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**ROMANIAN TEACHERS 'PERSPECTIVE ON THE EDUCATION
OF STUDENTS FROM VULNERABLE BACKGROUNDS**

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Abstract

Educational issues in Romania are increasingly associated with vulnerable backgrounds and understanding the perspective of teachers on this social phenomenon can significantly help us in developing ecological intervention strategies. The aim of this study was to reveal how teachers understand the causes of vulnerability and represent the general effects on students, but also to assess how they think about solutions. Such an approach is useful in designing teacher training programs dedicated to educational vulnerability. 671 teachers were surveyed, crosstabulation was operated between different variables, and the results indicate a focus on the family environment, low access to resources in many Roma communities, and poverty. The main effects associated with the origin of students from vulnerable backgrounds relate to school results, behavioral problems, and school dropout. Interestingly, teachers represent the solutions primarily as a family-level intervention and less as a structural intervention by the state or school. The nature of this research is exploratory and we assume the limits and certain reservations regarding the conclusions, but our results may indicate a valid direction in investigating the representations of teachers in Romania on the relationship between vulnerable backgrounds and education.

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Keywords: Educational success, family involvement, learning motivation, school dropout, vulnerable background

1. Introduction

To better understand vulnerability in Romania we can use a recent report by the Ministry of Labor and Social Justice (2019) which identifies several vulnerable social categories like people at risk of poverty, the elderly, children separated from parents or children at risk of separation from parents, young people in difficulty, people with disabilities, mother and child (at risk) and other vulnerable groups where we can also include children with low access to education, students at risk of dropping out of school, children with parents who have been working abroad for a long time, Roma citizens, young people over 18 who leave the institutionalized system, people in detention or who were previously detained, juvenile delinquents, drug or alcohol addicts, homeless people, people affected by diseases that disrupt their social and professional life, people living in isolated communities, immigrants, victims of domestic violence, victims of human trafficking and so on. We can consider that a person belongs to a vulnerable category as long as it does not have personal, social and community resources for proper integration into society and cannot achieve, for objective reasons, an elementary level of quality of life (Kiss, 2022; Mihăilescu, 2021).

The education in vulnerable environments is a highly debated topic (García-Carrión et al., 2018; Mngadi et al., 2020; Schmid & Garrels, 2021) because it directly or indirectly addresses the issue of access to quality education for a significant number of children (Luguetti & McDonald, 2020). In this paper we want to explore the perspective of Romanian teachers (Redding & Henry, 2019; See et al., 2020) on the phenomenon of vulnerability and the implicit impact on education (Frempong et al., 2012; Perțe, 2019; Perțe & Pătroc, 2019). Because teachers are in direct contact with students from vulnerable backgrounds and are the ones who implement measures to counteract the negative effects, the analysis of their representations of the phenomenon is of critical importance.

In order to better understand the impact of the vulnerable backgrounds, we must first think about factors with major influence such as dysfunctional families, inadequate parenting patterns, early work, lack of resources or inadequate social environment, revealed in the literature (Andrei et al., 2011; Chirtes, 2010; Jordan et al., 1996; Militaru, 2018; Patache et al., 2022; Pop, 2020, 2019). Given that from an educational perspective, the intervention involves the mobilization of teachers to implement various strategies, it is interesting to explore not only how teachers identify solutions but also how they represent the causes of this phenomenon (Gehrke, 2005).

In the last 2 years, in the context of the pandemic, the problems have worsened in relation to the origin of students from vulnerable backgrounds, which were estimated (Edelhauser & Lupu-Dima, 2021; Spielman & Sunavala-Dossabhoy, 2021) and predicted at some extent (Pătroc, 2018) in the literature (Bochiș et al., 2022; Hatos & Gyarmati, 2021; Stănculescu & Marin, 2022). In this context, an understanding of the impact is all the more necessary in order to be able to address these effects which have intensified the vulnerability.

2. Problem Statement

Given that the results of students from vulnerable backgrounds are declining in recent years (Bădescu, 2019; Paraschiva et al., 2018), the dropout rate among them is also increasing (Alexa & Baciuc,

2021; Gorghiu et al., 2020) - we believe that the development of intervention strategies should take into account the perspective of teachers on those negative tendencies, which we explore in this research.

