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**Education, Reflection, Development****IS SCHOOL EDUCATION THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN  
CHILDREN'S PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT?**

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**Abstract**

Romania faces many challenges related to human development, confirmed by European and national statistics, as well as by numerous debates in the media: high and growing percentage of the population exposed to the poverty risk, major socio-economic gaps between the urban environment and the rural areas, migration of families to work abroad, violence against children, high birth rate among teenage mothers, increase in chronic diseases diagnosed in children etc. These social problems mainly affect children, causing them a series of vulnerabilities that limit their school education attendance. In this socio-cultural context, we wonder whether education/school training is the most important factor in the development of children's personality in Romania. An analysis of the categories of vulnerabilities encountered/observed by teachers in children of young school age shows their existence in all the dimensions analysed (poverty, health, education, risk behaviours, family and social conditions). The most frequently encountered vulnerabilities in children belong to the family dimension. Thus, the decisive family role in the development of children's personality is confirmed and, at the same time, the axiom according to which education/school training is the most important factor in the development of children's personality is called into question. An understanding of the contexts in which children develop, the environments and social forces that constrain or help shape learning experiences is important in building personalized learning environments. This is where the responsibility of Romanian teachers comes in to test the complexity of social and school life.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of human personality is the result of the complex interaction of four factors: heredity, external environment (physical, social, cultural), education/schooling, and one's inner ego (Self).

Education defines the psychosocial activity, carried out at the level of the socio-cultural system, in order to shape and develop the human personality. School education/training defines the pedagogical activity, organized, designed and carried out at the level of education, in order to train and develop skills and the progressive professionalization of the school population.

In specialized pedagogical literature, education/school training is considered to be the most important factor in the development of human personality. Theories of education/schooling appreciate that all normal children have similar learning capacities, the differentiation being determined by education/schooling. In other words, a weak student benefiting from optimal-ideal learning conditions can become as competent as a good student placed in normal learning conditions.

Is education/school training the most important factor in the development of children's personality in Romania?

In the paper we shall prove the correctness of this statement, which has become a pedagogical axiom, set in academic and educational policy discourses. We will thus analyse the importance of education/school training in Romania's current socio-cultural context, characterized by a series of accents, limits and challenges related to human development.

### 1.1. The fundamental social issues affecting children in Romania

Romania faces numerous challenges related to human development, confirmed by European and national statistics, as well as by numerous debates in the media.

- i. Romania has a high and growing percentage of the population exposed to the risk of impoverishment. Analysing the risk of poverty or social exclusion varied across the EU Member States, the highest shares of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion were recorded in Romania (34%) (Eurostat, 2021a). The highest rate of material and social deprivation in the European Union in 2019 was recorded in the South-East Romania region (56.2%). Children in Romania are in the worst situation among the EU states in terms of multidimensional poverty (44.1%), an indicator composed of the relative poverty rate, severe material deprivation and population's percentage living in households with a low work intensity (Eurostat, 2021b). Among the EU countries, Romania recorded the highest rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (41.5%) in 2020 (Eurostat, 2020).
- ii. Romania exhibits major socio-economic gaps between the urban and rural areas. Some of Romania's counties have urban areas among the best performing in Europe, while some rural areas have third-world characteristics (World Bank, 2020).
- iii. Romania ranks second in the European Union when it comes to the birth rate among teenage young (Nanu et al., 2021), their percentage being three times higher than the average of European countries.

- iv. In Romania, a high percentage of families go to work abroad (<http://andpdca.gov.ro/w/date-statistice>, 30.09.2021). The situation of children left at home from families where both parents are away working abroad is a worrying reality.

**Table 1.** The situation of children with parents working abroad

Total families who went to work abroad	56278
Total children whose parents are absent, as they work abroad	73387
Families in which both parents are away working abroad	9374
Total number of children left at home from families where both parents are away working abroad	12339
Families where one parent is away working abroad	40161
Total number of children left at home from families where a parent is away working abroad	52520
Family with single parent working abroad	6743
Total number of children left at home from families where the sole breadwinner is away working abroad	8528

- i. Violence against children is a national phenomenon. The most frequent form of violence is neglect, and the most prevalent context is the family.

