SOCIO-ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND SCHOOL CLIMATE PERCEIVED BY CHILDREB AGED 11-15
A.T. Iakab, M.B. Iovu

Alexandra Teodora IAKAB
PhD. candidate
Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania
iakab.alexandra@yahoo.com

Mihai-Bogdan IOVU
Assoc. prof. PhD
Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania
iovu.mihai@socasis.ubbcluj.ro

Abstract: The access to education for vulnerable children does not mean just including them in educational settings, but also the manner in which it helps them to succeed, regardless of their socio-economic problems. The current paper aims at exploring the relationship between school climate and educational outcomes for children coming from families with low socio-economic background. 13 children (5 girls and 8 boys) aged 11-15 participated in a focus group. At the end of 2016-2017 school year, the educational status was problematic for 8 children: 1 grade retention and 7 failed classes (Math and/or Romanian language) and therefore needed to be reexamined in the fall. The material precarity, lack of adequate living conditions, of food or school supplies, were the main elements contributing to the school failure for these children. For children coming vulnerable families in most cases parents do not have the necessary resources to motivate children to succeed in school. Therefore, it is important to construct a supportive school environment where the positive climate helps children to fully participate at educational process and achieve their potential.

Key-words: vulnerable children, school climate, education

Introduction

Wang and Degol (2015) define school climate as moderating the quality of interactions between students, teachers, parents, school staff and reflecting the values, norms, objectives of the school as an institution. Therefore, the school is not just an institution where the child fully develops his/her cognitive

capacities, but also a setting which addresses the person as a whole, social, behavioral, emotional.

Previous research clearly demonstrates a relationship between school climate and a variety of outcomes. Gottfredson (2001) concluded that a common purpose and a set of shared values among school members are an important element in obtaining high levels of student achievement and low levels of school disorder. Furthermore, school environments that promote supportive relationships between teachers and students can protect those students from engaging into high-risk behavior (Gregory, Cornell & Fan, 2012).

A positive school climate contributes to later quality of education the state in providing for its citizens (O`Brennan & Bradshaw, 2007). Moreover, through a positive school climate there is an improvement of learning motivation and school performances (Way, Reddy & Rhodes, 2007). With respect to this, National School Climate Council (2009, p. 3) established a set of five standards:

The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing, and sustaining a positive school climate;
- The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions, and engagement; and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage students who have become disengaged;
- The school community's practices are identified, prioritized, and supported (a) to promote learning and positive social, emotional, ethical, and civic development of students; (b) to enhance engagement in teaching, learning, and schoolwide activities; (c) to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage those who have become disengaged; and (d) to develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity-building mechanisms for meeting this standard;
- The school community creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically;
- The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities, and norms that promote social and civic responsibility and a commitment to social justice.

When schools fail to comply with these standards, institutions like day care centers are an important community resource for children and their families (Breaz & Iovu, 2018). They offer a variety of customized programs for vulnerable children who are the focus of this paper.

Method

Aim

The current study addresses two reserach questions: (1) How do children from secondary school with low socio-economic backgrounds perceive the school climate? and (2) How do these vulnerable children construct their motivation for learning?

Sources of data and sampling

The research was carried at one day centre for vulnerable children from Cluj-Napoca during 2017. The day center offers services for a number of 44 children from low socio-economic backgrounds, aged 7-15, all of them being in risk for school abandonment. From the 44 children 13 students enrolled in secondary school were selected for participating in a focus group interview (table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive data for the sample (N = 13)

ID	Age	Gender	Grade	Failed classes 1st sem 15-16	Failed classes 2nd sem 15-16	Grade	Failed calsses 1st sem 16-17	Failed calsses 2nd sem 16-17
R	15	B	V	Romanian	Grade repetition	V	Romanian	Romanian
				Math				
				English			English	Math
				Spanish			Math	
				History				
V	14	B	VII	-	-	VIII	-	
O	11	B	IV	-	-	V	Italian	Grade repetition
							Math	
S	14	B	VI	Romanian	Italian	VII	Italian	-
				Italian			Geography	
				Math				
A	13	B	V	-	-	VI	-	-
M	14	F	VII	-	-	VIII	Math	Math
A.L	12	F	V	Romanian	Romanian	VI	Romanian	Math
				Math	Math		Math	
M.I	12	B	V	-	-	VI	-	-
I	13	F	VI	-	-	VII	Romanian	Math
							History	Romanian
							Math	
							English	
R.A	13	F	VI	Biology	Math	VII	Math	Math
				Italian	Geography		Spanish	Romanian
							History	
K	11	B	IV	-	-	V	Math	Math
								Romanian

P	12	B	V	Romanian		VI	Romanian	
				Math	-		Math	Math
							Physics	
							English	
E	14	F	VII	-	Romanian	VIII	Romanian	-

Source: children's files

From the 13 participants, 9 failed more than two classes in the first semester. During the second semester their educational status improved, with one student in grade repetition from the four in risk after the first semester.