3. Research Questions

Our main research question is: what is the perspective of teachers on the causes and effects of students' belonging to vulnerable environments? Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we will formulate several objectives that help us to better adjust our teacher training strategies in relation to the problems of educational vulnerability. The specific objectives deriving from this question refer to 1. Understanding the representation of teachers on the causes of educational vulnerability 2. Highlighting the representation of teachers on the effects of educational vulnerability and 3. Highlighting the solutions that teachers represent in relation to educational vulnerability.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to reveal the representations of teachers on the phenomenon of educational vulnerability in order to improve their training for properly implement specific intervention programs. Given that teachers will be the vectors of implementation of most measures in overcoming effects of educational vulnerability, knowing their representations of the phenomenon allows us also to better design and adjust the intervention strategies by different teacher training programs. Often, even if there are adequate funds, resources and infrastructure to implement social and educational intervention programs in schools, a lack of adequate assessment of the situation and a lack of attention paid to the situational perspective of those responsible for implementation, can lead to moderate or low success.

5. Research Methods

The sample consists of 671 teachers from N-V Romania. 46.6% of them work in urban areas and 53.4% in rural areas. 44.3% of teachers have an experience of over 20 years, 29.4% have an experience between 11-20 years, 14.3% have experience in education up to 5 years and 12.1% have an experience between 6-10 years. 32.5% work in middle school, 24.9% in preschool, 21.2% in primary school, 14.8% in high school, 4.5% in special education and 2.2% in vocational schools.

A questionnaire developed within the Teacher Training Department - University of Oradea was used, and was based on the information gathered from focus groups consisting of teachers working in vulnerable environments. The questionnaire contains 10 questions related to the environment in which teachers work, the experience in education, the educational level in which they work, the estimated number of vulnerable students in the school where they teach, estimating the impact of coming from vulnerable backgrounds, causes of vulnerability, the effects of the vulnerability observed in students, the responsibility of the measures regarding the students from vulnerable environments, what kind of measures they consider would be appropriate, the main causes of school dropout and the determinants of success for students from vulnerable environments.

A descriptive processing of the collected data was performed, which can be framed in 3 clusters. The cluster on general data on teachers such as the work environment, experience or educational level at

which they work, the cluster on teachers' perspectives on the causes, effects and responsibility of intervention in vulnerable environments and finally, the cluster on teacher representation on the causes of school dropout but also on school success in vulnerable environments. Chi-Square Test - Crosstabulation was used to evaluate the association between some items from the 3 clusters.

6. Findings

The primary assessment focused on the general perspective of teachers on vulnerability, thus understanding the estimation of the number of students from vulnerable backgrounds in the school where they work, the causes and observed effects of vulnerability, their measures and responsibility to counteract the negative effects. The secondary assessment focused on two central issues of the research, namely the main causes of school dropout and the determinants of school success achieved by students from vulnerable backgrounds.

A. Primary evaluation

In Table No. 1 we see the estimation of teachers regarding the number of students from vulnerable backgrounds who are in the school where they work. We note that 33.5% believe that the phenomenon of vulnerability affects up to 10% of students, and 24.1% believe that up to 30% of students would be affected. 9.2% of the teachers participating in the research consider that this phenomenon is not present in their schools.

Table 1. Students from vulnerable environments

	N	%
0-10%	225	33.5%
11-30%	162	24.1%
31-50%	121	18%
More than 50%	101	15.1%
No vulnerable students	62	9.2%

Regarding the estimation of the impact of the origin from vulnerable environments, in Table No. 2 we note that 48.3% of teachers consider that there is a significant impact, 41.4% consider that the impact is minimal and 10.3% consider that coming from vulnerable backgrounds has no educational impact. Although the representativeness of the sample is high, it is somewhat worrying that more than half of the teachers consider that the problems regarding the vulnerability are not major. The phenomenon requires further analysis and explanation and can be interpreted as a possible underestimation of the problem.

Table 2. Vulnerability issues

	N	%
Mild issues - not significant	278	41.4%
No issues	69	10.3%
Significant issues	324	48.3%

At this point, it is interesting to have a clear representation of the difference in perspective in relation to the urban or rural environment. In this sense we used a Chi-Square - Crosstabulation analysis (Table No. 3).

