorce' in Table 1). This makes it difficult for young people to become independent, with high financial burdens and no support services available to support them in becoming independent in housing, which is a crucial step, especially in the case of burdensome and intergenerational circumstances, unless temporary independence is offered by living in a boarding home or student residence. However, even in these cases, the question is legitimately raised (in some interviews) of what to do when their formal status (regarding their age or school status) no longer allows this supported and affordable form of living. This raises the threat of homelessness or, the more common alternative, a return to the burdensome environment of the primary family. There is hardly any research on the growing phenomenon of homelessness among young people in Slovenia, with a few exceptions such as Kreft Toman (2017) and Razpotnik (2007), who links young people's risk of homelessness to their institutionalisation.

Regarding school, the young people in our study were more likely to say that the school environment is insensitive to their difficulties, and their perception of school is that it is an environment primarily concerned with achieving

good results (where results mean grades that open the door to future stages of schooling), rather than a broader supportive environment where they can experience safety, supportive coexistence and cooperation. As Rupnik Vec and Slivar (2019) note, there is a high level of stress associated with school, which does not go hand in hand with the idea of a safe and supportive school environment. According to the testimonies of our interviewees, school staff often even express disbelief that the individual is really in distress; there is frequently a minimisation of problems and a tendency to overlook them or push them away. Our interviewees were often also victims of school violence, which in most cases was not addressed, perceived or resolved in any way. Thus, even with this additional burden, they were often left alone. In some cases, the school, or individual school staff members, have been positively and supportively involved. More often than the coordinated systemic responses of the school, we encounter the strong engagement of an individual school staff member.

There are also individual examples of coordinated school, healthcare and social care support tailored to the young person (classified in the content category 'Attempt to coordinate and or integrate different forms of support' in Table 1), but these are unfortunately rarely mentioned, even if we would like this to be a regular practice. The professions are confronted with the increasingly complex difficulties experienced by young people. The latter consequently report disjointed, uncoordinated and sporadic support, the untimeliness of some procedures where they expected support mainly from social work centres (classified in the content category 'Inconsistency of information and timeliness of support' in Table 1), or the unavailability of support when they needed it. They positively valued the personalised support they received in the form of an approachable and available relationship (either from a single professional or a specific group), where their problems were not demonised, and where they felt included, accepted and appropriate, despite their specific needs or the complexity of their challenges. It is precisely this complexity that makes it so difficult to respond to these challenges within the range of options given, which may explain the frequent reports of young people about individual practitioners who engage further, even beyond their formal duties. However, a future support system cannot be based on the additional engagement of individuals. It is therefore important to pave the way for the integration of disciplines, which could go beyond the currently partial reaches of each discipline. This can be called integrating services (Richardson et al., 2015), which can take place in a wide variety of ways. Without the integration of disciplines, it seems that more sustainable professional responses to the complex needs of young people will not be possible.

The young people interviewed sometimes mention a change of environment and attempts to become independent as more positive ways to escape long-lasting threatening situations. This is in line with the prevailing ideology, which places the full weight of responsibility for life choices, successes and failures on the shoulders of individuals. This can be a huge burden, especially in the case of failure or when things do not go according to plan. It can be assumed that the prevailing public rhetoric of individualism, which asserts that individuals are responsible for their own problems, is adopted by young people experiencing distress, representing a great burden for them. However much the development of a sense of dependence on oneself may sound like a winning solution (that does not presuppose systemic considerations and coordinated solutions), it is nonetheless fragile and worrying if it is not accompanied by a strong safety net of social and community support factors. The latter is in line with the recommendation made by Muijen (2015) for Slovenia, which suggests that, in the area of the psychosocial distress of young people, more emphasis should be placed on community-based support networks and strengthening networks of organisations, rather than simply increasing clinical capacity, measured in terms of the number of 'beds' needed for hospitalisation.

The safety net is one of the key themes of our research, as we see that it is fragile, weakening and transforming in the face of societal change. Comprehensive reflection is required to develop, nurture, nourish and compensate for this safety net. The full spectrum of behaviours should be understood as the best possible responses to adverse life circumstances in a given situation (Herwig-Lempp, 2022). This is the understanding that many of the interviewees desire, as they often express a need to be heard, seen and accepted. The latter is precluded by pathologising, shifting responsibility to individuals, focusing on symptoms, or any kind of decontextualised treatment.

Conclusion

We already know that more accumulated problems starting earlier in childhood mean poorer prospects for adequate support and coping in the future. Institutions, with their rather narrow focus, create a revolving door effect (Gomes et al., 2021), sending the young person from door to door with the message that the service they offer is not suitable for them or that they do not fit into the institution's framework. However, it is precisely the cases of complex needs that we need to take most seriously, as they point to the weaknesses of support networks, the gaps in the system, and the pressing areas that are not currently well addressed and that need to be prioritised in the future. According to many

recommendations and research findings (e.g., Collishaw, 2015; Cefai & Cavioni, 2015; Fjermestad et al., 2020), school is an appropriate and suitable context for the conceptualisation of ideas on the prevention of psychosocial distress, and as a centre of the community (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2016). It is also a catalyst in terms of initiating networking with other institutions in order to build stronger support networks.

The present research, although of an exploratory nature and focusing on the first-person perspective, confirms many findings of other studies on vulnerable individuals and groups, 'multi-agency families', 'multi-challenged families' and the like (De Vries & Bouwkamp, 2002; Gomes et al., 2021; Parton, 2006). The results show that the most vulnerable group of young people in distress evaluate their experiences with the provision of help more negatively than positively, often mentioning that they are overlooked with their difficulties and sent from door to door.

Given that we are dealing with complex adversities, the responses we design must also be complex and interdisciplinary. Organisations need to network with each other and think about more holistic responses. School, as a privileged space that encompasses all children almost without exception (Mikuš Kos, 2017), has a key role to play in this regard. However, it also needs to be clearly given this mandate. Moreover, the perceptions of young users must be considered in a more dialogical way than is characteristic of support services today. It is necessary to develop techniques and systems of more coordinated activity of different support services, whether specialised or generic, including the education sector. This should also include more training of professionals for cooperation and changing the role of mental health professionals, who could become more facilitators of cooperation at the expense of reducing their expert role in making individualistic diagnoses of the distress experienced by young people.

The limitations of the present research stem from its exploratory nature. One of them is the first-person perspective of young people, which needs to be supplemented with the perspective of parents as well as experts. Furthermore, there is a need to expand the opportunistic sampling with more systematic sampling, which would enable the analysis of the experiences of young people in specific environments, or groups of young people who are users of specific institutions or models of support.

Further research is needed to overcome the aforementioned limitations. We consider research of existing models of good practice and the conditions for their transfer to other contexts to be particularly promising. It is also important to research political and economic frameworks that enable the transfer and development of such models.

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