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**CAN CHILDREN BE TRUSTED? CHILDREN AND ADULT
POWER: A FOCUS ON ETHICS**

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Abstract

In many arenas of society, research is at the forefront of the challenge, the new interest in children’s lives and experiences. One of the key ideas producing change is the premise that different forces present in many societies are silencing children. This research reveals the difficulty of being a child, and the ways in which the Romanian society is creating conditions for children to be in. The impetus, as expressed by the UN Convention, has formed new questions for the students of Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, inside “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu. The aim of the study was to involve a group of 75 students to collect data about the ethics of relationships of children with adults, during their practical activities. *Are children really trusted? Is it children or adults’ power visible?* The methods used were interviews, study cases and analysis of the activity products. The qualitative analyses of the data collected allowed students to understand how the focus on ethics works. Findings revealed how adult’s way of seeing children are contributing to their silencing. The attitude is often that children’s opinions are less trustworthy than adults. Power relations can ensure that children are not heeded. Ethics in relationships with children is an important topic for students’ initial training to become teachers. Such challenge and research are creating a different kind of attention towards childhood and is demanding access for children to be seen and heard in new ways.

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1. Introduction

Our society is going through rapid and profound changes due to globalization processes, economic crisis, advancement of technology and social innovation, migrations and challenges to traditional identities. All these societal transformations confront the educational sector and the training of teachers with new challenges. The development of a knowledge-based society and the globalization process are creating new social and individual needs.

Research has proven that early childhood education is the most important phase to initiate a healthy development. Education has gained considerable importance in this context and has become, along with science, one of the fundamental pillars of societal development. Ethics is the foundation of human relationship to us and the world around us. The purpose and role of ethics has always been the preservation of the human being as a person, human dignity, and the conditions for leading a good life.

In many arenas of society, research is at the forefront of the challenge, the new interest in children's lives and experiences. Today's society changed the way we live and experience education. Innovations are being made in the way research is conceived and carried out. Its role in children's life is changing. In the past lots of research treated children as objects: research was done on them, with the agenda and framework set purely by adults. Nowadays children act as researches, researchers work with questions formulated by children or work with children in new ways driven by rights perspective. Still, not all societies around the world are ready to adapt or to change and fulfil children's real needs and capacities. The balance between adults' and children's trust and power is still a deep vulnerable key idea. Ethics in children's education is making the difference.

One of the key ideas producing change is the premise that different forces present in many societies are still silencing children. Such forces have made children invisible or rendered them visible only in particular ways. It is important to use research to set new agendas, to challenge ways of living and working that oppress, harm or limit children. It is also vital to test preconceptions and long-held beliefs about children's lived experiences, the actual effects rather than the adults' opinions of the way educators and parents see and relate to children, or the actual impact of services and their ways of working with them.

2. Problem Statement

The ways that adults relate to children and the ways that children see themselves are being questioned by challenges that are coming from children, service providers, researches and parents. In all educational systems around the world, arenas of children's lives are undergoing change, and are being tested and developed by new thinking, new ideas about practice and new directions in research. Legislation and action within organizations from international bodies to local preschools are creating repercussions in all dimensions of children's lives. This change in attitudes towards children is expressed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Ethics in today's children education promotes values and ethics for children and young people within the framework of the child's right to education. Such challenge and research are creating a different kind of attention towards childhood and is demanding access for children to be seen and heard in new ways. The attention to children being seen or listened to their own right, rather than as a part of the family, or through the filter of their parents or teachers, is giving

new insights into the ways as varied as poverty, healthcare or racism are featuring their lives. This different visibility is creating pictures that demand response (Jones, 2009).

Children's are often seen by adults in terms of stereotypes based on them being incapable or untrustworthy, vulnerable or dependent. Attitudes have been defined in several ways. Hill and Tisdall (1997) summarized the view that children are active, engaged participants in their lives and in society, as social actors with their own views and goals, and not just objects or problems. They quote a child asserting that children should have "the rights of agency: to take part in family decisions about our future, rights to make our own decisions about our future, rights to live our own life and not what our parents want us to do, the right to our own opinion" (Children's Rights Development Unit, 1994, 24 as cited in Hill and Tisdall, 1997). The change in attitude and practice involves seeing children as having rights, not as the property of adults. These ideas are the drivers of the contemporary re-examination of attitudes concerning children. The impetus, as expressed by the UN Convention, has formed new questions examined in this study.

