



# Socio-Educational Support Deficits in the Emancipation of Protected Youth in Spain

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## Abstract

**Background** The process of transition to adult life of youth with a record of protection is crucial to overcome the difficulties to achieve an independent life.

**Objective** This research aims to analyze the conditions under which protected youth are emancipated, as well as the factors that facilitate emancipation.

**Method** A qualitative study was performed with three samples: longitudinal follow-ups with youths when they exit the system and during 12 months ( $N=24$ ); life stories of youths who have exited the child welfare system at least 2 years ago and a maximum of 5 years ago ( $N=22$ ); interviews with professionals conducting their intervention in adolescent protection resources ( $N=18$ ).

**Results** The results indicate that protective action is not enabling youths' learning in normalized contexts, which negatively affects the conditions under which emancipation occurs. The experience of the protective action conditions the tendency to benefit from the post-majority socio-educational accompaniment.

**Conclusions** The importance of socio-educational intervention continuing during the first moments of emancipation, providing professional accompaniment to the entire collective, is highlighted.

**Keywords** Child welfare · Social exclusion · Disadvantaged youth · Welfare services

## Introduction

The child welfare system assumes the care of children who are in a situation of social vulnerability. Protective action is intended to reintegrate the minors into their natural context when family and contextual conditions allow this. Many young people come of age

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while residing in protective centers. This moment occurs at the same time as the demand to become autonomous (Goyette, 2019) due to the completion of the socio-educational accompaniment process. In Spain, when coming of age, it is considered a privilege and not a right for the administration to continue to provide support to young people who leave the protection system (Arnau-Sabatés et al., 2021). These youths leave child welfare resources without having made plans (Osgood et al., 2010) and without being able to adequately carry out an adult life (Gypen et al., 2017). In Spain, in 2019, there were 23,209 children in residential care, of whom 888 live in Galicia. In Galician residential centers, there are 345 young people between the age of 15 and 17 (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030, 2020). This group will transit to adult life while residing in resources of the protection system.

Youth who exit the protection system transit to adulthood within the context of social vulnerability, characterized by the inequality of opportunities and dependence which persist over their life trajectory (Del Valle et al., 2003; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Greeson, 2013). Young people with protective measures are more likely to remain poor than their young counterparts who have not been in protection (Berzin et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011), even if they are working (Naccarato et al., 2010) and living in situations of social exclusion.

The conditions under which this group is emancipated reflect the quality of the administrative protection action. To attend to youths who are protected by the administration from the situation of social difficulty in which they live, the administration should complete the protective measure, overcoming the vulnerability that motivated the intervention. Previous research highlights that the transition to adult life from the protection system presents shortfalls in the institutional supports during the process, in itinerary planning, and youth participation (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Parry & Weatherhead, 2014). The preparation time for adult life of protected youth is shorter than that of their contemporaries, and the challenges to overcome are greater because of deficits in the support available to them (Ballester et al., 2016; Gradaille et al., 2018; Stein, 2012). The situation leads to a reproduction of the social exclusion chain. These youths often remain vulnerable after they have become emancipated. Society has a responsibility to provide this collective with the resources it needs for successful emancipation (Xie et al., 2014).

Transition to adulthood is a complex process. Each itinerary requires individualized interventions adapted to the needs of each situation (Cassarino-Perez et al., 2018). Professional social intervention teams take on the challenge of responding to the demands of each youth in a system that presents deficits in supporting professional action. An example of these institutional support deficits is that the bureaucratic processes of the child welfare system are designed to accompany linear emancipation itineraries, but transitions to adulthood are reversible (Fernández-Simo & Cid, 2018; Fernández-Simo et al., 2020; Goyette, 2010). The rigidity of bureaucratic planning clashes with the precise flexibility of interventions that are carried out by coping with the uncertainty present in the randomness of human action (Meirieu, 2001).