**Table 2.** Situations of child abuse, neglect, exploitation (2021)

Cases of:	Family	At the AMP	Residential services	Educational units	Other institutions	Other locations
Physical abuse	931	15	47	19	11	129
Emotional abuse	1549	6	13	13	0	78
Sexual abuse	405	3	13	0	1	597
Neglect	7557	19	56	3	10	82
Exploitation through labour	78	0	0	0	0	121
Sexual exploitation	19	0	2	0	0	19
Exploitation to commit crimes	85	0	0	0	0	22
Total	10624	43	131	35	22	1048

- ii. In Romania, the incidence and prevalence of chronic medical conditions in children is increasing (Institutul Național de Sănătate Publică/The National Institute of Public Health, 2020, p. 16). Depending on the environment of origin, the main chronic conditions encountered in students are:

In the urban environment, refractive conditions are in first place: myopia, hypermetropia, astigmatism (5.3%), in second place is obesity due to non-endocrine causes (4.4%), followed by other metabolic diseases, such as diabetes (2%), weight hypotrophy (1.9%), spine deficiencies (1.4%).

In the rural area, obesity of non-endocrine causes (3.4%), refractive conditions (2.4%), weight hypotrophy (1.3%), stature hypotrophy (1.2%), speech disorders (1.1%), skin diseases (1%).

In 2020, family doctors declared 2306 new cases of children suffering from malnutrition (*idem*, p. 29).

The conclusion of these statistics is clear: We have poor, neglected, sick children, and this reality is one of magnitude!

### **1.2. The challenges of school education in response to current social problems**

The social issues highlighted (poverty, migration, abandonment, violence, chronic diseases, etc.) lead to a series of vulnerabilities that limit the participation of Romanian children in education/school training.

- i. The correlation between the educational level and the relative poverty rate suggests that the inequitable access to education of disadvantaged categories perpetuates the cycle of poverty and deepens inequalities between children from different social backgrounds (Pop & Onu, 2019).
- ii. Poverty is much more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas, with the rate of risk of poverty or social exclusion reaching 45.5%, almost 2.5 times higher than in large cities (Eurostat, 2021b).
- iii. The pandemic had a negative impact on school pupils and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma students and those from rural areas. In the case of Roma students, only 7% of them graduated from high school.
- iv. The phenomenon of parental migration to work abroad remains a largely spread one. More than 430,000 children emigrated between 2008 and 2017, of which almost 91% are temporary migrants (Onu et al., 2019, pp. 22-23). In their case, the problem of educational and social integration arises. There is also the category of minors left at home, usually in the care of an adult. Many of them are at risk of social exclusion and are at risk of dropping out of school.
- v. Domestic violence caused mainly by poverty continues to represent a patriarchal model of many families in Romania. The most widespread form of violence is neglect, and the most common context is the family. Among the effects of family neglect of children are poor school performance and school dropout.
- vi. Pregnancy among teenage girls in Romania is a cyclical phenomenon, which repeats itself from one generation to another in the same families (Nanu et al., 2021, pp. 14-15).
- vii. In Romania, the number of children with disabilities and/or special educational requirements is increasing. In 2017, 29% of children with disability certificates were not enrolled in any form of education, another 29% were educated in special schools or individually, and only 42% attended mainstream schools. Most of them complete only primary education (Pop & Onu, 2019).

We thus complete the conclusion of the previous section: We have poor, neglected, sick children, etc., and because of these causes, we have children with school failure, at risk of school dropout and social exclusion.

### **1.3. The efficiency of government services in Romania**

The fundamental problems affecting children in Romania draw attention to the low investment in relevant areas such as education, health and social protection. At the level of our country, the efficiency of government interventions through social services is very low:

- i. Romania has a 58% Human Capital index. The index measures the amount of human capital that could be achieved by a child born today by the age of 18, as well as the losses caused by insufficient investment in people (World Bank, 2021). The score of 0.58 in 2020 means that, in Romania, children born today will have a 58% level of productivity when they grow up compared to what they could have had if they had benefited from integrated education, health and social protection services.
- ii. At the national level: a) there is no strategy for an integrated approach to child well-being; b) collaboration between key sectors - education, health and social child protection - is deficient; c) there is no institution that ensures the intersectoral coordination of services, a situation that leads to inequitable access of children from the most disadvantaged environments to a minimum package of social services.

