

SOCIETY, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

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Multimedia Education in Support of Vulnerable Children: Between Opportunities and Challenges for Educational Inclusion

Liliana-Renate BRAN¹, Henrietta TORKOS²

Abstract. In the current educational context, the integration of multimedia strategies represents both an opportunity and a challenge in supporting children in vulnerable situations. This article explores the impact of educational technologies on the school inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing on the advantages and limitations of using digital resources. Based on the analysis of specialized literature and relevant case studies, the research highlights how interactive platforms, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and other multimedia solutions can facilitate access to personalized education tailored to the individual needs of students with learning difficulties or disabilities. Furthermore, the risks of digital inequality and technological dependency are discussed, as well as the challenges faced by teachers and specialists in implementing effective technology-based pedagogical methods. The conclusions emphasize the need for equitable educational policies that support the continuous training of teachers and universal access to high-quality digital resources, thereby contributing to reducing educational disparities and promoting an inclusive school environment.

Keywords: *multimedia education; educational inclusion; vulnerable children; digital inequality; digital pedagogy.*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly influenced educational practices, shaping new pedagogical approaches aimed at fostering inclusion and equal learning opportunities. Multimedia education, encompassing digital tools, interactive platforms, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR), has demonstrated great potential in supporting students with diverse learning needs (Mayer, 2021). For vulnerable children, particularly those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or with learning difficulties and disabilities, these innovations can provide personalized and engaging learning experiences that traditional methods often fail to deliver (UNESCO, 2022).

Despite its advantages, the integration of multimedia education in inclusive settings raises critical concerns related to digital inequality, technological dependency,

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and the preparedness of educators to effectively implement technology-driven teaching strategies. Research indicates that disparities in access to digital resources and insufficient teacher training may exacerbate existing educational gaps rather than bridge them (Selwyn, 2020). In addition, while interactive and adaptive learning tools can enhance motivation and engagement, there is an ongoing debate on their long-term effectiveness in fostering deep learning and cognitive development among children with special educational needs (Schmidt & Tang, 2023).

This paper aims to explore the dual role of multimedia education as both an enabler and a potential barrier to educational inclusion. Through a review of recent literature and case studies, the study critically examines how digital pedagogies can enhance learning opportunities for vulnerable students while also addressing the structural challenges that limit their effectiveness. By providing evidence-based insights, the discussion highlights the need for well-designed policies and teacher training programs to ensure that multimedia education truly contributes to equitable and inclusive learning environments.

2. Literature review

The integration of multimedia education in inclusive learning environments has been the subject of extensive research, with scholars examining both its benefits and its limitations in addressing the needs of vulnerable children. This section provides an overview of key theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to the role of multimedia in educational inclusion, focusing on three main areas: (1) the effectiveness of multimedia tools in supporting learning for children with special needs, (2) challenges associated with digital inequality, and (3) the pedagogical implications for educators.

2.1. Multimedia Education and Learning Outcomes for Vulnerable Children

Numerous studies have highlighted the positive impact of multimedia learning environments on children with diverse educational needs. Mayer's (2021) cognitive theory of multimedia learning suggests that combining visual, auditory, and interactive elements can enhance information retention and comprehension, particularly for students with learning difficulties. Empirical evidence supports this claim, demonstrating that interactive learning platforms, gamification, and adaptive digital content can improve engagement and motivation among children who struggle with traditional teaching methods (Clark & Mayer, 2016).

For students with disabilities, assistive technologies such as speech-to-text software, augmented reality applications, and AI-driven adaptive learning systems have shown promise in facilitating personalized educational experiences (Adebayo

et al., 2022). Studies indicate that such technologies can bridge gaps in literacy and numeracy skills while fostering independence and self-efficacy in children with cognitive impairments (Schmidt & Tang, 2023). However, scholars also caution against over-reliance on technology, arguing that it should complement, rather than replace, teacher-led interventions (Sanchez et al., 2020).

2.2. Digital Inequality and Barriers to Multimedia Education

While multimedia tools offer substantial educational benefits, their accessibility remains a pressing concern. The concept of "digital divide" (van Dijk, 2020) refers to disparities in access to technology, which disproportionately affect children from low-income families and rural communities. Research suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to high-speed internet, personal digital devices, and quality e-learning resources, limiting their ability to benefit from multimedia education (UNESCO, 2022).

Furthermore, digital inequality extends beyond hardware access to include disparities in digital literacy. Studies have shown that even when students have access to technology, they may lack the necessary skills to navigate online learning environments effectively (Hargittai & Micheli, 2019). This raises concerns about the risk of exacerbating educational inequities, as children who are already marginalized may fall further behind due to insufficient digital competence and support at home (Watson et al., 2021).

2.3. Pedagogical Implications and the Role of Educators

The successful integration of multimedia education in inclusive settings requires well-trained educators who can effectively leverage digital tools to enhance learning. However, research indicates that many teachers feel unprepared to incorporate technology into their pedagogical practices (Selwyn, 2020). A survey conducted by European Commission (2021) found that only 39% of teachers in primary and secondary education reported receiving adequate training in digital pedagogy.

Effective professional development programs are essential for equipping teachers with the skills needed to design and implement inclusive multimedia strategies. Research suggests that ongoing training, peer collaboration, and institutional support play a crucial role in building educators' confidence in using digital tools (OECD, 2019). Additionally, teacher attitudes toward technology adoption significantly influence its success in the classroom. While some educators embrace digital innovation, others remain skeptical due to concerns about workload, technical difficulties, and student dependency on technology (Kim et al., 2021).

The literature reviewed, underscores both the opportunities and challenges associated with multimedia education in supporting vulnerable children. While

digital tools have the potential to enhance learning outcomes and promote inclusion, issues related to digital inequality and teacher preparedness remain significant barriers. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including targeted policy interventions, increased investment in digital infrastructure, and comprehensive professional development programs for educators. The next section will explore empirical data and case studies to further examine the practical applications of multimedia education in inclusive settings.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine the role of multimedia education in supporting vulnerable children and its impact on educational inclusion. A descriptive research design was adopted to explore how multimedia tools facilitate learning experiences and address barriers in education for disadvantaged students. The study also investigates the challenges related to digital inequality and teacher preparedness in using multimedia strategies effectively.

Participants and Sampling

The study targeted primary and secondary school educators, educational specialists, and policymakers involved in digital pedagogy and inclusive education. A total of 47 participants were recruited using purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in teaching experience, school environments (urban/rural), and access to digital resources. The participants were categorized into:

- Teachers – from public and private schools, responsible for implementing multimedia strategies.
- Educational specialists – psychologists, special education experts, and instructional designers.
- Policymakers and administrators – professionals involved in educational policy and digital infrastructure.

Data Collection Methods

The study utilized both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques:

1. Surveys and Questionnaires:
 - A structured questionnaire with Likert-scale questions (1–5) was distributed to collect data on teachers' attitudes, perceived benefits, and challenges of multimedia use in inclusive classrooms.
 - Topics covered: digital competency, access to multimedia tools, barriers to implementation, and student engagement levels.

- The survey was validated through a pilot test with 10 educators to ensure clarity and reliability.
- 2. Semi-Structured Interviews:
 - Conducted with 20 selected participants (10 teachers, 5 educational specialists, 5 policymakers).
 - Focused on their experiences with multimedia teaching, strategies used, and limitations encountered in supporting vulnerable children.
 - Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically.
- 3. Classroom Observations:
 - In five schools, multimedia lessons were observed, focusing on engagement, interaction, and accessibility for students with learning difficulties.
 - A standardized observation protocol was used to assess teacher-student interaction, technology effectiveness, and inclusivity.

Data Analysis

- Quantitative Data Analysis:
 - Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (t-tests, ANOVA) to identify significant differences in teachers' perceptions based on factors such as school location (urban vs. rural) and experience levels.
- Qualitative Data Analysis:
 - Interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
 - Recurring themes related to multimedia effectiveness, challenges, and pedagogical strategies were identified.
 - NVivo software was used for coding and pattern recognition.

4. Results

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the role of multimedia education in supporting vulnerable children and the challenges related to digital inequality and teacher preparedness. This section presents the results from the quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and classroom observations, highlighting key themes that emerged from the data analysis.

1. Survey Findings

The quantitative analysis of survey responses (N=150) focused on teachers' perceptions of multimedia education, digital access, and challenges in inclusive classrooms.

1.1. Multimedia Education and Student Engagement

- 85% of teachers (n=68/80) agreed that multimedia tools (e.g., videos, interactive platforms, AR/VR) improved student engagement.
- Teachers reported that multimedia was particularly effective for students with learning disabilities (76%) and those from linguistically diverse backgrounds (69%).
- However, 22% of educators noted that students with attention disorders found multimedia overwhelming, requiring structured implementation.

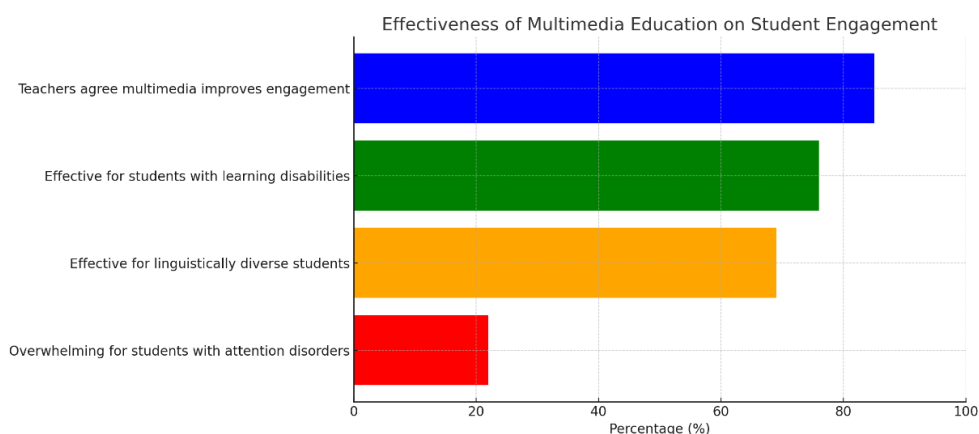


Image 1. The study results on multimedia education and student engagement

1.2. Digital Inequality and Accessibility Barriers

- 48% of teachers from rural schools reported limited access to high-quality digital resources, compared to only 12% from urban schools ($p < 0.01$).
- 62% of participants identified unstable internet connectivity as a major barrier, especially in economically disadvantaged regions.
- 39% of teachers expressed concerns that students from low-income families lacked personal devices or home internet access, limiting their ability to engage with digital learning outside of school.

1.3. Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

- While 73% of educators were willing to integrate multimedia into their teaching, only 41% felt adequately trained to do so.
- 55% of teachers stated that they had never received formal training on using educational technology in inclusive settings.
- Teachers with more than 10 years of experience were less likely to feel comfortable using multimedia ($p = 0.03$), highlighting a generational gap in digital pedagogical skills.

Table 1. The findings on digital inequality and accessibility barriers

Variable	N	Percentage (%)	Chi-Square / p-value
Limited access to high-quality digital resources (Rural Schools)	80	48	$\chi^2 = 10.25, p < 0.01$
Limited access to high-quality digital resources (Urban Schools)	80	12	$\chi^2 = 10.25, p < 0.01$
Unstable internet connectivity as a major barrier	80	62	N/A
Students from low-income families lack personal devices/home internet	80	39	N/A

Table 2. Teacher preparedness and professional development

Variable	N	Percentage (%)	Chi-Square / p-value
Educators willing to integrate multimedia	80	73.0	N/A
Educators feeling adequately trained	80	41.0	N/A
Teachers never received formal training on educational tech in inclusive settings	80	55.0	N/A
Teachers with >10 years experience feel less comfortable using multimedia	80	nan	p = 0.03

2. Qualitative Findings from Interviews

Twenty semi-structured interviews (n=20) with teachers, specialists, and policymakers revealed three major themes related to multimedia integration in inclusive education.

2.1. Effectiveness of Multimedia for Differentiated Instruction

Teachers emphasized that multimedia tools enhanced personalized learning by allowing students to engage with content at their own pace.

- “Students with dyslexia benefit significantly from text-to-speech applications and interactive reading platforms.” (Teacher, Urban School)
- “For students with autism, visual schedules and social story apps help them structure their daily activities and reduce anxiety.” (Special Education Specialist)

2.2. Challenges in Implementing Multimedia for Vulnerable Students

Despite the advantages, teachers reported struggles in adapting technology-based learning to the needs of all students.

- “Some children in rural areas lack access to technology at home, which creates a digital divide between students.” (Teacher, Rural School)
- “Educators need better training on how to customize multimedia tools for children with different disabilities.” (Policy Expert)

2.3. Concerns About Over-Reliance on Technology

A recurring theme was the concern that multimedia should not replace human interaction in the learning process.

- “Multimedia tools can be great, but students still need real-world interaction with teachers and peers.” (School Administrator)

3. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations (n=5 schools) revealed contrasting outcomes in multimedia use based on resource availability and teacher training.

3.1. Successful Multimedia Integration in Inclusive Classrooms

- Schools with high digital access successfully used interactive learning platforms (e.g., Kahoot, Google Classroom) to engage students.
- Students with dyscalculia performed better when using math-based gamification tools rather than traditional worksheets.

3.2. Barriers in Low-Resource Schools

- In rural schools, teachers struggled to incorporate multimedia consistently due to limited internet connectivity and outdated devices.
- In 3 out of 5 schools, technical difficulties disrupted lessons, reducing their effectiveness in enhancing student learning.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the role of multimedia education in inclusive learning environments while also highlighting persistent challenges related to digital inequality, teacher preparedness, and the effectiveness of multimedia tools for diverse learners. This section critically analyzes the results, compares them to previous research, and discusses their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

1. The Role of Multimedia Education in Enhancing Inclusion

The study confirms that multimedia tools have a positive impact on student engagement and learning outcomes, particularly for vulnerable students. 85% of teachers reported increased student engagement when using digital tools, supporting Mayer's (2021) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which suggests that combining visual, auditory, and interactive elements enhances retention and comprehension.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of multimedia in supporting students with learning disabilities aligns with research by Adebayo et al. (2022), who found that text-to-speech software, adaptive learning systems, and interactive gamification improve academic performance among children with dyslexia and dyscalculia. The classroom observations in this study reinforce this conclusion, as students with learning disabilities responded positively to digital interventions compared to traditional teaching methods.

However, some educators raised concerns that certain students with attention disorders found multimedia overwhelming. This echoes previous research by Sanchez et al. (2020), who argued that excessive sensory input in digital environments may lead to cognitive overload for children with ADHD. This suggests that multimedia education should be implemented with careful instructional design, ensuring that content is structured and scaffolded appropriately for diverse learning needs.

2. Digital Inequality as a Barrier to Inclusion

A major finding in this study was the significant gap in access to digital resources between urban and rural schools. 48% of teachers from rural schools reported limited access to high-quality digital tools, compared to only 12% from urban schools. This aligns with van Dijk's (2020) theory of the digital divide, which emphasizes that economic and infrastructural disparities lead to unequal educational opportunities.

The issue of home access to technology was also highlighted, with 39% of teachers expressing concerns that students from low-income families lacked personal devices or stable internet connections. Similar findings have been reported by UNESCO (2022), which warns that the expansion of digital learning could unintentionally deepen educational inequalities if not accompanied by targeted interventions to ensure equitable access.

These findings underscore the need for government policies that prioritize digital infrastructure investments in underprivileged areas. Expanding initiatives such as free internet access in public schools and subsidized device programs for low-income families could help bridge this gap.

3. Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

While 73% of teachers were willing to integrate multimedia into their teaching, only 41% felt adequately trained to do so. This is consistent with research by the European Commission (2021), which found that only 39% of educators across Europe reported receiving sufficient training in digital pedagogy.

The generational gap in digital confidence was also evident in this study, with more experienced teachers being less likely to integrate multimedia tools. This reflects Selwyn's (2020) argument that teacher resistance to technology often stems from a lack of exposure and confidence rather than opposition to its benefits.

To address this challenge, comprehensive professional development programs should be designed to equip teachers with the necessary digital competencies. The OECD (2019) emphasizes that ongoing training, rather than one-time workshops, is essential for sustainable technology adoption. Additionally, peer mentoring programs, where younger, tech-savvy teachers support senior colleagues, could help bridge the knowledge gap and encourage a culture of digital learning.

4. Balancing Technology and Human Interaction in Learning

One of the most debated findings was the concern about over-reliance on technology in inclusive education. While teachers acknowledged the benefits of multimedia tools, many stressed that technology should supplement, not replace, human interaction. This aligns with Clark and Mayer's (2016) Media vs. Method debate, which argues that learning outcomes are influenced more by instructional strategies than by the medium itself.

Educators in this study emphasized that personalized, teacher-led interactions remain crucial, particularly for students with emotional and social difficulties. Schmidt & Tang (2023) echo this concern, warning that an overemphasis on technology-driven learning could lead to decreased social engagement among students who need interpersonal connections for emotional development.

A blended learning approach, which combines multimedia resources with teacher-led instruction, could address this issue. Research by Kim et al. (2021) suggests that hybrid models, where technology enhances but does not replace direct teacher interaction, yield the most effective learning outcomes for students with special needs.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on these findings, several policy and practical recommendations can be made:

1. Bridging the Digital Divide:
 - Governments and educational institutions must increase investments in digital infrastructure for underprivileged schools.
 - Subsidized device and internet access programs should be expanded to ensure that economically disadvantaged students can access online learning at home.
2. Strengthening Teacher Training in Digital Pedagogy:
 - Mandatory professional development programs should be implemented to enhance teacher confidence and competence in multimedia-based instruction.
 - Peer mentoring initiatives could help bridge generational gaps in digital adoption among educators.
3. Optimizing Multimedia Design for Special Education:
 - Multimedia resources should be designed with structured instructional strategies to avoid cognitive overload, particularly for students with attention disorders.
 - Digital platforms should offer adaptive learning features, allowing students to customize their learning experience based on their individual needs.
4. Encouraging a Balanced Approach to Technology Use:
 - Schools should promote blended learning models that integrate teacher interaction with technology-driven tools to maintain a human-centered learning experience.
 - Further research is needed to assess long-term effects of multimedia education on student well-being and social skills.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the role of multimedia education in supporting vulnerable children, highlighting both its potential and its challenges in fostering educational inclusion. The findings indicate that multimedia tools significantly enhance student engagement and personalized learning, particularly for students with learning disabilities and those from linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, digital inequality, inadequate teacher training, and concerns over technology overuse remain critical barriers to effective implementation.

The digital divide, as evidenced by disparities in access between rural and urban schools, underscores the urgent need for infrastructure improvements and equitable distribution of digital resources. Without targeted policy interventions, vulnerable students may continue to face limited opportunities to benefit from multimedia education, exacerbating existing educational inequalities.

Another key finding was the lack of adequate teacher training in multimedia integration. While educators recognize the potential of digital tools, many feel unprepared to implement them effectively. This highlights the necessity for comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs, ensuring that teachers possess the digital competencies required to facilitate inclusive multimedia education.

Additionally, while multimedia technologies can enhance learning experiences, this study emphasizes that they should not replace human interaction in the classroom. A blended learning approach, combining multimedia tools with teacher-led instruction, emerges as the most effective strategy for ensuring balanced, inclusive, and high-quality education for vulnerable children.

8. Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of multimedia education on academic achievement, social development, and digital literacy among vulnerable students. Future research should also explore the effectiveness of policy-driven interventions aimed at reducing digital inequality and improving teacher preparedness in technology-enhanced learning environments.

9. Final Thoughts

Multimedia education presents tremendous opportunities to bridge learning gaps and enhance educational inclusion for vulnerable students. However, its success depends on strategic implementation, addressing accessibility, teacher preparedness, and instructional design challenges. By developing equitable policies, robust training

programs, and sustainable digital education models, stakeholders can harness the full potential of multimedia education to create a more inclusive and accessible learning environment for all students.

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Adolescent Vulnerabilities: Understanding the Structural Transformations of Adolescence

Emanuela CÂMPEAN¹, Remus RUNCAN²

Abstract. Adolescence is one of the most important periods in the development of the human being. This transition involves radical transformations that expose the adolescent to a wide range of vulnerabilities. The present paper aims to provide a multidimensional understanding of cognitive, affective, social, and decision-making changes, with the purpose of minimizing all related vulnerabilities. In order for the final outcome to be a person with resilience and autonomy, the essay emphasizes the tripartite role of the family, the school, and value-based communities.

Keywords: *adolescence, transformations, vulnerabilities, family, school, faith communities*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is an inevitable and defining stage in human development, marked by radical transformations across multiple dimensions: physical, social, psychological, emotional, etc. Situated between the milestones of childhood and adulthood, adolescence often involves a rollercoaster of rapid changes that can generate multiple vulnerabilities. The unpredictability of physical, emotional, and social adaptive changes can give rise to elements of uncertainty, restlessness, and severe inner disturbances.

The transition from childhood to maturity is marked by external pressures: a performance-oriented society, the relativization of values, cultural crises, etc. Contemporary life introduces additional factors that intensify the adolescent's vulnerable states, due to new forces exerted by technology and social media.

In this context, understanding these vulnerabilities requires an integrated approach that combines psychological, educational, and social perspectives. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the complex nature of adolescent transformations and the ways in which they can generate imbalances or opportunities in the formation of the young person's personality.

2. Definitions

The word "*adolescence*" derives from the Latin "*adolescere*," which means "to grow into maturity" or "to mature." There have been several attempts to define this

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transition, each capturing an important aspect. For example, concisely, Stanley Hall (1844–1924) was the first psychologist to conduct in-depth research on adolescent psychology and described it as a period of “storm and stress.”

In another interpretation, David Miller defined adolescence as a stage of human life that begins with the awareness that the privileges of an adult are owed to them, but not yet granted, and ends when full power and the social status of adulthood are conferred by society. The period of adolescence includes at least three stages: early adolescence (ages 10–13), middle adolescence (ages 14–17), and late adolescence (ages 18–22).

3. Transitions and Vulnerabilities During Adolescence

In essence, adolescence is often described as a stage of “personal revolution” in which the individual redefines their identity, place in the world, and personal values. It is a period of transition and questioning, marked by many uprooting aspects, making it imperative to understand these transformations and the dangers of the vulnerabilities that accompany them. (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004)

3.1. Transitions and Vulnerabilities in the Physiological Domain

The most evident transformation during adolescence is physiological. The somatic changes that begin during puberty – such as the development of secondary sexual characteristics, accelerated height growth, and hormonal changes – create a new physiological framework for the adolescent.

This physical transition from childhood to maturity is marked by pubescence, a period of time involved in the maturation of the reproductive function. It is easily observable that girls mature earlier than boys, even from a physical point of view.

This “biological explosion” can be accompanied by discomfort, insecurity related to body image, and an acute need to adapt to a body that is rapidly changing (Şchiopu & Verza, 2000). Moreover, increased hormonal activity directly influences emotional state, contributing to the appearance of intense or unstable affective reactions.

The main vulnerability within the physical transition involves the acceptance of and accommodation to the changing body. In this sense, any offensive or disapproving remark directed at the adolescent’s body can leave marks on their mental state.

3.2. Transitions and Vulnerabilities in the Domain of Cognition

The second transition in the universe of adolescence is encapsulated in mental development. With adolescence, thinking moves from concrete operations (related to observable situations) to formal operations – that is, abstract and hypothetico-deductive reasoning. Jean Piaget identified this transition around the ages of 11–12,

when the adolescent becomes capable of formulating hypotheses, anticipating the consequences of actions, and critically reflecting on reality (Piaget, 1965).

This new cognitive capacity encourages identity exploration but also leads to questioning authority, developing a critical spirit, and forming a personal perspective on the world. (Erikson, 1968) According to Piaget's model of mental development, four stages can be identified:

1. 0–2 years – the sensorimotor stage
2. 2–6 years – the preoperational stage, in which language develops
3. 7–11 years – the concrete operational stage, the stage of calculation
4. 12–15 years – the formal stage, conceptual verbalization

Middle adolescence is a period of amalgamation between concrete and conceptual thinking, a transition that will reverse in order as the median phase is surpassed. In this period, the main vulnerability is contained in the question: *What do I believe in contrast to what I have been taught?*

The universe of childhood was influenced by the first formative agents: parents and educators, whose ideas had not been questioned. During adolescence, these ideas are weighed and analyzed in relation to the newly created peer environment. (UNICEF, 2021)

3.3. Affective Transitions and Vulnerabilities

In basic terms, adolescence is a period of affective reconfiguration, thus emotional transition involves vulnerabilities. The intensity of emotions, instability of experiences, and difficulties with self-regulation define this stage. The adolescent experiences every emotion intensely – they are sensitive, reactive, and often overwhelmed by what they feel, even if they do not always know how to express or understand these experiences.

During this period, emotions are fluctuating and highly oscillatory, sometimes antagonistic almost instantly. Hormonal changes, the development of the emotional brain (limbic system), and social pressures all contribute to the intensification of emotional reactions. Many adolescents abruptly shift from euphoria to sadness, from enthusiasm to irritation, without any obvious cause. Kay Kuzma (2011) emphasizes that adolescents often overreact to minor stimuli precisely because they do not yet possess consolidated mechanisms of emotional self-regulation. This emotional instability can lead to interpersonal conflicts and difficulties in communicating with adults.

The emotional rollercoaster, a constant throughout adolescence, may stop once the young person outlines and assumes a personal identity. In this period of self-discovery, adolescents often feel lost and are haunted by the question “Who am I?” in their desire to find their identity. The concept of “identity crisis” formulated by Erik Erikson (1968) is essential in understanding the vulnerabilities of adolescence.

In the context of transitioning to maturity, the young person experiments with various roles, values, and behaviors in an attempt to build a coherent identity. If the family or social environment does not provide support or healthy models, the adolescent may enter a role confusion, generating anxiety, frustration, and a sense of inadequacy.

A dangerous vulnerability in the emotional transition is observed in the predisposition to depression within the adolescent context. According to recent studies in developmental psychology, the rate of depression and anxiety among adolescents is increasing (APA, 2022). There is no single universally valid cause of depression, but rather a bundle of triggering factors can be identified: inferiority complex caused by a defective self-image, pressure from social media and bullying, lack of emotional support, social isolation, etc. Girls are generally more susceptible to depressive states, while boys tend to express frustration through aggressive behaviors or social withdrawal. It is important that these signs not be ignored but interpreted as warning signals that require early intervention, especially in the context of childhood trauma.

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), the absence of secure relationships in childhood will affect the young person's ability to emotionally relate in a stable and coherent way with those around them. During adolescence, the peer group becomes a source of belonging, and in the absence of correct, positive relationships, the adolescent may develop low self-esteem, dysfunctional or depressive behavior. Moreover, adolescents who do not feel accepted within the family may seek "emotional substitutions" in risky environments. (Twenge, 2019)

3.4. Social Transitions and Vulnerabilities

Social transition is defining for the adolescent, as they are a being profoundly influenced by the social context in which they live. In addition to inner changes, the adolescent must find their place in a complex, often contradictory society that sends ambiguous messages about success, value, belonging, and identity. Within this framework, a series of social and cultural vulnerabilities arise that may affect the balanced development of the adolescent's personality.

The most important source of meaning in adolescence is the group of friends. The desire for acceptance and the fear of rejection may lead the adolescent to conformist behaviors, sometimes to the detriment of personal values or safety. According to the theory of normative social influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), individuals tend to conform to group norms in order to be accepted. Thus, an adolescent may adopt risky attitudes or practices (smoking, alcohol consumption, early sexual behavior) in order to maintain their status within the group.

Technology and the widespread digitalization of society, besides their inherent benefits, also pose major risks. The time adolescents spend in the virtual world is

increasingly extensive, and in this universe they often build a virtual identity that differs from their real one. This new world, often not shared with family members, shapes self-perception and distorts reality. Recent studies (Twenge, 2019) correlate intensive social media use with the emergence of depressive symptoms, especially among girls. Social identity is determined by the adolescent's relationship to peers, family, and society, but also by how they manage the virtual world responsibly.

Understanding one's social place is also influenced by the component of autonomy exercised during this period, as the relationship with authority transforms. Although parents remain important emotional reference points, adolescents become increasingly vocal, challenge imposed rules, and demand independence. Postmodernity accentuates the relativization of authority, so tense relationships can also be found with teachers and the educational system. In the emotional whirlwind, social adaptability can be facilitated by fostering an empathetic dialogue between mature individuals (parents, teachers, etc.) and the adolescent. A study by Steinberg (2001) shows that adolescents who perceive support and empathy from parents and teachers are more likely to adapt healthily in the social domain.

3.5. Decision-Making Transitions and Vulnerabilities

Especially in late adolescence, the individual is called to make decisions that may influence them for the rest of their life. Under the influence of cognitive and social changes, young people begin to project their future, but this process is often loaded with uncertainty, pressure, and lack of experience. Thus, multiple vulnerabilities arise concerning the ability to make autonomous, informed, and balanced decisions.

The pressure of choosing a career first appears in the form of the innocent childhood question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The answer to this question is perceived playfully, but over time, it weighs heavily on the adolescent's conscience. The volitional commitment to embrace a career is inseparable from questions that confirm identity and value, such as: "What am I good at?", "What does my family or society expect from me?"

The answer to these and similar questions is often exhausting, especially in the context of a volatile labor market and vocational identity uncertainty. In such a state, adolescents make impulsive decisions or act under the influence of their immediate community. The vulnerability of rushed decisions or those superficially influenced by peer pressure robs the young person of the understanding of their personal vocation. As a consequence, this may lead to frustration or even professional failure later on (Jinca & Negreț, 1999).

Social pressure fueled by competitive comparison and academic performance ranking generates anxiety, fear of failure, and even a decrease in motivation. Adolescents who do not excel academically may develop feelings of inferiority or label themselves as worthless, despite potential resources in other domains than

those previously ranked (dexterity, creativity, emotional intelligence, etc.). In this context, the school must avoid the role of leveling expectations for all adolescents who enter its doors. Every young person is unique and carries immense potential manifested in various branches of life. Failure to meet emotional needs and the rigidity of school methods leads to disinterest, absenteeism, deviant behavior, or school dropout. According to a UNICEF report (2021), students who feel that their opinions do not matter in school are three times more likely to experience exclusion or educational failure. Every adolescent is shaped in the crucible of the school environment, but this shaping must be more than informational. This does not imply substituting the adolescent in making future decisions, but rather supporting them in assuming their own convictions and choices in a conscious and mature way (Crabb, 1998).

4. Strategies for Preventing Adolescent Vulnerability

To avoid shipwrecking in the waters of adolescent transition, it is absolutely necessary that the adolescent receive support from the family, school, community, or specialized institutions. The starting point in reducing the impact of age-specific vulnerabilities is the understanding and study of the five transitions previously mentioned. All these transitions are necessary and expected to unfold within every individual as part of the developmental process from childhood to adulthood.

Nevertheless, the adolescent needs support from mature individuals in order to understand this transition and be guided in avoiding the vulnerable traps specific to each aspect (physical, cognitive, etc.).

The intervention of guiding agents (family, school, society) does not imply dictatorial control, but rather accompaniment, warning, validation, correction, and guidance in the maturation process. (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003)

4.1. The Role of the Family in Managing Adolescent Vulnerabilities

The first and decisive factor in the development of the adolescent is the family. Within it, the adolescent should find a haven of peace and emotional security. The presence of parents – who, even if they do not embody perfection, offer answers to uncomfortable questions through intentional interaction with the adolescent – contributes to a trusting, open, and supportive relationship that significantly supports the adolescent's psychological balance. James Dobson (1993) emphasizes that an adolescent will feel competent only if they are approved, praised, and corrected with respect. Even in the face of conflict, an attitude of firm love helps the adolescent understand limits and develop self-discipline.

Although both parents are necessary in helping the adolescent avoid the traps of transition, studies in recent decades show that the father plays an essential role

in the balanced development of the adolescent's identity. This aspect is less explored compared to the one regarding the mother–child relationship. The need for active father involvement is validated by Pruett's research (2000), which observed a higher level of autonomy, self-confidence, and capacity for responsibility in adolescents who have a close relationship with their father. The father should offer a model of identity and behavior to the adolescent in the home, and his involvement in a positive relationship with his child greatly reduces the risk of deviant behavior, substance abuse, or school dropout (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004).

Studies show that open father–adolescent communication is associated with increased self-esteem and the development of critical thinking (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). On the other hand, disengagement, indifference, or lack of positive interaction with the adolescent deepens their emotional regulation vulnerability. Therefore, the father's role is both one of identity model and relational pedagogue and visionary in guiding the adolescent transition.

In symbiosis with the paternal role, the inherent vulnerabilities of adolescence can be mitigated by the involvement of the mother. Her role transforms compared to childhood, when she offered care and authority. In middle and late adolescence, the mother becomes a guide, confidante, emotional support, and moral compass in facing the complexity of the transition to maturity.

Although adolescents increasingly claim independence and autonomy as they advance in life, a secure attachment to the mother provides stronger emotional resilience and a stable and healthy self-concept (Allen et al., 2003). Emotional regulation is achieved through open, honest, and affective communication between the adolescent and their mother. Studies show that adolescents who feel listened to and validated by their mothers are less prone to anxiety, depression, or risk behaviors (Yap et al., 2014). Planned and open conversations can correct the influence of harmful words the adolescent may have received both in the virtual and real worlds. The mother's interventions are no longer protective as they were during childhood, but rather take place under the auspices of counseling – she becomes a confidante and a reference point for her child, guiding them through the uncertain world in which they live (Noddings, 2005).

In the process of identity formation, healthy relationships with the extended family (grandparents, uncles) offer the adolescent additional support, continuity of values, and identity stability. McGoldrick and Carter (2003) emphasize that adolescents who understand the story of their own family have a more coherent self-identity and a deeper sense of social belonging, through the function of continuity understood via the broader image of the history to which they belong.

The experiential background of grandparents offers viable solutions in the decision-making transition expected during adolescence. Their role is even more significant in single-parent families, as they provide emotional balance to the adolescent.

Interaction with the extended family contributes to the adolescent's social education, being at the same time a factor of protection, refuge, and collective wisdom. The individualism of contemporary life may find its antidote in reclaiming the ancestral space of the extended family as a place of identity construction and future stability for the mature individual.

4.2. The Role of School in Managing Adolescent Vulnerabilities

The academic environment leaves a serious mark on every young person; thus, the school setting is vital in shaping the direction their life will take. All vulnerabilities of the five previously mentioned transitions are either positively or negatively impacted in the school context.

The first steps outside the family are usually taken in educational centers, which become true social laboratories. Here, the adolescent learns social skills through interaction with teachers and peers. The assumed safe and comforting environment of the family can be threatened by the rigorous and sometimes cold framework of the school setting. Consequently, the role of teachers is vital in emotional regulation and the stimulation of social skill development. Therefore, beyond cognitive concerns, a school that emphasizes care, relationships, and dialogue will nurture not only competent individuals but also emotionally stable, ethical, and involved citizens (Noddings, 2005).