Social care resources for the general population in Spain do not have adequate resources to attend to the needs of young people from the protection system (Arnau-Sabatés et al., 2021). Concerning the extension of protective action as of the age of majority, previous research has indicated that young people do not value the continuity of support from the child protection system, considering that it would limit their possibilities of achieving autonomy (Berzin et al., 2011; Perez & Romo, 2011). The literature has pointed out that youth identify protective action as limiting their personal autonomy, and they do not consider the continuity of socio-educational accompaniment positive after the age of 18.

In contrast, half of the young people who participate in transition programs to adulthood achieve their goals (Montserrat et al., 2015). It would be of interest to identify what kind of support is effective in promoting the transition to adult life in a vulnerable group.

Previous research has indicated the importance of analyzing the processes of the emancipation of youths who were protected during the first stage of independent life, to deepen our knowledge of these aspects and thus help to design more appropriate interventions (Fernández-Simo & Cid, 2018; Kääriälää et al., 2019). This research studies the emancipation conditions of youth who come of age in the residential resources of the protection system in Spain. Specifically, the situation of Galicia's child welfare system is analyzed. The objectives of the work are to: (1) analyze the impact of the conditions under which youth are emancipated from residential protection resources on their future adult life; (2) determine which factors facilitate a successful transition to emancipation.

## Method

### Study Design

The research, of a qualitative nature, is designed following the grounded theory. The qualitative methodology is ideal to address situations of social injustice by giving voice to populations that are historically in a situation of vulnerability. The data were collected with longitudinal follow-ups, life stories, and interviews with the professionals. The first author has performed socio-educational accompaniment with protected youth. This fact is used by the research team to facilitate data collection, as it reduces the impact of the researcher's presence and facilitates the proximity required to examine specific cases in greater depth (Ruiz, 2012). The proximity of the researcher to the collective increases his concern about the situation in which the protected youth are emancipated and serves as the dynamizing engine of the present work. The main motivation of the study is to help improve the protective action of the System. The first phase of the study was carried out through longitudinal follow-ups that we started in February 2015 and completed in November 2018. The follow-ups were carried out with youths who had just exited residential centers and faced alone the first moments of independent life. The duration of this phase was conditioned by the opportunity to accompany the youths at the time they exited the residential center. A total of 860 follow-up actions were performed (Table 1). The initial design of the research team focuses on the analysis of the following dimensions: economic capacity for independent living, access to housing, and work itinerary. In the first contacts, the participants indicate the importance of investigating social support networks. For this reason, this dimension is incorporated into the analysis. In qualitative research, the incoming data may modify the initial intentionality of the research team.

The second phase took place between January and November 2019. We intended to build life stories with which to analyze the factors that facilitated or hindered the process of emancipation. Three in-depth biographical interviews were conducted for each case. The results of the longitudinal follow-ups determined the aspects on which each interview focused. The following dimensions were analyzed: participation of the youths in decision-making regarding the most appropriate time to exit the residential resource; accompaniment in the design of strategies to face independent life; housing options; social support

**Table 1** Research phases

Phase 1: Longitudinal follow-ups					
Code	Start		End		Actions
	Month	Year	Month	Year	
LF1	02	2015	02	2016	43
LF2	04	2015	04	2016	29
LF3	10	2015	10	2016	45
LF4	10	2015	10	2016	32
LF5	03	2016	03	2017	33
LF6	05	2016	25	2017	29
LF7	06	2016	06	2017	44
LF8	06	2016	06	2017	36
LF9	07	2016	07	2017	42
LF10	07	2016	07	2017	28
LF11	07	2016	07	2017	33
LF12	09	2016	09	2017	45
LF13	11	2016	11	2017	33
LF14	12	2016	12	2017	27
LF15	12	2016	12	2017	31
LF16	02	2017	02	2018	44
LF17	04	2017	04	2018	38
LF18	06	2017	06	2018	42
LF19	06	2017	06	2018	35
LF20	06	2017	06	2018	38
LF21	07	2017	07	2018	33
LF22	07	2017	07	2018	42
LF23	10	2017	10	2018	32
LF24	11	2017	11	2018	26
Phase 2: Life histories			Phase 3: Interviews with professionals		
Code	Carried out		Code	Carried out	
	Month	Year		Month	Year
LH1	01	2019	E1	07	2020
LH2	01	2019	E2	07	2020
LH3	02	2019	E3	07	2020
LH4	02	2019	E4	07	2020
LH5	02	2019	E5	07	2020
LH6	03	2019	E6	08	2020
LH7	03	2019	E7	08	2020
LH8	03	2019	E8	09	2020
LH9	05	2019	E9	09	2020
LH10	05	2019	E10	09	2020
LH11	05	2019	E11	09	2020
LH12	06	2019	E12	10	2020
LH13	06	2019	E13	10	2020