Table 3. Students from vulnerable environments

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Table 5. Association between working environment and the representation on the severity of issues associated with vulnerability

	No effects			Mild effects			Severe effects			Total	
	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%
Urban	22	31.9%	-10.2	133	47.8%	3.3	158	48.8%	6.9	313	46.6%
Rural	47	68.1%	10.2	145	52.2%	-3.3	166	51.2%	-6.9	358	53.4%
Total	69	100%		278	100%		324	100%		671	100%

The results indicate that there is a significant association between the work environment (urban or rural) of teachers and the observed effects of vulnerability among students ($\chi^2 = 6.78$, $DF = 2$, $p = 0.03$). It is interesting, however, that 68.1% of teachers who consider that vulnerability does not have an impact on students, come from rural areas.

Regarding the teachers' perspective on the causes of vulnerability, in Table No. 4 we notice that a main cause associated with vulnerability belongs to dysfunctional families (47.1%). Also, Roma children with limited access to resources are prone to vulnerability, according to 21.9% of teachers. The

identification of these objective causes reveals that a training in this direction (communication with the family / management of the relationship with the Roma communities in vulnerable situations) would bring a significant increase in the impact that teachers could have in combating the phenomenon of vulnerability.

Table 6. Causes of vulnerability

	N	%
Both parents working abroad	53	7.9%
Dysfunctional families	316	47.1%
Other	29	4.3%
Poverty	95	14.2%
Roma students and the lack of resources	147	21.9%
Undiagnosed intellectual and developmental disabilities	31	4.6%

Regarding the effects of vulnerability in the opinion of teachers, the analysis of Table No. 5 indicates that first of all they are associated with low academic results 39.9%, behavioural problems 32.8% and school dropout 16.1%.

Table 7. Effects of vulnerability

	N	%
Behavior issues	220	32.8%
Low academic achievement	268	39.9%
Mental health issues	21	3.1%
Other	54	8%
School dropout	108	16.1%

The primary analysis in our research also covers the measures that teachers consider appropriate in combating the effects of the origin of students from vulnerable backgrounds (Table No. 6) and assigning responsibility for the implementation of these measures (Table No. 7). We find out that 36.4% of teachers consider that the best measure is family counselling, followed by psychological and educational counselling of students (20.6%) and social inclusion (15.6%). Regarding the responsibility for the measures that should be taken, 62.3% of teachers believe that the family should implement measures to counteract the effects of vulnerability and 17.7% believe that the authorities have this responsibility. Only 5.7% believe that the school and teachers would have such a responsibility. The fact that such a high level of responsibility is placed in the family sphere indicates that teachers may develop a pessimistic outlook on their own leverage.

Table 8. Measures in overcoming the effects of vulnerable backgrounds

	N	%
Extra educational activities	59	8.8%
Family counseling	244	36.4%
Financial / Resource support	95	14.2%
Other	30	4.5%
Psychological and educational counseling	138	20.6%
Social inclusion	105	15.6%

Table 9. Responsibility in implementing the measures in overcoming vulnerability

	N	%
Community	74	11%
Family	418	62.3%
Other	20	3%
Schools and teachers	38	5.7%
State	119	17.7%
Students	2	0.3%

At this point, we are also interested in how the attribution of responsibility is associated with the assessment of the impact of students from vulnerable backgrounds by teachers (Table No. 8). We used the Chi-Square - Crosstabulation test in this case as well.

Table 10. Responsibility - Impact Crosstabulation

	Severe impact		Mild impact			No effects		Total			
	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%
Family	189	58.3%	-12.8	184	66.2%	10.8	45	65.2%	2.0	418	62.3%
Authorities	73	22.5%	15.5	35	12.6%	-14.3	11	15.9%	-1.2	119	17.7%
Community	38	11.7%	2.3	35	12.6%	4.3	1	1.4%	-6.6	74	11%
Schools and teachers	15	4.6%	-3.3	15	5.4%	-7	8	11.6%	4.1	38	5.7%
Others	9	2.8%	-1.6	9	3.2%	-1	4	5.8%	1.7	22	3.3%
Total	324	100%		278	100%		69	100%		671	100%