The school's potential is also seen in cognitive modeling through the intellectual growth of the young person. In a context of relativized values and fake news, the school should offer the tools for developing the kind of critical thinking specific to maturity. For this, it is essential that teachers not only transmit content but also form character, serve as guides in career orientation, and provide emotional support in times of crisis. Social and cognitive development results from a holistic approach on the part of teachers – an approach that discourages standardization and uniformity and considers the characteristics of each young person.

Educational programs focused on preventing vulnerabilities during this period – such as the temptations of addictions or harmful peer groups – are necessary and desirable in the academic space.

The school offers clarity and mentorship, which are greatly needed in the turbulent world in which the adolescent lives.

4.3. The Role of Faith Communities in Managing Adolescent Vulnerabilities

Not last, but rather in congruence with the family and school, the religious, cultural, or civic community can become a formative reference point for the adolescent. Placed in a positive and value-oriented community, the adolescent can

form their identity through a sense of belonging and the assumption of moral responsibilities.

The faith community can function as a space for reflection on the meaning of life. Young people who find themselves in such communities and are involved in religious activities develop a higher level of empathy and civic spirit than those who avoid these communities. The space of faith becomes the place where the adolescent is accepted, valued, and encouraged to find moral, emotional, and social balance. According to Furrow et al. (2004), constant participation in such groups is associated with a decrease in risk behaviors and an increase in self-esteem.

The process of maturation inevitably involves the transition from irresponsibility to responsibility, and faith or cultural communities offer numerous opportunities for involvement in charitable, social, and cultural activities, where values such as empathy, self-sacrifice, and altruism are not only encouraged but also implicitly assumed.

Through the values they communicate, faith communities protect the young person from the risks of inappropriate peer groups, from the impulsiveness of reckless choices, and become laboratories for moral and social formation.

5. Conclusions

Adolescence represents a unique and intense stage in human development, in which biological, psychological, social, and moral transformations intertwine in a complex process of personal identity formation. It is a time of searching, of inner turmoil, but also of great potential.

The adolescent's vulnerabilities should not be viewed as dysfunctions but as opportunities for learning and maturation – if managed with empathy and responsibility by the significant adults around them.

Understanding the structural transformations of this period allows for the construction of an educational, familial, and community framework that fosters the harmonious development of young people.

Emotional support, validation, the cultivation of critical thinking, and moral guidance are essential in the process of becoming an integrated, responsible, and balanced person.

Investing in adolescents ultimately means investing in the future of a healthy and functional society. By offering authentic models, by creating spaces for dialogue, and by supporting conscious decision-making, adults can accompany adolescents on their journey toward maturity and personal fulfillment.

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The Impact of Parental Incarceration on the Developmental Environment and Interpersonal Relationships of Children in Romania

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Abstract. We live in a world of constant motion and urgency, shaped by a vocabulary that places increasing emphasis on the irreversible resource of “time.” The sound of children’s laughter, a kite that seemed to touch the clouds, endless days of play and lifelong friendships may seem like distant memories, yet they remain unforgettable. As time has passed, these moments have been gradually replaced by new joys, shaped by social evolution, but the comfort of a mother’s arms or a father’s gentle touch remains constant and irreplaceable. The stages and phases of a child’s life play a significant role in shaping their identity and development into adulthood. Central to this process are the support, stability, and consistent presence of parental figures. When a child is deprived of parental presence due to incarceration, the consequences can include family instability, social stigmatisation, and difficulties in forming secure attachments. Can a minor – particularly one in early adolescence – truly comprehend this phenomenon without experiencing disruption to their daily routine and overall life? This article aims to examine and bring to light this complex issue, encouraging reflection and deeper understanding. Childhood is a period marked by the exploration of emotions, but such a situation can lead to a predominance of negative emotional experiences. The resulting effects can deeply influence the child’s developmental environment, increasing the risk of insecure relational patterns, episodes of separation anxiety, emotional disconnection, and even feelings of abandonment. This paper proposes a study aimed at exploring the defining aspects of this phenomenon and at contributing to the development of supportive alternatives for affected children.

Keywords: *developmental environment, family reintegration, social stigmatization, parental incarceration, parental separation*

1. The Child in the Context of Parental Imprisonment: An Invisible Issue

The defining element of this topic is the family. But what is a family? The definition is broad and diverse, depending on the individual expressing their view, their level of education, their interests, the region they come from, or the specific situation they may be experiencing.

Some believe that “family is a group of people directly related through kinship, whose adults assume responsibility for raising children” (Popescu, 2009); others

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claim that “it forms the basis of society and influences the destiny of every individual, imposing its given model” (Brăguța, 2015), or see it as “a group of individuals connected by marriage, blood, or adoption; who constitute a single household; who interact and communicate with one another in their various social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister; who create and maintain a common culture” (Burgess, Locke & Thomas, 1971).

Undoubtedly, it is very difficult to find a universally accepted definition that encompasses all relevant and defining aspects. However, the importance of the family lies in its functions and types.

Among the many elements involved in defining the term ‘family’, most interpretations tend to include three common functions: reproductive, educational, and economic.

The focus of this theme is on the second function – the educational one – as it contributes to the development of children and young people within the family setting.

Bulgaru refers to family-based education by stating that “The child, with a tender soul, will imprint the good teachings of the parents as a seal pressed into wax. Once strengthened and grown, no one will be able to separate the education received within the family. At the same time, a child’s soul is like an icon, and the parents are the painters” (Bulgaru, 2017).

But what happens in families where one or both parents are serving a custodial sentence in prison?

The specialised literature, based on various studies, shows that the prevention of deviant behaviour often relies on a close parent–child relationship. Can such a relationship be maintained in these circumstances? (Costin & Bran, 2019)

In such cases, the parental model must often be “transferred” for a period to other members of the extended family or even to individuals outside the family, at least temporarily, until the mother, father, or both are released.

Things may appear straightforward and easily resolved – an ideal solution on paper – but in practice, it is a true challenge for professionals working with these children, their caregivers, or people within their close social circle. For parents, understanding and accepting custody arrangements is difficult and requires time, resources, and even support – and even more so for their children, who feel the need for a present parental figure, for love, and for their parents’ active involvement in their lives.

This category of children and their caregivers remains largely invisible, due to the fear of stigmatisation or even social marginalisation. It is well known that people who have been imprisoned are not exactly welcomed back into the community with open arms.

2. The Echoes of Imprisonment on Families, Children, and Incarcerated Parents

Much like a voice echoing through a cave, affecting all those within, the incarceration of one or both parents sends reverberations that disrupt and reshape the lives of other family members.

Most children affected by this phenomenon discover the truth about their parents' whereabouts and the reason behind their absence quite late – and some never find out at all. This leads to feelings of insecurity, abandonment, guilt, or even depression.

From an adult's perspective, the concept of 'maturity' is often cited as the reason why they refrain from explaining the real situation to the child in a clear and age-appropriate manner. However, this perceived maturity is often a misguided judgement that generates further problems – just as lying or avoiding the truth does – leaving the child to imagine and construct their own narrative.

These emotional effects, experienced particularly in certain environments such as the school setting, often lead to increased feelings of powerlessness and guilt, both for the children and the incarcerated parents.

Deprivation of liberty, as a consequence of criminal offences, may – as seen in many cases within the Romanian prison system – lead to far more severe indirect consequences. For some individuals, these consequences manifest in the absence of their parental role in their children's lives, restricted parent-child interaction limited to visiting hours or brief phone calls and letters.

The length of the sentence often has a direct impact on the quality of interaction between the incarcerated person and their children, as well as with other family members. In cases of lengthy sentences – sometimes exceeding 25 years – family relationships may become distant or deteriorate completely, even to the point of non-existence.

Families of those in custody often face heightened difficulties, bearing a dual burden: on the one hand, continuing their role as individual family members, and on the other, assuming the parental responsibilities of the absent parent. The main challenges may stem from the emotional struggles faced by the child, as previously mentioned, from the lack of income or reliance on a limited one, and from the social stigma attached to imprisonment.

3. Current Situation and Visibility of the Issue

The decision to explore this topic was not a random one. The motivation behind choosing it stems from the impact it has on all the actors involved, the level of tolerance shown by those around towards the issue, and the erroneous perceptions society holds about children whose parents are serving prison sentences.

From a statistical point of view, the data is far from encouraging, showing high numbers both at the European level and within our own country. A study conducted by UNICEF reveals that approximately 2 million children across Europe have one or both parents in prison (UNICEF, 2011).

The situation is no more promising in Romania. According to the most recent available data, there are an estimated over 16,000 children who have one or both parents incarcerated. This number has likely increased in recent years, in line with a rise in the overall prison population (ANPDCA, 2020).

4. Research Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to identify how parental incarceration impacts the psycho-emotional development of children and influences their interpersonal relationships, based on the observations and accumulated experiences of professionals who work directly with these children.

The research also seeks to highlight the recommendations of these specialists, which may then be analysed, refined, and applied in efforts to prevent or mitigate the issues previously outlined. The goal is not merely to describe the phenomenon, but to propose possible intervention strategies, grounded in qualitative and quantitative data provided by experts with hands-on experience working with this category of children.

Preliminary Documentation

Conducting a quantitative study with a qualitative component, aimed at obtaining relevant results, requires consulting both theoretical studies and practical field data, including the ways in which certain practices are implemented in reality. In other words, it is essential to avoid researching an already well-documented topic that has been previously tested without bringing added value to existing knowledge. Since this is a scientific research project, it has been preceded by an empirical exploration, based on experiences gathered in the workplace and on the shared insights of various professionals working in social work, psychology, education, and healthcare who engage directly with this group of children and youth. This empirical foundation has helped shape the research questions, which can now only be properly addressed through a structured scientific approach. The theoretical documentation phase included the analysis of existing studies, review of specialised literature from various fields, relevant books, reports, and statistical data.

Research Instrument

To meet the aforementioned aims and to confirm or refute the working hypotheses, a quantitative research method using mixed items was chosen. Specifically, I will

employ the questionnaire, a widely used tool for data collection in similar research studies. This instrument will include both closed-ended and open-ended questions. To gather measurable and comparable data on specialist perceptions, the first part of the questionnaire will consist of closed-ended questions, employing a Likert-type scale. This scale is frequently used in sociological research to obtain quick, statistically interpretable data based on respondents' level of agreement. Given the nature of the study and the professionals involved, the second part will include open-ended questions, allowing respondents to express their views and provide recommendations or proposals for preventing or mitigating the negative effects of parental imprisonment.

Hypotheses

- Children whose parents are deprived of liberty exhibit a higher prevalence of emotional and behavioural disorders compared to children from intact families, and these manifestations are correlated with the degree of social support and the quality of the relationship maintained with the incarcerated parent.
- Maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent through regular visits reduces the risk of social isolation and improves the child's emotional wellbeing.
- Social stigmatisation experienced by children of incarcerated parents is associated with significant difficulties in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships in school and community settings.

Objectives

1. To assess the emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by children with incarcerated parents, from the perspective of professionals working in social and educational services.
2. To analyse the role of the support network (extended family, school, social institutions) in the psychosocial adjustment of the child in the absence of the incarcerated parent.
3. To explore the impact of maintaining the relationship with the incarcerated parent (through visits, correspondence, or phone calls) on the child's social integration and emotional balance.
4. To formulate social intervention proposals and public policy recommendations aimed at preventing social exclusion and supporting children affected by parental incarceration.

Target Group and Sampling

The formation of the target group initially focused on distributing the questionnaire solely to individuals who had interacted with children or young people affected by

parental incarceration. However, it was later acknowledged that the insights of professionals who may have interacted – knowingly or unknowingly – with such individuals could significantly contribute to the development of supplementary ideas and intervention strategies.

The selection process was guided by the institutional environment surrounding these children, identifying professionals who are likely to interact with them. Thus, the target group included social workers, psychologists, medical professionals, school counsellors, teachers, and educators, whose primary beneficiaries are children and young people.

The questionnaire link was disseminated exclusively via social media networks and online platforms, clearly specifying that the intended respondents were those within the aforementioned professional categories.

The sample was formed naturally, and the questionnaire was distributed until the responses became theoretically saturated, meaning no new information was emerging. During April–May, approximately 50 completed questionnaires were collected from professionals in Romania. The snowball sampling method was used, with participants sharing the questionnaire with colleagues they knew were active in the relevant professional fields.

Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The respondents of the questionnaire represented the following professional categories:

- 34% educators/teachers
- 40% social workers
- 12% psychologists
- 6% medical doctors
- 2% university staff
- 4% school counsellors
- 2% speech therapists
- 4% secondary school teachers

Most respondents reported having over 10 years of professional experience, followed by those with 4 to 10 years, and the fewest had less than 3 years of experience.

Furthermore, 74% of participants indicated that they had worked directly with children whose parents were incarcerated in Romanian prisons.

The questionnaire included a set of Likert scale items, and the answers revealed the following trends.

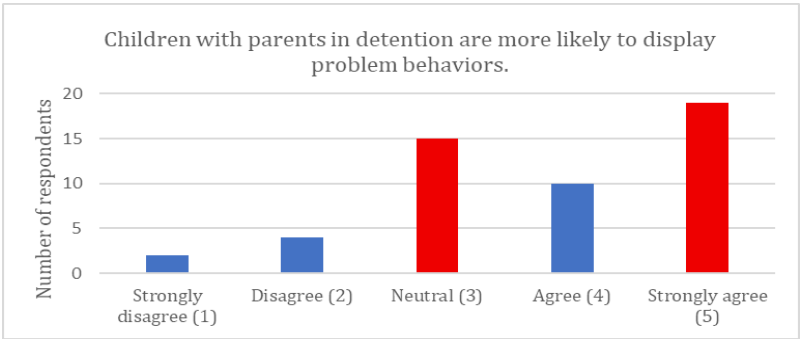


Figure 1. Summary of responses to the first question from the Likert scale

Following the centralisation of responses to the first question addressed to the specialists, it can be observed that the majority of them completely agreed with the statement 'Children with incarcerated parents exhibit problematic behaviours more frequently', with the next significant percentage expressing a neutral opinion.

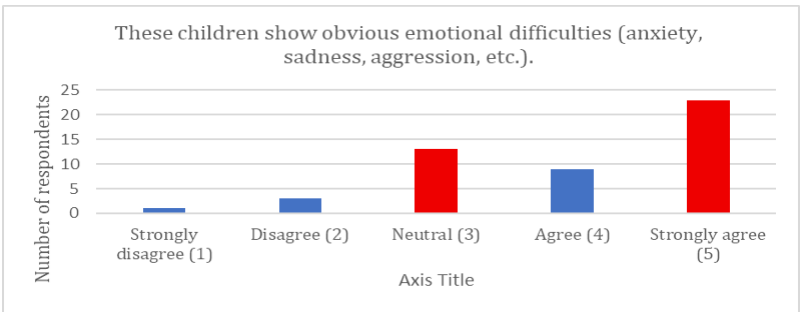


Figure 2. Summary of responses to Question No. 2 from the Likert scale

With regard to the statement “These children display clear emotional difficulties (anxiety, sadness, aggressiveness, etc.)”, the highest percentage was recorded for total agreement, followed by the percentage of those who chose not to respond to this statement.

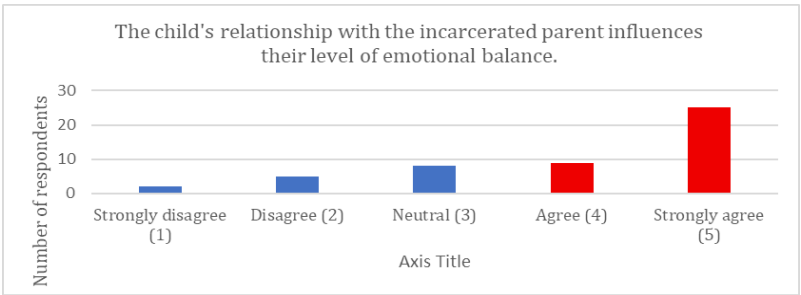


Figure 3. Summary of responses to Question No. 3 from the Likert scale

Regarding the statement “The relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent influences the child’s emotional stability”, most responses were recorded under “strongly agree” and “agree”.

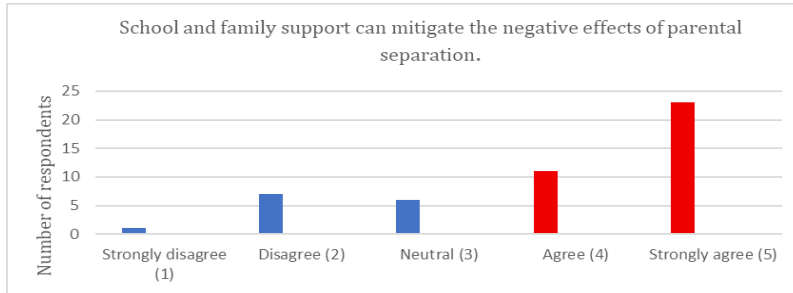


Figure 4. Summary of responses to Question No. 4 from the Likert scale

For the same item, most responses were also recorded for the statement “Support provided by the school and the family can reduce the negative effects of parental separation.”

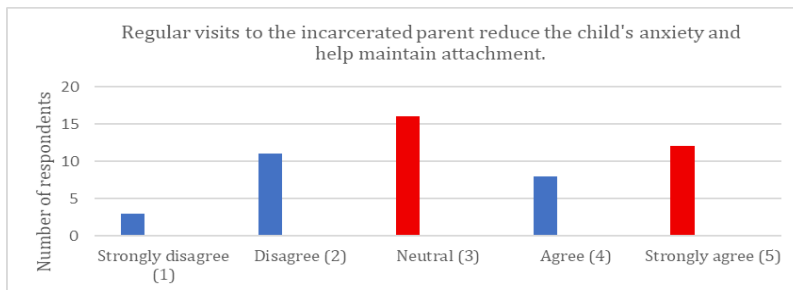


Figure 5. Summary of responses to Question No. 5 from the Likert scale

Regarding the statement “Regular visits to the incarcerated parent reduce the child’s anxiety and help maintain attachment,” most respondents chose to remain neutral, followed in proportion by those who strongly agreed.

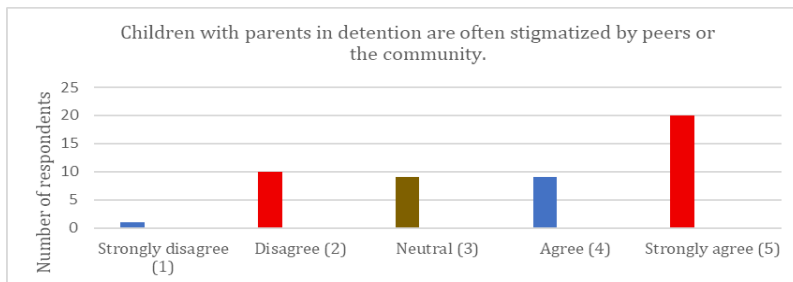


Figure 6. Summary of responses to Question No. 6 from the Likert scale

Opinions are divided regarding the statement “Children with incarcerated parents are frequently stigmatised by peers or the community,” with most respondents agreeing, but a significant proportion disagreeing.

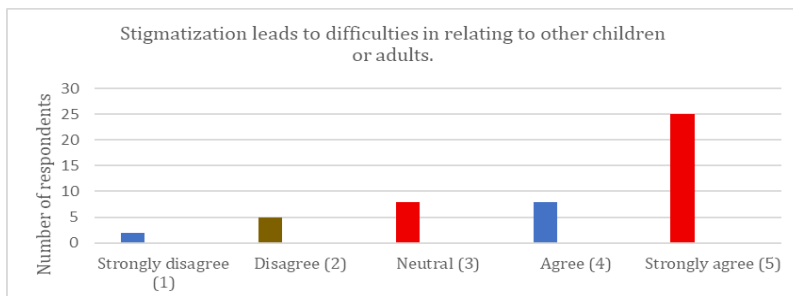


Figure 7. Summary of responses to Question No. 7 from the Likert scale

Interestingly, in response to the following statement – “Stigmatisation leads to difficulties in relating to other children or to adults” – most respondents strongly agreed, followed by a small proportion who chose not to express an opinion.

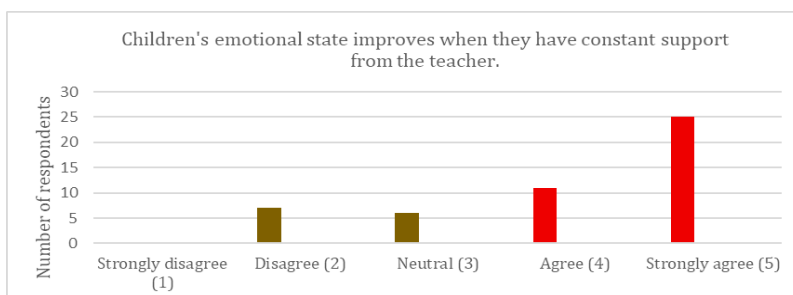


Figure. 8. Summary of responses to Question No. 8 from the Likert scale

For the statement “The child’s emotional state improves when they receive consistent support from the teacher,” most respondents strongly agreed, followed by those who agreed.

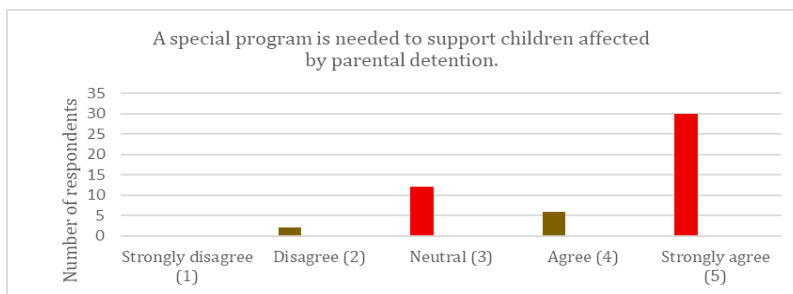


Figure 9. Summary of responses to Question No. 9 from the Likert scale

For the last statement, most responses were in total agreement with the need for a special programme to support children affected by parental detention. followed by a much lower percentage who chose the neutral option.

Following these statements, I chose to ask open-ended questions in order to be able to see exactly what are the ideas, opinions and proposals of the specialists on this topic.

Respondents were asked if they had observed emotional or relational changes in their work with children with incarcerated parents? and were then asked to describe. The majority of the responses were positive, stating that emotional or relational changes occur in these children, being described as 'Aggressiveness, avoidance, sadness, apathy, isolation, fear', or 'Anxiety, over-responsibilisation or apathy, dropping out of school', and one response even captures a situation stating "What I have noticed is that the pupil is behaving inappropriately, to stand out through inappropriate language and attitude. The child wants to counter possible criticisms of his family situation with an imposing and intimidating attitude towards peers and teachers." The emphasis on relationships was not missing from the descriptions either, 'Yes, the changes are relational in nature, the children are either aggressive, irritable, or very fearful, vulnerable', 'Yes, they are more aggressive, they try to treat the interlocutor with an air of superiority, they are rebellious'

Following a majority agreement, recommendations as to the type of support considered most effective most considered psychological intervention followed by support from other specialists (educators, doctors, social workers, psychotherapists, psychiatrist) and family support.

In terms of stigma reduction in schools or communities, specialists' recommendations included 'Specialised programmes and intervention', 'Awareness campaigns', 'Specialist help, counselling for the child and other family members', 'Informing all children about situations, examples of children, disadvantaged cases with the aim of raising their awareness to reduce stigma' and 'Education in schools with both children and parents'

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Following the centralisation and analysis of the collected data and their correlation with the specialised literature as well as with the hypotheses of the study, I consider that they have been validated, thus creating possible areas of action based on this theme.

The prevalence of emotional and behavioural disorders has been noted by the majority of specialists who work with children whose parents are in custody, identifying their experiences and manifestations such as anxiety, aggressiveness,

isolation, sadness. Subsequently, by giving examples in the open-ended answers to the questionnaire, the hypothesis is reinforced by the frequent use of terms such as: avoidance, dropping out of school, fear, over-responsabilisation.

The questions on intervention and recommendations show how the link between the relationship with the parent and the support of the school, family and society can bring major benefits to the child's life, thus helping to reduce these feelings identified by the specialists.

Hypothesis number two was partially supported, with specialists being very reluctant to allow children to visit children in the prison environment, which may be understandable given the security structure and rigours of the prison environment. However, this also reflects the low level of visibility of the specially designated areas within the prison for parent-child visits, the various activities organised by prison officers to celebrate certain holidays and outings into the community for relaxed socialising.

However, the importance of maintaining a close relationship and communication with the incarcerated parent was emphasised as essential for the children's mood and development.

As far as stigmatisation is concerned, the third hypothesis is fully validated, with a very high number of responses reflecting the degree of stigmatisation of these children and the impact of the way others behave towards them is sometimes transformed into undesirable behaviour and even major problems for the children affected by this phenomenon.

Thus, children whose parents are in custody become collateral victims of the actions of the parents, and society, the relevant institutions and the family are not fully prepared to deal with such situations, with dramatic changes in the development, relationships and progress of the children involved.

I believe that each one of us can change this, through reflection, research, intervention, strengthening relationships and giving due attention to this issue, which Romania is facing today and the trend is upwards.

This research is an introduction to the universe of this vast field that I will certainly continue to explore. The complexity of this research can be summarised by the next stage, which I would like to nuance, namely qualitative research at the level of communities where the number of cases of this kind is very high.

Among the limitations of this research are the relatively small sample and the equal distribution of the functions of the specialists, which may influence the answers as well as the complexity of the subject which certainly requires the application of part two, as I said before, the direct and qualitative analysis of the other subjects involved, and the use of attributes which are difficult to quantify by questionnaire alone.

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Approaching Social Vulnerability from the Perspective of Social Systems Engineering: A Position Paper

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Abstract. Social vulnerability refers to the varying capacity of individuals and communities to withstand and recover from socio-economic, environmental, and systemic challenges. Addressing social vulnerability requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates social systems engineering – a field that applies systems thinking to complex social issues. This position paper explores the intersection of social systems engineering and social vulnerability, emphasizing the need for holistic, adaptive, and data-driven solutions to enhance societal resilience. Through a thematic analysis of existing frameworks, this study identifies critical dimensions of social vulnerability, including infrastructure resilience, policy interventions, and community-driven adaptation. The paper highlights the role of predictive modeling, risk assessment, and decision-support systems in mitigating social vulnerability while also addressing ethical concerns and implementation challenges. By bridging engineering principles with social policy, this paper argues for a paradigm shift in vulnerability mitigation – moving from reactive to proactive, systems-based strategies. The discussion concludes with recommendations for interdisciplinary collaboration, evidence-based policymaking, and the integration of emerging technologies in social systems engineering to enhance long-term resilience. This research underscores the need for a transformative, systems-oriented approach in addressing social vulnerabilities across diverse populations.

Keywords: social vulnerability, social systems engineering, resilience and risk assessment, systems thinking in social policy, adaptive strategies for vulnerability reduction

1. Introduction

Social vulnerability is the ability of people, communities, and systems to foresee, adapt to, withstand, and heal from negative events such as public health crises, natural catastrophes, economic downturns, or technical disruptions. Unlike physical vulnerability, which concentrates on infrastructure and environmental hazards, social vulnerability includes economic conditions, access to resources, social capital, and systematic inequalities that shape individuals' and communities' capacity to resist shocks (Bixler et al., 2021; Quiros et al., 2021). Studies in this field

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have shown how disproportionately crises affect underprivileged communities, therefore stressing the importance of thorough plans including social, economic, and infrastructure resilience (Delgado et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2021).

Emerging as essential instruments in spotting and reducing social hazards are vulnerability assessment systems. For example, Maharani et al. (2016) investigated local-level vulnerabilities near volcanic areas, therefore illustrating the interaction between socioeconomic restrictions and environmental threats. Emphasizing the part of government and policy interventions, Newton and Weichselgartner (2014) mapped coastal vulnerability hotspots using a DPSIR (Drivers, Pressures, State, Impact, Response) framework. These studies support the necessity of a comprehensive strategy including socioeconomic elements in addition to considering environmental and infrastructure issues.

Conventional wisdom on social vulnerability sometimes centers on sector-specific remedies as social welfare programs, disaster response, or economic help. These scattered attempts, meantime, fall short in addressing the linked character of social vulnerabilities. By combining systems thinking, data analytics, and risk assessment methods (Aldawood & Skinner, 2020; Pence et al., 2019), social systems engineering offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending and managing difficult societal issues. This strategy encourages proactive, adaptable solutions to minimize vulnerabilities before they become crises, going beyond mere reaction times.

Research on infrastructure resilience, for instance, emphasize the need of engineering-based approaches in evaluating disaster consequences. Using probabilistic catastrophe effect assessments to infrastructure networks, Beck and Cha (2024) showed how predictive models might improve readiness and lower systematic hazards. In a similar vein, Bompard et al. (2013) investigated power grid vulnerabilities using an expanded topological methodology, therefore highlighting the use of engineering techniques in control of cascading failures. These realizations show how much a systems-based approach might help to solve vulnerabilities outside of disciplinary lines.

Moreover, more recent studies have connected social vulnerability with transportation systems and vital infrastructure. To improve water distribution planning, hogge et al. (2025) investigated how geospatial capabilities may combine hazard and socioeconomic vulnerability data. Likewise, Feng et al. (2012) highlighted the growing complexity of social risks in digital contexts by examining cybersecurity vulnerabilities in context-aware social rating services. Engineering approaches included into social policy frameworks could help to enable more strong responses considering both structural and human-centered aspects of vulnerability.

This position paper seeks to investigate the junction of social vulnerability and social systems engineering, therefore advocating a paradigm change in the

conceptualization, assessment, and treatment of vulnerability. Particularly, the initiative aims to:

- Analyze the limitations of conventional social vulnerability frameworks and propose a systems-based alternative.
- Examine the role of predictive modeling, decision-support systems, and engineering principles in mitigating vulnerability across different social contexts.
- Identify policy recommendations that bridge engineering methodologies with social resilience strategies, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

The paper will use a thematic analysis of current literature, leveraging case stories and empirical research to show the advantages of a social systems engineering approach, so attaining these goals. Theoretical foundations, methodological issues, important results, and policy consequences will be discussed in great detail in the next sections. Viewed through this prism, the research supports a change from reactive, scattered reactions to integrated, adaptive solutions improving long-term societal resilience.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Social Systems Engineering (SSE) is an interdisciplinary approach that applies systems thinking, engineering principles, and social science methodologies to address complex societal issues. SSE aims to enhance resilience by integrating adaptive frameworks that account for interdependencies between individuals, communities, and institutional structures (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016; Delgado et al., 2023). This perspective aligns with broader efforts in disaster risk reduction and public policy, where probabilistic models and vulnerability assessments inform interventions that mitigate systemic risks (Beck & Cha, 2024; Cerchiello et al., 2018).

The application of SSE in social vulnerability analysis is evident in various domains. For example, Cai and Wei (2020) utilized fuzzy evaluation models to assess vulnerability perception in disaster-prone regions, highlighting the importance of subjective risk assessments alongside objective indicators. Similarly, Delgado et al. (2023) examined the intersection of transport network disruptions and social exposure, illustrating how infrastructure resilience must be integrated with social support mechanisms. These studies underscore the need for a holistic framework that not only addresses physical risks but also considers social, economic, and psychological factors that shape vulnerability.

Probation and correctional systems also benefit from SSE by incorporating structured interventions that support desistance. Probation, often perceived as a mechanism for monitoring offenders, can instead function as a rehabilitative system when designed with systems-based approaches (Canton, 2024; Carr, 2020). A shift

toward relational desistance, which emphasizes mentorship and structured support networks, mirrors the principles of SSE in its focus on interconnected elements shaping individual outcomes (Fox & Marsh, 2016; Healy, 2020).

Social vulnerability is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring insights from criminology, disaster risk management, urban planning, and social policy. Theories of desistance in criminology, for instance, offer valuable parallels to social vulnerability by examining how individuals transition out of high-risk situations through support networks and identity transformation (Bottoms & Shapland, 2016; Elliott & Healy, 2013). This aligns with broader resilience theories in disaster research, where adaptation and recovery depend on institutional support, community cohesion, and access to critical resources (Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014; Maharani et al., 2016).

The gendered dimensions of social vulnerability further illustrate the intersection of criminology and social systems. Crewe et al. (2017) explored how gender shapes the experience of incarceration, noting that women face distinct social and economic barriers that hinder reintegration. Similarly, Cobbina et al. (2014) examined how race and neighborhood environments influence coping strategies among female parolees, demonstrating how systemic inequities contribute to vulnerability. These perspectives reinforce the need for SSE approaches that account for socio-cultural diversity and structural inequalities.

Moreover, desistance research provides additional insights into how social policies can be structured to reduce vulnerability. Graham (2018) and Hughes (2016) emphasized the role of rehabilitation work in sustaining behavioral change, highlighting the importance of long-term support networks. Similarly, Herzog-Evans (2011) investigated probation officers' role in facilitating desistance in France, revealing how institutional frameworks influence social reintegration. These studies suggest that effective vulnerability reduction strategies must incorporate relational support, structured interventions, and policy frameworks that promote long-term resilience.

Systems thinking offers a conceptual foundation for understanding and addressing social vulnerability by emphasizing interconnectivity, feedback loops, and adaptive capacity. Unlike reductionist approaches that isolate risk factors, systems thinking recognizes that social vulnerability emerges from dynamic interactions between individuals, communities, and institutions (Hart & Healy, 2018; Healy, 2020). This framework is particularly relevant in addressing complex challenges, such as disaster resilience, criminal desistance, and social reintegration.

For instance, Pence et al. (2019) applied Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to integrate social vulnerability assessments with emergency preparedness planning, demonstrating how spatial analytics can enhance systemic resilience. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2021) explored spatial patterns of social exclusion among rural-to-urban migrants in China, highlighting how geographic and socio-economic

factors intersect to shape vulnerability. These findings reinforce the value of SSE in designing interventions that are spatially and socially informed.

Probation and social reintegration efforts also benefit from systems-based approaches. Burke (2015) and Farrall et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of structural interventions in desistance, noting that long-term behavioral change depends on access to education, employment, and social capital. Vaughan (2007) further explored the internal narratives of desistance, illustrating how self-identity and perceived social roles influence rehabilitation trajectories. When applied to broader social vulnerability contexts, these insights suggest that resilience-building efforts should integrate personal agency with structural support mechanisms.

Ultimately, systems thinking provides a unifying framework that bridges criminology, social policy, and engineering methodologies. By recognizing the interconnected nature of social risks and leveraging interdisciplinary insights, SSE can offer innovative solutions for reducing vulnerability and fostering long-term resilience. The following sections will expand on these theoretical foundations, presenting empirical analyses and policy recommendations that support the integration of SSE into social vulnerability frameworks.

3. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a position paper format to critically analyze the intersection of social vulnerability and social systems engineering (SSE), synthesizing theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and policy considerations. Unlike empirical studies that rely on primary data collection, position papers serve a distinct role in scholarly discourse by consolidating existing knowledge and offering a structured argument for advancing a particular framework or approach (Canton, 2024; Carr, 2020). Given the complexity of social vulnerability, which spans multiple disciplines – including criminology, disaster risk management, and urban planning – a position paper allows for a holistic examination of key themes while integrating diverse methodologies (Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014; Maharani et al., 2016).

This methodological approach is particularly relevant in the context of social systems engineering, where multidisciplinary insights must be synthesized to develop practical solutions (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016). By drawing on research in resilience theory, criminology, and infrastructure management, this paper outlines a conceptual framework that bridges social and technical systems, emphasizing the interconnectedness of vulnerabilities across various domains (Beck & Cha, 2024; Delgado et al., 2023). The position paper format thus enables a critical evaluation of existing models while proposing a systems-based approach to mitigating social vulnerability.

The study identifies key thematic areas in social vulnerability research, focusing on structural determinants, adaptive capacity, and intervention strategies. These

thematic areas are essential for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of vulnerability and guiding the integration of SSE principles into social policy and practice.

Structural determinants, including socio-economic disparities, institutional policies, and geographic risk factors, shape individuals' exposure to vulnerability (Cai & Wei, 2020; Zhao et al., 2021). Research in criminology highlights how systemic barriers – such as racial disparities in sentencing and employment restrictions for ex-offenders – exacerbate vulnerability and hinder reintegration efforts (Cobbina et al., 2014; Crewe et al., 2017). Similarly, disaster risk literature underscores the role of infrastructure quality and resource accessibility in determining community resilience (Cerchiello et al., 2018; Pence et al., 2019). By analyzing these structural determinants, this paper situates social vulnerability within broader systemic inequities, advocating for targeted policy interventions.

Adaptive capacity refers to individuals' and communities' ability to respond to and recover from social and environmental stressors (Farrall et al., 2014; Fox & Marsh, 2016). In the context of probation and desistance, adaptive capacity is shaped by access to rehabilitation services, social support networks, and employment opportunities (Graham, 2018; Herzog-Evans, 2011). Similarly, resilience studies in disaster risk reduction emphasize the importance of community-based interventions that enhance local capacities for risk mitigation (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016; Maharani et al., 2016). By integrating insights from these fields, this paper explores how social systems engineering can enhance adaptive capacity through targeted interventions and resource optimization.

Effective intervention strategies for reducing social vulnerability require coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, including social work, criminal justice, and urban planning (Canton, 2024; Carr, 2020). In probation contexts, relational desistance models highlight the significance of mentorship and peer support in fostering behavioral change (Hart & Healy, 2018; Healy, 2020). Similarly, infrastructure planning frameworks advocate for participatory approaches that incorporate local knowledge in resilience-building efforts (Delgado et al., 2023; Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014). This paper synthesizes these intervention strategies, advocating for a systems-based approach that integrates rehabilitation efforts with broader social policies.

To bridge the gap between social vulnerability research and social systems engineering, this study employs a conceptual integration approach. This involves mapping existing theoretical frameworks onto SSE principles, identifying synergies, and proposing a unified model for vulnerability reduction.

The paper systematically maps core concepts from social vulnerability research – such as desistance theory, disaster resilience, and social exclusion – onto SSE methodologies. This mapping process enables the identification of overlapping

principles, such as feedback loops in rehabilitation and adaptive mechanisms in resilience planning (Farrall et al., 2014; Graham, 2018).

Drawing on systems thinking, the study develops a framework that categorizes social vulnerability interventions based on their structural, relational, and systemic dimensions. This framework aligns with existing SSE models that emphasize inter-connectivity, scalability, and iterative learning (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016; Beck & Cha, 2024).

The final analytical step involves translating theoretical insights into actionable policy recommendations. This includes proposing structural reforms in probation services, designing resilience-based interventions in high-risk communities, and advocating for interdisciplinary collaboration in social policy (Cai & Wei, 2020; Healy, 2020). By integrating SSE principles with social vulnerability research, this paper advances a holistic approach to understanding and addressing systemic risks. The following sections will further elaborate on these theoretical intersections, presenting empirical evidence and policy implications for enhancing resilience in vulnerable populations.

4. Findings and Analysis

The integration of social systems engineering into social vulnerability frameworks presents multiple dimensions of analysis. This section examines four key themes: (1) the role of infrastructure and technological resilience, (2) policy frameworks and governance strategies, (3) community-driven adaptation and social capital, and (4) ethical concerns and challenges in implementation.

Theme 1: The Role of Infrastructure and Technological Resilience

Infrastructure serves as a critical determinant of social vulnerability, particularly in communities exposed to environmental hazards, economic instability, and systemic social inequalities. The technological resilience of infrastructure – its ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruptions – has become increasingly important in contemporary discussions of social vulnerability (Paneru et al., 2024). The resilience of transportation networks, housing, water and sanitation systems, energy grids, and digital infrastructures directly impacts the capacity of individuals and communities to cope with and recover from crises (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016; Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014). Research suggests that infrastructure failures often exacerbate social vulnerability, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations who already face economic, social, and technological disadvantages (Steinmetz, 2021).

One of the key dimensions of infrastructure resilience is its intersection with socioeconomic disparities. Communities with limited access to adequate housing, reliable transportation, and energy security are particularly susceptible to cascading

risks that compound their vulnerability (Cerchiello et al., 2018). Housing quality, for example, influences exposure to environmental hazards such as flooding, extreme heat, and seismic events, while also shaping long-term economic mobility (Pence et al., 2019). Similarly, transportation infrastructure affects access to employment, healthcare, and social services, with disruptions in public transit disproportionately affecting low-income populations (Delgado et al., 2023).

Energy security is another critical factor. Energy disruptions not only affect daily living conditions but also exacerbate health risks for vulnerable populations, including the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and those dependent on electronic medical devices (Bompard, Pons, & Wu, 2013). The resilience of energy grids in response to extreme weather events has become a global concern, particularly as climate change increases the frequency of extreme heatwaves, storms, and cold spells (Paneru et al., 2024). The increasing reliance on digital and smart infrastructure raises further questions about cybersecurity and the risk of systemic failures, where cyber-attacks targeting energy grids, transportation networks, or financial systems could have profound social consequences (Aldawood & Skinner, 2020).

The growing digital divide presents a significant challenge to infrastructure resilience, disproportionately impacting economically disadvantaged groups, rural communities, and older populations (Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014). As digital platforms become central to education, healthcare, and employment, those lacking internet access or digital literacy face heightened exclusion (Steinmetz, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these disparities, with low-income households struggling with inadequate broadband, digital devices, and IT support (Petersilia, 2003; Zhao et al., 2021).

Beyond access, digital vulnerability includes cybersecurity risks, data privacy concerns, and the exploitation of personal information. Social engineering threats such as phishing scams and identity theft disproportionately target vulnerable populations, necessitating investments in broadband infrastructure, digital literacy programs, and cybersecurity protections (Feng, Liu, & Dai, 2012; Steinmetz, 2021).

Infrastructure resilience also plays a crucial role in criminal justice reform and desistance. Formerly incarcerated individuals face barriers to reintegration, including unstable housing, limited transportation, and restricted job access (Petersilia, 2003; McNeill, 2012). Transitional housing, public assistance, and employment programs reduce recidivism and support long-term desistance (King, 2014; Nixon, 2020). Digital monitoring and risk assessment tools in probation must also address equity and surveillance ethics (Tidmarsh, 2024). Integrating social systems engineering principles into reentry programs can bridge technological and social barriers, facilitating successful reintegration (Weaver & McNeill, 2015; Laub & Sampson, 2003).

From a social systems engineering perspective, enhancing urban resilience requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates technological innovation with

social equity considerations (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016). A systemic approach to infrastructure planning should incorporate community-based decision-making, public-private partnerships, and resilience assessments that prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations (Quiros et al., 2021). Governments and urban planners must rethink infrastructure investments to ensure that they promote accessibility, inclusivity, and long-term resilience (Delgado et al., 2023).

Investments in smart infrastructure, resilient energy grids, and inclusive digital services must be accompanied by policies that ensure equitable access and prevent new forms of exclusion (Bompard, Pons, & Wu, 2013). Additionally, climate adaptation strategies should be integrated into infrastructure planning, with a focus on protecting low-income and marginalized communities from environmental hazards (Beck & Cha, 2024).

The concept of "resilient cities" aligns with the principles of social systems engineering, emphasizing the need for cross-sectoral coordination, adaptive governance, and participatory decision-making (Bixler et al., 2021). This perspective advocates for the integration of physical, digital, and social infrastructures to create inclusive and sustainable urban environments (Cerchiello et al., 2018).

Infrastructure and technological resilience are fundamental to reducing social vulnerability and fostering long-term community stability. From physical infrastructure such as housing and transportation to digital networks and cybersecurity, the interconnectivity of these systems must be accounted for in social vulnerability reduction efforts (Paneru et al., 2024). To achieve meaningful impact, governments, policymakers, and social systems engineers must adopt an integrative approach that prioritizes accessibility, equity, and sustainability. Investments in smart cities, energy resilience, and digital inclusion must be coupled with policies that address socioeconomic disparities, ensuring that vulnerable populations are not left behind in the transition toward resilient infrastructure (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016).

Furthermore, criminal justice systems, social welfare programs, and emergency response frameworks must incorporate infrastructure planning into their broader social vulnerability reduction strategies (McNeill, 2012; Nixon, 2020). The ability to build resilient, inclusive, and adaptive social systems will determine how effectively societies can navigate emerging risks and create pathways for long-term stability and prosperity (Beck & Cha, 2024).

Theme 2: Policy Frameworks and Governance Strategies

Governance and policy frameworks shape social vulnerability by influencing resource allocation, risk management, and institutional responses (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Policies on criminal justice, disaster management, and urban planning must adopt multi-sectoral approaches to address intersecting vulnerabilities rather than isolated risks (Tidmarsh, 2024). A key limitation in current frameworks is service

fragmentation across sectors, creating inefficiencies in addressing overlapping vulnerabilities, particularly for marginalized groups (Cobbina et al., 2014). Ex-offenders, for instance, face housing insecurity, employment discrimination, and social stigma, yet reintegration policies often fail to address these interconnected challenges (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Nixon, 2020). To resolve this, governance strategies should align criminal justice policies with social welfare and economic frameworks, integrating housing, workforce training, and mental health services to support sustainable desistance (King, 2014; McNeill, 2012).

Disaster risk management must also incorporate social vulnerability assessments to ensure infrastructure investments prioritize at-risk communities (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016; Beck & Cha, 2024). Collaborative governance – engaging public–private partnerships, local agencies, and community stakeholders – ensures policies reflect lived realities and improve resilience (Tidmarsh, 2024; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Cities that integrate community-based risk assessments into climate adaptation planning achieve greater resilience and social cohesion (Quiros et al., 2021).

Advancements in governance include evidence-based policymaking in probation, desistance research, and disaster preparedness (Maruna, 2001). Social systems engineering enhances policy effectiveness by incorporating predictive analytics, network analysis, and system simulations (Kay, 2016).

For instance, risk assessment tools in probation systems have evolved to incorporate algorithmic models that predict recidivism probabilities, allowing for more individualized intervention strategies (Barylski & Wormith, 2022). Data-driven governance in criminal justice can improve resource allocation, ensuring that probation officers focus their efforts on high-risk cases while offering tailored support to individuals with a higher likelihood of successful reintegration (King, 2014).

Similarly, disaster risk reduction policies benefit from machine learning models that analyze historical disaster patterns, demographic data, and infrastructure vulnerabilities (Paneru et al., 2024). These predictive capabilities enable policymakers to design adaptive governance models that respond dynamically to emerging social vulnerabilities (Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014). The integration of GIS-based risk mapping in emergency preparedness strategies, for example, has proven instrumental in identifying high-risk communities and prioritizing evacuation planning (Pence et al., 2019).

Despite advancements in data-driven policy approaches, structural barriers remain a significant challenge in reducing social vulnerability. Exclusionary policies – such as criminal record discrimination, restrictive housing policies, and employer biases – perpetuate cycles of marginalization (Maruna, 2001; Petersilia, 2003). Research highlights the need for policy reforms that promote record expungement, anti-discrimination protections, and employer incentives for hiring justice-involved individuals (McNeill, 2012).

Disaster management and climate adaptation policies often neglect long-term displacement and economic recovery, disproportionately affecting low-income communities (Cerchiello et al., 2018). Many urban policies prioritize economic growth over equitable resilience planning, exacerbating vulnerabilities (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016). A systems-based approach would integrate affordable housing, climate adaptation, and infrastructure investments tailored to marginalized groups (Beck & Cha, 2024).

Beyond structural challenges, ethical concerns in governance must ensure justice, inclusivity, and sustainability (Steinmetz, 2021). Surveillance-based probation, predictive policing, and AI-driven risk assessments risk reinforcing racial bias, algorithmic discrimination, and privacy violations (Tidmarsh, 2024). Transparent policy design is essential to maintaining public trust and preventing harm to vulnerable populations (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). For instance, electronic monitoring in probation raises concerns about disproportionate use, psychological toll, and privacy (Rutter, 2021). Governance frameworks must balance public safety with ethical oversight, preventing systemic inequities (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011).

To enhance resilience, governance must embrace flexible, inclusive, and participatory models (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016). Strengthening cross-sector collaboration bridges policy gaps and reduces inefficiencies (Tidmarsh, 2024). Embedding equity into policy ensures access to resources for marginalized communities (Beck & Cha, 2024). Adaptive governance enables real-time adjustments and localized implementation (Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014). Ethical AI integration and digital inclusion safeguards must be prioritized (Steinmetz, 2021). Community-led initiatives further strengthen resilience by incorporating lived experiences into policy (Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

A shift from reactive to integrated governance enhances resilience, aligning policies with ethical, equitable, and sustainable principles (Paneru et al., 2024). Future governance must embrace interdisciplinary, data-driven approaches that prioritize long-term social inclusion.

Theme 3: Community-Driven Adaptation and Social Capital

Social resilience is not solely dependent on governance structures and infrastructure investments; it is equally shaped by community-driven adaptation and the strength of social capital. Communities that foster reciprocity, trust, and collective problem-solving have a greater capacity to mitigate risks and respond effectively to socio-economic and environmental disruptions (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Social capital operates through formal and informal networks, facilitating resource-sharing, knowledge exchange, and mutual support, which are crucial in both crisis situations and long-term recovery. Research on probation and relational desistance underscores the effectiveness of community-based interventions, particularly peer mentorship

and localized support systems, in improving rehabilitation outcomes for individuals transitioning away from criminal behavior (Nixon, 2020). These findings align with broader resilience studies that demonstrate how community engagement in disaster preparedness and response can significantly enhance adaptive capacity (Bixler et al., 2021).

The role of digital communities has expanded in recent years, providing new pathways for social capital formation. Online platforms have reshaped how individuals access social support, mobilize resources, and engage in collective action. However, digital spaces present both opportunities and risks for vulnerable populations. While online networks can serve as a bridge to employment opportunities, mental health resources, and emergency coordination, they also pose challenges related to misinformation, cyber exploitation, and digital exclusion (Rutter, 2021). For instance, social engineering tactics exploit the vulnerabilities of marginalized individuals, exacerbating existing inequalities (Steinmetz, 2021). Addressing these issues requires a dual approach that integrates in-person and digital forms of social capital, ensuring that technological interventions are inclusive, secure, and accessible to those most at risk. Moreover, effective community-driven adaptation strategies must actively involve marginalized voices in decision-making processes. Traditional top-down governance models frequently overlook the lived experiences of vulnerable populations, leading to policies that are either ineffective or exclusionary (Irving & Young, 2004). The integration of social systems engineering principles can facilitate participatory decision-making by employing tools such as community-driven simulations, scenario planning, and stakeholder mapping. These methodologies allow policymakers and practitioners to co-develop interventions that are contextually relevant and designed with direct input from affected communities. Additionally, leveraging indigenous knowledge and local expertise can enhance resilience-building strategies, ensuring that adaptation measures align with cultural practices and social realities (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016).

Another dimension of community resilience is its intersection with economic stability. Social capital plays a crucial role in facilitating economic reintegration for marginalized groups, including formerly incarcerated individuals, displaced populations, and those affected by systemic poverty. Access to social networks has been shown to improve employment prospects, financial literacy, and housing stability, all of which are key determinants of long-term resilience (Petersilia, 2003). Programs that link social capital with workforce development, such as community-led cooperatives and skill-sharing initiatives, have demonstrated success in reducing dependency on state support and fostering economic self-sufficiency (Laub & Sampson, 2003). From a policy perspective, investments in social infrastructure – such as public gathering spaces, local mentorship programs, and accessible digital literacy training – can strengthen community ties and promote sustainable adaptation strategies.

Ultimately, social capital and community-driven adaptation are indispensable components of resilience. Whether in the context of probation, disaster response, or socio-economic recovery, grassroots networks play a pivotal role in shaping long-term outcomes. To enhance social resilience, policymakers must prioritize inclusive, community-led approaches that integrate digital and traditional forms of support. By aligning governance frameworks with participatory decision-making and social systems engineering principles, institutions can develop adaptive strategies that empower communities, reduce social vulnerability, and build more equitable societies.

Theme 4: *Ethical Concerns and Challenges in Implementation*

While the integration of social systems engineering into social vulnerability frameworks presents promising opportunities for data-driven decision-making and systemic optimization, it simultaneously raises profound ethical concerns. One of the most pressing challenges is ensuring equity in technological and policy interventions. Research on criminal justice reform demonstrates that well-intended policies – such as risk-based probation supervision – can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities if not carefully designed and implemented (Kay, 2016). Similarly, predictive analytics in social policy must be rigorously examined to prevent algorithmic bias, as flawed data inputs or unexamined assumptions can disproportionately impact marginalized communities, deepening structural inequalities rather than alleviating them (Tidmarsh, 2024). This highlights the need for continuous ethical oversight and inclusive policymaking to ensure that technological solutions align with social justice principles.

A particularly contentious ethical issue is the tension between surveillance and autonomy. Technological solutions such as biometric monitoring in probation programs, predictive policing, or digital tracking for disaster response offer potential benefits for public safety and risk management. However, these same tools pose significant risks related to privacy, consent, and data security (Steinmetz, 2021). The widespread use of surveillance technologies raises concerns about government overreach, digital profiling, and the disproportionate monitoring of already vulnerable populations, such as low-income communities, refugees, and individuals with criminal records (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Ethical governance in this area requires a balance between risk mitigation and individual rights, ensuring that technological interventions empower rather than police at-risk groups. Transparency, informed consent, and robust data protection policies must be integrated into all digital governance models to prevent the erosion of civil liberties.

Beyond privacy concerns, another major challenge is the scalability of social systems engineering interventions across diverse socio-political and economic contexts. While technological solutions and policy frameworks may be effective in

one setting, their applicability in different cultural and governance environments is not guaranteed. Social vulnerability is deeply embedded in local histories, institutional structures, and community norms, meaning that one-size-fits-all interventions can fail to address underlying inequalities or even exacerbate them (Vaughan, 2007). Ethical frameworks must therefore prioritize contextual adaptation, ensuring that social engineering solutions are tailored to specific populations rather than imposed through rigid, top-down methodologies. Participatory governance models, where communities play an active role in shaping interventions, are crucial for ethical and effective policy implementation (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016).

Another ethical dilemma arises in the privatization of social vulnerability solutions. Many technological interventions are developed through public-private partnerships, introducing corporate interests into the policymaking space. While collaboration with the private sector can bring innovation and efficiency, it also creates the risk of profit-driven rather than needs-based solutions. For instance, proprietary algorithms used in social welfare systems may lack transparency, making it difficult for affected individuals to challenge unfair decisions or biases embedded within these systems (Steinmetz, 2021). Ethical policymaking must ensure that data governance frameworks prioritize public interest over commercial gains, enforcing strict accountability mechanisms and regulatory oversight.

Additionally, the ethical considerations of resilience-building extend to environmental justice. Infrastructure investments aimed at improving resilience must not only consider technological robustness but also social equity. For example, disaster preparedness programs often prioritize economically prosperous areas, leaving marginalized communities more exposed to risks such as climate change-induced displacement, food insecurity, and resource scarcity (Paneru et al., 2024). Ethical policy design must therefore integrate principles of environmental justice, ensuring that all communities – especially those historically disadvantaged – benefit equitably from resilience investments.

5. Discussion

The integration of social systems engineering into social vulnerability frameworks provides a critical opportunity to enhance policymaking, improve resilience strategies, and bridge existing gaps in vulnerability research. By employing a systems-based approach, this study highlights the need for multi-sectoral collaboration, data-driven policy innovation, and ethically responsible governance mechanisms. This section discusses the broader implications of these findings, emphasizing how social systems engineering can inform policymaking, address gaps in existing frameworks, and leverage emerging technologies for more effective interventions.

The findings underscore the necessity of reconfiguring policymaking processes to align with social systems engineering principles. Traditional approaches to social

vulnerability often rely on sector-specific interventions that fail to address the interconnectedness of risks across infrastructure, governance, and community resilience (Brunner & Grêt-Regamey, 2016). A social systems engineering perspective advocates for a holistic, cross-sectoral approach, where policies are designed to respond to systemic challenges rather than isolated vulnerabilities (Beck & Cha, 2024).

For instance, in disaster risk management, policymakers often prioritize structural resilience – such as fortifying infrastructure – without considering social determinants like mobility, economic resources, and community cohesion (Lambrou et al., 2023). However, studies indicate that social vulnerability is often heightened not by the initial disaster but by the long-term consequences of poor policy responses, such as inequitable recovery aid distribution and exclusionary rebuilding efforts (Bixler et al., 2021). A systems-based approach ensures that resilience planning includes socioeconomic factors alongside physical infrastructure investments, leading to more inclusive and effective policies.

Furthermore, the application of social systems engineering in probation reform reveals a similar need for structural adaptation. The desistance literature highlights that probation policies tend to focus on risk management rather than rehabilitation, often reinforcing punitive structures rather than fostering reintegration (Burke, 2015). Integrated policymaking that aligns criminal justice reform with broader social welfare initiatives – such as employment support, housing access, and mental health care – has been shown to improve desistance outcomes and reduce recidivism (McNeill, 2012). Therefore, policymakers must adopt a dynamic and adaptive governance model that aligns with evolving social challenges and prioritizes holistic rehabilitation (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011).

One of the most persistent gaps in existing social vulnerability research is the failure to integrate diverse social, technological, and environmental dimensions within a single cohesive framework. Many current models assess vulnerability in terms of either physical exposure (e.g., proximity to hazards) or socio-economic conditions (e.g., income inequality), but few integrate these variables into a comprehensive analysis (Cai et al., 2023). The absence of integrated methodologies limits the ability of policymakers to develop targeted interventions that address vulnerability at multiple levels.

For example, studies on environmental risk management emphasize the need for improved social vulnerability mapping to enhance early warning systems (Newton & Weichselgartner, 2014). Traditional hazard models often fail to account for the social conditions that exacerbate disaster impact, such as limited access to emergency resources, transportation barriers, and communication gaps in marginalized communities (Hogge et al., 2025). Social systems engineering can bridge these gaps by integrating geospatial analytics, network analysis, and behavioral modeling to create more nuanced vulnerability assessments (Delgado et al., 2023).

Similarly, in the domain of criminal justice and probation, existing desistance models do not always fully account for systemic barriers to reintegration. Many frameworks focus on individual-level behavioral changes without considering structural inequalities – such as employment discrimination or housing instability – that make long-term desistance difficult (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Social systems engineering can enhance desistance research by incorporating predictive modeling and systemic simulations that identify how structural barriers interact with personal agency (Carr, 2020). Such insights can guide policymakers in developing evidence-based interventions that support sustained behavioral change (Maruna, 2001).

Emerging technologies offer powerful tools for refining social vulnerability analysis and strengthening resilience strategies. Advances in artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and network modeling can enhance decision-making processes by providing real-time insights into evolving social risks (Aldawood & Skinner, 2020). However, the ethical and practical integration of these technologies requires careful consideration to prevent unintended consequences, such as reinforcing systemic inequalities or infringing on privacy rights (Steinmetz, 2021).

One of the key areas where technology can improve resilience is in infrastructure planning. Smart cities and digital twins – virtual models that simulate real-world conditions – are being increasingly used to optimize urban resilience strategies (Pence et al., 2019). These tools can predict how different socio-environmental factors interact, allowing policymakers to develop adaptive strategies that mitigate social vulnerability in high-risk areas (Zhao et al., 2021). However, ensuring that such models account for social equity is crucial; if digital resilience planning prioritizes economically affluent areas while neglecting marginalized communities, existing disparities may be exacerbated rather than alleviated (Quiros et al., 2021).

In the field of probation and criminal justice, digital monitoring technologies have been proposed as alternatives to incarceration, offering a means for individuals to reintegrate into society while remaining under supervision (Tidmarsh, 2024). While these innovations can reduce the burden on prison systems, they also raise ethical concerns about surveillance, data security, and potential biases in algorithmic decision-making (Vaughan, 2007). A social systems engineering approach can help navigate these challenges by ensuring that digital monitoring frameworks are designed with transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in mind (Best et al., 2017).

Moreover, the use of geospatial analytics in disaster preparedness has been shown to significantly improve emergency response capabilities (Cerchiello et al., 2018). Studies demonstrate that integrating social vulnerability data with real-time hazard assessments allows authorities to deploy targeted interventions that prioritize at-risk populations (Canton, 2024). However, widespread adoption of such technologies requires strong governance mechanisms to ensure data protection and prevent discriminatory practices in resource allocation (Feng et al., 2012).

The discussion highlights the transformative potential of social systems engineering in addressing social vulnerability, but it also underscores the need for ethical, interdisciplinary, and equity-focused implementation strategies. Effective policymaking must move beyond sector-specific interventions and embrace systemic, cross-sectoral approaches that integrate governance, infrastructure resilience, and community-driven solutions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines the intersection of social systems engineering and social vulnerability, identifying the limitations of existing models and advocating for a systems-based approach. By integrating insights from engineering, criminology, disaster management, and governance, the research underscores the necessity of cross-sector collaboration in addressing complex social challenges. The findings reveal that social vulnerability is shaped not only by individual risk factors but also by the dynamic interaction between infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and community resilience mechanisms. Thematic analysis highlights the importance of adaptive governance, ethical technology integration, and community-driven strategies in enhancing resilience.

A key takeaway from this study is the need to transition from fragmented, reactive responses to comprehensive, systems-based solutions. Conventional models often fail to recognize the interconnected nature of social risks, leading to ineffective policies that do not address root causes. Social systems engineering, incorporating predictive modeling, network analysis, and scenario planning, provides a framework for designing more effective interventions. These approaches enable decision-makers to anticipate vulnerabilities, optimize resource allocation, and implement evidence-based policies that are both sustainable and equitable.

The study also emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in resilience-building. Future research should focus on integrating qualitative social analysis with data-driven methodologies to ensure interventions are both technologically robust and socially inclusive. Ethical considerations must be prioritized, particularly in the use of digital monitoring tools, geospatial analytics, and artificial intelligence, to prevent unintended consequences such as algorithmic bias or excessive surveillance. Transparency and accountability are critical in maintaining public trust in these technologies.

Another crucial direction for future research is enhancing participatory governance in resilience planning. Community-driven adaptation strategies have proven effective in urban planning, desistance programs, and disaster preparedness, yet marginalized groups often lack representation in decision-making. Future studies should explore methods for embedding co-creation and stakeholder engagement into policy development to ensure that interventions align with the lived experiences of vulnerable populations.

Based on the study's findings, several policy and practical recommendations emerge. Policymakers should shift from siloed vulnerability frameworks to integrated social systems models that account for interdependencies across infrastructure, governance, and social structures. Investments in predictive modeling and decision-support systems using real-time data are necessary to assess emerging social risks while incorporating ethical safeguards to prevent data misuse and inequities. Strengthening public-private partnerships is also vital, particularly in infrastructure resilience, digital inclusion, and equitable access to services. Additionally, technological integration must adhere to strict ethical guidelines to prevent bias and privacy violations, ensuring that AI-driven policymaking and surveillance technologies empower rather than marginalize vulnerable communities. Lastly, fostering social capital and resilience from within communities requires investment in grassroots initiatives, peer mentoring programs, and local adaptation strategies through targeted funding mechanisms.

This study demonstrates that a social systems engineering approach provides a valuable framework for addressing social vulnerability. By combining technological advancements with social resilience strategies, policymakers and practitioners can develop interventions that are both ethically and practically sound. However, the success of these efforts depends on a commitment to equity, transparency, and participatory governance. As social vulnerabilities continue to evolve – driven by climate change, economic inequality, and technological disruptions – resilience-building must remain an ongoing process of adaptation and innovation. Future research should further refine and expand the application of engineering principles to social challenges, ensuring that resilience strategies remain dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to emerging risks.

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The Impact of Volunteering on the Personal Development of Youth

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Abstract. Volunteering plays a crucial role in shaping the personal development of young individuals. This study explores the effects of volunteering on high school seniors from "Mihai Viteazul" College in Ineu. Utilizing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Personal Growth Initiative Scale, and Social Skills Inventory, the research highlights significant improvements in self-esteem, personal growth, and social skills among participants. The findings underscore the importance of volunteer activities in fostering personal and social development in youth, advocating for their inclusion in educational curricula.

Keywords: *Volunteering, Personal Development, Youth, Self-Esteem, Personal Growth, Social Skills, High School Students, "Mihai Viteazul" College, Psychological Scales, Education*

Volunteering plays a crucial role in shaping the personal development of young individuals. This article examines the impact of volunteering on high school seniors from "Mihai Viteazul" College in Ineu, employing various psychological scales to measure its effects on personal growth, self-esteem, and social skills.

1. Literature Review

Research consistently highlights the benefits of volunteering on personal development. According to Wilson (2000), engaging in volunteer activities fosters a sense of community and enhances social skills. Similarly, Musick and Wilson (2008) argue that volunteering contributes to the development of self-esteem and life satisfaction. Furthermore, Clary and Snyder (1999) note that volunteering can lead to personal growth and a stronger sense of purpose.

2. Sociological Perspective

From a sociological standpoint, volunteering serves as a key mechanism for social integration and community building. The act of volunteering facilitates the creation of social capital, defined by Putnam (2000) as the networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared

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objectives. In the context of "Mihai Viteazul" College, volunteering provided students with opportunities to engage in meaningful social interactions, thereby enhancing their social networks and community ties. Moreover, volunteering activities reduce social divides by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds to work towards common goals. This aligns with Durkheim's (1893) concept of social solidarity, which posits that the cohesion of society is maintained through shared values and collective activities. The study at "Mihai Viteazul" College demonstrated that students developed a stronger sense of belonging and community identity through their volunteer work.

The sociological impact of volunteering also extends to role acquisition and identity formation. As youth engage in volunteer roles, they adopt new responsibilities and skills, contributing to their socialization process. According to Mead's (1934) theory of the self, these experiences allow individuals to perceive themselves from the perspective of others, fostering a greater understanding of societal roles and norms.

3. Methodology

This study applied several standardized scales to evaluate the personal development of students:

1. *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)*: Measures self-esteem levels (Rosenberg, 1965).
2. *Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS)*: Assesses intentional personal growth (Robitschek, 1998).
3. *Social Skills Inventory (SSI)*: Evaluates social competencies (Riggio, 1986).

The participants included 60 twelfth-grade students from "Mihai Viteazul" College who engaged in various volunteer activities over six months. The scales were administered before and after the volunteer period.

4. Results

The findings indicate a significant improvement in several aspects of personal development:

- **Self-Esteem**: The mean score on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) increased from 25.4 (pre-volunteering) to 29.1 (post-volunteering), suggesting a notable enhancement in self-esteem. This improvement highlights the positive impact of volunteer activities on the students' perception of their own worth and capabilities.
- **Personal Growth**: The Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS) scores showed a rise from 32.7 to 38.5, reflecting an increase in personal growth initiatives.

This indicates that the students became more proactive in seeking opportunities for self-improvement and development during the volunteering period.

- **Social Skills:** The Social Skills Inventory (SSI) results demonstrated an improvement, with mean scores rising from 75.3 to 81.6, indicating better social interactions and competencies. This suggests that participating in volunteer activities helped the students enhance their ability to communicate effectively, empathize with others, and navigate social situations more adeptly.

Overall, the six-month volunteer program facilitated significant positive changes in the students' self-esteem, personal growth, and social skills, demonstrating the valuable role of volunteering in fostering personal development among high school students.

5. Discussion

The study reinforces previous research by demonstrating that volunteering significantly impacts the personal development of youth. The improvement in self-esteem, personal growth, and social skills among students highlights the multifaceted benefits of volunteer activities. These results suggest that schools should encourage student participation in volunteer work as part of their educational curriculum to foster holistic development.

Development of Social Skills

Volunteering significantly enhances social skills by providing youth with numerous opportunities to interact with others in diverse settings. Through volunteer activities, students learn to communicate effectively, collaborate with peers, and empathize with individuals from various backgrounds. These experiences foster critical social competencies that are essential for personal and professional success.

Benefits of Social Skill Development Through Volunteering

Volunteering serves as a practical platform for students to develop key social skills. By engaging in community service, students gain firsthand experience in various social situations, which helps them to build confidence and improve their interpersonal abilities. Key social skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, and conflict resolution are nurtured through these experiences. Moreover, students learn to appreciate the value of diversity and inclusion, as they interact with people from different cultures and life circumstances. Active participation in volunteer work also enhances students' abilities to listen actively, express their thoughts clearly, and work collaboratively towards common goals. These skills are not only vital for their personal growth but also indispensable in their future professional endeavors. The structured and supportive environment of volunteer programs provides a safe space for students to practice and refine these competencies.

Impact of Volunteering on Social Skills at "Mihai Viteazul" College

At "Mihai Viteazul" College, students who participated in volunteer programs reported significant improvements in their social skills. Through their involvement in various community projects, these students experienced growth in areas such as conflict resolution, teamwork, and public speaking. The hands-on nature of these activities required them to engage with diverse groups, navigate complex social dynamics, and collaborate to achieve shared objectives. One of the most notable benefits observed was the enhancement of students' abilities in active listening, assertiveness, and adaptability. For instance, while participating in volunteer activities, students had to listen attentively to understand the needs of the community and respond appropriately. This active engagement helped them to develop a more nuanced understanding of social cues and improve their overall communication skills.