**Table 1** (continued)

Phase 2: Life histories			Phase 3: Interviews with professionals		
Code	Carried out		Code	Carried out	
	Month	Year		Month	Year
LH14	06	2019	E14	10	2020
LH15	06	2019	E15	10	2020
LH16	07	2019	E16	11	2020
LH17	07	2019	E17	11	2020
LH18	09	2019	E18	11	2020
LH19	09	2019			
LH20	10	2019			
LH21	11	2019			
LH22	11	2019			

prior to exiting the residential resource and the evolution of the support network during the emancipation process, evolving working conditions, and future prospects.

The results of the previous phases shaped the content of the interviews with the professionals, who had experience in the socio-educational accompaniment of protected adolescents. This third phase took place between July and November 2020. The interviews were delayed because of the restrictions arising from the COVID 19 pandemic. The objective of the interviews was to confirm the conditions under which young people exit the residential regime, as well as the factors that favor the transition to adult life. The professionals' vision allowed us to triangulate the results obtained from the young people who had been under the administration's guardianship.

## Participants

Intentional sampling was used. The qualitative study was conducted with three samples: longitudinal follow-ups with the youths when they exited the system and for 12 months ( $N=24$ ); life stories of the youths who had exited the child welfare system at least 2 years ago and for a maximum of 5 years ago ( $N=22$ ); interviews with the professionals conducting their intervention in adolescent protection resources ( $N=18$ ). The youth sample was configured according to the groups suggested by Stein (2006): "moving on," "survivors," and "victims." Moving on is made up of young people who stay longer in the child welfare system. They take on the challenges of transitioning to adulthood with a positive attitude towards achieving their personal goals. The "survivors" group is made up of young people with scarce qualifications and significant difficulties to successfully overcome the emancipation process. Despite social support deficits, they achieve personal autonomy in their adult lives. The "victims" group consists of young people with continuous changes in their place of residence and difficulties to consolidate their support network, and with life itineraries of school and work exclusion.

All the youths had to have resided for a minimum of 6 months in residential resources. The longitudinal follow-ups were completed with 14 males and 10 females (Table 2). During the process, 3 youths were excluded from the investigation because they did not complete the minimum follow-up time established. The average age was 18.3 years. The sample was

**Table 2** Sample of longitudinal follow-ups and life histories

	Longitudinal follow-ups			Life histories		
	Code	Age	Gender	Code	Age	Gender
Moving on	LF1	18	Female	LH3	20	Male
	LF2	19	Male	LH7	21	Female
	LF8	18	Female	LH9	22	Male
	LF17	19	Female	LH10	23	Male
	LF18	19	Male	LH11	21	Male
	LF23	18	Male	LH16	22	Male
				LH18	23	Male
				LH19	23	Female
Survivors	LF3	18	Female	LH1	20	Male
	LF9	19	Male	LH2	21	Male
	LF10	19	Male	LH8	20	Female
	LF11	18	Male	LH12	22	Female
	LF16	18	Female	LH13	21	Male
	LF19	18	Male	LH17	20	Male
	LF22	19	Female	LH22	23	Male
Victims	LF24	18	Female			
	LF4	18	Female	LH4	20	Male
	LF5	18	Male	LH5	21	Female
	LF6	18	Male	LH6	20	Male
	LF7	18	Male	LH14	20	Male
	LF12	18	Female	LH15	21	Female
	LF13	19	Male	LH20	22	Male
	LF14	18	Female	LH21	20	Male
	LF15	18	Male			
LF20	18	Male				
LF21	18	Male				

conditioned by the daily obligations of people in social difficulty, especially intense at a stage as strenuous as that of the transition to adult life. Thanks to the participants' involvement, we could overcome the difficulties for the scheduling of meetings due to the limited time available to young people in active employment. The life stories were configured with 6 females and 16 males, with an average age of 21.2 years. The initial sample included 24 participants but it was not possible to conduct all three interviews with 2 of the youths.