From the evaluation carried by the day center, all the selected children have low socio-economic backgrounds due to the low ratio for income per family member. They all miss a designated space for learning activities. The only place where they do this is the day center which they regularly attend.

Procedure

Two focus groups were carried in two different days (March 24th and March 27th, 2017). These focus-groups were recorded and then the transcriptions were used for data analysis. The focus groups addressed several topics like motivation for learning, school climate, relationship with peers and relationships with teachers. For data analysis we opted for thematic analysis using these major topics.

Ethics of the research

For pursuing this research I have asked the verbal agreement from the executive director of the Foundation who manages the day center and the project director in order to assure the confidentiality of the data and the improper use of the identification details of the children. There was no need for an agreement from the parents because as a social worker at this institution I already signed a confidentially agreement regarding children's data. I needed thou explained thou to explain children my new role in this research because as a social worker in the project I was responsible for maintain the relationship with schools

Results
Motivation for school attendance

The children use different motivation strategies helping them to attend school. Intrinsic motivation is mainly build on positive experience they have with a certain class helping them achieve a sense of ownership and competence in relation with the learning content (*No one is helping me, I like the class, I like*

the experiments, the teacher does not help me – E, b, 14 yo; *I like Geography because I know a lot of things* - A, b, 13 yo). On the other hand, external motivation relies on their perception in relation to their classmates (*I am the best from the classroom at this* – S, b, 14 yo) or in relation with the effort they have to put in a specific class compared to other classes (*I like it because I have to learn only one unit, unlike at other classes* - M.I, b, 12 yo). This component appears as most significant because children use different sources to keep them participating in the school environment: desire to be recognized in comparison to his/her classmates, the rewards teachers give them or the effort they put in for a certain learning content. Teachers are perceived as very inconsistent in their motivation strategies, sometimes being supportive (*He tells me c'mon I know you like to draw and then I do what I have to do* – M, f, 14 yo), and sometimes not (*He does not help me, I haven't learn anything new* – R.A, f, 13 yo; *I think the grades are according to how well behaved we are and not according to what we know* – O, b, 12 yo).

School climate and relationship with classmates

The school climate includes the entire set of relationships children develop among them. A positive climate is characterized by supportive and mutual beneficial relationships in daily interactions. In this interactive environment children are encouraged to collaborate beyond the curricular activities. Therefore they feel understood, accepted and an important figure in the group (Wang & Eccles, 2016). The level of support can be measured by the level of trust children have in their classmates so when they have a personal problem they can freely discuss it with colleagues and find solutions (*There is Paul, my desk mate, and I talk with him anything, he does not fights, he is a good guy* – A, b, 13 yo). Some introverted children find it very difficult to find support in their classmates (*I prefer not to share my problems when I have a problem* – S, b, 14 yo) or are quite reluctant considering the general perception of the classroom (*I speak with the class master and I do not like to talk with my colleagues, because they mock me, they say will keep the secret, that they would not tell anybody, but eventually they will tell* –P, b, 12 yo). There are no consistent differences between boys and girls on the level of perceived support, both finding a "significant other" to share his/her personal problems, but it is necessary that the other is the same gender. The majority of them see the classroom as being divided by different interests and not acting as a group (*Girls are with girls and boys with boys* – O, b, 11yo; *We are three groups, the less smart ones are together, the really smart ones are just talking to one another, and there are some in-betweens which are the largest group* – P, b, 12yo). Just two children perceive the class as supportive to one another and as a mutual resource, but limited for school issues, not personal (*So, for the class,*

we have a facebook group and usually the colleague who know does the homework and shares it there – E, b, 14yo).

Interpersonal relationships are problematic (*We have one boy who is staying only with girls, the others are calling him "little girl" because he does only what girls say. Sometimes we beat him but afterwards we apologize* – O, b, 11yo) and in general not guided by respect except for the ones belonging to the same group as them (*No, we curse each other* – I, f, 13yo; *It's a disaster! We scream, we curse at each other* – P, b, 12 yo).

It is important that at this age, children to be able to set significant relationships with peers as they will shape future adult relationship. Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins (2004) have already emphasized the importance of school connectedness in promoting a healthy development and to prevent problematic behaviors in adult life.