Case Study: Volunteering at SMURD in Ineu

One notable example of the impact of volunteering on social skill development is the case of MD, a twelfth-grade student at "Mihai Viteazul" College who volunteered with SMURD (Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication) in Ineu. MD's experience with SMURD provided him with a unique platform to enhance his social skills and personal growth.

Through his volunteer work, MD was exposed to high-pressure situations where effective communication and quick decision-making were crucial. He learned to interact empathetically with patients and their families, developing a deeper understanding of emotional intelligence and compassion. Additionally, collaborating with medical professionals and other volunteers helped MD refine his teamwork and leadership abilities.

MD's involvement with SMURD also allowed him to practice critical social skills such as active listening, as he often needed to understand the needs and concerns of patients in distress. His experience highlighted the importance of clear and concise communication, especially in emergency situations where accurate information could significantly impact outcomes. Overall, MD's volunteer experience at SMURD exemplifies how volunteering can serve as a powerful tool for social skill development. His growth in areas such as empathy, communication, and teamwork underscores the broader benefits of volunteer work for personal development and societal contribution.

6. Conclusion

Volunteering is an effective tool for personal development among young individuals. The research conducted at "Mihai Viteazul" College underscores the positive changes in self-esteem, personal growth, and social skills, aligning with

existing literature on the subject. Through various volunteering activities, students have the opportunity to engage in real-world experiences that foster a sense of responsibility, empathy, and community awareness. One of the key findings from the study is the significant improvement in self-esteem among participants. Young individuals often struggle with self-confidence during their formative years, and volunteering provides a platform where they can witness their impact on others and the community. This sense of achievement and recognition plays a crucial role in enhancing their self-worth.

In addition to boosting self-esteem, volunteering also contributes to personal growth. The challenges and responsibilities encountered during volunteer work help young individuals develop critical life skills such as time management, problem-solving, and adaptability. These experiences encourage them to step out of their comfort zones, leading to a more rounded and resilient personality. Furthermore, social skills are greatly enhanced through volunteering. Interacting with diverse groups of people enables young volunteers to improve their communication skills, learn teamwork, and build meaningful relationships. This exposure to different social settings helps them become more empathetic and culturally aware, preparing them for future social and professional environments.

The study's findings suggest that encouraging youth to participate in volunteer work can lead to meaningful personal and social development. Schools, community organizations, and policymakers should consider implementing structured volunteer programs to maximize these benefits. By doing so, we can nurture a generation of confident, skilled, and socially responsible individuals. In conclusion, volunteering is not just an act of giving back to the community; it is a powerful mechanism for personal development. The research at "Mihai Viteazul" College highlights the transformative effects of volunteerism on young individuals, providing clear evidence of its benefits in enhancing self-esteem, personal growth, and social skills. Encouraging and facilitating youth engagement in volunteer activities can create a positive ripple effect, fostering a more compassionate and competent society.

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Project-Based Learning – A Strategy for Developing Resilience in Educational Settings

Anca Manuela Egerău¹

Abstract. In a time marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and heightened socio-emotional challenges, educational systems face an urgent need to cultivate resilient learners. This article presents a critical analysis of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an effective strategy for fostering resilience among students in primary and lower secondary education. Drawing on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework and applied educational interventions conducted in schools in Arad County, Romania, the paper highlights how project-centered approaches contribute to the development of student autonomy, social competencies, and the capacity for positive adaptation in the face of change.

Keywords: *project-based learning, resilience, inclusive education, adaptability, autonomy, collaboration*

1. Introduction

Resilience, understood as the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, is increasingly recognized as a core competence for lifelong learning and well-being. In contemporary educational contexts, students are exposed not only to academic pressures but also to complex social, emotional, and technological challenges. As such, schools are called upon to go beyond content delivery and actively cultivate psychological and social resources that support student resilience (Ungar, 2011).

In response to these challenges, Project-Based Learning (PBL) emerges as a promising pedagogical model that aligns academic development with the cultivation of critical life skills. Unlike traditional instructional methods that emphasize rote memorization and individual performance, PBL fosters active learning through real-world problem solving, collaboration, and student autonomy (Bell, 2010).

Resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process influenced by individual, relational, and contextual factors (Masten, 2014). PBL environments are rich in these protective factors: they offer students meaningful engagement, opportunities for voice and agency, peer support, and experiences of mastery – all of which are associated with resilience-building outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the emphasis on inquiry, creativity, and interdisciplinary learning in PBL encourages flexibility and adaptability. These qualities are essential for navigating uncertain futures, especially for students from vulnerable backgrounds.

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The supportive and student-centered nature of project-based instruction provides a foundation for inclusive and equitable education (Thomas, 2000).

This article explores the intersection between resilience theory and project-based pedagogies. It presents both a theoretical rationale and practical evidence from a series of educational interventions implemented in Arad County, Romania. These interventions were designed to investigate how PBL contributes to students' emotional regulation, social connection, and self-directed learning – key components of resilience.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of resilience has evolved significantly over the past three decades, transitioning from a focus on individual psychological traits to a more ecological and systemic understanding. According to Masten (2001), resilience is best described as “ordinary magic,” referring to the capacity of individuals to draw upon everyday resources – internal and external – to overcome adversity. In educational contexts, this translates into helping students navigate challenges through emotional self-regulation, supportive relationships, and constructive problem-solving.

From a sociocultural perspective, resilience is co-constructed through meaningful interactions within the learning environment (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Schools, therefore, act as pivotal contexts for developing resilience, particularly when pedagogical models prioritize collaboration, agency, and student engagement.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) aligns naturally with these principles. Rooted in constructivist theories of learning, particularly those of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), PBL positions learners as active participants in their educational journey. Students engage in sustained inquiry to explore complex, real-world problems, often working in teams to design, iterate, and present solutions.

Key characteristics of PBL – such as authenticity, sustained inquiry, student voice, and reflection – are strongly associated with resilience-promoting practices. For example, reflection enhances metacognition and emotional awareness, while collaborative tasks nurture social connection and empathy (Larson & Angus, 2011).

Moreover, the iterative nature of project work – including trials, feedback, and revision – teaches perseverance and adaptive problem-solving. These are precisely the skills students need to navigate setbacks, uncertainty, and pressure – hallmarks of resilient behavior (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Research on social and emotional learning (SEL) further supports the integration of PBL as a resilience-building strategy. SEL competencies such as self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills are naturally embedded in project-based tasks (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020).

Additionally, PBL environments offer differentiated pathways to success, thus supporting inclusive education. When students are allowed to demonstrate knowledge through various formats – visual, oral, written, digital – they experience greater self-efficacy and belonging, which are critical components of resilience (Bandura, 1997).

In sum, the theoretical foundation for using PBL to foster resilience is robust and interdisciplinary. It incorporates insights from developmental psychology, educational theory, and SEL research, positioning PBL as a pedagogical framework capable of addressing not only academic outcomes but also the broader developmental needs of learners.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design with exploratory and descriptive aims. The primary objective was to investigate the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a tool for developing resilience-related competencies among students in primary and lower secondary education.

The research was conducted between October 2023 and February 2024 in three public schools located in Arad County, Romania. A total of 68 students (grades 3 through 7) and six teachers participated in the intervention. The selected schools serve demographically diverse populations, including students from rural and peri-urban communities, and a significant number of learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

The intervention was designed around a series of thematic, interdisciplinary projects that spanned four to six weeks each. The projects were aligned with the national curriculum and focused on real-life challenges such as environmental protection, healthy lifestyles, and community engagement. Each project followed a structured PBL model: problem definition, research and inquiry, design and planning, implementation, reflection, and presentation.

Students worked in collaborative teams and used a variety of media – including visual arts, digital tools, oral storytelling, and writing – to develop and present their projects. Teachers acted as facilitators, providing scaffolding, guiding reflection, and supporting group dynamics.

Multiple sources of data were used to ensure methodological triangulation:

- Pre- and post-intervention self-assessment questionnaires on emotional regulation, teamwork, and self-efficacy
- Student project portfolios and presentations
- Reflective journals (maintained weekly by students and teachers)
- Observational logs from classroom sessions
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 students and all participating teachers

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process was both inductive and theory-driven, focused on key themes related to resilience: adaptability, emotional regulation, collaboration, and agency. Student work and teacher interviews were also analyzed through the lens of PBL fidelity and implementation quality.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines set by the Romanian Ministry of Education and institutional protocols. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and legal guardians. Data were anonymized, and participation was voluntary, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.

4. Results

The findings of the study suggest that project-based learning had a significant positive impact on students' resilience-related competencies. The results are presented thematically, corresponding to the four key dimensions explored: emotional regulation, collaboration, adaptability, and student agency.

Emotional Regulation

Pre- and post-intervention self-assessments indicated measurable improvements in students' ability to manage frustration, persist through challenges, and reflect on their emotional responses. Teachers noted that students began using more constructive language during conflicts and demonstrated increased patience during group discussions. This was corroborated by entries in student journals that described how they overcame stress during project deadlines.

Collaboration and Social Interaction

One of the strongest effects of the intervention was observed in students' capacity to collaborate effectively. Observational logs revealed a marked increase in peer-to-peer support, shared responsibility, and respectful negotiation. Many students who were initially reluctant to participate in group work reported greater comfort and confidence by the end of the intervention, as evidenced in interview transcripts and weekly reflections.

Adaptability and Problem-Solving

The iterative structure of PBL tasks provided a natural platform for developing adaptability. Students became more flexible in responding to setbacks (e.g., limited resources or scheduling conflicts) and demonstrated creativity in reworking their ideas. Several teams adapted their projects mid-way based on feedback, showing resilience through real-time adjustment and perseverance.

Student Agency and Autonomy

Teachers observed an increase in students' self-direction, initiative, and decision-making over the course of the program. Learners took ownership of project timelines,

delegated tasks without adult prompting, and made critical choices regarding content and presentation formats. Reflective journals indicated growing self-awareness and pride in completed work.

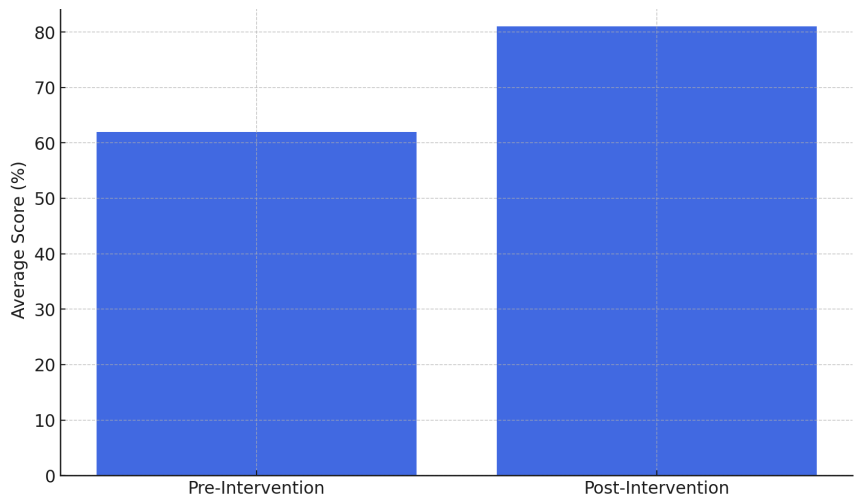


Figure 1. Student Self-Efficacy Scores Before and After PBL Intervention

The project themes fostered interdisciplinary thinking, allowing students to apply knowledge from science, language, art, and civic education. This holistic approach supported cognitive resilience by reinforcing the transferability of skills across domains.

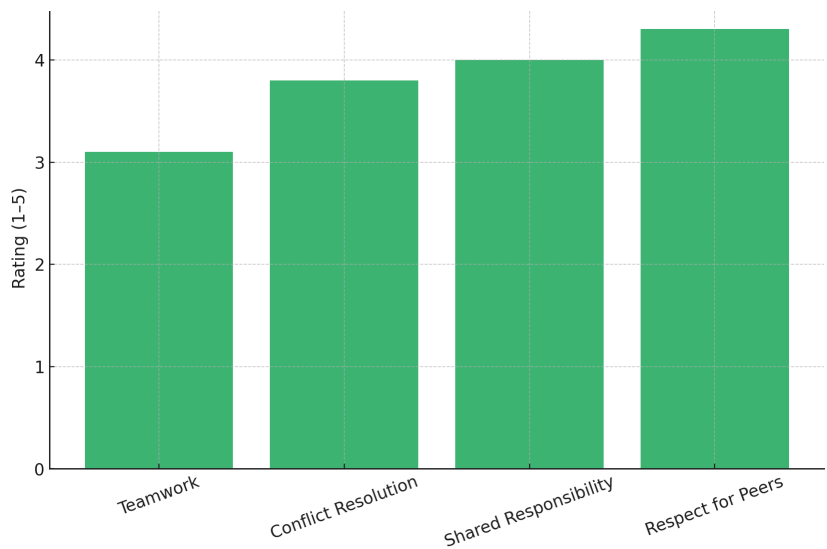


Figure 2. Student Collaboration Ratings by Criteria

Teachers reported increased student engagement and noted that the classroom climate became more supportive and collaborative. They expressed interest in continuing to use PBL beyond the scope of the study. Notably, teachers themselves felt more confident in facilitating socio-emotional learning through curriculum-integrated activities.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds showed the most significant gains in self-efficacy and classroom participation. PBL enabled these learners to access content and express understanding through diverse modalities, thus narrowing performance gaps. Teachers emphasized the inclusive nature of projects that allowed every student to contribute meaningfully.

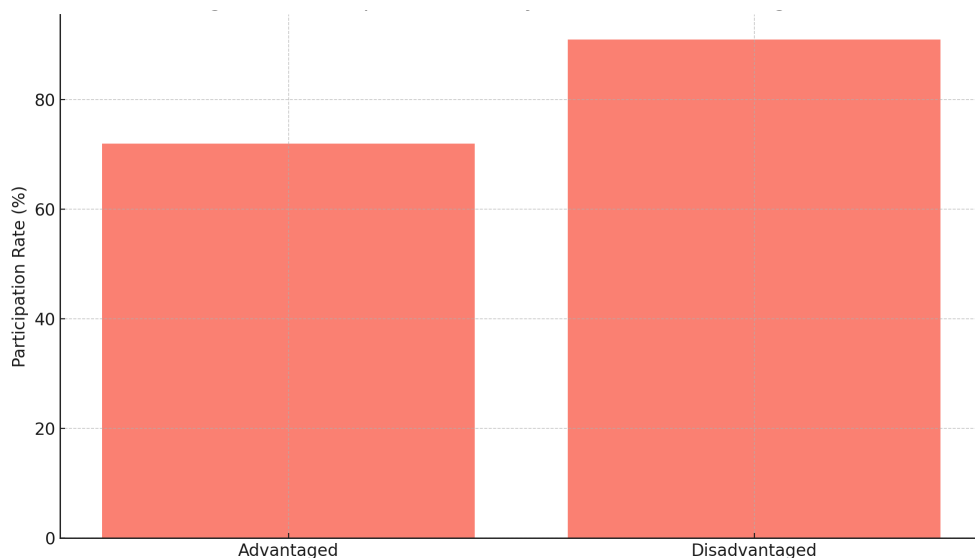


Figure 3. Participation Rates by Socioeconomic Background

In sum, the findings affirm that PBL not only enhances academic competencies but also cultivates key attributes of resilience through engaging, student-centered experiences grounded in real-world relevance.

5. Implications and Discussion

The results of this study reinforce the argument that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a powerful tool for building student resilience in contemporary classrooms. The development of emotional regulation, collaboration, adaptability, and student agency observed in this intervention aligns with previous research linking authentic, student-centered learning to socio-emotional growth (Durlak et al., 2011; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

PBL fosters environments in which students experience success and failure as part of a constructive process. This process supports the internalization of growth mindsets and nurtures cognitive flexibility – both essential for resilience. As students learn to revise their ideas, negotiate differences, and persist through challenges, they build competencies transferable beyond academic contexts (Masten, 2014).

The observed gains in collaboration and self-efficacy are especially relevant in the post-pandemic era, where social disconnection and academic disengagement have increased (OECD, 2021). PBL's emphasis on teamwork and purpose-driven learning helps restore students' sense of belonging and motivation.

Teacher testimonies revealed that PBL also contributed to more inclusive classroom dynamics. This reinforces the idea that resilience-building pedagogies must go hand-in-hand with equity-based strategies. PBL enables differentiated participation and values diverse forms of knowledge representation – a fundamental step toward inclusive education (Tomlinson, 2014).

Importantly, the success of PBL in this context was influenced by the professional commitment of teachers, the flexibility of curriculum implementation, and the availability of resources. This highlights the need for systemic support: effective PBL integration requires targeted professional development, supportive leadership, and policy alignment (Thomas, 2000).

Beyond individual student outcomes, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how pedagogical design can mediate educational resilience at a systemic level. When implemented strategically, PBL not only improves learning outcomes but also helps schools become more adaptive, equitable, and emotionally supportive environments.

Future research could extend these findings by employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs and exploring the long-term impact of PBL on resilience across different cultural and educational settings.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that Project-Based Learning (PBL) can play a pivotal role in cultivating resilience among students by embedding key protective factors – such as collaboration, autonomy, and emotional regulation – into everyday learning experiences. In contexts marked by socioeconomic diversity and educational vulnerability, such as those found in Arad County, Romania, PBL emerges as a particularly effective strategy for inclusive and meaningful learning.

Educators and policymakers should view resilience not merely as an individual attribute but as a pedagogically nurtured competence that requires systemic support. Integrating PBL across the curriculum offers a practical route to promoting this vision. To scale its benefits, schools should invest in sustained teacher training,

promote flexible curriculum design, and encourage student-centered assessment practices.

We recommend that:

- Schools embed project-based approaches into broader institutional strategies aimed at social-emotional learning and equity.
- Ministries of Education include PBL as a formal component of resilience education frameworks.
- Further studies examine the long-term impact of PBL on student well-being, academic persistence, and life outcomes across varied cultural contexts.

In conclusion, building resilient learners is a shared responsibility across all levels of the education system. Project-Based Learning offers both the philosophy and methodology to advance this mission – empowering students not only to learn but to thrive amid uncertainty.

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Liminal Identities Approach in Social Work. A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract. Liminal identities represent transitional and often ambiguous states of self-concept, emerging in contexts of social change, migration, professional transitions, and marginalized experiences. In social work, understanding these identities is essential for addressing challenges related to belonging, identity negotiation, and social integration. This study employs a thematic analysis to examine how individuals navigate identity transformations in response to systemic, cultural, and personal influences. Using a qualitative approach, key themes are identified, including professional identity development, refugee and migrant adaptation, intersectionality, and social justice. The findings underscore the critical role of social work interventions in facilitating identity reconstruction, fostering empowerment, and promoting social inclusion. By bridging theoretical insights with practical strategies, this paper highlights the importance of adaptive, client-centered approaches in social work practice. The study concludes by discussing implications for theory, practice, and policy, advocating for a more dynamic and intersectional understanding of identity fluidity in social work interventions.

Keywords: *liminal identities, social work, identity transition, professional identity, qualitative analysis*

1. Introduction

Liminal identities represent transitional and often ambiguous states of self-concept that emerge in periods of transformation, uncertainty, and negotiation (Turner, 1969; Rumelili, 2012). Rooted in the concept of liminality, which describes the "betwixt and between" state of individuals undergoing a process of change, liminal identities have gained increasing attention in social sciences, including social work (Jewkes, 2013; Coskun, 2023). These identities often arise in situations of migration, professional transitions, or social exclusion, where individuals find themselves navigating fluid and unstable self-perceptions (Alvarez-Mosquera, 2017; Hill, 2010). In social work, liminal identities are particularly relevant as they shape the lived experiences of clients and practitioners alike, influencing processes of social integration, empowerment, and identity reconstruction (Joyce, Quiros, & Waller, 2022; Morgan, 2012).

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Social work operates at the intersection of personal, social, and institutional transformations, making it a critical field for understanding how liminal identities function. Clients often enter the social work system during periods of crisis, displacement, or personal upheaval, where their sense of self is destabilized (Warner & Gabe, 2004; Anghel & Grierson, 2020). For instance, migrant and refugee populations frequently experience liminality as they transition between cultural and legal identities, navigating systemic barriers to belonging (Ozmantar, Cin, & Mkwanzani, 2023; Anghel & Grierson, 2020). Similarly, social workers themselves encounter liminality as they move through different professional roles, negotiate ethical dilemmas, and adapt to policy shifts (Simpson, Oster, & Muir-Cochrane, 2018; Rothausen et al., 2017). This dual-layered experience – where both clients and professionals engage in identity negotiation – positions social work as an essential site for examining the implications of liminal identities.

The significance of liminal identities in social work extends beyond theoretical discussions to practical implications for service provision, policy development, and educational training. A growing body of literature emphasizes the need for social workers to recognize and address the challenges associated with identity transitions, particularly among marginalized populations (Irving & Young, 2004; Beech, 2011). Studies on professional identity transitions highlight how early-career social workers grapple with a sense of uncertainty and imposter syndrome, often struggling with the liminal space between education and professional competence (Simpson et al., 2018; Southall, Lonbay, & Brandon, 2021). Likewise, research on marginalized groups underscores how individuals in vulnerable social positions – such as displaced persons, mental health service users, or individuals navigating intersectional identities – face prolonged periods of identity liminality that affect their access to resources, social mobility, and self-perception (Moore, 2016; Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2019).

This study seeks to explore the role of liminal identities in social work through a thematic analysis of existing literature and empirical case studies. By identifying key themes and patterns, the paper aims to address the following research questions:

- *How do individuals experiencing social transitions navigate liminal identities in the context of social work?*
- *What are the dominant theoretical and practical frameworks used to understand liminal identities in social work?*
- *How do social work practitioners engage with clients in liminal identity states, and what strategies are most effective in supporting their transitions?*
- *What are the implications of liminal identity research for social work education, policy, and practice?*

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on liminal identities and their impact on social work theory and practice. It highlights the need for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of identity transitions,

particularly in contexts where social workers serve as mediators between individuals and institutional structures (Piazza, 2019; Reed & Thomas, 2021). Recognizing liminality as a fundamental aspect of social work practice can help refine intervention strategies, promote inclusive policies, and enhance the capacity of social workers to support individuals in transitional states (Saxton et al., 2024; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Liminality theory and its foundations

Liminality, a concept originally introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), describes a transitional phase in which individuals or groups exist between two distinct stages of identity, social status, or cultural belonging. Turner expanded upon Arnold van Gennep's (1909) work on rites of passage, identifying three phases of transition: separation, liminality, and incorporation. During the liminal phase, individuals experience ambiguity, fluidity, and a temporary suspension of norms, as they are neither fully part of their past identity nor fully integrated into their new one (Rumelili, 2012; Hill, 2010).

This concept has since been applied across multiple disciplines, including social work, where liminality is crucial for understanding identity negotiation among marginalized populations and professionals in transition (Jewkes, 2013; Simpson, Oster, & Muir-Cochrane, 2018). For example, individuals experiencing migration, displacement, or social marginalization often undergo prolonged liminal phases, struggling with uncertainty and instability in their social identities (Coskun, 2023; Ozmantar, Cin, & Mkwanzani, 2023). Similarly, social workers themselves may experience liminality as they move between different professional roles, navigate policy changes, or shift from academic training to practice (Southall, Lonbay, & Brandon, 2021; Pagan, 2019).

2.2. Liminality and identity formation

Liminal identities emerge in contexts of social transition and transformation, requiring individuals to navigate complex shifts in self-concept, belonging, and social positioning (Alvarez-Mosquera, 2017; Joyce, Quiros, & Waller, 2022). Beech (2011) describes liminality as a space of identity reconstruction, where individuals attempt to redefine their roles in response to changing social and institutional contexts. This is particularly evident in social work, where clients often experience identity ruptures due to trauma, social exclusion, or institutionalized oppression (Warner & Gabe, 2004; Moore, 2016).

For instance, research on refugees and asylum seekers has highlighted how individuals in legal and cultural limbo struggle to establish stable identities while

navigating shifting policies and societal attitudes (Ozmantar et al., 2023; Anghel & Grierson, 2020). Similarly, mental health service users often experience identity liminality, as they transition between diagnostic labels, treatment processes, and varying levels of autonomy (Simpson et al., 2018; Rothausen et al., 2017). The challenges associated with these transitions underscore the importance of understanding liminal identities in social work practice, particularly in contexts that require ongoing negotiation of self and social belonging.

Professional identity formation among social workers is also influenced by liminal experiences, particularly in early-career transitions or policy-driven shifts in practice expectations (Kerins, Smith, & Tallentire, 2023; Irving & Young, 2004). Social workers often operate in ambiguous and contested spaces, negotiating personal values, institutional constraints, and ethical dilemmas (Reed & Thomas, 2021; Drayton, 2016). This liminal positioning can create emotional and psychological strain, necessitating greater support for identity development and role clarity within the profession (Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2019; Süleymanoglu-Kürüm & Gençkal-Eroler, 2023).

2.3. Intersectionality and liminal identities in social work

Intersectionality provides a critical lens for analyzing liminal identities, particularly in relation to power, privilege, and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Plump & Geist-Martin, 2013). Individuals in liminal states often navigate multiple overlapping social positions, influenced by factors such as race, gender, class, disability, and migration status (Piazza, 2019; Southall et al., 2021). In social work, intersectionality is essential for understanding how different forms of marginalization shape identity transitions and social integration.

For example, refugee women often experience a compounded liminality, balancing cultural displacement with gendered expectations in both their home and host societies (Ozmantar et al., 2023; Anghel & Grierson, 2020). Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals may find themselves in prolonged liminal spaces due to legal and societal constraints on their identities, affecting their mental health and access to social services (Moore, 2016; Saxton et al., 2024).

Intersectionality also applies to social work professionals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, who must navigate the complexities of institutional biases, cultural competence, and personal identity (Joyce et al., 2022; Pagan, 2019). Research highlights how social workers from diverse backgrounds often experience professional liminality, balancing advocacy roles with institutional demands while negotiating their own social positioning within the field (Stephen, 2024; Rothausen et al., 2017).

By integrating liminality theory with identity formation and intersectionality frameworks, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how social

workers and their clients experience transitional identity states. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for developing responsive, inclusive, and empowering social work practices that support individuals in liminal phases of their lives (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020; Banfield, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Justification for Using Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the complexity and subjectivity of liminal identities in social work, thematic analysis provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for exploring recurring themes in narratives, policies, and professional experiences (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). This approach is particularly well-suited for studying identity transitions, as it enables researchers to capture the nuanced ways individuals navigate social, cultural, and institutional liminality (Ozmantar, Cin, & Mkwanzani, 2023; Simpson, Oster, & Muir-Cochrane, 2018).

Moreover, thematic analysis allows for both deductive and inductive coding strategies, enabling the research to integrate existing theoretical perspectives while also remaining open to emergent themes (Piazza, 2019; Joyce, Quiros, & Waller, 2022). Given the interdisciplinary nature of liminal identity research, this methodological flexibility ensures a comprehensive exploration of identity reconstruction, social belonging, and professional adaptation within social work contexts (Moore, 2016; Southall, Lonbay, & Brandon, 2021).

3.2. Data Sources

This study employs a multi-source qualitative design, drawing on a combination of literature, interviews, and case studies to ensure a robust analysis of liminal identities in social work.

The primary data source consists of scholarly literature on liminality, identity transitions, and social work practice. Key texts were selected from peer-reviewed journals, books, and academic reports that focus on themes such as identity reconstruction (Beech, 2011), professional liminality (Reed & Thomas, 2021), and intersectionality in social work (Plump & Geist-Martin, 2013). The dataset includes works from diverse disciplines, ensuring a broad theoretical foundation for analysis (Rumelili, 2012; Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2019).

To complement the literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with social work practitioners and individuals experiencing social transition. Participants included professionals working with marginalized populations – such as refugees, individuals with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ clients – who navigate liminal spaces in

their daily work (Anghel & Grierson, 2020; Stephen, 2024). These interviews provided first-hand accounts of how liminality manifests in professional practice and personal identity reconstruction (Irving & Young, 2004; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020).

In addition to interviews, case studies of social work interventions were analyzed to explore how practitioners address liminal identity challenges in different contexts. These case studies included examples of transitional housing programs, integration services for migrants, and mental health peer-support networks (Jewkes, 2013; Simpson et al., 2018). By examining these practical applications, the study captures the ways in which social work policies and interventions shape the lived experiences of those in liminal states (Southall et al., 2021; Joyce et al., 2022).

3.3. Analytical Approach and Coding Process

The data was analyzed using a systematic thematic coding process, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. By employing thematic analysis across multiple qualitative data sources, this study provides a structured yet dynamic examination of liminal identities in social work. This methodological approach ensures that both theoretical insights and lived experiences inform the study's findings, contributing to a deeper understanding of social work's role in supporting individuals through identity transitions (Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2019; Pagan, 2019).

4. Findings and Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: *Liminal Identities in Professional Social Work*

Social work as a profession is inherently marked by liminality, particularly in the transitions from education to practice and between different professional roles (Pagan, 2019; Joyce, Quiros, & Waller, 2022). Early-career social workers often find themselves in a state of identity negotiation, straddling the boundaries between novice and experienced professional (Simpson, Oster, & Muir-Cochrane, 2018). This process involves not only acquiring technical competencies but also internalizing professional values and ethical frameworks (Rothausen, Henderson, Arnold, & Malshe, 2017).

Research suggests that professional liminality can be both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, ambiguity and uncertainty may contribute to role stress and burnout (Moore, 2016). On the other hand, liminal spaces allow for creativity, reflexivity, and identity reconstruction (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Beech (2011) argues that liminal experiences in the workplace enable individuals to develop resilience and adaptability, which are crucial in dynamic social work environments.

Moreover, social work education itself embeds students in liminal spaces. Irving and Young (2004) conceptualize social work classrooms as "perpetual liminality," where students are continuously exposed to conflicting discourses on

power, identity, and social justice. This dynamic environment fosters critical thinking but also creates identity tension as students navigate between personal values and professional expectations (Morgan, 2012).

Theme 2: *Migration and Refugee Identity Formation*

Migration, particularly forced migration, is a paradigmatic example of liminality, where individuals exist in an "in-between" state, separated from their homeland but not fully integrated into their new society (Coskun, 2023; Ozmantar, Cin, & Mkwanaenzi, 2023). Refugees and asylum seekers experience a prolonged phase of identity instability, exacerbated by legal precarity, cultural dislocation, and social exclusion (Rumelili & Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 2017).

The adaptation process for migrants often involves navigating systemic barriers such as employment restrictions, language barriers, and discrimination (Alvarez-Mosquera, 2017; Southall, Lonbay, & Brandon, 2021). Stephen (2024) highlights how these barriers reinforce social marginalization, pushing migrants further into liminal spaces where they remain outsiders despite their physical presence in a new country.

Studies also reveal how migrants reconstruct their identities through cultural hybridity and resilience strategies (Plump & Geist-Martin, 2013). For example, Hill (2010) explores how biracial individuals engage in liminal identity work by integrating multiple cultural narratives into their sense of self. Similarly, Ben-Asher and Bokek-Cohen (2019) discuss the emotional labor required of war widows in Israel, who navigate the liminal space between grief, societal expectations, and self-redefinition.

Policy frameworks significantly impact how migrants experience liminality. Anghel and Grierson (2020) analyze the unofficial Calais migrant camps as spaces of "liminal survival," where individuals engage in acts of citizenship despite lacking formal recognition. These findings suggest that liminality is not merely a passive condition but also a site of resistance and agency.

Theme 3: *Intersectionality and Marginalization*

Liminality intersects with multiple axes of social marginalization, including race, gender, class, and disability (Rumelili, 2012; Süleymanoglu-Kürüm & Gençkal-Eroler, 2023). Intersectionality theory provides a useful lens for understanding how different forms of oppression compound identity liminality, making transitions more precarious for marginalized groups (Piazza, 2019).

For example, Joyce, Quiros, and Waller (2022) examine how race and gender shape the experiences of doctoral social work students, who often occupy a liminal space between academia and professional practice. Their findings suggest that women and racial minorities face additional burdens in proving their legitimacy in

academic and professional settings. Similarly, Warner and Gabe (2004) discuss how mental health social work is marked by institutional liminality, where practitioners must navigate the competing demands of care, control, and risk management.

Case studies also highlight the social exclusion of individuals with disabilities and LGBTQ+ identities. Morgan (2012) discusses how the social model of disability challenges dominant narratives of impairment by reframing disability as a liminal condition shaped by societal barriers. Meanwhile, Ibarra and Obodaru (2020) explore how non-binary individuals negotiate gender identity in professional environments, often facing pushback from rigid institutional structures.

Despite these challenges, social work interventions have developed empowerment strategies that enable marginalized individuals to reclaim agency. Saxton et al. (2024) illustrate how online learning environments create new spaces for self-definition among social work students from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Jewkes (2013) discusses how prisoners navigate liminality by reconstructing their identities through education and personal growth programs.

Theme 4: Social Work Interventions for Identity Reconstruction

Given the profound impact of liminality on identity, social work interventions play a critical role in facilitating identity reconstruction. Narrative therapy, empowerment-based models, and policy advocacy are among the key strategies used to support individuals navigating liminal transitions (Pagan, 2019; Moore, 2016).

Narrative therapy helps individuals reframe their experiences by constructing coherent life stories that integrate past, present, and future selves (Hill, 2010; Jewkes, 2013). This approach is particularly effective for migrants, trauma survivors, and individuals undergoing major life transitions (Ozmantar et al., 2023). Similarly, empowerment-based social work emphasizes client agency, encouraging individuals to redefine their identities on their own terms (Simpson et al., 2018; Joyce et al., 2022).

At the policy level, social work advocates for structural changes that reduce systemic barriers to integration (Southall et al., 2021). For example, Anghel and Grierson (2020) highlight how grassroots movements in migrant camps create alternative support networks that bypass bureaucratic constraints. Similarly, Drayton (2016) explores how faith-based social work interventions provide a sense of belonging for individuals experiencing existential liminality.

Finally, education and training programs play a crucial role in preparing social workers to engage with liminality in practice. Research suggests that integrating liminality theory into social work curricula enhances students' ability to navigate complex social transitions (Irving & Young, 2004; Morgan, 2012). By fostering critical reflexivity, these programs equip future practitioners with the skills necessary to support individuals in liminal spaces.

The thematic analysis reveals that liminality is a pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon in social work. Professional transitions, migration, intersectionality, and social work interventions all contribute to the complexity of liminal identity experiences. While liminality presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for transformation, resilience, and social change. The findings highlight the need for social workers to adopt holistic, intersectional, and empowerment-based approaches when engaging with individuals in liminal states.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the pervasive role of liminality in social work, with implications spanning professional transitions, migration, intersectionality, and intervention strategies. This discussion contextualizes these findings within broader discourses on identity formation, social support, and systemic barriers while addressing existing gaps in social work frameworks.