The sample of professionals was composed of 13 women and 5 men (Table 3). It was essential for them to have a minimum work experience of 12 months. The work experience of the sample ranged from 13 to 115 months. They had worked for an average of 47.8 months. Their mean age was 30.8 years.

## Data Collection Procedures

Participants in all three phases were informed about the nature of the investigation and signed their informed consent. This research was endorsed by the ethics committee of the

**Table 3** Sample of professionals

Code	Age	Gender	Professional experience in months
E1	35	Female	115
E2	43	Male	196
E3	36	Female	113
E4	40	Female	70
E5	32	Female	62
E6	26	Male	16
E7	28	Female	38
E8	25	Female	16
E9	27	Female	19
E10	39	Male	28
E11	30	Female	29
E12	35	Female	18
E13	33	Female	45
E14	26	Female	25
E15	25	Female	16
E16	28	Male	28
E17	24	Male	13
E18	23	Female	15

Doctoral Program in Education and Behavioral Sciences of the University of Vigo and approved with the code CE-DCEC-UVIGO 2020-09-03-0872. The first contact was made by telephone to schedule a face-to-face meeting in which to answer any questions about data processing and confidentiality. Follow-up interviews were conducted at various places agreed on with the participants based on their time availability. In all cases, the conditions guaranteeing both comfort and confidentiality in each contact were met. All interviews were recorded by the first author. At each meeting, respondents were reminded of the possibility of refusing to allow data processing. In the final interview, the essential information was summarized, making it easier for the interviewee to modify any aspect. The interviews lasted an average of 42 min.

## Data Analysis

The information obtained was analyzed using the sequence proposed by: prior analysis, material exploration, and processing of the results. The recorded information was initially analyzed, and operational criteria were established. The research team reviewed the codes to verify their confirmability and ensure that they were linked to the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The coding was performed by the first author and supervised by the rest of the research team. Confirmability audits were carried out with the help of two external experts, establishing the categories at the end of the first phase. The categories were reviewed again with expert support at the end of the following two phases. The process increases the credibility of the data as a result of the triangulation of techniques (Martínez, 2006).

**Table 4** Facilitating factors in the process of transitioning to adult life of youth in protection

Categories	Frequencies				
	Moving on	Survivors	Victims	Professionals	
Participation in the decision of when to exit the residential resource	E 12 M 2	4	3	15	
Access to the Preparation for Adult Life Program	E 11 M 11	9	13	3	
Prior definition of emancipation strategies	E 10 M 3	6	2	13	
During the protection itinerary, transit through a maximum of two residential resources	E 10 M 2	6	2	16	
Socio-educational accompaniment following the exit from the residential resource	E 9 M 1	5	2	1	
Social supports		4	9	1	
Prior to the exit from the protection system	E 11 M 2	2	2	17	
Presence of supports during the emancipation process	E 9 M 3	6	15	0	
Work experience in the residential resource	E 8 M 5	7	3	9	
Work		3	7	9	
Stable work itinerary after exiting the protection system	E 10 M 0	3	2	2	
Planned exit from residential resource to housing at least three months in advance	E 10 M 1	7	12	15	
Housing		4	2	2	
Availability of economic resources to cover housing	E 7 M 2	4	2	3	



## Results

Table 4 differentiates between personally experienced (E) and manifested (M) facilitating factors. Experienced factors correspond to realities lived through, which the informant considers decisive. Manifested factors are processes that participants consider necessary for support during the transition to adult life but which they have not experienced. The categories assign high frequencies, indicating agreement between the perspectives of the young people and the professionals. The “Moving on” participants have higher frequencies of experienced aspects, both during their stay in the system (coinciding with the professionals) and at the beginning of their life as adults (Table 4). The group of “victims” mostly groups the positive dimensions for emancipation into unexperienced aspects.