Literature on childhood, as well as the directions and findings of recent researches involving children and ethics in their education, has emphasized issues concerning power and the nature of the impact of adult attitude on children's lives. The attitudes of adults, in all their different roles and relationships, affect children deeply. Madge's (2006) survey of over 2000 UK children aged between 7 and 13, for example, revealed aspects of what children's experience of living with adults' attitudes is like. The analyses of the children's responses to the questionnaires indicated that they considered the "worst things" about being a child were restrictions, school and not being taken seriously.

Several authors and researchers have pointed to adult attitudes as a key barrier to the development and future of children's lives (Badham, 2004). Adult attitudes that children cannot be trusted as having valuable opinions worthy of being acted on can still stop their real involvement. Criticisms in different countries echo this: that adult attitudes are "the greatest barrier" to effective participation in areas such as decision making (Bessel, 2007a). These attitudes include: perceptions of children's capacities that see them incapable; the idea that children are best served by adult judgements and opinions; the idea that adult perceptions about children's lives are more valid than those of children themselves; concern that children will harm themselves, or others, if not governed by adult decision making; the confining and restricting effects that stereotyping can have; unwillingness to adapt or change processes to enable children's participation; a desire to maintain authority over children.

Others have indicated the importance of identifying the ways in which such negative attitudes towards children connect with processes of social exclusion and inequality. Until recent decades, children were silenced, their voices unheard and their experiences largely concealed. If discipline is understood by adults as controlling child's behaviour, without considering the impressive emotional and motivational life of the child, adults are not connected in an authentic way to what the child is thinking and feeling (Cooper, & Redfern, 2018). Critical perspectives on the marginalization of children were inspired by earlier political movements that challenged the contours of traditional knowledge. These critical approaches helped open attention to the silencing of children and to the goal of bringing them to voice. The theme of voice – voicing experiences, claiming the right not only to speak but also to be listened to, has become a metaphor for political recognition, self-determination and full presence in knowledge (Thorne, 2002).

Other researchers proved that the only way to build mature and trusted adults is to treat children's capacity to be mature or trusted enough for their views to be considered (Pânișoară, 2017). Several authors

have begun to examine the education system in various societies from perspectives that emphasize children's voices as capable commentators of their experiences (Duckett, Sixmith, & Kaga, 2008). Many examples reflected the ways in which the differences between adult and child decision-making capacities and power can be used by adults as a way of not acknowledging children's opinions and input when it is not what they want to hear. The processes of constructing relationships with children needs more researches from different perspectives: from the experience of the children involved, the school staff and the education authority (Jones, 2009).

3. Research Questions

This study examines attitudes towards and experiences of childhood, based on the students from "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu findings during their practical investigation. The novelty consists in discovering ways of identifying and understanding areas where adult attitudes towards children prove to be problematic, for a proper initial training of future teachers. The focus is on adult's attitudes towards children, children's own attitudes towards themselves, and the interaction between the two, looking for ways of achieving change to benefit both children and adults. Adults feature powerfully in children's lives in many ways: as parents, legal representatives or teachers, friends, providers of services as schooling or healthcare, members of the community they live within and as legislators. Such attitudes are present in the home and in the law court, in the way adults talk with children and the ways policies govern their lives. Given this position, adult attitudes can have significant positive or negative influences and effects on children's lives. The students involved developed their investigation using the next research questions, that were addressed to children, parents and kindergarten teachers:

- *Are children really trusted?*
- *Is it children or adults' power visible?*
- *Do adults encourage the idea of children as incapable and incompetent?*
- *What are the effective ways of recognizing children's capability?*

This study looked at how these attitudes are being challenged and changed, because it explored how children involved into investigation see themselves and how they view childhood.

4. Purpose of the Study

Early childhood educators encounter many ethical issues during their work with children and families all over the world. Practitioners, parents and educational policy representors in our country are constantly debating around the difficulty of being a child and the ways in which the Romanian society is creating conditions for children to be in. The impetus, as expressed by the UN Convention, has formed new challenges for the senior students from Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, inside "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu. To become well prepared teachers, they must be involved in practical investigations that helps them deeply understand the reality of childhood today.

The aim of this study was to involve a group of 75 students in their final university year to collect data about the ethics of relationships of children with adults, concerning the balance of "trust" and "power" between them. The investigations took place in five kindergartens, were each student chose two children to address the questions and to find what attitudes are held about them from three perspectives: the child, the

teacher and the parents' perspective about trusting and empowering children by adults. 150 children of different ages, from 3 to 6 years old became participants in this research, together with their parents and teachers. Students had the chance to develop new competencies while they analysed the cases of different children. Such initial training that involves learning experience, participation, research and information imparting, creating relationships with children and adults' responsible of their education, which requires a focus on the ethics, is important for the profession of teaching.