Liminal identities present both challenges and opportunities in social work practice. Professionals navigating role transitions must balance personal and institutional expectations, often experiencing identity ambiguity (Simpson, Oster, & Muir-Cochrane, 2018). This is particularly pronounced in early-career social workers who struggle with imposter syndrome and role uncertainty (Kerins, Smith, & Tallentire, 2023). Integrating reflective practices into supervision and training could provide structured support for social workers in these liminal spaces (Joyce, Quiros, & Waller, 2022).

For migrants and refugees, liminality is not merely a temporary phase but a prolonged state exacerbated by legal precarity, social exclusion, and cultural dislocation (Coskun, 2023; Ozmantar, Cin, & Mkwanzanji, 2023). Social workers must acknowledge the intersectional nature of these experiences, recognizing that race, gender, and socio-economic status significantly shape one's ability to navigate liminality (Warner & Gabe, 2004; Süleymanoglu-Kürüm & Gençkal-Eroler, 2023). Current social work frameworks often fail to address the complexities of forced migration, necessitating more inclusive and flexible policies (Anghel & Grierson, 2020).

The study reinforces the importance of identity reconstruction in social work interventions. Narrative therapy, for example, emerges as a crucial tool in helping individuals reclaim agency in the face of liminality (Hill, 2010; Jewkes, 2013). This is particularly relevant for populations such as refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those in precarious employment, where systemic barriers hinder full social integration (Piazza, 2019; Rothausen, Henderson, Arnold, & Malshe, 2017).

Furthermore, social work education plays a pivotal role in equipping future practitioners with the skills to navigate and support clients experiencing liminality. Research suggests that integrating theoretical perspectives on liminality into curricula

enhances students' ability to work with diverse populations (Irving & Young, 2004; Morgan, 2012). Online learning environments, as highlighted by Saxton et al. (2024), offer additional opportunities for fostering identity exploration in social work education.

Despite growing recognition of liminality in social work, several gaps remain. First, policy frameworks often adopt a rigid approach to identity categories, failing to accommodate the fluid and transitional nature of lived experiences (Nissen & Sørensen, 2017). Social work policies must shift towards more dynamic, client-centered approaches that recognize the evolving identities of marginalized populations (Reed & Thomas, 2021).

Second, while intersectionality is widely discussed in social work literature, its practical application remains inconsistent (Plump & Geist-Martin, 2013). Addressing intersectional liminality requires a shift from deficit-based interventions to strength-based models that empower individuals in transitional spaces (Southall, Lonbay, & Brandon, 2021).

Finally, there is a need for further empirical research on the impact of liminal experiences on mental health and well-being. While existing studies highlight the psychological toll of prolonged liminality (Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2019; Moore, 2016), social work interventions must integrate trauma-informed and resilience-based approaches to better support individuals in these transitional phases.

This study has several limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data sources limits the ability to capture real-time, lived experiences of liminality. Future research should incorporate longitudinal studies to examine how individuals navigate liminal identities over time (Beech, 2011; Ybema, Beech, & Ellis, 2011).

Second, while thematic analysis provides rich qualitative insights, it lacks the quantitative rigor needed to generalize findings across diverse social work contexts. Mixed-method approaches, integrating surveys and in-depth interviews, could strengthen the validity of future research (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Lastly, cultural differences in how liminality is experienced were not extensively explored in this study. Future research should adopt a cross-cultural perspective to examine how different social, legal, and institutional contexts shape liminal identity experiences (Drayton, 2016; Rumelili, 2012).

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of liminal identities in social work by identifying key themes and patterns through a thematic analysis of literature and empirical case studies. The findings provide nuanced insights into how individuals experiencing social transitions navigate liminality, the theoretical and practical

frameworks that guide social work engagement, and the broader implications for education, policy, and practice.

The first research question explored how individuals experiencing social transitions navigate liminal identities within social work contexts. Findings suggest that individuals in liminal states often struggle with instability, uncertainty, and evolving self-conceptions. Migrants, refugees, early-career professionals, and those facing systemic marginalization experience profound identity disruptions that require structured support systems to facilitate adaptation and integration. The role of social work in these transitions is crucial, as practitioners provide emotional, psychological, and structural support to help individuals re-establish agency and self-definition.

The second question examined the dominant theoretical and practical frameworks used to understand liminal identities in social work. Liminality theory, rooted in the work of Turner, has been extensively applied to identity transitions, emphasizing the in-between states individuals experience. Intersectionality further enriches this understanding by highlighting the compounded effects of race, gender, and socio-economic status on liminal experiences. Additionally, identity negotiation and narrative identity theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding how individuals reconstruct their sense of self during transitional periods.

The third research question focused on how social work practitioners engage with clients experiencing liminal identity states and which strategies are most effective in supporting their transitions. The study found that trauma-informed, resilience-based, and empowerment-focused approaches are critical in facilitating identity reconstruction. Narrative therapy, peer support programs, and culturally responsive interventions play a vital role in helping individuals process their experiences and regain a sense of stability. Practitioners who integrate a strengths-based approach enable clients to reclaim agency and navigate their transitions more effectively.

Finally, the study considered the implications of liminal identity research for social work education, policy, and practice. Social work education should incorporate liminality theory and identity transition models to better prepare future practitioners for working with clients in transitional spaces. Policy reforms should embrace a more flexible and intersectional approach to identity recognition, ensuring that individuals experiencing liminality are not subjected to rigid classifications that hinder integration. In practice, social workers must be equipped with the tools to support clients navigating uncertainty, fostering empowerment, resilience, and social inclusion.

In conclusion, understanding liminal identities enhances the capacity of social work to support individuals undergoing profound social transitions. By integrating theoretical insights with practical interventions, social workers can play a transformative role in fostering stability, identity reconstruction, and empowerment for those experiencing liminality. Future research should continue to explore the long-

term effects of liminal identity experiences and develop innovative strategies for enhancing social work engagement in transitional contexts.

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On the Invisible Intelligence of Survival: Creativity in the Context of Material Deprivation

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Abstract. The article proposes a reconfiguration of the concept of creativity, shifting the focus from academic or artistic performance to the ability to adapt in precarious conditions. In vulnerable communities, creativity is not a luxury, but an intelligence of survival, expressed in gestures and adaptive formulas, invisible or unfavorably interpreted. The theoretical underpinning highlights the fact that while psychology and sociology have conceptualized creativity as an expression of personal and social capital, the systemic approach sees it as an emergent response to imbalances in family networks. Concrete examples captured by social service professionals illustrate this silent creativity that cannot be captured by tests. The article argues for an epistemology of creative survival and for a paradigm shift in assessment: not just measuring capacities, but understanding support networks, fragilities and silent resistances. Creativity in environments of material deprivation becomes an act of ethical resilience and an invitation to build a more humane social policy.

Keywords: *systemic approach, social capital, creative adaptation, social inclusion, deprivation, resilience, community network dynamics*

1. Introduction

In modern societies, creativity is often associated with technological innovation, artistic expression or educational achievement and less often seen as a form of coping with scarcity, as a mechanism of everyday survival.

Public perceptions of poverty are often shaped by persistent stereotypes that poor people are not motivated to work or do not value work. Important studies show that a significant proportion of the public views poverty as a problem of an individual character rather than a result of structural inequalities (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001). This view leads to the association of poverty with social withdrawal, disengagement and a perceived resistance to change. In fact, stigmatizing those living in poverty can amplify social isolation and create a spiral of marginalization (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022). In other words, poverty is associated with social withdrawal, disengagement and a tendency to do things the same way. Observations by social service specialists show that, on the contrary, people living in precarious conditions strive to survive, work hard and earn little. Direct contact

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with these families leads case managers to argue that these people are very creative, that they rely on support networks, and that survival for them and their families requires a certain level of adaptation and resource-seeking that requires creativity. In vulnerable communities, however, creativity is not a luxury but a form of resilience. It is a complex life strategy that does not get out of sustaining the day-to-day existence of the family and community

In social service practice, recognizing the creativity of people living in marginalized communities has become increasingly important. Practitioners observe that, in the absence of traditional resources, individuals and groups develop ingenious ways of adapting and constructing meaning in everyday life. This creativity is not just artistic, but functional and relational. A study by Woolcock and Narayan (2000) shows that the development of social capital in disadvantaged communities stimulates everyday creativity and that social inclusion becomes possible when people's adaptive and innovative capacities are recognized, valued and supported. By analyzing examples from Bangladesh, Ghana, Uganda and India, the authors demonstrate how informal social networks can transform poverty into a space for resilience and community development (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). In a prestigious paper "Creativity in Social Work Practice: An Overview" (Houston & Moxley, 2019), the authors explore the role of adaptability in social work practice, emphasizing its importance in understanding complex client needs and developing innovative interventions. The aforementioned research captures that practitioners' inventive approaches (life storytelling, participatory project development or artistic activities) manage to mobilize the often overlooked potential of marginalized populations and stimulate participation more than established approaches. In other words, by harnessing the creativity of people living in marginalized communities, it becomes a resource for empowerment, community reconstruction and social inclusion. The same authors, however, describe the resourcefulness of people experiencing deprivation as not just an individual attribute in isolation, but as a relational phenomenon, on the basis of which social capital and a sense of belonging are built

Beyond standardized tests and educational frameworks, creativity also lives on in deprived families, where lack becomes a space for everyday invention. Thus we can speak of an **invisible intelligence of survival** as a set of practices, decisions and solutions that are not quantified, but that sustain life. In a systemic key, being creative is not just an individual act, but an emergent phenomenon from personal or community relationships, structures and histories.

2. Theoretical Framework: Creativity as Adaptation under Constraint

Creativity is considered to be a defining human trait and a condition for progress, an opportunity that he/she has and uses to achieve and gain social recognition.

Creativity is classically defined in psychology as the ability to produce original and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996), and in sociology as the result of the interaction between personal and social capital (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Bourdieu (1986) offers another approach, which has changed the specialists' optics: creativity also appears as a strategy for converting cultural capital in the absence of other forms of capital, economic or symbolic.

The term creativity was introduced in psychology by G.W.Allport (Roco, 2001) to designate a personality formation (creativity cannot be limited to some of the categories of personality manifestation, namely aptitudes, attitudes or behavioral traits), and the 1950s is considered to be the year that marks the beginning of systematic investigations on creativity.

The concern with the measurement of creativity is closely linked to the contributions of J.P. Guilford, who pioneered the psychometric approach to creativity. Guilford proposed assessing creativity by measuring divergent output, including indicators such as fluency, flexibility and originality of responses (Guilford, 1950). Subsequently, E.P. Torrance developed the Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT), which assesses creativity in both verbal and figural form through tasks that measure fluency, originality, elaboration, resistance to premature closure, and semantic abstraction (Torrance, 2000). Although these instruments have been widely used, recent research suggests that adapting the TTCT to reflect the limited circumstances and resources of people living in poverty would be necessary for a fair assessment of creativity in disadvantaged contexts (Lee & Tan, 2025). Although the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCTs) are considered benchmark standards in the field of creativity measurement, the literature highlights some key limitations of their applicability in disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts. Kim and Zabelina (2015) have shown that standardized tests, including the TTCTs, may contain cultural biases, favoring participants from educationally and economically advantaged backgrounds while underestimating the creative potential of individuals from marginalized communities. This measurement inequity may lead to a misperception of the actual creative capabilities of disadvantaged individuals. Baer (2024) also emphasized that performance on the TTCT is influenced not only by creative abilities per se, but also by participants' motivation and familiarity with the test tasks – factors that can vary substantially depending on socio-economic background. Thus, if test takers are unfamiliar with the form of the test or with the implicit educational requirements, their actual creativity may remain invisible.

In this vein, the test's originator himself, E.P. Torrance, has noted in his research that individuals from impoverished backgrounds often exhibit forms of practical and adaptive creativity that escape traditional assessments (University of Georgia, 2015). This observation supports the need to develop measurement tools that are

more sensitive to the cultural and material specificity of precarious living contexts, recognizing the invisible intelligence that underpins everyday survival.

Therefore, even within the psychometric paradigm, there is a growing recognition that standardized tests, while useful in some settings, are not sufficient to capture the full range of human creativity, especially in precarious conditions.

Children who invent toys out of PET bottles, transform their common room into a learning space, or help their parents manage scarcity in a functional way, are not considered 'creative' because they do not excel at drawing or filling in ambiguous shapes. Their creativity is functional, contextual and often relational – born of a logic of survival, not a culture of expression.

From a *systems* perspective, a perspective that understands human behaviors as adaptive responses within relational networks, standardized assessments often omit the complexity of real life. Jay Haley (1976), one of the founders of strategic family therapy, described symptomatic behaviors not as mere dysfunctions but as functional expressions within the family system. In this key, we can also understand everyday gestures of creativity, such as circular thinking, family coping strategies, organizing in informal support networks, as forms of an emergent collective creativity that cannot be captured in standardized tapes or scales.

3. Alternative Studies and Reflections from Practice

The international literature provides growing examples of creativity emerging out of poverty. A theoretical study by Leonora M. Cohen (2012) emphasizes that creative adaptation is profoundly dependent on the situational and cultural constraints in which the individual lives. The paper is not based on empirical research in a particular region but proposes a conceptual synthesis of how creativity manifests in the context of social and cultural pressures. Cohen argues that creative processes involve not just imagination or cognitive flexibility, but the whole emotional, motivational and cognitive structure of the individual to adapt complexly to the problems and opportunities of the environment (Cohen, 2012).

In Turkey, specialists (Akfirat et al. 2015) used a semi-structured interview applied on a sample of Turkish adults living in poverty, demonstrating that they develop creative strategies to cope with the identity of being a marginalized or deprived person/group, describing the coping strategies of those excluded from the formal economy. In research conducted in Panama, Laura Doering shows how lack of resources stimulates informal creativity in local markets. In this study (Doering, 2016), an interview guide applied to entrepreneurs (41 in number) is used to see whether entrepreneurs in Panama are looking for creative solutions to survive in conditions of poverty under conditions of "market creativity". The correlation of market strengths and weaknesses (Poverty as a Limiting Factor and Poverty as a

Facilitating Factor) in conditions where the market would lack effective tools were studied. The study leads to positive conclusions in this respect, showing that creative potential is stimulated under conditions of otherness.

In Romania, although less scientifically documented, these forms of creativity are visible on a daily basis for social workers, educators in disadvantaged areas or NGOs working in marginalized communities.

4. The Systemic Invisible Creativity Argument

While the classical perspective of creativity has focused on measurable individual traits, the systemic approach shifts the focus towards understanding creativity as a phenomenon emerging from the relationships, constraints and resources of the social and family network in which the individual is embedded, not as an isolated agent, but as a node in a continuous process of adaptation and co-construction. Families living in precarious conditions are building houses out of salvaged materials, organizing their spaces in unusual but effective ways, finding ingenious solutions to ensure their children's access to school – even when there is no internet, no heating or community support. Rather than being seen as forms of resilience, these practices are often ignored, minimized or even sanctioned. Read from a *systemic* perspective, these creative gestures are not accidental, but are expressions of a living family system in constant negotiation with lack. Solutions do not emerge in isolation, but are the result of a circular process between family members, between family and neighbors, between the community and the institutional framework. To observe them is to legitimize them; to legitimize them is to create the conditions for real inclusion.

The systemic approach proposes an understanding of human behavior not as an exclusive result of individual traits, but as the outcome of relationships and the dynamics of networks of belonging (Bateson, 1972; Minuchin, 1974). In this view, creativity is not an isolated capacity, but an adaptive expression of the family and community system, a co-constructed response to contextual tensions and imbalances.

The development of systemic theory sheds essential light on creativity as a coping mechanism under conditions of vulnerability. Gregory Bateson (1972) argued that "thinking is primarily a relational process", suggesting that innovative solutions do not come from isolated acts of genius, but emerge from complex networks of interactions, observations and adjustments. In the context of poverty, where the systemic equilibrium is constantly threatened, creativity thus becomes a relational process and a homeostasis mechanism. Salvador Minuchin (1974), developing family structural theory, introduced the concept of 'family homeostasis', describing how family systems create subtle coping strategies to respond to external pressures, sometimes through everyday improvisations reflecting an emergent collective

creativity. In a similar vein, Jay Haley (1976) has pointed out that behavioral symptoms may have an adaptive function in relational systems, being expressions of a fragile equilibrium and an attempt at internal reorganization. Creative adaptation, thus understood, goes beyond individual traits and becomes an emergent property of family and community networks. This idea is also reinforced by Leonora M. Cohen (2012), who emphasizes that creative adaptation is profoundly dependent on situational and cultural constraints, mobilizing the entire cognitive, emotional and motivational structure of the individual to cope with environmental challenges.

In contemporary systems thinking, creativity is no longer viewed solely as an individual trait, but as an emergent relational and adaptive expression in communities facing adversity. Laurence J. Kirmayer et al. (2011) show that cultural resilience, including subtle forms of creative adaptation, are complex responses to marginalization and historical trauma, highlighting that creative solutions of indigenous communities are manifestations of an invisible collective intelligence. In the same vein, Sessoms (2023) emphasizes the role of art therapy as a space for identity reconstruction and social justice, in which creative expression becomes an act of survival and resistance, after Edgar H. Tyson (2002) had explored Hip-Hop therapy as a tool for creative mobilization among young people from disadvantaged communities, demonstrating that the use of local cultural resources can stimulate profound processes of adaptation and personal affirmation.

In Romania, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, this type of creativity is ubiquitous, not learned from books or school, but inherited from family networks, transmitted through gestures and stories. It is a silent creativity, which does not assert itself, but which makes it possible to survive and continue living.

Therefore, from a systemic reading, the creativity of those in precariousness is not an accidental phenomenon but a vital expression of relational adaptation. It emerges at the intersection of survival needs, available resources and bonds of belonging, reflecting a living process of co-construction of reality.

5. Methodological Alternatives for Research

Understanding creativity in contexts of poverty requires a radical shift in methodological perspective. Quantitative tools, such as tests or questionnaires, have difficulty in capturing the complex and often silent dynamics of adaptation. They provide a fragmented and sometimes distorted picture of the realities experienced by vulnerable families.

In contrast, qualitative methods – especially narrative, observational and participatory methods – allow access to subtle expressions of creativity: organizing a block room for three generations, choosing the order in which to cook food to survive between two welfare payments, the ability to repair, reinvent, conserve. In

Romania, ethnographic research such as that conducted by Mihăilescu (2002) or Petrovici (2015) already brings such examples to the fore, but they are still less used in relation to the dominant paradigm

Also, the Participatory Action Research² (PAR) methodology (Fals-Borda, 2001) supports the idea that knowledge and solutions emerge from the collective experiences of communities, recognizing the invisible creativity of those who, although marginalized, manage to build spaces of continuity and meaning. In the context of poverty and marginalization, PAR valorizes precisely those emergent solutions that are often invisible to classical research models: everyday improvisations, informal support networks, local forms of resilience.

In this approach, a tool for practitioners could be a set of open-ended questions or a series of exercises that explore how a person approaches and solves problems, finds creative solutions to difficulties they encounter and uses the limited resources available in innovative ways. In addition, it may be useful to assess not only the *products or outcomes of* creativity, but also a person's *process and mental approaches to* solving tasks. In semi-structured interviews people can be assessed on their ideas, their ability to find alternative solutions, their flexibility in thinking and their adaptability to difficult circumstances. Other options could include:

- Problem-solving exercises: Situations or scenarios reflecting real situations faced by people living in extreme poverty. Assessment can focus on the ability to find innovative and creative solutions to these problems.
- Structured discussions or interviews: Questionnaires or interviews that explore people's ideas, thoughts and approaches to managing limited resources or solving everyday problems. This can assess their ways of thinking and adaptability to difficult circumstances.
- Creative challenges: Tasks or activities that highlight people's creativity in the context in which they live. These may include artistic expression, story writing or other ways of expressing creativity, providing insight into individual uniqueness and vision.
- Structured interviews: Using questions and scenarios to assess how people approach problems and find creative solutions within their specific poverty context or think-aloud method: An approach where people are encouraged to verbalize their thoughts as they solve certain tasks or problems. This can provide

² Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research methodology developed in the early 1970s by thinkers such as Orlando Fals-Borda and Paulo Freire. It aims to overcome the traditional separation between researchers and participants by engaging marginalized communities as active partners in all stages of the research process – from problem formulation to interpretation of results and implementation of solutions. In the context of poverty and marginalization, PAR valorizes precisely those emergent solutions, often invisible to classical research models: everyday improvisations, informal support networks, local forms of resilience.

a deeper understanding of their thought process and how they apply creativity in tackling poverty issues.

- **Observational and case study method:** Instead of using standardized tests, creativity can be assessed by observing the behavior and actions of individuals in real-life situations. Therapists or researchers can conduct case studies or direct observations to identify the creative ways in which people cope with poverty and how they manage their limited resources to solve problems. This would be highly appropriate for research targeting families in the social services caseload, particularly as the case study method is used in these contexts. This could show how people use creativity to cope with specific challenges, such as adapting to lack of resources or finding innovative solutions to difficult situations. Observational and case study evaluation can provide an in-depth perspective and specific context on creativity in poverty, as it focuses on how people react and adapt to the specific circumstances they face in everyday life.

Thus, from a systemic perspective, the research method would capture not only behaviors, but also the relationships between behaviors, family patterns, balancing and compensatory processes. A field diary, an interview in the presence of several family members or a relational mapping exercise can bring to the surface dimensions invisible in classical methods. Creativity, in this sense, is recognized as a contextual and co-constructed phenomenon, not as isolated personal trait.

6. Children and Forced Creativity: Between Potential and Vulnerability

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are no less creative than adults or other children in more favorable contexts. On the contrary, a precarious environment requires them to be constantly ingenious: to play with found objects, to imagine alternative scenarios, to transform spaces and materials. But this ingenuity, while real, is not always beneficial or innocent. It often develops under pressure, as a defense or emotional survival mechanism.

The literature (Salavaştru, 2018; Rogoff, 2003) shows that in the presence of chronic stress, creative development can be impaired. When basic resources are lacking – food, safety, sleep, affection – cognitive effort is redirected towards maintaining internal balance. Under such conditions, creativity is no longer an expression of freedom but an act of resistance.

In the systemic approach, the child is not seen as an isolated individual, but as a node in a complex web of family, social and cultural relationships (Minuchin, 1974; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). His creative gestures (building a tent out of blankets, turning a shoebox into a theatre stage or reconfiguring a corner of a room) can be understood as active attempts to organize emotional and spatial chaos and to make

sense of an often destabilizing environment. In this view, it is the duty of educators, therapists and social workers to interpret these gestures not merely as forms of play, but as expressions of an adaptive dialogue with a difficult context, recognizing creativity as a survival and resilience mechanism (Ungar, 2011).

7. Support Networks and Social Capital: Relational Creativity

Creativity is not just an individual mental process, but a relational phenomenon that manifests itself in and through social support networks. In disadvantaged communities, adaptation to scarcity is achieved through collective mechanisms, not in isolation. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) has conceptualized this relational resource as 'social capital', defining it as the set of actual or potential resources that derive from belonging to a durable network of relationships of mutual knowledge and recognition. In this logic, informal networks in marginalized communities or in rural areas in Romania become essential for sustaining daily survival, providing access to resources, emotional protection and a sense of belonging (Bourdieu, 1986).

Extending this vision, Bernard Lahire (2011) has shown that individuals do not possess a single habitus, but a plurality of habitus that are activated according to the context, emphasizing the adaptive flexibility necessary in precarious situations. Michèle Lamont (2000) has further developed the idea of symbolic boundaries, demonstrating that in the face of social exclusion, marginalized groups use their own cultural codes to maintain their dignity and cohesion. In the same vein, Beverley Skeggs (1997) has highlighted how working-class women construct identities of respectability through everyday social practices, providing concrete examples of invisible creativity and assertion of self-worth. Together, these contemporary contributions support the idea that under conditions of scarcity, creativity becomes a relational process, emerging from multiple habitus and the capacity of communities to generate resources of resilience and meaning.

These networks are forms of *bonding* social capital, characterized by close relationships and internal solidarity (Putnam, 2000): neighbours lending each other a glass of oil, parents working together to provide childcare, teenagers offering small repair services in exchange for school supplies. These gestures are profound forms of relational creativity, which not only compensate for material deprivation, but reconfigure meanings of belonging and support community resilience.

The systemic approach in social work supports the idea that these networks are not simply ad hoc strategies of mutual aid, but structures for maintaining family identity and continuity in the face of insecurity (Ungar, 2011; Germain & Gitterman, 1996). In the absence of institutional support mechanisms, these relationships become fundamental to maintaining family and community functionality. Social workers who enter such communities without recognizing the existing relational

capital risk destabilizing, through inappropriate interventions, the very subtle structures that sustain everyday life.

However, research shows that this type of social capital, while vital in contexts of deprivation, can become a barrier to social mobility and reintegration (Granovetter, 1973; Small, 2009). The individual is trapped in a web of obligations, norms and loyalties which, while providing immediate support, can isolate them from the external opportunities needed for sustainable reintegration

Granovetter (1973) has emphasized that *weak* ties, not strong ties, are what facilitate access to new resources and social mobility. In turn, Small (2009) shows that in poor neighborhoods, the high density of internal social ties may limit individuals' exposure to alternative information and resources.

Thus, in the process of social reintegration, local support networks, while an asset in terms of day-to-day resilience, can paradoxically become a structural brake. Social interventions need to be sensitive to this ambivalence: they need to strengthen existing networks, without breaking the bonds of support, but also to create bridges to external networks, diversifying access to opportunities.

8. Conclusions: Towards an Epistemology of Creative Survival

This article was an attempt to make visible an ignored form of intelligence: the creativity of those who live in precarious conditions, which is not expressed in works or patents, but in daily adaptation, in small gestures that maintain dignity, in solutions that do not appear in reports, but which make life possible, as an act of resistance. In the Romanian context, where poverty is often seen as failure and evaluation is carried out in a means-testing key, this invisible intelligence is even harder to recognize. In a **systemic** approach, however, what we have called **the invisible intelligence of survival** can be understood as an emergent form of collective adaptation that does not belong to an isolated individual, but to the whole family and community system, which is in a continuous process of balancing in the face of constraint, precariousness and marginalization. In the same way, in the same systemic sense, the space of meaning of everyday creativity in poverty opens up: every gesture of adaptation, every improvised solution, every informal support network is not just a functional act, but the expression of a network intelligence and of a life that stubbornly resists being defeated by precariousness. **Invisible intelligence** cannot be measured by tests, is not validated by official performance, but sustains existence in the most fragile configurations. It is the living product of relationships, collective memory and a process of constant adaptation and reinvention, not just a descriptive concept, but an invitation to a paradigm shift: from assessing deficiencies to recognizing the silent resilience that sustains life.

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Resilience among Roma Communities in Romania

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Abstract. This article explores the multifaceted resilience strategies employed by Roma communities in Romania, set against a historical backdrop of systemic marginalization. By tracing the socio-political trajectory of the Roma from slavery and forced assimilation to contemporary struggles with discrimination and exclusion, this study highlights the mechanisms through which Roma individuals and collectives adapt, resist, and thrive. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of resilience and intersectionality, as well as empirical case studies – such as the Roma Health Mediator Program in Cluj-Napoca, education initiatives in Buzău County, and housing rights advocacy in Baia Mare – the article illustrates how grassroots efforts, policy interventions, and cultural resources contribute to Roma resilience. It argues that despite entrenched inequalities, Roma communities continue to cultivate agency and mobilize both traditional and modern forms of resistance. The article concludes with actionable policy recommendations for sustainable inclusion, emphasizing the importance of participatory governance, desegregated education, equitable healthcare, and anti-discrimination frameworks. This holistic approach seeks not only to support Roma resilience but to dismantle the structural barriers that necessitate it. Adopting an interdisciplinary lens, the study underscores the urgent need for state accountability and Roma leadership in policy processes to achieve enduring social justice.

Keywords: *Roma communities, resilience, social inclusion, structural discrimination, Romania, policy reform, intersectionality*

1. Introduction

The Roma population, estimated at over 10 million in Europe, represents the largest ethnic minority on the continent. In Romania, where approximately 1.85 million Roma reside (according to recent demographic estimates, although official census data undercounts this figure), the community has historically endured systemic marginalization, poverty, and discrimination (FRA, 2020, p. 6). Despite these adversities, Roma communities have consistently exhibited resilience – a dynamic process through which individuals and groups overcome challenges, sustain cultural identity, and foster social mobility. This article aims to analyze the resilience strategies of Roma communities in Romania by examining their historical context, contemporary challenges, and adaptive responses. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on sociological theory, policy analysis, and empirical case studies. Central to the analysis is the concept of resilience, which, as Ungar (2011, p. 6) defines it, involves

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"the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways."

2. Historical Context: Marginalization and Survival

Understanding Roma resilience necessitates a historical perspective. The Roma presence in Romania dates back to the 14th century, when they were brought as slaves to the Danubian Principalities. This system of slavery – abolished only in the mid-19th century – was marked by severe exploitation, dehumanization, and the systematic denial of rights (Achim, 2004, p. 45). The post-slavery period offered little improvement, as Roma continued to face exclusion from land ownership, formal education, and political participation.

During the interwar and communist periods, state policies oscillated between forced assimilation and outright neglect. Under communism, Roma were relocated to segregated housing, subjected to compulsory employment, and denied the right to cultural expression. These policies reinforced socio-economic stratification and erased traditional community structures (Surdu & Kovats, 2009, p. 8). Despite these oppressive conditions, Roma communities preserved cultural practices, oral traditions, and informal economies as forms of survival and resistance.

The fall of communism in 1989 brought both new opportunities and intensified vulnerabilities. Democratization allowed for the emergence of Roma civil society and political representation, yet it also exposed communities to rising xenophobia, economic marginalization, and institutional neglect (Tremlett, 2013, p. 100). The ensuing decades have seen a proliferation of programs aimed at Roma inclusion – many funded by the European Union – but with limited transformative outcomes.

3. Theoretical Framework: Resilience and Intersectionality

This analysis is grounded in the resilience framework and enriched by intersectionality theory. Resilience is conceptualized not as a static trait but as a set of dynamic, context-dependent strategies. These strategies encompass psychological, social, and structural dimensions. Intersectionality, a framework articulated by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1243), highlights how overlapping identities – such as ethnicity, class, and gender – shape experiences of oppression and resistance.

In the Roma context, resilience is enacted through both individual coping mechanisms and collective action. It includes maintaining cultural identity, accessing education, participating in political advocacy, and building community solidarity. The interplay between structural constraints and agency is central to understanding how Roma navigates marginalization while asserting their rights and dignity.

4. Empirical Strategies of Resilience in Contemporary Romania

Resilience in modern Roma communities is expressed through several domains: education, employment, cultural expression, and activism. These domains intersect to form a mosaic of everyday resistance and adaptation.

4.1. Educational Aspirations and Mediation

Despite widespread educational exclusion, many Roma families emphasize the importance of schooling for social mobility. Programs such as the Roma School Mediator initiative have been instrumental in bridging the gap between schools and Roma families, improving attendance rates and reducing dropouts (Barany, 2002, p. 245).

Roma NGOs and community leaders have also implemented tutoring and mentorship programs to support Roma youth in navigating academic pathways. As Vincze (2012, p. 67) notes, “education is simultaneously a site of reproduction of inequality and a space for emancipation.”

4.2. Cultural Revitalization and Artistic Expression

The resurgence of Romani cultural identity has been a powerful form of resilience. Music, dance, language preservation, and storytelling are deployed as strategies to counteract negative stereotypes and assert pride in Roma heritage.

Festivals such as the International Romani Art Festival (IRAF) and projects like the RomArchive have provided platforms for Roma voices and challenged monolithic narratives. Cultural expression thus serves both as healing and political resistance (McGarry, 2010, p. 142).

4.3. Economic Adaptation and Informal Economies

Amid persistent discrimination in formal labor markets, many Roma rely on informal economies – recycling, craftsmanship, street vending – as livelihood strategies. These practices reflect both necessity and entrepreneurial resilience.

In recent years, some Roma entrepreneurs have leveraged digital tools and microfinance opportunities to develop small businesses, especially in crafts, construction, and service sectors (Kóczé & Rövid, 2017, p. 34). Cooperative models and social enterprises have emerged as alternatives aligned with community values.

4.4. Grassroots Mobilization and Political Advocacy

Roma activists and civil society organizations have become increasingly vocal in combating structural racism. Movements such as Aresel and the Roma Civic Alliance have organized protests, conducted legal advocacy, and engaged in policy consultations.

While representation remains limited, Roma candidates have secured local and national positions, signaling a shift in political agency. Participatory governance models, as promoted by European frameworks, have empowered Roma communities to influence policy on housing, education, and health (Ryder, Rostas & Taba, 2014, p. 22).

4.5. Resilience in Health: The Role of Mediators

The Roma health mediator program has been lauded as a best practice by the World Health Organization. By employing trained Roma women as intermediaries between healthcare systems and communities, the program has improved immunization rates, maternal care, and health literacy. These mediators also serve as advocates who navigate systemic barriers and confront discriminatory practices in health institutions (Zeman, Depken & Senchina, 2003, p. 513). The model exemplifies community-led resilience through institutional interface.

5. Case Studies of Community Resilience

To deepen the understanding of resilience among Roma communities, this section explores two case studies: the Pata Rât settlement near Cluj-Napoca and the Roma community in Telechiu village, Bihor County.

5.1. Pata Rât, Cluj-Napoca

Pata Rât is a segregated Roma settlement on the outskirts of Cluj-Napoca, formed after mass evictions in 2010. Despite poor living conditions and systemic exclusion, the community has developed grassroots initiatives such as the Desire Foundation and the Common Front for Housing Rights (*Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire*).

Through legal advocacy, protest, and alliances with academia and international institutions, the residents of Pata Rât have created visibility and pushed for dignified housing solutions (Vincze et al., 2018, p. 72). Their activism reflects resilience through resistance and reimagining urban citizenship.

5.2. Telechiu Village, Bihor County

In Telechiu, a Roma community faced frequent floods and infrastructural neglect. A local Roma leader coordinated with NGOs and local authorities to build a community center, secure flood defenses, and organize health outreach programs. These efforts were supported by the Roma Education Fund and Romanian Social Development Fund. The success in Telechiu illustrates how community leadership, external partnerships, and sustained engagement can enhance resilience (Matache & Bhabha, 2016, p. 159). The initiative strengthened trust in public institutions while preserving community autonomy.

6. Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Inclusion

Addressing the structural barriers and enhancing the resilience of Roma communities in Romania requires systemic and sustained policy reform. The following recommendations are grounded in the evidence presented in previous sections and aim to inform inclusive, equitable, and culturally sensitive policymaking.