Instead, there are numerous programs run by NGOs (with the support of government ministries and/or agencies), but these are rarely implemented on a large scale and consistently. Among the NGOs that provide services for the well-being of children, we list: UNICEF, Salvați Copiii, Roma Education Fund, OvidiuRo, Ready Nation, Copiii Noștri Foundation, Holt, etc.

The interventions of the civil community in mediating, identifying and supporting, in the short term, vulnerable children and their families are also noted. An important role is played by teachers, especially primary school teachers (the first level of compulsory education in Romania), who have the (not easy) responsibility of testing the complexity of social and school life.

These statistics argue three essential aspects for children's personality development:

- i. Teachers have the major responsibility to test the complexity of social and school reality.
- ii. The family has a decisive role in the development of children's personality.
- iii. The level of children's well-being in Romania can only increase if and when children, especially the most vulnerable, benefit from increased access to integrated education, health and social protection services.

## **2. Problem Statement**

- i. The current socio-cultural context of Romania is characterized by a series of accents, limits and challenges related to human development.
- ii. Romania faces numerous social problems that affect children: poverty, migration, abandonment, violence, chronic diseases, etc. These lead to a series of vulnerabilities that limit children's participation in school education/training.
- iii. In this socio-cultural context, we ask ourselves: is education/school training the most important factor in the development of children's personality in Romania?

### 3. Research Questions

- i. What are the categories of vulnerabilities encountered/observed by teachers in children of small school age? What are the most common vulnerabilities observed by teachers in young school-aged children? What is the extent of this reality?
- ii. In the current socio-cultural context, is education/school training the most important factor in the development of children's personality in Romania? What are the opinions of Romanian teachers regarding the influence of factors on children's personality development? Do teachers in Romania share the belief that the family is the most important factor in the development of the personality of young school-age students?
- iii. In building personalized learning environments, a knowledge and understanding of the contexts in which children develop, the environments and social forces that limit or help shape learning experiences is important. Do the teachers in Romania know the family contexts of the children?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is guided by the question: Is school education the most important factor in the development of children's personality in Romania? We will prove the correctness of the statement, which has become a pedagogical axiom, fixed in academic and educational policy discourses, according to which school education is the most important factor in the development of children's personality.

The objectives of the research are the following:

Objective 1: Identifying the categories of vulnerabilities encountered/observed by teachers in Romanian children and analysing their extent.

Objective 2: Hierarchy of vulnerabilities found in children in Romania and analysis of causative factors.

Objective 3: Analysis of the influence of education/school training in the development of children's personality, in the current socio-cultural context of Romania.

### 5. Research Methods

The research approach is applicative-ascertaining, and uses:

- i. methods of data collection: study of documents, questionnaire-based survey, interview-based inquiry;
- ii. methods of presentation and statistical data processing: digital tools;
- iii. methods for interpreting research results: digital tools; content analysis.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Vulnerabilities encountered in Romanian children

Objective 1: Identifying the categories of vulnerabilities encountered/observed by teachers in Romanian children and analysing their extent.

The fundamental social problems that affect children in Romania (poverty, migration, abandonment, violence, chronic diseases, etc.) lead to a series of vulnerabilities that limit their participation in education/school training.

What are the categories of vulnerabilities encountered/observed by teachers in children of small school age? What are the most common vulnerabilities observed by teachers in young school-aged children? What is the extent of this reality?

In an opinion poll carried out in 2022, 1312 primary education teachers from urban and rural areas were questioned about the categories of children's vulnerabilities they have faced in recent years.