Participation in decision-making about the right time to exit the residential resource is conditioned by the youth’s itinerary in the system. An educator stated that “unplanned exits from the centers are mostly because of the youth’s misbehavior or unforeseen decisions of the Child Technical Team” (E13). “It’s important to be allowed a little more freedom when deciding when you leave the center, as it’s a very stressful time, and they pressure you a lot to hurry,” said one young woman (LF8). Another participant stated that “I was lucky enough to be able to organize my exit from the center with my educators, but I have seen how many mates would mess it up and exit from one day to the next or already directly exit when they were 18 years old, with nowhere to go” (LH17).

Access to the program of transition to adult life (Mentor Program of Support for Emancipation and Labor Insertion) is conditioned by the evolution of the itinerary while under protection. The results indicate that the most difficult participants do not have access to residential resources to support their emancipation. “There are very few places in the protected homes for emancipation, and the homes that exist are occupied by young people who do better and are more likely to succeed” (E17), said one professional. “I was offered the opportunity to go to a support home for independent living just before I turned 18. I was nervous because for weeks, I hadn’t been told anything but my educators had commented that I should have no problem getting a place” (LF1), said a young woman referring to her good behavior in the system. The opposite situation is that of another participant who stated that “I was not offered to go to the home because my technicians told me that I had not demonstrated that I wanted to do things right and they sent me along to my brothers. They didn’t help me although I asked for help many times. If you don’t go to a place where they help you to live alone, how are you going to learn?” (LH4). “I went to the home to prepare for emancipation and I learned how to organize things at home and how to understand the reality of life. Life is very complicated and full of problems, so I think all kids should go through the home” (LH22).

Socio-educational work on personal strategies for the transition to adulthood is regarded as a determining aspect. Intervention in this dimension is conditioned by the evolution of the personal itinerary in the child welfare system. The results indicated that youths who presented better adaptability to residential resource dynamics were the ones to whom emancipation strategies were addressed more intensely. “Educators were continually making me think about how I should act to solve the problems I was going to face when I lived alone” (LH7), said one participant. Another young woman stated that “it is important for them to teach us how to solve the problems of life alone but here, the only thing they care about is for us to behave well” (LF24). “I left the center without anyone teaching me how to rent a flat or how monthly expenses are organized” (LH14), said a boy who had several incidents of bad behavior during his stay in the system. “Professional teams try to prepare

for adult life, but sometimes our precarious working conditions don't allow us to do this, especially if the youth's behavior makes us focus more on solving everyday problems than on planning for the future," argued a professional.

Stability in the same residential resource facilitates the configuration of professional reference networks and the achievement of personal goals. "It's important to get the youths to stay with the same teams so they have a safe space from which to prepare for life" (E16), said a professional. "I went through four different centers, getting worse and worse. So much change is not good but if I misbehaved, and they changed me [to another center]; they didn't solve the problem. At the last center, the rules were very strict and I learned not to mess it up, but we couldn't go out of the center at all, and therefore, when I exited, everything went very wrong" (LH20), said a young man. Another participant stressed that it is important that there are no changes in residential resources, but defended changing the youths to emancipation housing before the age of majority. "I spent three years in (name of the center) but it was good for me to change to (emancipation housing) because, in the other centers, the things about living alone that matter are not so present. I think all the youths should go through a home like this before they're 18" (LH3).