6.1. Institutionalize Roma Participation in Policy Design

Roma voices must be at the center of policy formulation and evaluation. This entails not only consultation but genuine partnership with Roma-led organizations at local, regional, and national levels. According to Ryder, Rostas, and Taba (2014, p. 17), “inclusive policy design requires mechanisms that guarantee Roma agency, accountability, and co-ownership.” Establishing advisory councils, allocating quotas for Roma representation, and investing in Roma leadership development are essential steps toward participatory governance.

6.2. Reform Education Systems for Equity and Inclusion

Desegregation and intercultural education must be central to educational reform. This involves abolishing segregated schooling, revising curricula to reflect Roma history and contributions, and training educators in anti-bias pedagogy. Funding should be directed toward inclusive education initiatives such as remedial programs, scholarship schemes, and mentorship for Roma students. Policies should also support the employment of Roma teachers and mediators to serve as role models and liaisons.

6.3. Ensure Equal Access to Quality Healthcare

Building on the health mediator model, Romania should expand community-based health services tailored to Roma needs. Funding for mobile clinics, multilingual materials, and culturally competent training for medical staff must be prioritized. Moreover, structural reforms are needed to eliminate administrative barriers to healthcare access, such as lack of identification documents or discriminatory practices. Targeted investment in mental health services is also necessary to address the psychosocial impacts of long-term marginalization.

6.4. Promote Socioeconomic Integration Through Targeted Employment Programs

Inclusive labor market policies must focus on skills development, entrepreneurship support, and anti-discrimination enforcement. Public-private partnerships can be leveraged to create apprenticeship and internship pathways for Roma youth. Micro-financing programs should be expanded to encourage Roma entrepreneurship,

particularly in traditional crafts and emerging digital sectors. Social enterprises and cooperatives also offer sustainable models for employment that align with communal values.

6.5. Safeguard Housing Rights and Combat Spatial Segregation

National and local governments must commit to ending forced evictions and ensuring secure tenure for Roma residents. Investment in social housing, upgrading informal settlements, and involving Roma in urban planning are key strategies.

Legal assistance and advocacy mechanisms should be made available to help Roma communities claim housing rights and resist spatial marginalization.

6.6. Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Transparent mechanisms must be established to monitor the implementation and impact of Roma inclusion policies. These should include disaggregated data collection, independent evaluations, and community feedback systems. The EU's Roma Strategic Framework (2020) provides a useful model for indicators-based assessment that can be adapted at the national level. Civil society must be resourced to serve as watchdogs and collaborators.

6.7. Combat Anti-Roma Racism Through Public Awareness Campaigns

Public education campaigns that challenge anti-Roma prejudice and promote intercultural understanding are vital. Media, schools, and cultural institutions must play a proactive role in reshaping public narratives. Support for Roma arts, media projects, and cultural festivals can humanize Roma experiences and foster dialogue. As McGarry (2014, p. 769) argues, "transforming Roma representation is a political act that can shift societal attitudes."

7. Policy Landscape and Institutional Responses

Over the last two decades, national and European policies have aimed to improve Roma inclusion. Romania's National Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority (2021–2027) emphasizes education, health, employment, and housing. However, gaps between policy and implementation remain profound. Monitoring reports cite insufficient funding, poor inter-agency coordination, and lack of community participation as key barriers (Open Society Foundations, 2019, p. 45). Moreover, the persistence of anti-Roma prejudice undermines policy efficacy. Best practices include community-based monitoring, participatory budgeting, and Roma-led program design. For policies to succeed,

resilience must be recognized not as a passive endurance but as an active capacity to transform socio-political structures.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Roma communities in Romania have shown extraordinary resilience despite facing entrenched marginalization they have exemplify resilience through multifaceted strategies rooted in cultural identity, collective action, and adaptive ingenuity. While structural discrimination persists, Roma responses demonstrate that resilience is not merely survival – it is transformation. However, resilience alone is not sufficient; structural transformation is needed. These policy recommendations outline a comprehensive framework that centers Roma agency, addresses systemic injustice, and promotes long-term social inclusion.

To support Roma resilience, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Invest in Roma-led education and health initiatives.
- Recognize and support informal economies through legal and financial tools.
- Institutionalize participatory governance in policy-making.
- Fund cultural preservation and counter-stereotyping campaigns.
- Ensure robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms in Roma inclusion programs.

By valuing and amplifying Roma agency, Romanian society can move toward a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient future.

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The Desistance Paradigm and the Correctional Space in Probation: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract. In criminology, the desistance paradigm studies the complex mechanisms by which people stop criminal activity and change into a steady, prosocial identity. An important intervention point in this process, probation provides rehabilitative support as well as monitoring. Emphasizing structural and institutional factors, identity transformation, and the difficulties of maintaining long-term behavioral change, this paper uses a thematic analysis to investigate the junction between desistance and the correctional space inside probation. The results show that probation is a site of both opportunity and constraint where people negotiate liminal identities molded by social interactions, personal agency, and systematic events. Particular focus is on the part probation officials play in encouraging or discouraging desistance, the success of rehabilitation programs, and the wider consequences for criminal justice policy. This paper emphasizes the importance of probation systems changing towards strengths-based, relational, and trauma-informed methods by combining theoretical frameworks with practical observations. Emphasizing policies meant to improve rehabilitation efforts, remove structural obstacles to reintegration, and lower recidivism by more person-centered treatments, the conclusions stress.

Keywords: *desistance, probation, correctional space, offender rehabilitation, identity transformation*

1. Introduction

Desistance, the process of ceasing criminal behavior, is a core focus in criminological research and a critical concept in probation practice. Desistance stresses personal development, social support, and structural options that allow people to withdraw from offending (Albertson, Phillips, Fowler, & Collinson, 2022). Unlike conventional punitive treatments). An important intervention area where people negotiate the complexity of desistance, balancing rehabilitation with supervisory limitations, is probation. Probation serves as both a rehabilitative platform and a correctional tool, therefore influencing offenders' reintegration experiences and long-term behavioral modification (Canton, 2024; Burke, 2015).

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From early models emphasizing personal willpower to modern systems stressing the interaction between personal agency and structural assistance, the research of desistance in probation has developed from Early theoretical stances stressed the importance of identity transformation and saw desistance as a linear process defined by significant life events as job, stable relationships, or aging (Elliott & Healy, 2013; Farrall, 2016). More recently, though, studies refuting this deterministic viewpoint frame desistance as a dynamic and frequently nonlinear journey with recurrent difficulties, failures, and social effects (Best, Irving, & Albertson, 2017; Benouamer, Telle, Tiberi, & Pham, 2024). Particularly important in this process are probation officials, who offer direction, encouragement, and monitoring that helps someone move effectively into a law-abiding existence (Dufour, 2015; Chui & Chan, 2014).

Furthermore, probation works in a larger sociopolitical context where structural obstacles including poverty, discrimination, and systematic inequity influence a person's desistance path (Cobbina, Morash, Kashy, & Smith, 2014). Particularly race and socioeconomic class, intersectional elements alter probationers' experiences, so impacting their access to resources and chances that support recovery (Glynn, 2016; Coley, 2024). The correctional area inside probation so becomes a zone of both limitation and possibilities, where people must negotiate bureaucratic institutions while trying to recreate their identities (Coskun, 2023).

Modern methods combining parts of restorative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and social inclusion techniques have also affected the desistance paradigm. Programs like Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) model show how organized responsibility, along with rehabilitative support, could enhance probation results (Bartels, 2019.). In social work, too, viewpoints support a more person-centered approach to probation, stressing customized interventions catered to the particular needs and socioeconomic situation of offenders (Canton, 2022).

This study aims to investigate the relationship between desistance and the penal environment in probation, thereby examining how probation systems either help or impede offenders' long-term recovery. By means of actual case studies and a thematic analysis of current literature, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do individuals experiencing social transitions navigate liminal identities in the context of probation?
- What are the dominant theoretical and practical frameworks used to understand desistance within probation?
- How do probation officers and correctional policies shape the desistance process?
- What are the implications of desistance research for probation practice, policy, and social reintegration strategies?

By exploring these questions, this paper contributes to the growing body of desistance literature and offers insights into the ways probation can be structured

to better support offenders in their journey toward reintegration. The study also underscores the importance of adopting a holistic, strengths-based approach to probation, recognizing that desistance is not merely an absence of crime but a process of identity transformation and social re-engagement (Fox & Marsh, 2016; Barry, 2013).

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of desistance, or the process of ceasing criminal behavior, is central to probation practice and has been explored through various theoretical lenses. Contemporary desistance research identifies three primary stages: primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance, each reflecting different aspects of behavioral change and identity transformation (McNeill, 2009; King, 2013). Additionally, probation plays a dual role as both a correctional and rehabilitative space, facilitating desistance through structured supervision, social support, and access to rehabilitative services (Herzog-Evans, 2011; McCulloch, 2005). This section outlines key desistance theories and examines how probation functions as a space where identity reconstruction and reintegration occur.

Desistance theories have evolved from early behavioral models that emphasized external control to more recent approaches focusing on identity change. Primary desistance refers to a temporary cessation of criminal activity, often due to external constraints such as legal supervision (Hart & Healy, 2018). Secondary desistance occurs when individuals internalize a new self-concept as a non-offender, often facilitated by social bonds, employment, and community support (Healy, 2020; King, 2014). Tertiary desistance extends beyond behavioral and cognitive transformation to include full social reintegration, where individuals gain acceptance within their communities and develop a sense of pro-social belonging (Kay, 2016; Nixon, 2020).

Probationary systems play a critical role in each stage of desistance, particularly in fostering secondary and tertiary desistance through rehabilitative initiatives and structured supervision. Research suggests that identity reconstruction is a crucial element of sustained desistance, where individuals must renegotiate their self-concept and establish a pro-social identity (Irving & Young, 2004; Hill, 2010). However, this process is complex and often nonlinear, with many individuals experiencing periods of relapse before achieving stability (Mizel & Abrams, 2018).

Desistance does not occur in isolation but is deeply embedded in social structures and relationships. The probation process, when implemented effectively, provides individuals with the necessary support to navigate the challenges of reintegration (Koffeld-Hamidane, Andvig, & Karlsson, 2024). Studies suggest that desistance is more likely to be successful when individuals receive guidance from probation officers who employ a strengths-based, relational approach rather than punitive supervision (Kemshall, Burroughs, Soren, & Thorogood, 2021).

Social capital plays a significant role in supporting desistance by enabling access to employment, education, and pro-social networks (Wilson, 2014). Peer mentoring programs, where individuals with lived experience guide those in the early stages of desistance, have been shown to enhance self-efficacy and reinforce the belief in change (Nixon, 2020). Additionally, the role of social identity in desistance has been examined in relation to restorative justice practices, which emphasize accountability and reintegration rather than exclusion (Kirkwood & Hamad, 2019).

Probation operates at the intersection of punishment and rehabilitation, creating both constraints and opportunities for individuals attempting to desist from crime (Tidmarsh, 2024). On one hand, probation imposes legal obligations and behavioral restrictions, often reinforcing a sense of surveillance and control. On the other hand, when approached through a rehabilitative lens, probation can serve as a vital support system that fosters long-term behavioral change and identity reconstruction (Järveläinen, Rantanen, & Toikko, 2024).

The probation process is often described as a liminal phase – a transitional space where individuals move between offender status and reintegration into society (Hill, 2010; Irving & Young, 2004). This liminality can be both empowering and destabilizing, depending on the quality of support provided by probation officers and the availability of social resources (Hart & Healy, 2018). Probation that prioritizes desistance-oriented strategies – such as education, therapy, and employment programs – has been found to significantly improve reintegration outcomes (Kemshall et al., 2021).

Despite its potential, probation is not always effective in promoting desistance. The overuse of risk-based models and surveillance-oriented supervision can create barriers to reintegration by reinforcing criminal identities rather than facilitating change (Kay, 2016). Additionally, individuals on probation often face systemic challenges such as stigma, economic exclusion, and limited access to support services, all of which can impede their desistance efforts (King, 2014; Rutter, 2021).

Technology and social media have introduced new dimensions to the desistance process. Online identities and digital traces of past offenses can hinder reintegration, as individuals struggle to escape the stigma of prior convictions (Rutter, 2021). This highlights the need for probation systems to adopt a more holistic, adaptive approach that considers modern socio-technological realities in desistance efforts.

Desistance theories provide a valuable framework for understanding the complex and multidimensional nature of disengaging from crime. The role of probation as both a correctional and rehabilitative space is crucial in this process, with its success largely dependent on individualized, relational approaches that prioritize identity transformation and social support. As research continues to develop, probation systems must move beyond punitive control and embrace evidence-based practices that empower individuals to construct sustainable, prosocial identities.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach for this study is rooted in thematic analysis, a qualitative research method that allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns within textual data. Given the complexity of desistance and its intersection with probation, thematic analysis provides a structured yet flexible framework for examining how individuals navigate their transition away from crime. This section outlines the justification for using thematic analysis, describes the data sources utilized, and details the analytical process applied to the collected data.

Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for studying desistance because it enables researchers to explore subjective experiences, identity transformations, and structural influences shaping the desistance process. Unlike quantitative methods that focus on measuring recidivism rates, thematic analysis delves into the lived experiences of individuals engaged in desistance, revealing underlying psychological, social, and systemic factors (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that desistance involves both behavioral change and identity reconstruction, thematic analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals perceive their transition away from crime and the role probation plays in this process.

Additionally, thematic analysis provides a systematic yet iterative approach to identifying recurring patterns within textual data. This is particularly relevant for desistance research, where themes such as identity renegotiation, social capital, and institutional support emerge across multiple studies and individual narratives. By adopting this method, the study can capture the nuanced and multi-layered nature of desistance as experienced within probation settings.

This study draws on secondary data sources, including a comprehensive review of existing empirical studies, policy reports, and theoretical discussions on desistance and probation. The selection criteria for sources included:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published in criminology, probation, and social work journals.
- Qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of individuals on probation.
- Theoretical and policy papers that examine the structural and institutional role of probation in facilitating desistance.

To ensure reliability and validity, the study incorporates diverse perspectives from different jurisdictions, offender populations, and probation models. Sources were retrieved from established academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, with a focus on research published within the last two decades.

The thematic analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings were synthesized into a cohesive narrative, highlighting key insights into how probation supports or hinders desistance. The final themes

were integrated into the study's discussion and policy recommendations, ensuring direct applicability to probation practice.

As a secondary research study, this analysis did not involve direct engagement with research participants, thereby eliminating risks related to confidentiality and informed consent. However, all reviewed literature was critically appraised for ethical integrity, methodological rigor, and relevance to ensure that the findings accurately represent the experiences of individuals navigating desistance through probation.

The use of thematic analysis in this study facilitates a deeper understanding of desistance as a complex, identity-driven process within the probationary system. By systematically analyzing qualitative research, this approach uncovers key theoretical, structural, and experiential factors influencing desistance, ultimately informing more effective probation policies and practices.

4. Findings and thematic analysis

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of desistance within probation, structured around three key themes: structural and institutional influences on desistance, the role of probation officers in identity transformation, and challenges in achieving long-term behavioral change. These themes reflect the complex interplay of personal agency, systemic support, and the barriers that individuals face in their transition away from criminal behavior.

Theme 1: Structural and Institutional Influences on Desistance

Desistance is not solely an individual journey but is shaped by structural and institutional contexts, including probation policies, risk assessment tools, and social support systems. Research suggests that probation as an institution can either facilitate or hinder desistance, depending on how it is structured and implemented (Carr, 2020; Graham, 2018). The role of risk assessment tools has been particularly debated, with studies indicating that while they offer a structured approach to monitoring individuals, they may also reinforce negative labels, making it harder for probationers to redefine their identities in prosocial ways (Barylski & Wormith, 2022).

The strengths-based model of probation, which prioritizes rehabilitation and personal development, has emerged as a promising alternative to punitive supervision (Fox & Marsh, 2016). This model emphasizes building social capital, fostering motivation, and reducing criminogenic risks, ultimately enhancing the probability of long-term desistance (Hough et al., 2020). However, bureaucratic constraints and punitive elements within probation systems often create tensions between control and support, leaving probationers caught between compliance-driven requirements and their own rehabilitative needs (Farrall et al., 2014).

Additionally, broader social structures such as employment opportunities, housing stability, and social integration play a crucial role in desistance. Studies highlight that lack of access to stable employment and social reintegration increases recidivism risks, particularly for individuals who struggle with stigma and social exclusion (McNeill, 2012; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). As such, probation policies must address not only criminal behavior but also social inequalities that undermine successful reintegration (Petersilia, 2003).

Theme 2: The Role of Probation Officers in Identity Transformation

A central factor influencing desistance is the quality of relationships between probation officers and probationers. Research suggests that probation officers who adopt a supportive and rehabilitative role are more effective in fostering identity transformation and long-term behavioral change (Healy, 2012; Hughes, 2016). Relational desistance, a concept emphasizing the importance of trust and social support, highlights how offenders are more likely to desist when they experience positive, constructive engagement with probation professionals (Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

The narrative approach to desistance, introduced by Maruna (2001), underscores the importance of self-redefinition in the rehabilitation process. Probation officers play a critical role in helping individuals construct a new, prosocial identity that is not solely defined by their past criminality. This process often involves challenging internalized stigma, reinforcing strengths, and creating alternative life narratives that promote self-efficacy (Vaughan, 2007).

However, the dual role of probation officers as both enforcers of compliance and providers of support presents a challenge. Studies have shown that when probation supervision is overly punitive or surveillance-focused, individuals feel disconnected from the process, leading to frustration and increased risk of reoffending (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Conversely, when probation officers take on mentorship roles, they facilitate genuine engagement and trust, which are essential for successful desistance (Crewe et al., 2017).

In some cases, probation officers become “gatekeepers” to social opportunities, influencing access to housing, education, and mental health support. The research suggests that probationers who receive holistic, individualized interventions – rather than one-size-fits-all supervision – are more likely to transition successfully into society (Fergusson, 2021).

Theme 3: Challenges in Achieving Long-Term Behavioral Change

While many probationers experience initial success in desistance, maintaining long-term behavioral change remains a persistent challenge. The literature highlights several key barriers, including social stigma, lack of support networks, and the enduring impact of past criminal records (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

One of the most significant challenges is the "pains of desistance", a concept that captures the psychological and emotional struggles individuals face in their transition away from crime (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). These struggles often include feelings of isolation, identity confusion, and difficulties in forming prosocial relationships. Without ongoing mentorship and structured support systems, many individuals relapse into criminal behavior due to a lack of belonging and economic stability (Hughes, 2016).

Another challenge is the disconnection between short-term compliance and long-term change. Many probation programs emphasize monitoring and surveillance, often requiring individuals to adhere to rigid conditions without necessarily equipping them with the skills and resources needed to sustain change (Farrall et al., 2014; Laub & Sampson, 2003). While compliance with probation conditions is often seen as a proxy for rehabilitation, research suggests that formal compliance does not necessarily equate to genuine desistance (Maruna, 2001).

Finally, intersectional factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic background influence an individual's ability to achieve long-term desistance. Women, for example, often face unique barriers related to trauma, domestic violence, and caregiving responsibilities, which standard probation models fail to adequately address (Crewe et al., 2017). Similarly, individuals from racialized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds encounter additional systemic obstacles, including discriminatory hiring practices and lack of access to community resources (Bottoms & Shapland, 2016).

To overcome these barriers, probation programs must adopt a more holistic, individualized approach, integrating therapeutic interventions, employment training, and community support networks (Fox & Marsh, 2016; Healy, 2012). Emerging models, such as peer mentoring and lived-experience programs, have shown promise in bridging the gap between formal supervision and meaningful social reintegration (Nixon, 2020).

The thematic analysis reveals that desistance within probation is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, relational, and individual factors. While probation can provide a crucial support system, its effectiveness depends on how supervision is delivered, the role of probation officers, and the availability of long-term social support.

Structural barriers, such as stigmatization, economic marginalization, and rigid probation requirements, continue to hinder desistance outcomes. At the same time, positive, trust-based relationships with probation officers can significantly enhance an individual's ability to redefine their identity and sustain behavioral change. The findings suggest that desistance should not be viewed as a linear or solely individual process but rather as an ongoing negotiation between personal agency and structural support systems.

Moving forward, policy and practice should prioritize flexible, person-centered approaches that acknowledge the diversity of desistance experiences. By shifting from a punitive model to one that fosters rehabilitation, probation systems can more effectively support individuals in their long-term transition toward a crime-free life.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of desistance within probation, emphasizing the interplay between structural, relational, and personal factors. This section discusses the implications for probation policy and practice, as well as gaps in desistance research that warrant further exploration.

A significant implication of this study is the need to shift probation from a compliance-driven system toward a rehabilitative and supportive model. Research has consistently demonstrated that punitive and surveillance-focused probation strategies do not facilitate long-term desistance (Barry, 2013; Canton, 2024). Instead, approaches that emphasize trust, personal agency, and social capital are more effective in helping probationers build crime-free identities (McCulloch, 2005; Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

Therapeutic jurisprudence-based models, such as Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE), have shown promise in integrating swift but proportionate sanctions with rehabilitative support, striking a balance between accountability and assistance (Bartels, 2019). However, these models must be adapted to account for the diverse needs of probationers, including those from marginalized communities (Glynn, 2016).

One of the most critical factors in the probation process is the relationship between probation officers and clients. Research suggests that probation officers who engage in motivational interviewing, strengths-based supervision, and relational desistance approaches foster greater self-efficacy and identity transformation among probationers (Healy, 2020; King, 2014).

Probation officers should be trained in narrative approaches to desistance, which enable probationers to reframe their past experiences and develop future-oriented identities (Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2016). However, institutional constraints and high caseloads often limit officers' ability to provide individualized support, leading to a mechanical rather than transformative approach to supervision (Albertson et al., 2022; Nixon, 2020).

Additionally, probation services must address issues of cultural competency and intersectionality. Studies indicate that Black and ethnic minority probationers often face additional systemic barriers, such as racial profiling, economic marginalization, and mistrust of the justice system (Cobbina et al., 2014; Glynn, 2016). Training probation officers to recognize these challenges and adopt more inclusive practices is essential for equitable desistance outcomes (Chui & Chan, 2014).

Even after successfully completing probation, many individuals struggle with the long-term consequences of having a criminal record, particularly regarding employment, housing, and social reintegration (McNeill, 2009; Canton, 2022). Social stigma remains a major barrier to desistance, reinforcing exclusion rather than rehabilitation (Fergusson, 2021). Probation policy must therefore extend beyond supervision and into resettlement strategies, ensuring that probationers gain access to stable employment, education, and social services (Dufour, 2015; Fox & Marsh, 2016). Programs that facilitate peer mentoring, lived experience employment, and community engagement have proven particularly effective in bridging the gap between desistance research and real-world policy implementation (Nixon, 2020; Kirkwood & Hamad, 2019).

Despite significant advancements in desistance research, several critical gaps remain, particularly in understanding how different populations experience probation and rehabilitation.

Most desistance studies focus on short-term behavioral changes during probation rather than long-term identity transformation (Elliott & Healy, 2013; Farrall et al., 2014). Longitudinal research tracking individuals beyond probation is needed to understand which factors contribute to sustained desistance over the life course (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Studies also need to differentiate between primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance. While primary desistance refers to the cessation of criminal behavior, secondary desistance involves internal identity changes, and tertiary desistance requires broader societal acceptance of the ex-offender's reintegration (King, 2013; Healy, 2020). Current probation policies often fail to account for these distinctions, resulting in superficial or short-term rehabilitation efforts (Kemshall et al., 2021).

Most desistance theories are based on male-dominated samples, yet emerging research highlights significant gendered differences in how individuals navigate probation and rehabilitation (Crewe et al., 2017). Women on probation often experience unique barriers related to trauma, domestic violence, and caregiving responsibilities, which are not adequately addressed in standard desistance models (Best et al., 2017).

Research suggests that gender-responsive probation programs – which incorporate trauma-informed care, mental health support, and childcare assistance – are more effective in facilitating desistance among female probationers (Benouamer et al., 2024; Herzog-Evans, 2011). However, such approaches remain underutilized in mainstream probation policy, highlighting the need for more targeted interventions (Burke, 2015).

An emerging area of interest is the impact of social media on desistance trajectories. While online platforms can provide opportunities for social reintegration, they also expose probationers to potential triggers, stigmatization, and digital surveillance (Rutter, 2021).

Probation policies need to consider how digital engagement affects identity transformation and reintegration, particularly for younger probationers who rely heavily on online interactions for employment, education, and social relationships (Tidmarsh, 2024). Future research should explore how digital literacy programs and virtual mentorship initiatives can support desistance within a rapidly evolving technological landscape (Mizel & Abrams, 2018).

While mental health challenges are prevalent among probationers, there is limited research on how mental health interventions can be integrated into desistance models (Anderson, 2016; Hill, 2010). Studies indicate that probationers with untreated mental health conditions face significantly higher risks of recidivism, yet most probation programs prioritize risk management over therapeutic support (Deering & Smith, 2016; Wilson, 2014). Future research should investigate how probation services can integrate psychological and psychiatric care into supervision models, ensuring that probationers receive holistic and individualized support rather than reactive, punishment-oriented interventions (Adshead, 2014; Hart & Healy, 2018).

The discussion underscores the importance of moving beyond traditional, punitive probation models and toward a rehabilitative, person-centered approach. Key policy implications include rethinking the role of probation officers, addressing systemic barriers to reintegration, and adopting evidence-based desistance models that prioritize social support, education, and long-term stability.

At the same time, significant research gaps remain, particularly concerning long-term desistance trajectories, gendered experiences, digital influences, and mental health considerations. Addressing these gaps requires a multidisciplinary approach, integrating criminology, psychology, social work, and digital sociology to develop more holistic and effective probation strategies. By embracing a strengths-based, inclusive, and evidence-driven model of probation, policymakers and practitioners can better support probationers in their transition to a crime-free life, ultimately contributing to a more just and rehabilitative criminal justice system.

6. Conclusion

Emphasizing the ways in which probation systems could either help or impede long-term rehabilitation, this study has investigated the complicated link between desistance and the penal environment in probation. Several important new perspectives on the navigation of liminal identities, theoretical and practical frameworks of desistance, the function of probation officials, and the wider consequences for policy and practice have surfaced by means of a thematic analysis of current literature and empirical investigations.

Those on probation typically live in a situation of liminality – that is, between offender status and complete reintegration into society. This transitional period

calls for well-planned interventions acknowledging the psychological, social, and structural difficulties of desistance. Although probation provides a chance for rehabilitation, social isolation, workplace discrimination, and stigma can all help to prolong the liminal condition and raise recidivism risk.

Results imply that desistance is a socially ingrained process needing supporting surroundings that help to rebuild identity rather than only an individual endeavor. Probation programs have to change their emphasis from risk management alone to comprehensive rehabilitation plans giving agency, social capital, and relational desistance top priority.

Three main desistance models – primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance – that influence probation behavior have been underlined in this paper. Although main desistance is the stop of illegal activity, secondary desistance stresses internal identity development and tertiary desistance addresses society acceptance of the probationer's reintegration.

More successful than surveillance-heavy approaches are probationary programs combining strengths-based, person-centered, and relational desistance models. Particularly helpful in maintaining behavioral change have been narrative approaches to desistance – in which probationers rebuild their past events into positive future identities. But institutional limitations and risk-oriented rules sometimes prevent these models from being fully used, therefore restricting the transforming power of probation.

Although their influence on the desistance process is mostly shaped by probation officials, their efficiency depends on their capacity to balance authority with rehabilitation. Officers who use a therapeutic and relational approach – that is, who give motivation, direction, and trust-building top priority – tend to have better success rates in helping desistance. But systematic obstacles including heavy caseloads, bureaucratic restrictions, and a punitive attitude inside probationary agencies sometimes prohibit officials from offering the required individualized support.

Many times, correctional strategies overlook the long-term difficulties of reintegration in favor of short-term risk reduction over sustained rehabilitation. Policy systems that combine desistance-supportive strategies including trauma-informed treatments, peer mentorship programs, and job-oriented reintegration programs are much needed.

Results show that the probationary system has to change from its conventional supervisory role to adopt a more rehabilitative and reintegrative attitude. Probation services have to give interventions that enable long-term desistance and successful reintegration top priority, not only risk management and compliance.

From a practice standpoint, probation programs should include customized, client-centered approaches addressing social stigma, job challenges, and mental

health issues. Customizing treatments to the particular situation of every probationer helps practitioners promote more environmentally friendly results of rehabilitation. Long-term desistance can be improved with a strengths-based strategy that acknowledges the probationer's capacity for change instead of only tracking dangers.

Legislators, governments and criminal justice systems have to change probation rules to provide long-term desistance top priority over temporary compliance top priority. Often stressing control and monitoring, current probation regimes could impede reintegration and transformation of identity. Policymakers should concentrate on putting evidence-based rehabilitation-promoting policies including incentives for job, education, and family reunification initiatives into action. Restoring justice methods, community involvement, and legislative initiatives removing structural obstacles for those with criminal histories should get more weight in social reintegration. Preventing recidivism depends much on community-based programs that foster social inclusion and offer post-probation assistance. Eliminating limits on housing, work, and social benefits for former prisoners would greatly raise their chances of long-term desistance.

Emphasizing mentoring, peer support, and strengths-based therapies, probation rules should include relational desistance models. These strategies offer a more encouraging structure for identity development by encouraging social contacts and a feeling of belonging. Trauma-informed care and cultural competence training also must be taught to probationers so that desistance routes are open to a variety of them. Knowing how mental health, drug use, and systematic inequality interact would help police better offer genuine rehabilitation assistance.

Record expungement and anti-discrimination laws should be adopted by governments to help to lessen the long-term social stigma connected with a criminal past. Often creating insurmountable challenges to reintegration, incarceration's downstream effects lock people in cycles of marginalization. Policies supporting equitable hiring policies, housing availability, and financial support for individuals leaving the prison system can help to greatly lower recidivism rates.

Programs for employment and education designed for probationers should also be extended to assist in economic stability as the basis for desistance. Between supervision and self-sufficiency, offering vocational training, apprenticeships, and corporate incentives for hiring justice-involved people can help to close the distance.

By lowering caseloads and moving away from punitive monitoring, probationary officials would be free to establish closer bonds of rehabilitation with their offenders. High caseloads might result in insufficient interaction with probationers' personal problems and reintegration needs, therefore lessening the usefulness of probation as a rehabilitative tool. Moreover, applying desistance-oriented officer training courses helps probationers to assist in reintegration and identity transformation. Officers should be more suited with skills to inspire, mentor, and guide probationers

through the desistance process, so building trust and self-efficacy than with rule enforcement.

Future research should follow probationers over long times to see how desistance develops outside of the first monitoring period. Many current research concentrate on short-term success rates, therefore neglecting the long-term dynamics of identity transition and reintegration. Research should also investigate how digital participation, gender, and intersectionality affect desistance to make sure laws stay sensitive to the several requirements of probationers. Examined as possible aids for maintaining desistance are the expanding influence of social media, online learning, and virtual support networks in probation.

This research emphasizes the importance of probation systems changing from punitive control toward supportive rehabilitation. Criminal justice systems can build a more efficient, compassionate, and fair probation system by combining strengths-based desistance models, reform of probation rules, and elimination of structural obstacles to reintegration. Desistance is ultimately about reconstructing life, identities, and possibilities as much as it is about stopping illegal activity. For people negotiating probation, a justice system that adopts this viewpoint will be more suited to help with long-term social reintegration and crime-free lives.

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The Impact of Education on the Development of Resilience among Children Affected by Parental Migration

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Abstract. Parental migration is a social phenomenon with significant implications for the emotional and cognitive development of children left behind. In this context, resilience is configured as an essential skill for adapting and managing the challenges generated by parental separation. This paper explores the role of education in developing resilience in children affected by parental migration, highlighting the importance of structured educational interventions, psychosocial support and an inclusive school environment. Approaching the phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective, the research analyzes factors such as the emotional support provided by teachers, the integration of socio-emotional learning strategies and the active involvement of the community in supporting these children. The results obtained suggest that an educational framework adapted to the specific needs of children with migrant parents contributes significantly to increasing their capacity to cope with difficulties, reducing the risks of emotional vulnerability and social exclusion. The study emphasizes the need to develop educational policies and intervention programs dedicated to strengthening the resilience of these children, thus ensuring a balanced educational and social path for them.

Keywords: *education, resilience, children, parental migration, socio-emotional support*

1. Introduction

Parental migration for work has become a large-scale social phenomenon, with profound implications for the development of children left behind. With Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, this phenomenon has experienced a considerable intensification, with the facilitation of labor movement resulting in the migration of a significant number of parents in search of economic opportunities abroad. According to estimates, a considerable number of children in Romania are in a situation of separation from their parents, which has a direct impact on the processes of emotional, social and educational development. These socio-economic realities call into question the nature and extent of the consequences for children,

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and research conducted in this field suggests that parental migration can negatively influence fundamental aspects of children's development (Iosim et al., 2022)

Numerous studies have shown that separation from parents can significantly affect children's emotional and cognitive development. In this regard, children left at home are at increased risk of developing emotional disorders, such as depression and anxiety, as well as difficulties in social integration, especially in the context of not receiving stable parental support (Dafinoiu et al., 2021). Thus, the absence of parents can lead to increased vulnerability of these children, especially in terms of managing emotions and adapting to social norms, and in some cases, the effects can be long-term, affecting their ability to interact effectively with peers and integrate into the community.

However, the impact of parental migration on children is not exclusively negative. On the other hand, financial remittances sent by parents can contribute to improving children's material conditions and facilitate their access to quality education. According to recent research, these financial resources can significantly improve children's living standards and reduce the economic barrier to accessing educational services or extracurricular activities that are essential for their personal development (Matei & Bobârnat, 2021). In some cases, children from migrant families can develop increased motivation for academic performance, perceiving education as an essential means to improve their future prospects and overcome their precarious socio-economic conditions (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2020). These are aspects that can represent a source of positive mobilization, stimulating academic performance and creating a favorable framework for their intellectual development.

However, the absence of a stable parental figure can also lead to some significant difficulties, such as an increased risk of school dropout, emotional instability, and difficulties in making important decisions in daily life. Children left at home may experience a deficit in direct parental guidance, which can lead to a decrease in motivation for education and, implicitly, to a higher rate of school dropout (Matei & Bobârnat, 2021). Also, risks related to emotional and social instability, such as difficult relationships with peers or authorities, can deepen the adaptation difficulties of these children.

In this context, education plays a key role in developing the resilience of children affected by parental migration. Educational interventions can contribute significantly to supporting these children in their adaptation process, by developing coping skills that allow them to face everyday challenges (Dafinoiu et al., 2021). Studies suggest that a relationship of trust and support from teachers can significantly reduce the negative impact of parental migration on children, facilitating their integration into the school community. In addition, access to extracurricular activities, which promote social interactions and the development of cognitive skills, can contribute to improving self-esteem and reducing the feeling of emotional abandonment felt by these children (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2020).