**Table 3.** Vulnerabilities encountered in children of young school age - The percentage of teachers who say that they have faced the following vulnerabilities in recent years

Dimension	Vulnerability	Percentage of teachers
Poverty	Child living in a household in monetary poverty	54.3%
	Child living in a household in extreme poverty	25.9%
	Child living in overcrowded housing	56%
Health	Child who is not in accordance with developmental standards	63.5%
	Child at risk of chronic disease (myopia, obesity, diabetes, etc.)	46.9%
	Child living in a household with persons with chronic diseases	48.1%
	Child with disabilities	39.5%
Education	Child who did not attend kindergarten	48.4%
	Child aged between 6 and 10 who was not enrolled in school or did not attend classes	21.7%
	Child at risk of dropping out of school	38.5%
	Child at risk of dropping out of school, who has special educational needs (CES)	35.6%
	Child who dropped out of school	24.2%
Risk behaviours	Child with certificate of special educational requirements	45.7%
	Child at risk of violent behaviour	58%
	Child living in a household at risk of violent behaviour	48.8%
	Child in a family at risk of violence against children	41.4%
Family and social conditions	Child in a family at risk of child neglect	44.4%
	Child without a parent at home	92.6%
	Child without either parent at home, but with an adult caregiver in the household	54.3%
	Child without adults in the household	6.8%
	Child born to teenage mother	31.3%
	Child separated from family who is in the protection system	11.3%
	Child at risk of family separation	23.5%

- i. What are the categories of vulnerabilities encountered/observed by teachers in children of small school age?

All the dimensions analysed (poverty, health, education, risk behaviours, family and social conditions) are found in vulnerabilities encountered in children of small school age.

Objective 2: Hierarchy of vulnerabilities found in children in Romania and analysis of causative factors.

- ii. What are the most common vulnerabilities observed by teachers in young school-aged children?

The most frequently encountered vulnerabilities in children belong to the family dimension or are directly related to it:

- iii. Child without a parent at home, vulnerability caused mainly by parents going to work abroad;
- iv. Child who is below the developmental standards, vulnerability caused by the increased incidence of chronic medical conditions in children, as well as the poverty level of the family;
- v. Child at risk of violent behaviour, vulnerability caused by the patriarchal practices of many families in Romania, amplified by the degree of poverty. The most prevalent form of violence is neglect, and the most prevalent context is the family.
- vi. Child living in overcrowded housing, vulnerability caused by the poverty level of the family;
- vii. Child living in a household in monetary poverty. The most important factors that increase children's poverty risk are the family's ability to obtain income (closely related to the parents' education level), the family structure (the large number of children in the family) and the efficiency of government interventions through social services, efficiency which in the case of Romania is low.
- viii. What is the extent of this reality?

More than 90% of primary school teachers state that they have faced, annually, one or more vulnerabilities, observed in one or more students in the class.

## **6.2. Teachers' beliefs regarding the influence of factors on children's personality development**

Objective 3: Analysis of the influence of education/school training in the development of children's personality, in the current socio-cultural context of Romania.

The results of the previously presented survey confirm the decisive role of the family in the development of children's personality. At the same time, these results call into question the axiom, fixed in academic and educational policy discourses, according to which education/school training is considered to be the most important factor in personality development.

What are the opinions of Romanian teachers regarding the influence of factors on children's personality development? Is education/school training the most important factor in the development of children's personality in Romania? Do teachers in Romania share the belief that the family is the most important factor in the development of the personality of young school-age students?

Theories of education/schooling appreciate that all normal children have similar learning capacities, the differentiation being determined by education/schooling. In other words, a weak student benefiting from optimal-ideal learning conditions can become as competent as a good student placed in



normal learning conditions. In an opinion survey carried out in 2021, 1680 teachers for primary education answered that they totally agree with this statement in percentage of 15.5 %.

**Table 4.** The influence of education/school training in the development of the personality of the child of small school age

A weak student who benefits from ideal learning conditions can become as competent as a good student placed in normal learning conditions.	
Totally agree	15.5%
Mostly agree	60.7%
Agree to a small extent	22.6%
Totally disagree	1.2%

The belief that the influence of education/school training in the development of the personality of the young school-aged child is not absolute and unitary is also reinforced by the answers to the following question. 13.1% of the responding teachers fully agree with the statement that all normal children have similar learning abilities, the differentiation being determined by education/school training.