5. Research Methods

The entire investigation was supervised by the university teachers' responsible of the practical activities and the mentors' students have in the kindergartens during the academic year 2017-2018. All research questions become a challenge that invites each participant to its own change. The methods used were interviews, study cases and analysis of the activity products. Each student analysed two children in the classroom, to carry out case studies. The interviews using the research questions were addressed to children, their parents and teachers, by assuring the confidentiality of their involvement. The case studies and the analyses of children's activity products (draws of their personal relationships with parents and teachers) allowed students to be able to understand and explain how each child is treated. Students had the chance to discover each child from his perspective and from the adults' responsible of his education perspectives. One of the most important aspect of their effort was for students first to establish a comfortable relationship with all participants, to collect authentic data about such a sensitive theme. Each student used the three methods with the constant support of their teachers and mentors.

6. Findings

This paper highlights the current need to understand and assess children's competence and investigate their opinions, wishes and values, to respect a child's integrity and to balance children's rights of participation. Students from the final academic year of teachers' training for preschool and primary education at "Lucian Blaga" University at Sibiu had the chance to emphasize the need to recognize a child's competence, and on critic ways when parents or staff do not leave opportunities for a child to be involved. They questioned assumptions and practices which shows ways of constructing ethical relationships. The first task for all the 75 students involved was to develop very close, comfortable, emphatic and trustful relationships with two children each, and with their parents and teachers. All students learned that in today's research children are full participants in all the steps during any study about their lives, and their opinions, feelings and voices need to be considered and valued.

The qualitative analyses of the data collected allowed students to understand how the focus on ethics works and why it is important to understand the impact of different attitudes on children's lives. During the end of the second semester, they were organized in meeting groups to present their interviews' data collected, all the study cases and the children's activity products in front of all students, interpreting with their colleagues and university teacher the results obtained. They valued this opportunity as very meaningful and relevant for their initial teacher training, for having a real chance to discover the reality of some children's relationships with their parents and teachers. Understanding today's childhood is not possible without relating closely with children and adults that educate them.

Students were encouraged to listen to children's voice and to look for all the differences between children's and adult's perspectives about "trust" and "power". Relating with children of different ages, from 3 to 6 years old, was challenging and powerful. Many case-studies allowed them to understand how different some perspectives on the child's capability are according to his age. Findings revealed that children's educational needs are respected and valued only when the child is considered a trustful partner in his own education. It was a matter of attitude and that was the most important achievement for all students involved: they could consider and understand how powerful adult's attitudes are in children's lives and how much children are affected by them.

Before talking of grit and resilience, students realized that adults should be challenging children with the fundamental questions about how they live their lives and they should treat them as capable and trustworthy partners. During their practical activities they could realize that an important issue concerns adults' views of children as not to be trusted in relation to their own lives and experiences. Connected to this is the ways in which adult opinions, practices and voices can come into collision with those of children.

Interviewing children was the students first challenge, an important one to be able to understand how children of today are and how childhood is changing. Becoming professionals in early childhood education it's a very sensitive training. Here are some relevant results that students find relating with children and presenting their case-studies: children involved were questioned, listened and valued, so they felt that their emotions and thoughts really count. Student's intervention supported by mentors created a new way of communicating with the little ones, focused on their own lives and relationship with adults. Positive effects about children's wellbeing occurred during the entire investigation.

All case studies were based on interviews, several observations and activity products. The results aimed were that some children are considered capable and their opinions are valued by parents and teachers, but many of them are silenced, their voices unheard and their experiences largely concealed. Some confessed that they were never asked before if they have any opinion about their capability. Parents are deciding everything for them. Others were not used to talk about how they feel, being raised without an accent on their emotional education. Students understood that some adults consider that children cannot reason, make judgments for themselves, and they don't need to consult them about what is happening to them. The underlying picture here is of a child who is handled and "done to" by the adults and by the services he receives. This concern whether children can be involved in decisions and actions about their life and education, or whether they are incapable and immature with adults needing to make decisions for them.