Thus, the negative effects of migration can be mitigated through an adapted educational system and through interventions that support the emotional and social development of children. In this regard, it is essential that educational and social authorities develop policies and programs that support children left behind by their parents' migration, in order to ensure a balanced educational path and an optimal development environment (Fond-Harmant & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2016).

2. The Dimension of the Phenomenon of Parental Migration in the International Context

Parental migration for work is a global phenomenon that has intensified in recent decades, with a significant impact on family structures and the development of children left behind in their countries of origin. According to United Nations estimates, there were approximately 232 million international migrants in 2013, representing 3.2% of the global population (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2013). While labour migration brings economic benefits by increasing family incomes, it also has profound social impacts, particularly on children left behind.

This phenomenon is prevalent in regions where the labor force migrates massively in search of economic opportunities. In Latin America, between 7% and 21% of children live in transnational families, where one or both parents are absent due to migration (DeWaard et al., 2018). In Asia, maternal migration is associated with more pronounced negative effects on children's emotional development, while in sub-Saharan Africa, family separation leads to changes in social norms and decreased levels of parental supervision (Strong et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2016).

2.1. Impact on Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health

International studies suggest that those children left behind are more prone to depression, anxiety, and emotional distress compared to those who grow up with both parents. In China, research has shown a significant percentage of children with migrant parents suffer from depression, having difficulty managing emotions and relating to others (Jin et al., 2020, Chen et al., 2022).

The impact of parental separation varies by gender, with girls being more vulnerable to depression and anxiety, and having a greater emotional need for parental support. On the other hand, boys are more prone to aggressive behavior and delinquency (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2021; Zheng, 2016). At the same time, the absence of the mother has a greater impact on emotional attachment than the absence of the father, leading to lower levels of emotional security (Dewaard et al., 2018). In Jamaica, children affected by parental migration reported feelings of loss similar to

those of orphaned children, thus highlighting the strong impact of separation in the long term (Pottinger, 2005).

2.2. School Performance and the Risk of Dropping Out

Parental migration influences children's academic performance, with effects varying depending on educational support and family structure. On the one hand, financial remittances can contribute to improving access to education, allowing children to benefit from additional resources, such as tutoring or access to better educational institutions (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2019). On the other hand, lack of parental supervision leads to decreased academic motivation, school absenteeism and even an increased risk of school dropout, especially among boys (Udrea & Guiu, 2022).

In Cambodia, children with migrant parents were found to complete fewer years of schooling compared to those living with both parents (Marchetta & Sim, 2021). In Bangladesh, the probability of school enrollment decreases by 10% among children affected by migration (Ahmed et al., 2024).

2.3. Physical Health and General Development

In some regions, children left behind are at higher risk of malnutrition, stunting, and physical health problems. In China, these children are 51% more likely to have health problems than those living with both parents (Jin et al., 2020). Similarly, in Ethiopia, India, and Peru, parental migration did not lead to significant improvements in children's health, even as family incomes increased (Nguyen, 2016).

3. The Consequences of the Phenomenon of Parental Migration in Romania

Economic migration has become a significant social phenomenon in Romania, with major implications for family structure and the development of children left behind in the country. After Romania joined the European Union in 2007, the migration flow has intensified considerably, leading to a significant increase in the number of children left behind by their parents. It is estimated that between 10% and 15% of the Romanian population migrated in search of economic opportunities, which has had a considerable impact on the number of children affected by this phenomenon (Dafinoiu et al., 2021). According to data provided by the National Authority for the Protection of Child Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA), in 2021, approximately 75,000 children in Romania had at least one parent working abroad, and almost 20,000 of them were completely deprived of both parents (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2020). Other estimates suggest that the actual number of children affected by parental migration is much higher, reaching 350,000 children (Matei & Bobârnat, 2021).

This phenomenon has caused significant changes in family structure, requiring changes in parental dynamics and having important consequences on the emotional and educational health of children. In the context of migration, children left behind are often cared for by grandparents, relatives or designated guardians, and in some cases, they are placed in foster care (Udrea & Guiu, 2022). This situation is prevalent in rural regions in northeastern and southwestern Romania, where unemployment is high and employment opportunities are limited (Bălțeanu et al., 2018).

3.1. Impact on Children's Mental and Emotional Health

Studies conducted in Romania confirm that separation from parents has negative effects on the emotional health of children left at home. A study on a sample of 889 adolescents with migrant parents revealed that 51% of them suffer from dysthymia, a chronic form of depression (Dafinoiu et al., 2021).

Factors contributing to the emotional vulnerability of children left behind can be identified in several ways, having a significant impact on their psychological development. A major factor is the feeling of abandonment, perceived by children as an emotional rejection by their parents, which can negatively influence their self-esteem and affect their social interactions. At the same time, the lack of adequate emotional support is another important factor: although grandparents or other responsible persons can provide physical care, the emotional support essential for the child's healthy development is often insufficient. In addition, the absence of parents, especially the mother, can generate an insecure attachment, which increases the risk of anxiety and can lead to difficulties in the child's emotional regulation (Brumariu et al., 2018). Parental migration also affects children's interpersonal relationships, as they have difficulty integrating into social groups and are more prone to isolation or deviant behaviors (Matei & Bobârnat, 2022).

3.2. School Performance and The Risk of Dropping Out

Parental migration generates a complex impact on the education of children left behind in the country, with both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, financial remittances sent by parents contribute to improving access to higher educational resources, facilitating the continuation of studies and integration into more performing educational systems (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2019). In this context, some studies suggest that these children may show increased motivation, being aware that academic success can offer them better opportunities in the long term (Udrea & Guiu, 2022).

On the other hand, parental migration also has significant negative effects. The absence of a stable parental framework can lead to an increased risk of school dropout, especially in rural areas, where children are more vulnerable to absenteeism and can more easily give up on education (Matei & Bobârnat, 2022). Also, the lack of an

authoritative parental figure is associated with decreased discipline, which can lead to difficulty concentrating and decreased motivation, affecting academic performance.

Furthermore, gender differences significantly influence the impact of parental migration on children's education. In general, boys are more likely to drop out of school and engage in risky behaviors, while girls are particularly affected by the emotional effects of parental separation, which negatively affects their long-term academic performance (Brumariu et al., 2018).

3.3. Changes in Family Structure and Social Relationships

Parental migration causes a significant reconfiguration of family roles, having a notable impact on family structure and functioning. In the context where parents migrate, children left behind are often forced to take on additional responsibilities, and older siblings are, in many cases, the ones who take on parental roles, which can disrupt their own development and socialization process (Matei & Bobârnat, 2021). This change in family dynamics can profoundly influence children's psychological and social development.

In terms of social relationships, parental migration can lead to a number of significant consequences. Children may become more emotionally dependent on grandparents or older siblings, in an attempt to compensate for the absence of their parents. This emotional dependence can affect, in the long term, their ability to establish balanced and healthy interpersonal relationships. These children may also experience social stigma, often being perceived as vulnerable or "abandoned", which can affect their self-esteem and social integration. Furthermore, following separation from their parents, they may develop a distant attitude towards them, having difficulty maintaining a stable emotional relationship in the long term, which can negatively influence the parental bond and the sense of family belonging.

4. Resilience of Children Left at Home Following Parental Migration

Resilience is a key concept in understanding how individuals respond to adversity, often characterized as the process by which a person manages to adapt to and overcome difficult circumstances, while maintaining emotional and social functioning. It involves the ability to cope with challenges and recover from traumatic or stressful events without developing significant dysfunctional behaviors (Garmezy & Masten, 1991; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Essentially, resilience involves an active and positive adaptation to adversity, reflecting the individual's ability to maintain psychological and emotional balance in a context marked by difficulties.

It is important to note that resilience is not an innate trait, but a dynamic process, influenced by a series of internal and external factors. Internal factors include traits

such as temperament, emotional self-regulation skills and coping strategies, while external factors refer to social, family and contextual support (Rutter, 2012). This continuous process of adaptation is closely linked to the balance between the individual's vulnerabilities and the resources available in their environment.

In the case of children affected by parental migration, resilience plays a decisive role in preventing the development of emotional and behavioral disorders. Separation from parents, associated with their migration in search of economic opportunities, can be a major stressor. The ability to respond effectively to these challenges depends on the available emotional and social support resources, as well as the adaptive skills developed within the family and social framework. In this light, resilience becomes an essential skill to overcome the difficulties generated by the absence of parents and to maintain a state of psychological well-being. Educational interventions and community support can significantly contribute to the development of coping skills of these children, helping them overcome the challenges arising from their separation from their parents and protect their emotional health in the long term (Rad & al., 2021).

4.1. The Impact of Education on the Development of Resilience Among Children Affected by Parental Migration

As we have seen, parental migration is a complex social phenomenon, which involves a series of challenges for children left behind, and education plays a fundamental role in their adaptation process. In this context, resilience is an essential factor in supporting them in the face of difficulties. Studies show that parental migration can create a series of risk factors for children's psychosocial and educational development, including anxiety, depression and difficulties in social integration (Pîslariu, 2023; Pîslariu et al., 2023). However, an adequate educational system can play an important protective role, contributing to the development of resilience and reducing the negative effects of separation from parents.

Education can support the development of children's resilience through several mechanisms. The first and most important of these is the emotional and social support that children receive from teachers and peers. According to research, meaningful relationships developed in school have a direct impact on children's ability to cope with separation and the difficulties associated with parental migration. Teachers and counselors who demonstrate empathy and understanding can contribute substantially to the development of children's coping skills, thus supporting them in their adaptation process (Pîslariu, 2023). These relationships are vital, given that many of these children do not benefit from direct parental support from their departed parents, and school often becomes their main emotional refuge.

Another mechanism through which education influences resilience is by providing a stable and predictable environment. Children who experience parental migration

find themselves in an unstable environment, where frequent changes can increase anxiety and insecurity. In these conditions, school can provide a stabilizing refuge, providing a routine and a setting in which children can experience academic and social success. This success, even in the short term, contributes to increased self-esteem and confidence in one's own abilities, essential for developing resilience (Dârjan, Lustrea & Predescu, 2015).

In addition to these forms of direct support, socio-emotional education plays a significant role in developing the resilience of children affected by parental migration. Educational programs that integrate socio-emotional development components, such as emotion management, conflict resolution, and communication skills development, help children understand and cope with their own feelings related to separation. Thus, learning coping skills is essential, as these children often face considerable emotional challenges, such as feelings of abandonment or the fear of being forgotten by their parents (Pîslariu, 2023). When children are supported to express and regulate their emotions, this contributes not only to their emotional health, but also to their resilience to stress.

The involvement of parents who remain in the country also plays an important role in developing resilience. In situations where one parent remains at home, active involvement in the education and life of children is essential for strengthening a stable and supportive environment. Without such support, children may be at increased risk of developing problematic behaviors and may have low school performance (Sârbu & al., 2023). Parenting education, through courses and support for parents who remain at home, can also contribute to creating a more favorable environment for children's development. Courses for parents who have gone to work abroad can improve communication and support provided to children, which can reduce the negative effects of migration on them (Pîslariu, 2023).

Furthermore, research findings suggest that more active involvement of educators in the lives of these children, by initiating extracurricular activities and group projects, can contribute to increasing the sense of belonging and developing children's social skills (Costin et al., 2021; Pîslariu et al., 2023). Children who benefit from additional support in the school setting, such as group activities and collaborative learning, are less likely to self-isolate and drop out of school. This social integration is crucial, as children who feel supported and accepted are better able to cope with the emotional and social problems related to their parents' migration.

4.2. The Role of Support Networks

Furthermore, studies highlight the importance of community support in children's adjustment. Support networks, including teachers, counselors, extended family members, and nongovernmental organizations, can significantly contribute to developing a sense of security and belonging. These networks provide not only

emotional support, but also information and resources that can help children navigate the challenges of their parents' migration. Community involvement is essential in preventing social exclusion and ensuring balanced emotional and educational development (Udrea & Guiu, 2022).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Parental migration is a phenomenon with profound implications for the emotional, social and educational development of children left behind, and resilience is a key factor in their adaptation process. This paper highlighted the importance of education in supporting the development of resilience among children affected by parental migration, underlining the need for structured educational interventions, constant psychosocial support and an inclusive school environment. The study demonstrated that education can act as a significant protective factor, contributing to increasing children's capacity to cope with difficulties and integrate into their communities.

On the one hand, parental migration can generate emotional vulnerabilities, such as anxiety, depression and difficulties in social integration. Children who experience separation from their parents are also often more exposed to the risks of dropping out of school, and the absence of a stable parental framework can negatively influence academic performance and interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, educational and socio-emotional support can significantly reduce these risks. Studies have shown that by implementing appropriate educational strategies and creating a stable environment, children can overcome these challenges and develop coping skills essential for their long-term emotional health (Pîslariu et al., 2023; Dârjan, Lustrea & Predescu, 2015).

Regarding socio-emotional education, it has proven to be an essential tool in developing the skills children need to manage emotions and adapt to social norms. Programs that promote socio-emotional learning help children understand and better regulate feelings related to separation, build healthy relationships, and better integrate into social groups (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition, the active involvement of the community and parents who stay at home is crucial for the success of these interventions, providing children with constant support and a stable environment. This contributes to the development of a sense of belonging and the prevention of social exclusion (McInerney & McInerney, 2010).

Therefore, it is imperative that educational institutions integrate programs dedicated to the development of socio-emotional skills, especially for children affected by parental migration. These programs should focus on essential skills such as managing emotions, resolving conflicts and strengthening healthy interpersonal relationships, all of which are vital for the integration of children into a stable and

balanced social framework. In this context, socio-emotional education becomes an essential tool, providing children with the necessary means to express and regulate their emotions, to navigate relational challenges and to build supportive relationships that allow them to cope with difficulties (Durlak et al., 2011).

Educational authorities should also adopt specific educational policies that respond to the needs of children left behind by parental migration. These policies should include not only additional resources for their access to quality education, but also measures to support their integration into extracurricular activities. Studies suggest that participation in such activities has a positive impact on children's social and emotional development, and such an educational framework can significantly contribute to increasing their resilience (Pîslariu et al., 2023). Education systems need to create opportunities that allow children to learn and integrate into communities, providing them with a stable environment that supports them in overcoming the negative effects of parental migration.

In addition, the support of parents who remain at home plays a crucial role in the adaptation process of children. Counseling and education programs for parents can significantly improve their ability to support their children's adaptation to new living conditions (Breaz, 2019). According to research, active involvement of parents in their children's education can reduce the risks of school dropout and the emotional vulnerabilities associated with separation (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2019). Also, parental involvement in the educational process, even in the absence of a migrant parent, can strengthen emotional bonds and contribute to maintaining a stable environment for children, essential for their harmonious development.

Creating community support networks is another essential aspect. Teachers, school counselors, extended family members, and local organizations can significantly contribute to increasing the sense of security and belonging of children affected by parental migration. Community support networks are essential for preventing social isolation and for providing a stable and supportive environment in which children can face emotional and educational challenges. Studies have shown that the involvement of a support network can significantly enhance children's ability to cope with difficulties and can help build a strong sense of security and trust (McInerney & McInerney, 2010).

Ultimately, implementing these recommendations will significantly contribute to reducing the negative effects of parental migration on children, supporting them to develop effective coping skills and adapt more easily to new living conditions. By supporting their socio-emotional and educational development, we can create a favorable environment in which these children can learn, integrate and grow up emotionally and socially healthy, thus protecting their future.

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Psychological Aspects in Counseling the Intellectually Gifted Child

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Abstract. Identifying intellectually gifted children poses significant challenges due to the diversity within this group. Contrary to common stereotypes, giftedness is not limited to high academic achievers but also includes children who may underperform because of socioeconomic barriers, lack of motivation, or emotional factors like perfectionism. The distinction between giftedness and talent, clarified by researchers like Gagné and Munro, emphasizes the complexity of recognizing intellectual potential. Giftedness can arise from both genetic and environmental influences, with early stimulation playing a crucial role. Assessment must begin early and be ongoing, incorporating diverse tools to uncover hidden potential and support the child's development.

Keywords: *intellectually gifted children, psychological problems, group interventions, special interests*

1. Identifying Intellectually Gifted Children

Identifying intellectually gifted children is a problem for parents and teachers alike because they are not a homogeneous group (Atwood, 1997). The common image is of a diligent child who gets his work done quickly and is recognized as a nerd. In reality the picture of this group is much more complex. In addition to high-achieving children, there are also those who, although gifted, have not achieved due to lack of economic resources, lack of interest, perfectionism or boredom.

Originally the words gifted and talented were used interchangeably. In 1991 Gagne differentiated the concepts of gifted and talented by defining giftedness as above-average competence in human abilities, and talent as above-average performance in a particular domain. Giftedness refers to human aptitudes such as intellectual or creative abilities, while talent is demonstrated in areas such as literature, art or mathematics (Gagné, pp. 230–234).

Initially the words gifted and talented were used interchangeably. In 1991 Gagne differentiated the concepts of gifted and talented by defining giftedness as above-average competence in human abilities, and talent as above-average performance in a particular field. Giftedness refers to human aptitudes such as intellectual or creative abilities, whereas talent is demonstrated in areas such as literature, art or mathematics (Gagné, pp. 230–234).

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In 2001 Munro differentiates gifted children as displaying exceptional abilities in areas in which they have been taught, and gifted children as displaying exceptional abilities in certain areas without being explicitly taught (Munro, 2001, pp. 129–137).

The causes of giftedness are still incompletely understood. Psychologists are divided into two camps: the genetic factors camp and the environmental factors camp. The genetic camp is based on the assumption that intelligent people also marry intelligent people, thus producing gifted children. Occasionally, however, these children also occur in families with average or low intelligence. This phenomenon is called mutation. The other camp is based on the theory that you can create a gifted child by exposing them to a variety of early experiences. Studies have confirmed that this method works mainly at young ages, after which intelligence begins to stabilize around the age of 9–10. However, it is known that parents who have engaged their children in conversations from an early age, encouraging them to express their point of view, are generally more intelligent than their peers who have not had this experience. (Slocumb & Payne, 2000, pp. 80–81).

The key characteristic that is often associated with creativity is divergent thinking. As opposed to convergent thinking (finding a single conclusion), divergent thinking requires gifted learners to produce multiple ideas that are different from the norm. Psychologists tend to agree that creativity is not the same as intelligence, but that intelligent individuals tend to have an intelligence score around 120. Gardner (1993) suggested that creativity only emerges after 10 years of study in a particular field (Gardner, 1993).

2. Assessment of Intellectually Gifted Children

As many children go unnoticed because they have hidden giftedness, an assessment is necessary which includes many meetings with children and parents, standard tests, etc. Diagnosing children's potential can be done as early as 3 years of age. Only 5% of children are gifted. Identifying gifted children but also their abilities and talents should be an ongoing process (DeLandtsheer J., 2011, pp.1–7).

The assessment procedure typically includes the following:

1. formal testing and indicators of skills, abilities, aptitudes, creativity, achievement, achievement, interests, and learning type;
2. meetings with parents (as they can observe the child in all circumstances);
3. meetings with teachers to obtain information about homework, portfolios, grades, or outstanding talents and accomplishments.

The most common psychological tools for identifying gifted children are psychological tests, but they should not be the only source of identification. Tests are used to identify gifted children because they offer objectivity and systematization and are also widely used for entry into different programs. However, formal assessment

is only one way of determining giftedness. Tests should be used in conjunction with subjective assessment and should correspond to the characteristics of a single domain. The variety of characteristics of gifted children – intellectual, creative, artistic, artistic, organizational, and specific domains – require more than a single assessment to identify. Many factors are involved in classifying a child as gifted: the dynamics of testing, the health of the child or teacher, the child's or teacher's confidence that day in his or her own abilities, maturity, etc. These tests usually exclude gifted children who have language skills, have disabilities, are from a minority background, or have poor financial resources.

Both potential and performance are essential elements in determining giftedness alongside IQ, but they are dynamic, and change over time. A child may be classified as gifted one year, while not the next. This situation is a nightmare for programs specifically designed for these types of children, which is why most educational agencies use the phrase “once gifted, always gifted” (DeLandtsheer, 2001, p. 5).

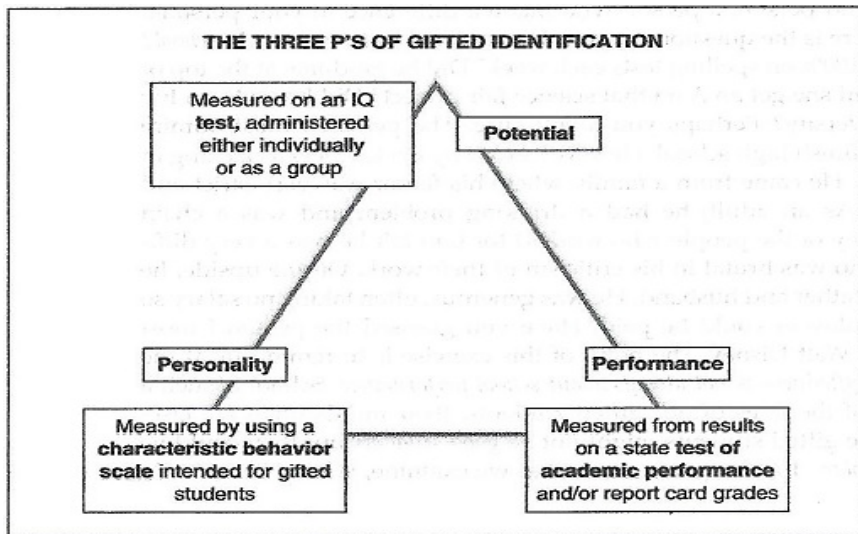


Figure 1. “The Three P’s of GATE Identification”

Source: John DeLandtsheer, *“Making ALL Kids Smarter: Strategies That Help All Students Reach Their Highest Potential”*, SAGE Publications, 2010

Quantitative instruments, such as those that follow, use scores to describe a child's performance in relation to others, or the degree to which each child possesses a particular characteristic in relation to a standard level of performance.

The tests most commonly used by school psychologists are group tests, which are administered when it is suspected that some gifted children have not been recognized. These tests are used as an input into specific programs aimed at these children. Testing should be carried out after the age of 6, as it is very difficult to

determine IQ up to this age. For children younger than 6 years of age the measurement of giftedness includes a questionnaire with a list of characteristics (University of Denver Biographical Questionnaire – Silverman and Rogers, Prediagnostic Questionnaire for Parents), interviews and observations of parents and educators, and portfolios.

Tests of visual, spatial, auditory and even sensory skills are also used to identify the most effective ways of learning, and motivational tests are used to identify spiritual and emotional intelligence. It is also necessary to monitor multiple intelligences to understand current concerns.

Interpretation should reflect the present and demographic range, not just national norms (important for areas with large numbers of individuals from a particular minority or ethnic group), and should capture the child's developmental range. In some cases it is important to re-analyze subscores, as children with disabilities and gifted children may be overlooked if only the overall score is used.

These test scores do not guarantee a place in special programs for these children. Many schools still do not have organized special programs, so parents and teachers should work together to identify developmental educational strategies for these students.

There is always a risk of mental health problems, that's why the "(MDI-C) Multiscore Depression Inventory for Children" developed by David J. Berndt and Charles F. Kaiser, or the "Children's Depression Inventory" developed by Maria Kovacs, is often used to identify the risk level of young people.

3. Psychological Problems of Gifted Children

The pursuit of excellence is a personal journey into the highest realms of existence, and the passion for perfection is selective, targeting only those who have the potential for excellence. Especially a quality of the gifted, perfectionism is a tool of self-development. The drive toward one's own perfection is manifested toward dissatisfaction with "what is", and a desire to become what one "ought to be" (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977, p. 42).

Perfectionists set high standards for themselves, and experience great disappointment when they fail to meet them. They are besieged with so much guilt and shame that few people understand. Even when others applaud them, they feel miserable, realizing how high they have aimed.

Perfectionists are capable of ecstatic heights, when they are completely caught in the flow and unaffected by the constraints of time or the judgments of others, when the activity itself becomes the reward, not the means to an end. The best moment usually occurs when a person's mind or body is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and meaningful (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp5-6).

Perfectionism is an energy that can be used both positively and negatively. It can cause frustration if the person feels unable to meet the standards set by themselves or others. But it can also be the passion that leads to extraordinary achievements.

Hewitt and Flett identified three components of perfectionism:

- Self-oriented – is intrapersonal perfectionism characterized by the motivation to be perfect;
- Outward-oriented – involves behavior similar to self-oriented, but directed toward others;
- Socially prescribed – is the belief that others have perfectionistic expectations of you. (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, pp. 98–101)

In the research for the MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERFECTIONISM SCALE by Hewitt and Flett in 1989, a correlation was found between self-oriented perfectionism and depression and outward-oriented perfectionism and narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders (Hewitt & Flett, 1989, p. 339). So we can state that perfectionism can easily lead to anxiety, depression, anorexia, bulimia, sexual dysfunction, suicide, drug abuse, and many others.

Perfectionism is one of the most notable characteristics of gifted. In 1994 Roberts and Lovett found a much higher level of perfectionism in gifted children compared to other children (Roberts & Lovett, 1994, pp. 241–259).

Healthy perfectionists possess a strong desire for order and organization, accept their mistakes, are glad that their parents have high expectations of them, and have healthy ways of coping with perfectionism.

Dysfunctional perfectionists are constantly anxious about their mistakes, have expectations that are far too high for them, perceive that others have extraordinary expectations for them, internalize negative remarks from others, and have a constant need for approval from others.

Why are gifted children perfectionists?

1. First, because perfectionism is an abstract concept, and it takes an abstract mind to understand its meaning and appreciate its vision.
2. Second, perfectionism is a function of asynchrony or unbalanced development. Gifted children set standards according to their mental age even though chronological development is behind.
3. Third, these children generally have older friends, and thus tend to set standards similar to them.
4. Fourth, they have enough anticipation that they generally tend to be successful in their first attempts to master any skill. From the youngest ages they have had the ability to predict the consequences of their acts compared to their peers, so that they have been able to avoid failure. Prudence is a skill of introverts, who make up more than half of the gifted population (Silvermann, 1998, pp. 216–255).

5. Fifth, gifted people crave challenges and stimulation, and if school is too easy for them, they will do anything to complicate tasks, including even achieving a perfect score. Since there's no joy in demonstrating mastery of a skill or concept learned long ago, artificial rewards such as grades become the only possible gratification, although this manner encourages dysfunctional perfectionism in young people.
6. Sixth, perfectionism is a distortion of the desire for one's own perfection. Spiritual maturity is necessary for perfectionism to merge with a higher consciousness.

In Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD), perfectionism has a deeper meaning. The desire for one's own perfection emerges in the course of the individual's progress from lower levels of functioning to higher ones. Internal forces, which Dabrowski calls 'overexcitabilities', are necessary for progress to take place. These "overexcitabilities" are of five types:

- Psychomotor – e.g. accelerated speech, intense athletic activities, agitation or acting on impulses, etc.
- Sensual – e.g. the need for touch, hugs, or to be the center of attention, etc.
- Imaginational – e.g. dreams, nightmares, fear of the unknown, conflation of truth with fiction, etc.
- Intellectual – e.g. persistence to inquire, eagerness for knowledge, preoccupation with theoretical problems, etc.
- Emotional – e.g. shyness, anxieties, fears, depressions, loneliness, concern for others, etc.

These excitabilities generate conflict and pain in the gifted child, but also give him/her the ability to find a way out of the situation, resulting in moving to a higher level than before.

Such functioning levels are:

- Level I – individuals experience little inner conflict, self-reflection or empathy for others. Their goal is self-preservation, or auto-preemption. They are emotionally limited, with little ability or willingness to respond to the emotional needs of others. Rigidity of belief and prejudice is reflected in their psychological makeup.
- Level II – rigidity is replaced by an abundance of flexibility. The individual is at the mercy of fate, without any rudder in the sea of choices. Every path seems of equal value. This is where society has the greatest impact. External standards, imposed by the social group, form the basis of judgment. The individual tends to feel inferior to others or is preoccupied with how they are perceived by others.
- Level III – is marked by the individual's ability to realize the ideal of the personality, and his need to compare himself with this ideal. The recognition of personal qualities and defects lead to the struggle between "what is" and "what should be". This struggle includes moral questions, existential concerns,

and the discovery of the universal hierarchy of values. Here the individual is concerned not with his or her own identity, but with his or her own place in the universe, and community responsibility.

- Level IV – the struggle between "what is" and "what ought to be" turns into "what ought to be, will be". Individuals exhibit high levels of responsibility, autonomy, authenticity, empathy for others, self-control, reflective thinking.
- Level V – is the attainment of the personality ideal. At this level the individual lives in harmony with the universal principles of justice.

The majority of the population functions at levels 1 and 2, with level 2 being considered the norm. Gifted children often have much stronger personal values than others their age. They tend to be much more sensitive to others and much more aware of the injustices taking place in the world. (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977 p. 42)

Some of the internal characteristics that can lead to emotional difficulties are:

- A) High sensitivity;
- B) High intensity;
- C) Emotional distress.

There are problems associated with giftedness. Some are external, caused by society's lack of acceptance and understanding of the concept of giftedness, others are internal, related to advanced development.

The most common problems in these children are:

- Confusion about the meaning of giftedness;
- Idealism;
- High levels of internal conflict;
- Lack of understanding by others;
- Hostility of others toward their abilities;
- Continuous self-criticism in striving for perfection;
- Concerns about morality and justice;
- Unrealistic expectations of others;
- Preoccupation with their own interests;
- Social maladjustment represented by isolation, depression and failure at school;
- Inattention to some lessons that are not up to their level, or not in line with their interests;
- Failure to accept school rules, giving the impression of obedience;
- Frustration in achieving goals. (Van Tassel-Baska, 1983, p. 13).

As students' life experience and acquired knowledge grow, their skills diversify and their problems temper. For some preferences are maintained and emphasized, for others they oscillate or change radically. The key to success is for the parent to realize the areas in which the child can excel, and to encourage the child in the discovery of his or her talents, without overburdening the child, as there is a risk of producing disgust and disinterest.

Perception of others

Labeling has many negative aspects. Teachers tend to expect the gifted to be superior at everything. Parents may have unrealistic expectations of the child, giving them too much responsibility and decision-making power, causing role reversal in the family (Dirks, 1979, pp. 9–10). All these reactions from parents, teachers and peers make it very difficult for children to understand a healthy perspective of giftedness.

Own perception

Many of the present manifestations are related to perfectionism. The high sensitivity of these children is all pervasive, but unfortunately they are taught to be ashamed of it, particularly affecting boys, although this sensitivity is the basis of compassion, morality and justice. (Van Tassel-Baska 1983, p. 14)

Among the problems present at this level we list: difficult social relationships, difficulty in choosing interests, lack of school challenges, depression (often manifested as boredom), high levels of anxiety, difficulty accepting criticism, withholding talents for integration, nonconformity or resistance to authority, refusal of routine, excessive competitiveness, isolation, low frustration tolerance, lack of tolerance of others, poor study practices, lack of awareness of impact on others, lack of recognition of their needs (Sanborn, 1979, pp.284–300).

Compared to other children, they are more trustworthy when under the temptation to cheat, their reading preferences and social attitudes are healthier, and they have greater emotional stability. (Terman & Oden, 1947).

4. Psychological Counseling of Intellectually Gifted Children

Conducting a psychological profile can produce a better understanding of the student's unique interests, learning styles, abilities, etc. This will provide better insight into how to counsel and learn. The five areas to consider when developing a profile include:

- Academic Achievement;
- Learning Styles and Strengths;
- Interests;
- Special Interests;
- Vision and Goals for the Future.

Most therapists, although possessing the basic knowledge, often require little adjustments to work with these children.

Counselors should:

- a) be aware of emotional as well as intellectual differences;
- b) inform children about their characteristics, and possible developmental resources;
- c) focus on both cognitive and emotional needs;

- d) act as advocates for these students;
- e) be sensitive to the value of the difficulties they are experiencing;
- f) encourage students to seek answers to the problems they are experiencing;
- g) assess strengths and weaknesses and offer constructive criticism;
- h) value, encourage, and reward their own learning initiative;
- i) assist in decision-making;
- j) serve as initiators in identifying them, and including them in special programs;
- k) team up with parents and teachers to prevent possible problems (Van Tassel-Baska 1983, pp. 8–9).

They need the following communication skills:

1. paying attention;
2. stimulation to express their emotions;
3. reflecting on content and feelings;
4. asking questions to aid communication.

Atwood in 1997 described steps to follow in counseling these gifted children:

1. exploring the child's value system;
2. exploring the past, and its role in the present;
3. putting the past into perspective;
4. expanding the value system through question-influenced reflection;
5. amplification and stabilization of the new value system (Atwood, 1997).

Levy and Plucker in 2008 recommended counselors working with these children to possess the following skills: counseling and therapy skills, consultation skills, supportive skills (Levy & Plucker, 2008).

Other experts added that counselors working with gifted children should be able to teach them stress management techniques (Reis & Renzulli, 2004, pp. 119–130). Other skills such as meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, breathing techniques, mindfulness techniques, and guided imagery techniques are also helpful (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016).

The most basic techniques used are Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Solution Focused Brief Therapy. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is based on the principle that feelings and behaviours are mainly determined by that person's thoughts (Ronen, 2007).

Solution-focused brief therapy focuses on finding solutions as a method of reconceptualizing and solving students' problems (Sklare, 2014). It has the role of expanding problem and solution thinking (Creed, Reisweber & Beck, 2011).

Counseling strategies in perfectionism also include cognitive behavioral therapy. This involves breaking down into core thoughts, helping to reframe thoughts in a healthier way.

Other strategies for removing the anxiety associated with perfectionism include relaxation techniques, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation strategies (Fisher

& Kennedy, 2016), coping techniques, guiding students through real or imagined failures (Cross & Cross 2015, pp. 163–172), or even writing down fears on a sheet of paper before an exam (Cassady & Jhonson 2002, pp. 270–295).

Group interventions with other gifted children can also be helpful, helping children achieve social relationships by introducing others with similar abilities, interests, or problems (Peterson & Lorimer, 2014, pp. 167–180).

Establishing a role model is necessary. They usually have difficulty finding a suitable role model who has similar interests and a rich dose of expertise in the child's preferred area. The more unrealistic the model, the more likely it is that the child will eventually lose the interest, motivation, and perseverance needed to accomplish the goal (Silverman, 1993, p. 43).