**Table 5.** The influence of education/school training in the development of the personality of the child of small school age

All normal children have similar learning abilities, the differentiation being determined by education/schooling.	
Totally agree	13.1%
Mostly agree	52.4%
Agree to a small extent	32.1%
Totally disagree	2.4%

In other words:

- i. the power of education/schooling is not absolute and unitary;
- ii. children have different learning capacities and the differentiation is not solely determined by education/schooling;
- iii. not always a student benefiting from ideal conditions of education/school training can register school success. Other factors and conditions come into this equation.
- iv. not always a teacher will succeed in improving learning outcomes for all students. The quality of pedagogical action depends on the quality of the social environment (especially the family).

**Table 6.** The influence of education/school training in the development of the personality of the child of small school age

All normal children have similar learning abilities, the differentiation being determined by education/schooling.	Totally agree	13.1%
	Mostly agree	52.4%
A weak student who receives ideal learning conditions can become as proficient as a good student placed in normal learning conditions	Totally agree	15.5%
	Mostly agree	60.7%
As a teacher, I can improve learning outcomes for all children.	Always	42.9%
	Most of the times	54.8%

- i. Do teachers in Romania share the belief that the family is the most important factor in the development of the personality of young school-age students?

Most of the responding teachers share the belief that the social environment, especially the family, is the most influential factor in the development of the personality of young school-aged children. Parenting style, family needs and resources influence the cognitive and socio-affective development of children, as well as the educational activity / school training.

**Table 7.** The influence of the family in the development of the personality of the child of small school age

Parenting style, family needs and resources influence the cognitive and socio-affective development of children, as well as the educational / training activity schoolgirl.	
Totally agree	48.8%
Mostly agree	47.6%
Agree to a small extent	3.6%

However, analysing the direct influence of the family on school success or failure, teachers assign it a secondary role in relation to education/school training. In practice, school education/training has the greatest degree of influence in ensuring school success.

**Table 8.** The influence of the family in the development of the personality of the child of small school age

The social environment (especially the family) is the main factor responsible for school success or failure.	
Totally agree	11.9%
Mostly agree	54.8%
Agree to a small extent	32.1%
Totally disagree	1.2%

Primary school teachers share the belief that heredity is the second most influential factor in the development of the personality of young school children.

**Table 1.** The influence of heredity in the development of the personality of the child of small school age

Children are born/have different learning capacities (lower and higher).	
Totally agree	53.6%
Mostly agree	29.8%
Agree to a small extent	14.3%
Totally disagree	2.4%

Analysing, however, the direct influence of heredity on school success or failure, teachers assign it a minor importance.

**Table 9.** The influence of heredity in the development of the personality of small school age children

Pupils with lower learning abilities experience low academic performance in the long term, leading to school failure and dropout	
Totally agree	7.1%
Mostly agree	31%
Agree to a small extent	57.1%
Totally disagree	4.8%

- ii. What are the opinions of Romanian teachers regarding the influence of factors on children's personality development?

In the beliefs expressed by primary education teachers in Romania, the hierarchy regarding the influence of factors on the development of personality in students of low school age is presented as follows:

- 1) Family;
- 2) Heredity;
- 3) Education/school training.

In the practice of primary education teachers, the hierarchy regarding the influence of factors of personality development on school success for students of low school age is presented as follows:

- 1) Education/school training;
  - 2) Social environment, especially the family;
  - 3) Heredity.
- Do teachers in Romania share the belief that the family is the most important factor in the development of the personality of young school-age students?

In the beliefs expressed by teachers for primary education in Romania, the family is the most important factor in the formation and development of the personality of children of small school age.

### **6.3. Teachers' awareness of the family environment in which children develop**

In the opinions of teachers for primary education, the social environment, especially the family, represents the most influential factor in the development of the personality of children of small school age.

Do teachers in Romania know the family contexts of the children?

Although they recognize the major importance of the family in the development of the child's personality, 63.1% of the responding teachers say that they visit the students' homes only in special situations, 17.8% of them - never.