School climate and relationship with teachers

Children define a supportive relationship with a teacher if they are allowed to joke, to express freely and to decide upon certain tasks (*She knows what it means to joke, we don't have to write, she counsels us more* – V, b, 14yo) or to emotionally connect (*She loves me and she is the only one who does that* – I, f, 13 yo). Some teachers do not always explain issues connected to the learning content (They don't explain it, they call you in front of the class, asks you the formula and if you don't know it they give you a bad grade – V, b, 14 yo), display a disrespectful attitude (*If we raise hand and ask they scream at you that you weren't paying attention and only after this he explain once more* – I, f, 13 yo; *They tell us if we don't understand to raise the hand and ask. We do and then they say "how did you not understand what I have just said?"...and then we don't say anything* – E, b, 14 yo). Students do not feel motivated because when they get a failing grade they are exposed in front of the others because they have low expectations (*When we get a bad grade they say "a...nothing new, I was expecting this". You can't change, you let yourself influenced by anything and anyone, and they say we should try more* – A, f, 13 yo). Therefore, when they get a bad grade, teachers are *relaxed* (A, b, 13 yo), *accustomed* (P, b, 12 yo), or *don't care* (A.L., f, 12 yo).

Relationship with teachers is very important in improving students' school performances. Wang and Dishion (2012) concluded that when feel understood and supported by teachers, students obtain better results and decreases the probability to engage in problematic behaviors.

Sense of security in school

From the 13 participants at focus groups, 10 consider that there is neither order nor discipline in school. These are very important because they

prove the significance of structure and regulations. So, when there is the impression that rules are not important, their safety might be affected (These children are naughty and they start the fight – R.A., f, 13 yo). The most serious problem is physical violence, especially the older boys beating the younger ones, but also violence towards other persons, where they are no supervision from an adult during the recessions (*They go and throw rocks on cars passing on the road* - R, b, 14 yo). In general, students did not mention feelings of threatening. But one serious problem they constantly mention is drug consumption. 5 children know about this in their school (*I know one girl from 9th grade who has drugs and one time they took all the phones from her classmates to listen to their calls and that's how they caught her* – I, f, 13 yo).

Conclusions and recommandations

The family problems are often too big to handle by parents themselves, therefore affecting their resources to invest in children's education. Moreover, the low level of educational attainment and completion will later impact children's future employment, health and welfare prospects (The Smith Family report, 2016), therefore continuing the poverty cycle. The material precarity, the lack of adequate living conditions, lack of proper food or school supplies etc. combined with the low education of parents proved to be the main causes of school failure for children with low socio-economic background. Furthermore, the higher risk of these children to develop behavioral and psychological problems lead to more parental rejection rather than love and acceptance (Breaz & Tomiță, 2018). Because parents are not able to motivate children, but more often to sustain for long term the motivation for learning in school and to achieve, educational structures must step in and support vulnerable children to fully participate in learning process and help them achieve their full potential. By constructing a positive climate, children have the opportunity to fully express themselves, to become visible in the classroom and to feel included in school's life. From an emotional perspective this helps them build a healthy self-esteem and trust while from a cognitive point of view helps them continuous self-improvement. Way, Ranjini and Rhodes (2007) showed that positive perceptions of school climate (teacher support, peer support, student autonomy in the classroom, and clarity and consistency in school rules and regulations) decline during the middle school. This happens because there is a great discrepancy between what children need (e.g. autonomy, opportunities, consistency) and what the schools offers.

In order to increase and sustain children's motivation we might rely on the restorative practices, helping teachers confront with the difficulties children face through building a sustained supportive relationship. Usually, teachers dealing with children's lack of attention and superficiality in school tasks,

therefore disturbing the entire climate, do not manage to positively engage students in a significant manner. The restorative practices have been successfully applied to judicial, family, work-related issues, in companies or in schools in order to reduce violence, behavioral problems, communication and inter-institutional collaboration (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). Schools that have enrolled a high number of children with low socio-economic backgrounds are in general performing badly in national evaluations and are in a higher risk of recording different behavioral problems. The low performance of the school is mainly due to its incapacity to address these challenges coupled with the lack of experience for teachers in creating a supportive environment fostering a qualitative education process for all the students, regardless of children's backgrounds. Some of the recommendations we make are:

.Offering a supportive school climate and an adequate learning environment (e.g. development positive and trusting relationships between all the participants of the educational process, elaborating sensitive assessment instruments capable to identify the entire area of problems a child might encounter at school and/or in family of origin, availability of psychological counseling, support groups for children and staff, earning new approaches in conflict resolution);

.Elaborating public educational policies adequately addressing issues like: development of staff's competencies to work with vulnerable and disadvantaged children;

d)   *Developing and sustaining the collaborative relationship between family and school.* Often, it becomes difficult for a parent to be fully engaged in the educational process because of their lack of time, low level of education, economic hardships, and schools' attitude to constantly blame. Therefore it is necessary to build a collaborative relationship between parents and schools that first and foremost will foster the best interest of the child.

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