The results indicate that there is a significant association between the attribution of responsibility for the measures and the impact of the vulnerability assessed by the teachers ($\chi^2 = 23.08$, $DF = 8$, $p = 0.01$). We note that 22.5% of teachers who consider that vulnerability generates severe effects among students believe that the authorities should be more involved in these issues. It is also noted that 11.6% of teachers who believe that coming from vulnerable backgrounds does not produce negative effects, believe that the responsibility should be at the level of schools and teachers, the percentage being more than double that of teachers which determines that the effects of the vulnerability are severe or mild. Also, one result that needs to be analyzed below is that of community responsibility for teachers who believe that vulnerability has no negative effects - only 1.4% believe that there is such a responsibility, compared to 12.6% for teachers who consider that there is a minimal impact, or 11.7% among those who consider that there is a severe impact.

B. Secondary evaluation

In the second part of the paper, we focused on two central issues of the research, namely the main causes of school dropout and the determinants of school success achieved by students from vulnerable backgrounds.

Regarding the perspective of teachers surveyed on the causes of school dropout, we find the following data in Table No. 9, which indicates an absolute cause related to dysfunctional families (62.3%), followed by lack of basic resources (10.1%).

Table 11. Dropout_cause

	N	%
Child labour	11	1.6%
Deviant behavior	5	0.7%
Dysfunctional families	418	62.3%
Lack of basic resources	68	10.1%
Lack of involvement from the authorities	40	6%
Lack of involvement from the students	43	6.4%
Lack of stimulation in the primary social environment	40	6%
Lack of stimulative educational content	5	0.7%
Low academic capacities	27	4%
Other	14	2.1%

We took for a separate analysis (using Chi-Square Test - Crosstabulation) the first three items indicated by teachers as being related to school dropout - dysfunctional families, lack of resources and lack of student involvement.

The first analysis looks at whether there are significant differences between the representations of the causes of school dropout in urban and rural teachers, and the results indicate that there is no significant association between assigning the causes of dropout and the work environment of teachers ($\chi^2 = 1.46$, DF = 2, $p = 0.4$).

We also analyzed whether there are differences in the experience of teachers. The results indicate that there is no significant association between assigning the causes of dropout and teacher experience ($\chi^2 = 7.9$, DF = 6, $p = 0.2$).

However, the results showed a significant association between the level at which teachers work and the attribution of the causes of school dropout (Table No. 10). Only the relevant variables were selected for this crosstabulation, after the primary descriptive analysis.

Table 12. Teaching Level * Causes of school dropout Crosstabulation

	Causes of school dropout									Total	
	Family causes			Resources			Students			N	%
	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual		
Preschool	104	24.9%	-6.6	27	39.7%	9.0	9	20.9%	-2.4	140	26.5%
Primary	98	23.4%	6.3	16	23.5%	1.1	2	4.7%	-7.4	116	21.9%
Gymnasium	143	34.2%	8.7	10	14.7%	-11.9	17	39.5%	3.2	170	32.1%
High-School	53	12.7%	-3.9	10	14.7%	.7	9	20.9%	3.1	72	13.6%
Other	20	4.8%	-4.5	5	7.4%	1.0	6	14%	3.5	31	5.9%
Total	418	100%		68	100%		43	100%		529	100%

The results indicate that there is a significant association between assigning the causes of dropout and the level at which teachers work ($\chi^2 = 27.4$, DF = 8, $p = 0.01$). An analysis by activity levels reveals that the family is considered responsible primarily by high school teachers (34.2%), lack of resources is highlighted by teachers in preschool (39.7%) and primary education (23.5%), and students are considered responsible for dropping out of school (39.5%) by high school teachers.

The last dimension addressed in this paper refers to determinants of educational success in terms of students from vulnerable backgrounds.

In Table No. 11 we see the gross results. The motivation of the students is on the first place (27.7%), the involvement of the parents is on the second place (24%) and the involvement of the school and the teachers on the third place (20.4%). In the next places are the increased intellectual capacity (10.1%) and the positive role models of students (9.7%).

Table 13. Performance determinants

	N	%
Extrafamilial support	25	3.7%
Family involvement	161	24%
High intellectual capacity	68	10.1%
High motivation	186	27.7%
Institutional support programs	19	2.8%
Other	10	1.5%
Positive models	65	9.7%
School and teachers involvement	137	20.4%

We will analyze in the following some associations of these determinants indicated by the teachers. We will also focus on the first 3 dimensions indicated by the teachers - the motivation of the students, the involvement of the family, the involvement of the school and the teachers. Only the relevant variables were selected for this crosstabulation, after the primary descriptive analysis.