One of the challenges for students to analyse was whether adult attitudes serve children's best interest, or whether they make automatic decisions based on preconceptions about children's capabilities. Each child confessed a different story. What was the most powerful experience for students was children's amassing reaction of joy and surprise to the research questions, they felt that being questioned was already a proof of considering them capable and trustworthy partners, not just little children with no opinions. They felt so well for being consult and their need of being appreciated as capable and trustworthy persons was huge. They were encouraged to draw about how they feel and how they need to be treated by parents and teachers. The drawing of their own power and level of trust was a very deep theme, with positive psychological effects on them. Analysing their activity products was a new chance to understand children's emotional and social needs. They see themselves with strong capacities and opinions about their life and

childhood, they even can give adults advise about relating with them with benefits for all. The qualitative analysis of the children's responses to the research questions indicated that they consider the worst things about being a child are restrictions and not being taken seriously.

Interviewing parents aloud students to understand the tensions between children's needs and adult's attitudes. On the one hand the findings expressed some parents' anxieties that children need to be kept safe and outside any danger, whether they are at home or in the street, because they are incapable and vulnerable, on the other hand some considered that encouraging children to feel capable and trustworthy from early ages is very important for their future development. Why do these opposite attitudes exist, what impact they have on children's lives? These were new reflective questions raised by the students involved. Findings revealed how more parents' way of seeing children are contributing to their silencing. The attitude is often that children's opinions are less trustworthy than adults. Power relations can ensure that children are not heeded: their views identified as invalid or inappropriately biased in many cases.

Interviewing teachers helped students to analyse the differences between parents and teachers concerning power and the nature of impact of teachers' attitude on children's lives. The teachers from early childhood education develop strong and close relationships with their children. Most of the interviewed teachers considered children strong and capable since early ages. A small number of them proved to have attitudes towards children that they are not to be trusted or capable at very early ages. According to the data analysed parents are seeing their children more vulnerable or dependent than the teachers. Children's voice is heard and valued only in a small number of families, compared to the ones that are treating them as "small" and "incapable" of making any decision yet. Using the research three methods, students understood that the attitude of adults, in all their different roles and relationships, affect children deeply.

The final approach towards attitudes within this study was a focus on discoveries about ways of identifying and understanding areas where adult attitudes towards children prove problematic. All participants were encouraged to draw on ideas towards ways of achieving change to benefit both children and adults. Identifying problematic issues created chances to identify ways to resolve them. The resolving key was considered a better communication between children and adults. In addition, the study is revealing that children are not passive in the face of the impact of adults on their lives.

This study created a challenge, that children voiced demands to be heard. It's important to identify the attitudes that have a negative impact on children's lives and identify those that are creating positive effects on children. The key aim is to make these findings accessible – to help ask questions about adult attitudes and to see how thought, research and practice involving children is offering a changing picture. We need to produce change for children to improve their lives. The add value of this study is the involvement of students in the construction of positive attitudes with children, with respect to their needs and with a strong motivation to develop better relationships with them and their parents. Professionals in early childhood education need to understand the world of children by listening to them and trusting their voice and capacities since early ages. Training students to examine the ethics in relationships between children and adults is essential. The students involved proved to be responsible and deeply impressed by the impact of their investigation upon all beneficiaries.

7. Conclusion

Ethics protects and nurtures humanity of our existence, both in ourselves and in others, and practice of dialogue is essential. We always live in relationship to others, namely in a relationship of mutual giving and receiving, therefore recognition of our dependence on others and caring for others is essential. One purpose of education is to help make children capable and trustworthy, virtuous, honest, responsible, and compassionate. Another is to make mature students informed and reflective about important and controversial educational issues.

Ethics in relations with children is an important topic for students' initial training to become teachers. Such challenge and research are creating a different kind of attention towards childhood and is demanding access for children to be seen and heard in new ways. However, the act of seeking views and giving children the power as competent individuals whose views are taken seriously and acted upon, or negotiated with, by adults is complex.

The study is relevant to advocate the position that, whatever the educational situation, the child should be an active, reflective participant, rather than incapable and passive. The most important recommendations from the study would assist in: involving children as competent participants in education; constructing relationships according to children's needs and rights; given children opportunities to think and express their voices; and respecting and valuing children's views on planned interventions.

The results obtained draw on a wide range of thought, research and practice to debate, challenge and re-appraise long held beliefs, attitudes and ways of working and living with children. Children's own perspectives on their lives and on adults' attitudes towards them are drawn and throughout the study. The main result is a wide-ranging invitation to all practitioners involved in children's education or parents to become aware of current perspectives on children and childhood, to develop a critical relationship with the content, and to develop their own 'reading' of childhood. Thoughts are provoked through examples of this study, reflections, activities, key points and guidance on further research on children's needs to be trusted and empowered from early ages.

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