**Table 10.** Teachers' awareness of the family environment in which children develop

Make home visits to children/students	Only in special situations	63.1%
	Never	17.8%
	Once a year	11.5%
	At least once a semester	7.6%

In order to ensure a personalized training, it is necessary to know the family environment in which the child develops.

Personalized training is aimed at ensuring the child's well-being and thriving. It is focused on the person, on the empowerment of the pupils, so that they exhibit the availability and desire to learn. The pupil's learning is the coordinate of a personalized training. Customised actions are carried out to remove vulnerabilities that alter the pupils' learning ability; ensuring basic needs (physiological, security, belonging, affection) through an effective partnership with the family, expanding the support network, support from qualified institutions and organizations; increasing self-esteem, etc.

Personalized training is a first step in achieving differentiated training.

Differentiated instruction aims to ensure progress in learning. It is focused on activating the learning potential, on improving the ability and learning pace of each school pupil and student. The coordinates of a differentiated training are: enable pupils to learn more easily; to learn with more pleasure; to learn more thoroughly; to study independently. Differentiated training aims to address performance by each pupil and student.

In building personalized learning environments, awareness and understanding of the contexts in which children develop, the environments and social forces that limit or help shape learning experiences is paramount.

## 7. Conclusion

The future society is not only about our own children, but about the nation's children. This truth brings to the fore the importance of the socio-cultural system of education, affirmed through a series of emphases, limits and challenges.

- Romania faces numerous social problems that affect children: poverty, migration, abandonment, violence, chronic diseases, etc. They cause a series of vulnerabilities that limit their participation in the activity of school education/training.

The most common vulnerabilities found in children belong to the family dimension or are directly related to it:

- iii. Child without a parent at home, vulnerability caused mainly by parents going to work abroad;
  - iv. Child who is below the developmental standards, vulnerability caused by the increased incidence of chronic medical conditions in children, as well as the poverty level of the family;
  - v. Child at risk of violent behaviour, vulnerability caused by the patriarchal practices of many families in Romania, amplified by the degree of poverty. The most prevalent form of violence is neglect, and the most prevalent context is the family.
  - vi. Child living in overcrowded housing, vulnerability caused by the poverty level of the family;
  - vii. Child living in a household in monetary poverty. The most important factors that increase children's poverty risk are the family's ability to obtain income (closely related to the parents' education level), the family structure (the large number of children in the family) and the efficiency of government interventions through social services, efficiency which in the case of Romania is low.
- The reality highlighted is one of great magnitude. More than 90% of primary school teachers state that they have faced, annually, one or more vulnerabilities, observed in one or more students in the class.

The research results confirm the decisive role of the family in the development of children's personality and, at the same time, call into question the axiom according to which education/school training is the most important factor in personality development.

In the beliefs expressed by primary education teachers of Romania, the hierarchy regarding the influence of factors on the development of personality in students of low school age is presented as follows:

- 1) Family;
- 2) Heredity;
- 3) Education/school training.

In the practice of teachers for primary education in Romania, the hierarchy regarding the influence of personality development factors on school success for students of low school age is presented as follows:

- 1) Education/school training;
- 2) Social environment, especially the family;
- 3) Heredity.

The family is the most influential factor in the development of children's personality in Romania. The teacher has the major responsibility to test the complexity of social and school reality.

Although they acknowledge the major role of family, most teachers in Romania do not visit pupils' and students' homes. In order to ensure a personalized training, it is necessary to know the family environment in which the child develops. An understanding of the contexts in which children develop, the environments and social forces that constrain or help shape learning experiences is important in building personalized learning environments.

The fundamental problems affecting children in Romania draw attention to the low investment in relevant fields such as education, health and social protection and bring forward the importance of the socio-cultural education system, due to invest more resources for children and for the future of Romania. The intergenerational circle of exclusion is perpetuated when the low level of education and poor health limit the chances of access to the labour market for the next generation of children.

The entire socio-cultural system of education must share the same visions, values and educational concepts:

- i. vision that prioritizes the well-being of all children: Children first! No child left behind! No invisible child!
- ii. vision that holds us all accountable: The future society is not only about our own children, but about the nation's children.

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