

SAPERE AUDE: A SOCIAL MENTORSHIP PROJECT WHICH USES EDUCATION TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN THE PUBLIC CARE SYSTEM



With the adoption of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its relevant Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the United Nations with Goal 4 renewed its mission for better education of children and young people worldwide. While the earlier Millennium Development Goals focused on access to primary education, the 2030 Agenda goes beyond this. With Goal 4 and its focus on quality education, the international community recognizes that learning goals in themselves are not enough – it is important to aim for both the quality of education as well as the social and emotional well-being of students, in order to achieve substantial learning outcomes.^[1]



As a group of European organizations working in the fields of child and youth care, mentoring services and academic research, our work is highly connected with the targets of SDG 4. This includes eliminating disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the most vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, and children in marginalized situations.[2]

The Sapere Aude[3]

Improvement of the academic results of young people in care through mentoring pilot project was developed in 2016 and funded by the European Union Programme Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships in the field of school education. The initiative was motivated by recent academic research, as well as on-the-ground experiences from organizations spanning five European countries: Spain, France, Germany, Austria and Croatia.[4]

These international partner organizations share the core observation that children and young people who grow up in the public care system lack inclusive and equitable quality education opportunities. This is also reflected in a number of studies which demonstrate immense differences in the overall educational outcomes between children and young people living in residential care settings compared with

their peers who live with their biological families. The 2008–2010 cross-national research project YIPPEE, which investigated the pathways to education of young people in public care, demonstrated inadequate educational situations within five European countries. The findings also showed that only 8% of young people who had been in care as children went on to access higher education, which was five times fewer than the overall number of young people accessing higher education.[\[5\]](#)

One of the major factors in this situation is that we often see a structural division between the social care system and the education system as well as the failure of these systems to work adequately together. Moreover, it seems that the meaningful education of children and young people living in residential care is a low priority for professionals working with these segments of the population. This impression is reflected in the low expectations and little interest that social workers and responsible social institutions show towards the educational and professional development of their young clients. By neglecting the importance of education of these children and adolescents, we risk continuing and reinforcing the cycle of endemic poverty and unsatisfactory living conditions which many of them have already experienced.

Social mentoring as a tool to break the cycle of social exclusion and the lack of education?

The Sapere Aude project aimed to make a positive contribution towards breaking this cycle of intergenerational lack of education and social exclusion, by empowering these children and young people through a specialized social mentoring project. Social mentoring, in the framework of the project, consists of a trusting and continuous relationship between a mentor and a mentee who lives in the social care system and lacks an individual support system through a partner or role model.[\[6\]](#)

Practical studies have shown that a close personal relationship, such as one with a mentor, can have a very important and positive impact on adolescents while they go through challenging life transitions. The Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care also emphasized the importance of a mentor in the context of emotional health: "(...) having at least one adult who is devoted to and loves a child unconditionally, who is prepared to accept and value that child for a long time, is key to helping a child overcome the stress and trauma of abuse and neglect."[\[7\]](#)

Besides that, a social mentoring relationship provides young people with role models who may inspire them, while also giving them a more diverse picture of "real life" and its varying challenges.

Results of the Sapere Aude social mentoring process

Driven by the scientific and practical findings above,

the main objective of the project was to implement a nine-month social mentoring initiative and evaluate whether this mentorship had a positive impact on the educational results of young people between 12 and 17 living in residential care. All social interactions and weekly meetings between the mentor and the mentee were monitored by care givers and the Research Team on Childhood, Adolescence, Children's rights and their Quality of Life (ERIDI) of the University of Girona. During the process, the ERIDI collected around 444 pre- and post-test surveys from mentees, mentors, care givers and teachers as well as 838 individual mentoring reports regarding all mentoring activities.

The data collected from these surveys and reports reflected the complexity and heterogeneity of every mentoring relationship and national setting. Nevertheless, we were happy to discover that the results confirmed the positive impact of the Sapere Aude mentorship project on the educational outcomes of children and adolescents who are currently living in our residential care centers. Besides the fact that the grades of the participants improved in the fields of natural science, social sciences, foreign languages and sports, it is particularly noteworthy that the mentees expressed a much higher self-confidence regarding their educational results and professional future. For example, many of the children and adolescents stated that they would like to start vocational training after completing school. The data also showed that the mentees are less likely to look favourably at dropping out of school than they were before the mentoring project.

Asked about the school and learning settings, the mentees demonstrated a fear of stigmatization and exclusion from their familiar learning environment. The majority of the surveyed mentees spoke in favour of an inclusive learning approach and having the possibility to do individually tailored schoolwork that corresponds to their own level of learning. Overall, they expressed their gratitude for having a dedicated person in their life and for receiving the mentor's sole focus.

Even though we received a lot of positive feedback from them, their answers also brought up some very concerning topics. Mentees saw their educational future more positively than before the mentorship project, but they also stated in the post-tests that they have less hope and less positivity towards their life and future in general. This was raised in particular by participating children and young people with refugee status who suffer from traumatic experiences and constant uncertainty regarding their residency. The result of the social mentoring underscores the importance of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which urges us to focus on the social-emotional well-being of vulnerable people in order to achieve substantial learning outcomes.[\[8\]](#)

The Author

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^[1] Raikes, Abbie et. al. (2017): "Social policy report. Children, Youth and Developmental Science in the 2015–2030 Global Sustainable Development Goals". In: Children, Youth and Developmental Science in the 2015–2030 Global Sustainable Development Goals, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 1-2.

^[2] United Nations: "Sustainable Development Goals. Quality Education": <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

^[3] The popular Latin phrase and philosophic principal Sapere Aude has been used in different epochs and contexts to encourage and empower people to think for themselves and live a self-determined life. Without going any deeper into the theoretical concepts of Sapere Aude, it can be said that education continues to be a key element within almost every empowering process, especially when it comes to young people living in vulnerable situations. Therefore, we decided to name our project SAPERE AUDE.

^[4] The SAPERE AUDE project group consists of experts from the field of child and youth care: Fundació Privada Plataforma Educativa (Spain), BTG — Federal Association of Therapeutic Communities (Austria), S&S gem. Gesellschaft für Soziales mbH (Germany), Parrains Par Mille (France) and the PLAY Association (Croatia), as well as research experts from the University of Girona.

^[5] Cameron, Claire; Jackson, Sonia (2011): "Final report of the YIPPEE project WP12 Young people from a public care background: pathways to further and higher education in five European countries". Thomas Coram Research Unit Institute of Education, University of London, UK.

^[6] Allen, B., & Vacca, J.S (2010): "Frequent moving has a negative affect on the school achievement of

foster children makes the case for reform, Children and Youth Services". In: Children and Youth Services Review, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 829-832.

[7] The Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care (2000): "Developmental Issues for Young Children in Foster Care". In: American Academy of Pediatrics, vol. 106, no. 5, pp. 1145-1146.

[8] For further details please take a look at our homepage: www.sapereaude-project.com/the-project/