Young people comment on the importance of having socio-educational accompaniment after exiting the residential resources. "Even if you leave the center ready to live alone, the problems are constant, and it's important for there to be someone you trust to ask how to solve things," said one young man. The words "trusted person" are present in the arguments related to fear of the emancipation process. "You know what the issue of jobs is like: today, you have a job and tomorrow you don't, so I think that there should be people like (names emancipation technician), who you know are there to help you" (LH2), said another boy. "The administration should generalize accompaniment during the first years of life outside the centers to support leaving the exclusion situation. We currently have the MENTOR (emancipation program) but it would be good if you had financial support measures to act when difficulties arise" (E4), said a professional. The professionals present higher frequency in the defense of post-majority socio-educational accompaniment. In the case of the youths, their conformity with the continuity of intervention of the protection system varies depending on their experience. Participants who emphasize that the normative repertoire of the residential resources prevails in the professional intervention to the detriment of the acquisition of autonomy are more reluctant to continue socio-educational accompaniment during the first years of independent life.

Social reference is more present in young people who develop well in the protection system. Social supports before exiting the residential resource facilitate the achievement of the goals of personal itineraries. "Having (name of the social referent) helps me focus on what to do and when I'm down, I go to him. He's helped me a lot and I know he'll be there" (LF23), a young man argued. "Not having anyone to really give you a hand makes you nervous and you see everything looking very dark. I see friends who have parents who always help them but I wasn't that lucky" (LH6), a participant said. "It is positive for the centers to try to create support networks, as it is important when the youths are inside, but it is especially decisive when they go out into the adult world. Very little is currently being done, but not because we do not know that it is important but because we do not have the means to do so" (E4), said a professional. "You find everything very hard when there is no one you know who will give you good advice because they love you" (LF5), said a young man.

The results indicate the appropriateness of work experience being provided during the stay in the welfare system. "Youths have to work when they're in the centers to adapt to the reality of employment with our help. If they don't do it when they're inside, they'll have

more difficulties outside” (E14), said a professional. “I studied, but when I had no classes, I worked as a waiter, and that allowed me to save and learn how things are in companies” (LH9), said a young man. “I was looking forward to working to be sure I could support myself. It makes you feel good to know you’re working” (LF16), a girl argued. Another young man regretted never having had the opportunity to work and commented “it is very difficult to get a job the way things are and without work, there is no money to solve problems” (LF21).

Planning the exit from the residential resource is conditioned by the youth’s evolution in the child welfare system. The results indicate that, for young people with greater difficulties adapting to residential resources, exits are often unplanned. Young people value the possibility of being able to exit with an agreed residential option. “I planned the exit for a while with my educators and came to share a flat with a group of friends” (LH3), said one participant. “You know that if you behave badly, they will kick you out, but sometimes bad behavior is inevitable because of the situations that arise... I exited in a very improvised way, in my view, and got very nervous” (LH12), said one participant. “It’s about everyone having a choice of where to go, but you know that if you behave badly or there is a lack of resources, sometimes things go fast and you don’t plan as you should. The administration should provide more means for more appropriate exits and above all, work with the families” (E6), a professional argued. “Youths who exit with financial resources do so because they have orphanage pensions or because they’re working, but not all of them have the supports to get on with their projects. The administration should provide financial benefits until the goals of the educational project are achieved” (E13), a professional argued. “I have the money to pay for my living expenses because I have a job but, you know, most people don’t have one, and they’re living as well as they can” (LH19), said a young woman.

## Discussion

The results of the research highlight the appropriateness of addressing specific strategies for the transition to adulthood. During the stay in residential resources, intervention in aspects related to emancipation is not always prioritized. Longer stays under protection do not improve the conditions in adult life (Brännström et al., 2020). Research participants value positively the access to specific emancipation programs that prioritize the definition of strategies for independent living (Courtney et al., 2018; Scannapieco et al., 2016). The results coincide with previous research (Park et al., 2020), indicating the importance of access to transitional resources as soon as possible, as this provides more time to prepare for independent life. Therefore, stays in generalist residential resources for adolescents for whom family reintegration is discarded should be reduced, increasing access to centers that prioritize emancipation.