Table 14. Work environment * Success determinants Crosstabulation

		Success factors									Total		
		Motivation			Family			School and Teachers					
		N	%	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%
Environment	Urban	74	39.8%		-15.2	88	54.7%	10.8	70	51.1%	4.3	232	47.9%
	Rural	112	60.2%		15.2	73	45.3%	-10.8	67	48.9%	-4.3	252	52.1%
	Total	186	100%			161	100%		137	100%		484	100%

The results (Table No.12) indicate that there is a significant association between the environment in which teachers work and the perspective on the determinants of success in students from vulnerable backgrounds ($\chi^2 = 8.4$, $DF = 2$, $p = 0.01$). A primary analysis shows that rural teachers consider the individual motivation of students from vulnerable backgrounds to be important in a percentage of 60.2%, compared to urban teachers, who only in a proportion of 39.8% consider it to be responsible. Also, when it comes to the role of the family, in the urban environment it is assigned a more important role in relation to the success of students (54.7%), compared to the rural environment (45.3%). Only the relevant variables were selected for this crosstabulation, after the primary descriptive analysis.

Table 15. Determinants of Success * Experience of teachers Crosstabulation

		Experience						Total	
		0-5 years			Over 5 years				
		N	%	Residual	N	%	Residual	N	%
Success	Motivation	24	35.3%	-2.1	162	38.9%	2.1	186	38.4%
	Family	32	47.1%	9.4	129	31%	-9.4	161	33.3%
	School and teachers	12	17.6%	-7.2	125	30%	7.2	137	28.3%
	Total	68	100%		416	100%		484	100%

Continuing the statistical processing, we analysed the association between the experience of teachers (we formed 2 groups, those with experience up to 5 years and those with experience over 5 years) with the explanations regarding the determinants of success in students from vulnerable backgrounds. The results (Table No. 13) indicate that there is a significant association between teacher experience and perspective on the determinants of success in students from vulnerable backgrounds ($\chi^2 = 7.9$, $DF = 2$, $p = 0.01$). We can highlight the fact that teachers at the beginning of their career give an important role to the family (47.1%) and associate less school and teachers with the success of students from vulnerable backgrounds (17.6%).

7. Conclusions

The results are consistent with the recent literature on the topic (García-Carrión et al., 2018; Huy, 2018; Mihić et al., 2022; Martín-Antón et al., 2020; Marlow & Rehman, 2021; Ortan et al., 2021; Răcășan, 2016; Szabó, 2018; Vazquez & Greenfield, 2021; Wood, 2019). We note that most teachers work with students from vulnerable backgrounds and almost half of them consider the implications of vulnerability to be significant. The main cause of the effects of vulnerability is associated by teachers with dysfunctional families, low-income Roma students and poverty. The effects that teachers associate with vulnerability are related to poor student achievement, behavioural disorders and dropping out of school. It is interesting that the measures that teachers consider appropriate refer first to the counseling of the family and then to the counseling of the students. Regarding the responsibility of the intervention, over half of the teachers consider that the family should be involved more. Focusing on the central issues of vulnerability, we note that teachers associate school dropout with dysfunctional families, and the positive outcomes of students from vulnerable backgrounds are related to the motivation of students first, then to the involvement of family and teachers / school (Cauley & McMillan, 2010; De Witte et al., 2013; Gubbels et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020).

From this exploratory analysis, an image emerges that reveals the importance that teachers give to the family of children from vulnerable backgrounds, but also to the motivation of students when it comes to the positive results obtained despite unfavourable conditions. There are too few data for generalizations, but in the representation of teachers on the phenomenon of vulnerability we notice that not so much emphasis is placed on resources, schools or state intervention. The solutions sought are mostly in the immediate area of the students and their family. At this point we can further insist that there is a limited confidence of teachers in institutionalized intervention or in the allocation of resources as fundamental factors (Bradea, 2016; Dogaru & Anghel, 2019; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; Pop, 2021;

Senler, 2016). All this data on how teachers represent the educational vulnerability of students helps us to design training programs that take into account this perspective.

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