The exit from the system seems to be conditioned by the youths’ evolution during their itinerary. Adolescents who have difficulties adapting to residential resources rate their passing through the child welfare system negatively. These young people often carry out improperly planned exits to adult life. Previous research agrees that later exits often make the emancipation process a more positive experience (Dutta, 2017; Tyrell & Yates, 2016). On the contrary, premature exit from the protection system increases the difficulties in the transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012). The findings indicate that the youths’ good behavior determines their possibility of access to emancipation housing. It would be necessary to increase the number of places in these facilities to generalize the possibility to

access these homes for independent living. Support for the transition process to adult life is crucial with a collective that is emancipated with deficits in economic, social, and emotional supports (Avant et al., 2021; Fernández-Simo et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2020). The professionals are aware of the deficits of the child welfare system, especially in the cases of youth with worse evolution during their stay in residential resources. In these cases, the planning of bureaucratic processes is carried out without taking into account the needs of time and dedication that the professional teams require for each young person (Ellem et al., 2020). The organizational structure forces the exit of youths with worse evolution in order to optimize the few places and means available. The population with the greatest difficulty does not receive the support they need during their transit to adult life.

The intervention of resources for emancipation should ensure the possibility of the youths' participation. Protected adolescents' participation in decision-making increases the effectiveness of protective action (Cassarino-Perez et al., 2020; Nesmith, 2017). When making decisions, it is important not to forget that it is your own life. It is essential, on the path of good practice, not only to defend changes in the protection system but also in the professionals' beliefs about the people they accompany (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). The professionals must believe in the potential of youth participation and attempt to overcome the obstacles to participation. Participation is not only limited to defining the goals of the socio-educational project (Fernández-Simo & Cid, 2018) but should also promote meaningful community involvement, as an indicator of the quality of the protective action and the means for personal development during the preparation for adult life (De-Juanas et al., 2020). The bureaucratic organization of the system itself is prioritized to the detriment of youths' ability to decide such important aspects as the time of exit from the residential resource. Previous research coincides with this, indicating that these organizational aspects are prioritized to the detriment of adolescents' needs. As an example, the choice of a school responds more to issues about the organization of transportation from the protection center than to the characteristics of the school (García-Molsosa et al., 2020).

Historically, the child welfare system has intervention deficits arising from watertight practices in which each service or program deals with a specific part of the action, with difficulties for coordination that would allow a comprehensive action (Melendro, 2014; Melendro et al., 2017). The integral perspective helps improve personal goals in very complex situations (Rodríguez-Bravo et al., 2014). The interaction of the adolescents with the environment from a personalized approach, mediated by the professionals, helps them acquire skills for adult life (Bernal et al., 2020; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019). The system tends to over-rate the control of adolescents to the detriment of their learning in community contexts. Institutional practices are accustomed to the prevalence of control, which is mistakenly confused with the necessary supervision. The institution should evolve towards the predominance of supervision as young people approach the age of emancipation. It is a question of enabling learning opportunities in community spaces, outside the continuous control of the institution. The young people must progressively control their itinerary. Personal autonomy should not be conditioned by institutional control but by the persons' conformity and control over their own life (Moleiro et al., 2017). Increasing the learning spaces in the context enhances acquiring personal strategies for solving daily-life difficulties, through self-reflective processes (Bernal & Melendro, 2017).

Professional accompaniment during the transition to adult life is essential to overcome the difficulties of this collective. Specialized intervention improves the conditions of the emancipation process in crucial aspects such as housing or employment (Courtney & Hook, 2017). The difficulties with which vulnerable youth are being emancipated show that the accompaniment should be prolonged after the stay in child welfare resources (Cassarino-Perez et al.,

2020; Magnuson et al., 2017), as such difficulties remain years after exiting the protection system (Brännström et al., 2017). It would be advisable for this intervention to be carried out by the same professionals who prepared the transition to adulthood. Team members become significant figures for the youths, supporting the intervention through their previously established relationship (Melendro et al., 2013) and enhancing adolescents' trust through the accompaniment and their perception of the professionals' coherent performance (Hiles et al., 2013). Professional referents promote the understanding of the youths' complex experiential reality by mediating in the interpretation of the situations experienced. The clarity and veracity of the professionals' narrative discourage young people from speculating to fill the information gaps (Stabler et al., 2019). Positive relationships with the professionals affect the assessment of the protective action and the experience of exiting the residential resource (Magnuson et al., 2017; Marion et al., 2017; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Paulsen & Thomas, 2018).

Respecting the essential integral perspective of the intervention assumes that the relationship with the environment is an opportunity to create new support networks. The professionals play a necessary reference role during the preparation of the emancipation process but this role is destined to disappear when autonomous life is consolidated, at which point the young person should have natural social support networks. Coordination between specialized child services and civil society community resources will help to establish stable networks of institutional support (Ballester et al., 2014). Transition to adulthood programs must still focus their efforts on facilitating social support networks (Greeson et al., 2015a, 2015b). The youth collective encounters barriers to access and participation in activities that would help to create social support networks during their stay in protective resources and, subsequently, in adult life (Greeson et al., 2015a, 2015b). The objective of these programs is to help overcome these barriers. Their implementation is not yet very significant, as they are still at an initial phase. Few young people have access to these programs. These initiatives are promoted by non-governmental organizations. The public administration remains oblivious to this reality. The generalization of these initiatives is one of the outstanding challenges of the Spanish child welfare system. Social referencing facilitates the internalization of personal skills (Hook & Courtney, 2011) that positively affect the insertion into the labor market (Zinn & Courtney, 2017) and the transit to adult life (Blakeslee, 2012; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Neal, 2017; Rouse et al., 2021; Wojciak et al., 2018).

The process of emancipation of youth under protection takes place in a very short period of time, and they face strenuous personal challenges. The high number of changes in their life in such a short period affects their capacity to cope with typical situations of transition to adult life (Dima & Skehill, 2011). The results of this research indicate that neither the youths nor the professional teams can set the pace of the emancipation processes (Hollingworth & Jackson, 2016). We highlight what is stated by Coleman (1989) in his focal theory. Adolescents focus on each of the many changes they face during adolescence rather than drawing up a strategy to tackle them together. The flexibility of the system when facilitating the necessary times and spaces for each individual case will be decisive in advancing an effective emancipation strategy.

## Conclusions

The Spanish child welfare system is still lacking an effective commitment to resources oriented to the process of transition to adult life. This research adds to all the previous literature that has indicated the deficits with which the collective is emancipated. It emphasizes

the importance of the system's making the bureaucratic processes more flexible, depending on the needs of each case. It is recommended that socio-educational accompaniment be continued during the first moments of emancipation, facilitating professional intervention with all the young people who wish it. The administration should increase the resources and teams specialized in transition to adult life. Access to these centers is currently only facilitated for young people with a better development in the system. Young people who go through autonomous homes have a better situation in their independent life.

Generalist residential resources prioritize rigid forms of functioning, which make learning in community spaces more difficult. The factors analyzed allow concluding that the control of the resources in the lives of adolescents is an obstacle to their acquisition of autonomy. Internal activities that are assumed by the limited human resources available predominate in the centers. The system offers activities within the system, whereas the adolescents' needs recommend learning in normalized contexts. Experiences in the community facilitate the internalization of strategies and the configuration of social support networks, both dimensions essential for a positive transition to adulthood. A change of perspective is proposed, going from control-focused intervention to intervention conditioned by the need for supervision. The professionals can monitor the activities so they are developed without unwanted risks, but at the same time, enabling rich pedagogical community experience. Protection policies still require a profound change in facilitating support for adult life. We will be able to refer to the quality of the protective action when protected youth are emancipated with equal opportunities compared to their contemporaries, overcoming the situation of social exclusion that gave rise to the protection file. The recent pandemic has increased the social vulnerability of young people who have greater difficulty achieving their goals of emancipation. The health alert has increased the urgency of assuming the pending aspects to facilitate the transition to adult life of the protected youth.

## Limitations

The sample size is limited by the nature of the study. Longitudinal follow-ups require the involvement of the participating youth to facilitate the work of the research team. The youth sample had to combine the strenuous challenges of the emancipation process with their participation in this work. This circumstance, coupled with the difficulty of access to the population, limited the number of participants in the study. The results are not intended to be generalized.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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