5. Psychological Intervention

Nr. crt	Intervention strategies	The actual action
1	Child-centered approaches to decrease emotional distress	- increasing motivation for learning by developing a content program according to the child's interests - counseling sessions - encouraging positive experiences by highlighting them in front of others, thus increasing self-esteem - finding daily time for communication in the family, leading to better collaboration
2	Family-level efforts to improve family conditions	- involving parents in education, both by finding time for different activities and by supporting the child in extracurricular activities - prioritizing to improve behavior, using reinforcement and empowerment. - keeping a record of the frequency of good/ bad behavior, thus helping parents to monitor progress - putting the family in contact with other families going through similar experiences in order to share ways of improving behavior - attendance at family counseling sessions, either at the school psychologist's office or at any other office
3	School-level action	- Involving all teachers in correcting behavior by highlighting good things in front of the class - initiating specific activity circles so that children can pursue their passions - stimulating participation in voluntary activities, with the aim of developing group membership - empowering pupils by offering class activities - involving favorite teachers in joint activities - setting up special gifted classes, where more than one gifted pupil is identified in the school

Intellectually gifted children can come from any social background, both from families with high intellectual abilities and from parents with low intellectual abilities, so the development of their abilities will be strongly influenced by their environment.

Children who come from families with an intellectual background will have a smoother path, because the family also knows how to support them and hone their skills. Whereas a child from a family without an intellectual background will have to face all the problems on their own, often feeling misunderstood, with a much higher risk of not recognizing their abilities, hiding them to fit in with the family environment, having problems with adaptation, communication and even dropping out of school.

Misconceptions in society, and forcing them to learn according to standard school methods and isolating them form the ideal recipe for social maladjustment and a host of problems. Due to the family, education system and society that wants to put them in a box and label them, they fail to use their imagination, creativity and go beyond their limits, and start to feel misunderstood, unimportant, leading to psychological problems such as anxiety or depression.

Due to their individual characteristics, from environment to personality, counseling helps them to regain their often-precarious self-esteem, to integrate, and to develop healthily.

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The Social Dimension of Multimodal Literacy: Educational Interventions for Reducing Inequalities

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Abstract. In the context of accelerating digitalization and social transformation driven by new technologies, literacy skills have undergone a profound reconfiguration. Multimodal literacy becomes not only an educational necessity but also an essential condition for the full participation of individuals in contemporary society. This article investigates the role of multimodal literacy as a social practice and presents the results of an educational intervention carried out in primary school, aimed at reducing inequalities in literacy development. By applying project-based learning and adapting modes of communication to students' real needs, the research demonstrates significant improvements in comprehension, expression, and collaboration skills.

Keywords: *multimodal literacy, educational equity, project-based learning.*

1. Introduction

The term "literacy" has evolved beyond its traditional meaning of basic reading and writing, now encompassing a broad spectrum of cognitive, social, and technological competencies. Access to information, the ability to express ideas, and active participation in civic and professional life are contingent upon navigating multimodal environments.

Literacy is no longer viewed solely as the capacity to decode and encode text, but as a socially situated practice influenced by cultural and institutional norms (Street, 1984). The New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspective emphasizes that literacy practices are embedded in social contexts, shaped by power dynamics, and linked to identity construction (Gee, 2008).

In the 21st century, digital environments have amplified the importance of multimodal communication, requiring learners to interpret and produce meaning across a variety of media forms. As Lankshear and Knobel (2011) argue, new literacies involve different kinds of knowledge and skills compared to traditional print-based literacies, including collaboration, design, and critical evaluation.

Children now grow up immersed in complex semiotic environments that extend far beyond traditional classroom materials. From an early age, they interact with multimedia content, social media, and interactive technologies, all of which shape their ways of learning and communicating (Marsh, 2006). This reality necessitates a shift in pedagogical approaches to embrace multimodality.

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Multimodal literacy, as defined by the multiliteracies framework, recognizes the interplay between language, image, gesture, sound, and spatial design in meaning-making (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Educators are thus challenged to support students in becoming proficient not only in reading and writing but also in navigating complex multimodal texts.

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that multimodal approaches can enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds (Walsh, 2009). By incorporating diverse modes of representation, teachers can provide more inclusive and differentiated instruction that aligns with students' varied learning styles and cultural experiences.

Furthermore, schools play a critical role in mitigating social inequalities by offering equitable access to digital tools and multimodal learning opportunities. Without intentional interventions, existing gaps in access to technology and digital literacy can perpetuate educational disparities (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Addressing the social dimension of multimodal literacy thus becomes a matter of both pedagogical innovation and social justice.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Multimodal Literacy

Multimodal literacy involves the combined use of several modes of communication: linguistic (written, oral), visual (images, graphics), aural (sounds), gestural, and spatial. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), communication in the contemporary world cannot be reduced to monomodal texts but requires a semiotic integration of diverse forms of expression.

Multimodal literacy draws upon social semiotics, a framework that views communication as a culturally situated process where signs are not fixed but shaped by their social contexts (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Meaning is thus made through the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources, such as language, images, colors, layout, sound, and movement.

Halliday's (1978) theory of systemic functional linguistics laid the groundwork for understanding how language operates within social functions, which was later extended by multimodal theorists to include non-linguistic modes. Kress (2010) further emphasized that modes are socially shaped and culturally given, with each mode having its own affordances and constraints in communication. As digital media became more prevalent, scholars began to investigate how meaning-making expands beyond alphabetic text. The New London Group (1996) introduced the concept of multiliteracies to capture the multiplicity of communication channels and the cultural diversity shaping literacy practices. They argued for a pedagogy of multiliteracies that includes both linguistic diversity and multimodal forms of expression.

In educational settings, multimodal literacy supports differentiated instruction by engaging learners through various sensory pathways. This is especially important for students with diverse learning needs, as it allows for flexible representations and responses (Rowse & Walsh, 2011). For example, visual storytelling, video creation, and digital comics offer students alternative avenues for demonstrating understanding.

Technological advancement has facilitated the shift from static print to dynamic, interactive forms of texts. According to Mills (2010), multimodal texts on digital platforms invite participation and reconfiguration of the reader-text relationship, encouraging users to become producers and not just consumers of meaning. This aligns with constructivist pedagogies that value student agency.

Furthermore, multimodal literacy is not limited to digital formats. It includes embodied and spatial modes, such as gesture, posture, and use of classroom space. Siegel (2006) underscores the importance of embodiment in literacy learning, suggesting that the body itself can function as a mode of communication when interpreting or representing meaning. A key concept in multimodal theory is “design,” which involves the purposeful selection and combination of modes to construct meaning (Kress & Bezemer, 2009). This design perspective highlights the creative agency of learners in making choices about how to express their ideas and how to adapt to different audiences and purposes. Multimodal approaches in early childhood education have also gained attention. Burnett and Merchant (2018) emphasize that young children naturally use multiple modes to communicate – drawing, speech, movement, and play – and that literacy instruction should build on these practices rather than restrict them to formal print.

Assessing multimodal work presents new challenges for educators. Traditional rubrics focused on writing fluency or grammar may not account for students’ effective use of image, layout, or sound. As Serafini (2012) suggests, educators need new frameworks to analyze and evaluate multimodal texts that attend to visual grammar and design principles. Finally, implementing multimodal literacy in schools requires teacher preparation and curriculum transformation. Research by Walsh (2010) shows that teachers who integrate multimodal resources, including interactive whiteboards, digital texts, and media production, not only enhance student engagement but also support higher-order thinking and collaboration.

3. Multimodal Literacy and Educational Inequalities

Unequal access to educational resources, digital infrastructure, and family support leads to significant gaps among students. Multimodal literacy can serve as a social equalizer by facilitating inclusion through diversified learning channels and by valuing students’ multiple intelligences and expressive capacities (visual, narrative, artistic, etc.).

Digital inequalities persist not only in terms of device access but also in terms of the quality of digital engagement. Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) emphasize the importance of “meaningful access,” which includes skills, support, and opportunities to use technology in creative and empowering ways. Multimodal literacy initiatives can bridge this divide by offering authentic and engaging learning experiences.

Socioeconomic status often correlates with students’ exposure to diverse modes of communication and cultural capital. Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction highlights how schooling can inadvertently reinforce social stratification when it privileges dominant literacies. Multimodal approaches can help deconstruct this hierarchy by legitimizing diverse cultural and semiotic expressions.

Students from underrepresented backgrounds often bring rich out-of-school literacies, such as storytelling, music, and visual art. When these practices are integrated into classroom learning, students feel seen and valued. Moje et al. (2004) advocate for asset-based pedagogies that leverage students’ everyday literacies as resources for academic success. Multimodal texts provide entry points for learners who may struggle with traditional print literacy. For English language learners (ELLs), for example, combining images, gestures, and audio narration with written text can scaffold comprehension and support language development (Ajayi, 2009). Multimodal tools thus support inclusive language learning environments.

Inclusion through multimodality also extends to students with learning disabilities. Dalton and Proctor (2007) demonstrate how digital storytelling and multimedia composition support students with dyslexia or attention disorders, allowing them to participate fully in meaning-making processes through alternative modes. Moreover, schools that embrace multimodal pedagogies create more democratic learning spaces. Vasudevan (2009) shows how youth media projects empower marginalized students by enabling them to represent their identities and experiences through film, photography, and spoken word. This fosters a sense of agency and belonging.

Despite its benefits, implementing multimodal literacy to address inequality requires systemic change. Teachers need professional development to understand the pedagogical value of multiple modes and how to assess them fairly (Rowse & Walsh, 2011). Curriculum guidelines must also evolve to accommodate multimodal composition and analysis. There is a danger that without critical reflection, multimodal literacy could reproduce digital divides by favoring students already adept at technology. Buckingham (2007) warns that digital literacy must be taught explicitly and not assumed, particularly when used to combat educational inequalities.

Achieving equity through multimodal literacy depends on how schools conceptualize literacy itself. As Janks (2010) argues, a critical literacy approach is essential – one that not only incorporates multiple modes but also interrogates power relations embedded in texts, technologies, and classroom practices.

4. Research Methodology: The Educational Intervention

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995) to explore the effects of multimodal project-based learning on the development of literacy skills among primary school students. The intervention was implemented in Arad County, Romania, over the course of a full academic semester.

The research was conducted in two public primary schools located in semi-urban communities in Arad County, selected based on demographic diversity and accessibility. A total of 46 fourth-grade students (aged 9–10) participated in the study, along with their two classroom teachers. The schools enrolled students from both majority and minority ethnic backgrounds, with approximately 30% of pupils coming from low-income families.

The study followed a design-based research (DBR) framework (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), which is suitable for developing and refining educational interventions in real-world contexts. The intervention centered on project-based learning (PBL) activities that integrated multiple modes of communication – textual, visual, oral, and digital – aimed at fostering multimodal literacy.

The intervention spanned 12 weeks and was aligned with the Romanian national curriculum. Each week, students engaged in at least one structured multimodal learning activity. The instructional design was informed by the principles of multi-literacies pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), including situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. The core activities included:

- Creating posters and digital presentations: Students researched a topic collaboratively and presented their findings using visual and textual modes.
- Developing illustrated stories: Pupils composed narratives accompanied by hand-drawn or digital illustrations.
- Creative writing and collage: Learners explored poetic and narrative genres, enhanced by cut-and-paste visual composition.
- Integrated group work: Teams of students designed and presented multimodal projects (e.g., storyboards, digital booklets) based on classroom themes.

Data were collected using multiple sources to ensure triangulation and validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018):

- Student portfolios, including drafts, final versions, and reflections on their work.
- Pre- and post-intervention writing samples, assessed using multimodal criteria (Serafini, 2012).
- Observational logs and video recordings of classroom sessions, focused on student engagement, collaboration, and use of modes.
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and a subset of students, exploring perceptions of learning and changes in literacy practices.

Data were analyzed using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), followed by interpretive synthesis. The analysis focused on identifying shifts in students' ability to express meaning through different modes, collaboration dynamics, and self-perceived literacy development. A rubric adapted from Serafini's (2012) multimodal text analysis model was used to evaluate student work, covering aspects such as coherence, mode integration, and audience awareness.

Parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to data collection. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research, ensuring participant confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. Anonymized data were used in all analyses and reporting.

The study is limited by its qualitative nature and small sample size, which restrict generalizability. However, the in-depth, context-specific findings offer valuable insights into how multimodal literacy can be developed in Romanian primary classrooms through project-based interventions.

5. Results and Impact

The educational intervention revealed a series of meaningful outcomes that illustrate the potential of multimodal literacy to support inclusive and transformative learning in primary education. Data triangulation through pre-/post-intervention samples, observations, portfolios, and interviews enabled a holistic understanding of student progress and engagement.

A comparative analysis of student writing samples before and after the intervention indicated significant improvements in both written and oral expression. Students demonstrated greater lexical diversity, better organization of ideas, and improved coherence. Their oral presentations also became more structured, confident, and purposeful. These findings are consistent with previous research that links multimodal composition with gains in expressive fluency (Dalton & Proctor, 2008). Portfolios and classroom discussions showed a notable evolution in students' ability to engage critically with content. Many students began to question representations, make intertextual connections, and reflect on their creative choices. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2011), the multimodal composition process encourages meta-awareness and fosters critical literacies, which was echoed in the students' reflections on their projects.

Teachers reported heightened motivation, particularly among students who had previously been disengaged or had struggled with traditional literacy tasks. Observational logs showed that when allowed to use drawing, collage, or digital tools, students took greater initiative and ownership of their work. This aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, which emphasizes the role of autonomy and creativity in intrinsic motivation.

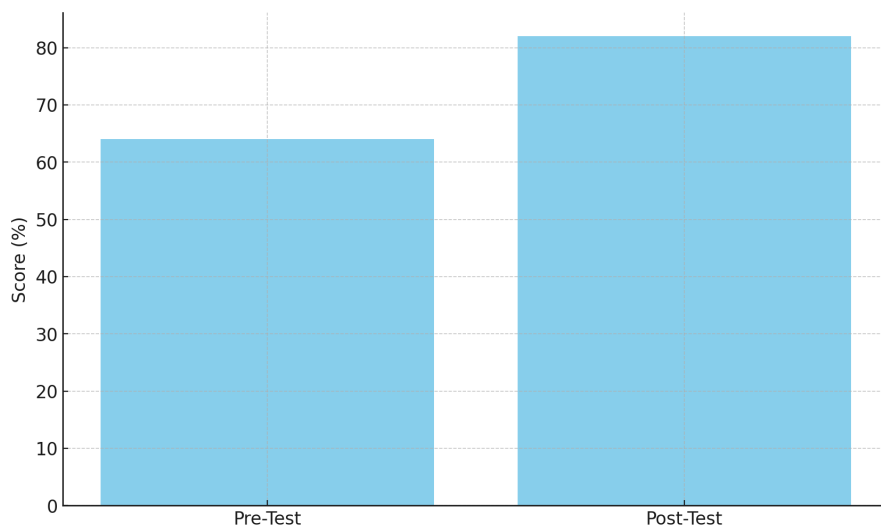


Figure 1. Average Writing Scores Before and After Intervention

Post-intervention data showed a narrowing of achievement differences between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. While students from higher SES backgrounds maintained strong performance, those from low-income families demonstrated marked improvement, especially in collaborative and visual expression tasks. This supports the idea that multimodal learning environments provide equitable entry points for diverse learners (Walsh, 2009).

The project-based framework encouraged students to collaborate in heterogeneous groups. Interviews and teacher observations noted improved peer interaction, negotiation of meaning, and task delegation. These findings support Mercer and Littleton's (2007) argument that dialogic teaching and collaborative tasks enhance both social and cognitive development. While the students had limited prior experience with digital tools, they quickly acquired basic competencies in using tablets, presentation software, and visual design elements. By the end of the intervention, students were able to construct coherent multimodal texts that included images, captions, and hyperlinks. This growth parallels findings by Burn and Parker (2003), who argue that engagement with media production fosters visual and digital literacy skills.

Multimodal projects offered space for students to express personal narratives and cultural identities. For instance, a group of Roma students created a digital story based on traditional folktales, which was positively received by peers and staff. According to Hull and Nelson (2005), multimodal texts allow for richer identity representation, especially for marginalized learners. Participating teachers reported increased awareness of students' diverse strengths and a shift in pedagogical approach. They highlighted the value of multimodal assessments and expressed willingness to adopt these strategies beyond the scope of the project. This mirrors findings by

Serafini (2015), who emphasizes the need for teacher re-training in light of evolving literacies.

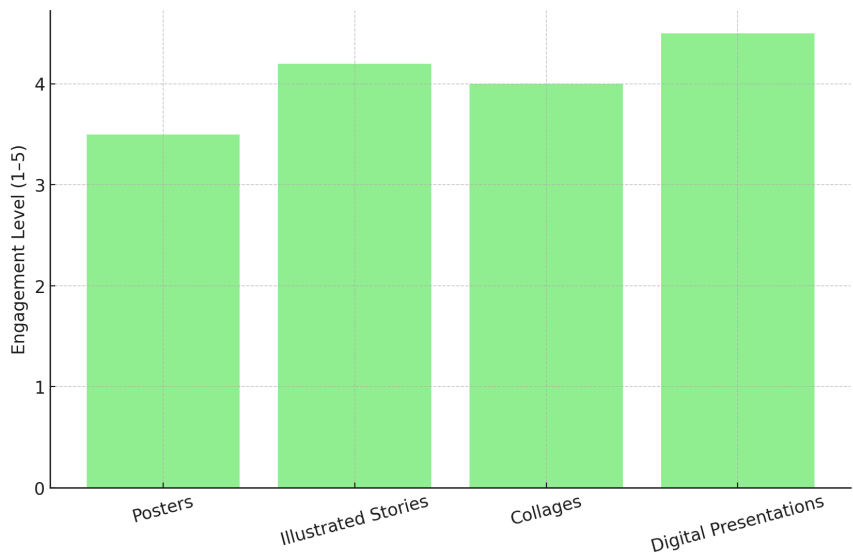


Figure 2. Average Student Engagement by Activity Type

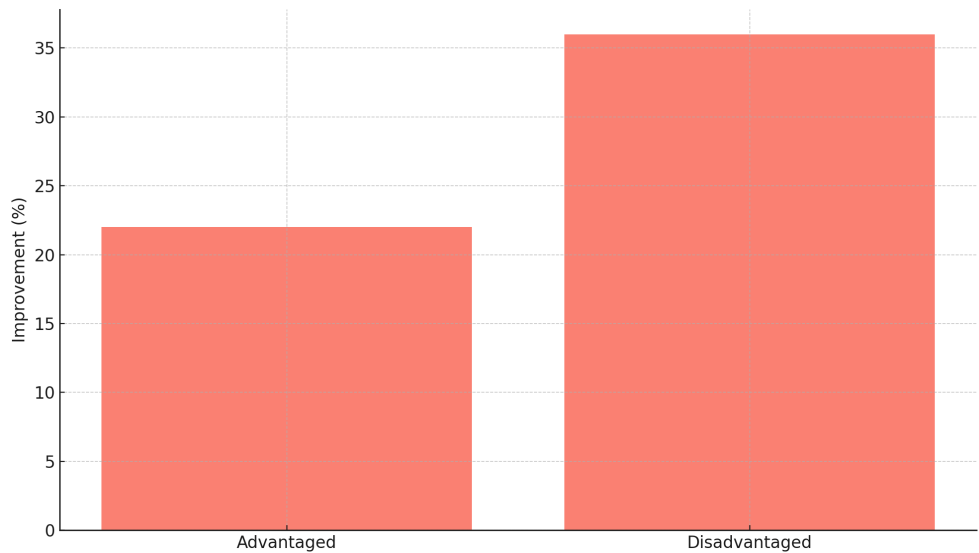


Figure 3. Improvement in Literacy Skills by Student Group

While the intervention was time-limited, some activities (such as visual journaling and collaborative presentations) were integrated into the regular curriculum by teachers post-study. This suggests that multimodal literacy is not only effective but

sustainable in real-world classroom conditions (Unsworth, 2008). Despite overall success, challenges included limited access to digital devices, initial resistance to group work, and time constraints. These challenges were gradually mitigated through scaffolding, peer support, and differentiated instruction. As Cope and Kalantzis (2015) note, integrating multimodal literacy requires adaptive teaching and systemic support.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Approaching multimodal literacy from a socio-didactic perspective offers a comprehensive framework for inclusive and equitable education. The results of this study reinforce the growing body of evidence suggesting that multimodal pedagogies support diverse learners by addressing multiple modes of expression and engagement.

Multimodal literacy enables a shift from transmission-based teaching to participatory learning environments, where students construct meaning through multiple sign systems. This is particularly beneficial in diverse classrooms where students possess different strengths, linguistic backgrounds, and cultural experiences (Stein, 2008). By recognizing students as meaning-makers across modes, educators can foster greater inclusion and academic equity.

The integration of multimodal strategies into mainstream curricula, however, requires systemic commitment. As Walsh (2010) notes, teachers often lack the training or resources to implement multimodal learning effectively. Professional development programs should focus not only on digital competencies but also on pedagogical frameworks that encourage critical engagement with multimodal texts. Curricular policies must also evolve to reflect the complexity of literacy in the digital age. Traditional assessment methods remain anchored in monomodal outputs (e.g., essays), while multimodal compositions – such as infographics, digital stories, or podcasts – are often undervalued. Jewitt (2009) argues that recognizing multimodality in assessment is essential for validating the full range of student literacies.

A critical dimension of multimodal pedagogy is its potential to disrupt social hierarchies embedded in traditional schooling. By enabling students from marginalized communities to represent their experiences through accessible media, multimodal practices foster cultural affirmation and self-efficacy (Vasudevan, 2006). This aligns with critical literacy perspectives that seek to democratize knowledge production.

From a sociocultural standpoint, the classroom becomes a site of negotiation, where learners' voices, modes, and identities intersect. Kress (2010) underscores that different modes offer different affordances – some better suited for expressing emotion, others for logic or spatial reasoning. Embracing this diversity of expression allows educators to support a wider range of learning styles. The findings of this research suggest that multimodal literacy can contribute directly to reducing school dropout rates, particularly by re-engaging students who may not thrive in text-

centric educational models. When students see their communicative practices legitimized in school, their motivation and sense of belonging increase – factors that are predictive of school retention (Finn & Rock, 1997). Technological infrastructure remains a significant barrier, especially in under-resourced schools. Policymakers must ensure equitable access to devices, internet connectivity, and multimodal learning tools. Without this support, attempts to implement inclusive pedagogies risk exacerbating the very inequalities they aim to address (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). The Romanian educational context, where this study took place, is gradually adopting digital technologies, but curricular and teacher-training reforms are still needed. The results of this intervention underscore the urgency of embedding multimodal literacy in national strategies for educational modernization and equity, aligned with European and global priorities (OECD, 2021).

The study highlights that multimodal literacy is not a pedagogical add-on, but a necessary component of contemporary education. It offers tools for inclusion, relevance, and engagement, particularly for students who are traditionally underserved. For meaningful implementation, educational stakeholders – teachers, administrators, policymakers – must collaborate to rethink teaching, learning, and assessment in light of the multimodal turn.

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Mothers and Children Behind Bars: Dilemmas of Raising Children in Prison Settings and Intervening to Uphold Fundamental Rights

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Abstract. The experience of giving birth can be a significant and impactful moment for most mothers. This period is especially difficult in the absence of adequate support. In traditional Romanian families, the birth of a child often brings family members closer, encouraging mutual support and a shared understanding of the complex experience of motherhood. However, in certain cases, this moment coincides with the execution of a custodial sentence, forcing those involved to make a difficult decision. Choosing between separating a mother from her newborn or raising the child for a year behind bars is a complex dilemma that raises multiple social concerns and may lead to the violation of fundamental human rights. What is the most effective form of intervention? And how can we mitigate the consequences of this phenomenon, which affects multiple levels of personal and institutional life? These are two of the main questions this paper aims to explore and clarify.

Keywords: *motherhood in prison, professional dilemmas, best interests of the child, mother-child attachment, social intervention*

1. Relevance of the Topic and the Scope of the Phenomenon

This topic is rarely addressed, largely due to the lack of accessible data and detailed information, or simply because the general public finds it hard to accept that, in our country, a newborn can spend the first year of life behind bars. More often than not, this reaction stems from the juxtaposition of terms such as “motherhood” or “newborn” with those of “prison” or “bars,” which appear fundamentally incompatible – especially among traditionally minded Romanians.

However, the complexity and the ethical dilemmas raised by this issue compel me to develop a theoretical framework, viewed through the lens of a professional who has intervened in such cases in the role of social worker.

Beyond the challenges posed by the experience of motherhood in prison – which I will expand on in the following chapters – there are also numerous postnatal difficulties that expose a new mother’s vulnerabilities, leaving room for tensions, discomfort, or even emotional harm. The prison environment is a harsh one, and this is no secret: every piece of information about a fellow inmate can be used

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to gain an advantage. Motherhood, in this context, opens the door to significant vulnerability.

The purpose of this research is to bring to light the dilemmas faced by social workers, psychologists, educators, and other professionals who intervene in the custody and care of a mother-child pair within the prison system. Additionally, the aim is to raise awareness about the phenomenon in order to support the development of specialized interventions that ensure respect for both the rights of the child and the rights of the detained woman who becomes a mother during incarceration.

Based on my professional experience as a social worker in the Romanian prison system, I have frequently encountered situations involving the custody of a mother-child pair that fall into what we might colloquially call “legal grey areas” – that is, situations for which neither legislation nor professional practice provide clear guidance. I believe this area requires more extensive research and development in order to anticipate and regulate circumstances that currently leave too much room for interpretation, depending on the people involved and the resources available.

Of course, other studies have been conducted on this subject, but they usually focus on limited aspects and are often framed only from a theoretical standpoint or based on short-term research. In contrast, working and interacting daily, over several years, with incarcerated mothers and their children has allowed me to gather a broader range of insights that can offer a different perspective.

Until a scientific study based on a formal research methodology and applied to a representative sample is developed, I will focus on conceptual, legislative, and theoretical analysis, aiming to open space for reflection.

The main objective is to identify the core social, ethical, and legal dilemmas arising from raising children in a prison environment and to outline a coherent intervention model that ensures no fundamental rights of the individuals involved are violated.

2. Description of the Theoretical Framework

In the Romanian prison system, there is only one dedicated women’s penitentiary. Although it is possible for female inmates to be housed in special sections of other facilities, these arrangements are limited in both number and duration.

The women’s penitentiary in Romania exclusively holds female inmates, regardless of their legal status or the prison regime under which they serve their sentence. From a legal standpoint, they may be in pre-trial detention, convicted at first instance, or finally convicted. In terms of the sentence enforcement regime, inmates may be assigned to maximum security, closed, semi-open, or open regimes depending on the length of the sentence and other factors.

For this specific category of mother-child pairs, the National Administration of Penitentiaries, in accordance with existing legislation, has arranged a specially

designated detention space that allows for custodial care of such pairs. This has led to the emergence of the term “prison maternity.”

Motherhood is often described as “a gift that a woman receives, the most noble title she can bear” (Macovei & Nicolai, 2011), and is seen as a unique and emotionally profound experience that is difficult to put into words. Marcela Lagarde characterizes this period as an indirect punishment for the child of an incarcerated mother, thereby creating a “dyadic” relationship that is disrupted the moment incarceration occurs (Lagarde, 2005).

This perspective is well-founded, especially when considering prison restrictions and limited access to various objects or products in the detention sector – items that are essential for a newborn from the very first days of life. These needs are highly specific and not commonly encountered in the prison environment. Despite the staff’s efforts to create as child-friendly an atmosphere as possible, not all of these needs can be met immediately, as they often require approvals following thorough verification.

Such situations help clarify the meaning of the term “prison maternity” and can be fully understood only by professionals who are familiar with such cases and who actively seek out ways to facilitate or resolve urgent situations.

Beyond the initial period during which the mother–child pair is accommodated in the penitentiary, Romanian law stipulates a time limit after which a mother can no longer remain with her child in prison. At that point, she, along with her family and representatives of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, must identify another individual to whom the child can be entrusted. This abrupt separation disrupts the direct bond between mother and child and can deteriorate the attachment relationship.

Turchină and Ciubotaru describe this mother–child attachment as laying “the foundation for the child’s socialization and mental health. Attachment allows the child to form an internalized model of how the world, the attachment figure, and the relationship function – along with their own self-image and sense of self-worth. If the attachment is secure, the child will develop autonomy and competence on the basis of trust in themselves and in others” (Turchină & Ciubotaru, 2012).

Other articles on this topic also examine how adult behavior mirrors the environment in which individuals were raised during early childhood, and such studies reveal patterns of deviant behavior in those who lacked a secure attachment to their parents.

In addition to previous research conducted in this area, various theories have been proposed to better understand the phenomenon and its many implications.

The most relevant is attachment theory, developed in the 1950s and 1960s by psychoanalyst John Bowlby and Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth. This theory states that every child needs a secure relationship with a caregiving adult in order

to achieve balanced social and emotional development. Without such a relationship, proper development cannot occur (Morgan, 2020).

Many authors and researchers have expanded upon this theory over time. From my perspective, the most accurate interpretation is offered by Turchină and Dumbrăveanu, who note: "Between two adults, such bonds can be reciprocal and mutual; in the case of child attachment to a caregiver, these bonds are predominantly asymmetrical and one-directional" (Turchină & Dumbrăveanu, 2013).

Taking all of the above into account, it becomes clear that allowing mothers to stay with their newborns for as long as possible is not only justified but also strongly recommended.

Often, mothers in these situations justify their decision to bring their newborns into prison for up to a year by citing the lack of support in the community. Social stigma plays a major role here – drawing negative attention and causing people to avoid supporting the mother in raising her child after the one-year legal period. In other cases, it is not the mother's decision but rather a matter of judicial constraints. If the mother has not been definitively convicted, a sentence suspension cannot be granted. Given the severe backlog in Romania's court system, this leads to extended waiting periods.

3. Raising a Child in Detention in Terms of Social and Legal Implications

Each country has a certain period during which the mother can raise the child in the prison environment, depending on the legal and legislative system in that country.

In Germany, convicted mothers can stay with their children in special units called Mutter-Kind-Einrichtungen. (Greiffenhagen, 2010). In France, there are spaces called family life units set up inside prisons where they can stay together for up to 18 months of the child. (Dearing, 2016)

There are also countries such as the UK that have Mother and Baby Units, but access is not easy for mothers to obtain, as it is a selection made beforehand, and the maximum term is the same as in France, up to a maximum of 18 months. (Minson, 2021)

One of the countries that apply drastic and immediate measures in terms of child protection, Norway, allows the child to be in prison with the mother only for a maximum period of 9 months and as far as possible an alternative is sought to avoid fostering. (Smith, 2006)

In our country, according to Law no. 254/2013 on the execution of punishments and deprivation of liberty measures ordered by judicial bodies in the course of criminal proceedings, any child may stay with his/her mother inside the penitentiary until the age of 1 year, and in exceptional cases it can be extended until the age of 2 years. (Law 254/2013)

Mothers' needs are the same regardless of the country, but the socio-economic climate can influence and direct, through legislation, the time that each newborn can spend behind bars without breaking any laws.

During this period, be it longer or shorter, in addition to depriving the child of certain rights, of other family members, of objects/things that could facilitate the newborn's difficult periods and of the first important events in life, the very beginning of life itself being 'punished' generates stigmatization in later periods of life.

Getting to know family members can only be done through the visitation sector depending on the mother's enforcement regime. Limiting visits and interaction with other members has effects both for the other family members, whether adults or minors, and for the incarcerated mother and child. At the same time, depriving the newborn child of a family environment and of the care and knowledge of family members may make it more difficult for the newborn child to hand over care after the age of one year.

The Guardian ran an article this year highlighting the confluences of a study by Dr. Laura Abbott, according to which she identified severe trauma in women deprived of their liberty in the UK, who were separated from their children after the period of growing up in prison, at which point she (The Guardian, 2025)

These women who have been convicted of various different crimes, with different amounts of punishment, are usually kept in custody in specially designed spaces inside the prison units that keep female persons, in Romania the only such section is organized and operates in the Women's Penitentiary Ploiești-Târgșorul Nou. The legislative regulation being provided for by Law no. 254/2013 on the execution of punishments and deprivation of liberty measures, art. 28 para. (3) "Prisoners who give birth while serving their sentence may keep the child with them, in a special place in the penitentiary, until the child is one year old, with the approval of the commission appointed for this purpose." (Law 254/2013, art.28)

Other legislative resources on the basis of which this period of maternity in penitentiary works are: the Government Decision no. 157/2016 for the approval of the regulation for the application of Law no. 254/2013 and the Order of the Minister of Justice no. 2882/C/2015 for the approval of the methodological norms for the application of some provisions of Law no. 254/2013, of course there are other internal regulations, special provisions, guidelines or provisions issued as a result of meeting situations not provided for by the above-mentioned legislation.

All these contribute to the smooth running of the work and ensure that the rights of both the child and the mother are respected, thus benefiting from specific food, the basic necessity in terms of ensuring hygiene and ensuring safety from other convicted persons.

Dilemmas also arise in terms of legislation, however, focusing attention on respect for fundamental human rights. Does the custody of a newborn child ensure

that the rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are fully respected, here I am referring to the right to family, to a safe environment and to good development?

If we lean toward totalitarian respect for the rights of the child, do they not infringe on the mother's rights to raise and care for her own child, unless there is some other restriction on this?

This brings us to an impasse which has no alternative at this point in time, and especially when there is no possibility of choosing to request the interruption of the execution of the custodial sentence while in pre-trial detention. It may seem hard to believe, but there have been mothers who have been remanded in custody for more than a year and have had to bring up their child in prison, without having any alternative.

The situation of long-term pre-trial detention is a worldwide problem, according to Global Prison Trends 2023 reports, in around 50 countries, the number of people on remand in prison facilities is higher than the number of people convicted (Penal Reform International, 2023).

4. Contexts and Challenges of Parenting in a Prison Environment

Spending the first year of a child's life in a restrictive environment, where normality depicts barred windows, early morning roll call, and people wearing uniforms and carrying guns, is not exactly the most pleasant start in life.

In the penitentiary access with certain items is totally forbidden or requires approvals, which can lead to delaying or depriving access to a service/object needed by a newborn. Thus, it can be described as a closed, cold environment with a subculture of place that may limit the stimulation, socialization or freedom of movement to which every child is entitled.

Another relevant aspect is the staff with whom the mother-child couple comes into contact, if in terms of social reintegration sector specialists can be considered as being able to interact with this type of beneficiaries, from the point of view of detention security and prison regime staff, things are not as good here.

Even so, according to the reports of the National Administration of Penitentiaries, the shortage of staff is acute, and there are units that operate with only one specialist psychologist, which could contribute to an unrealistic intervention, as the time allocated to each person is insufficient to identify and carry out individual qualitative approaches.

The social intervention is complex in cases of mother-child couple fostering, requiring long-term monitoring, assessment, counseling, mediation and even programs/activities in order to acquire the necessary skills in child rearing. At the same time, social intervention is guided by the type of offense, abilities, prohibitions, health or family problems.

The mother-child couple's choice to remain in prison generates a combination of reactions from society, manifesting social stigma, marginalization and even the risk of exclusion when the child is integrated into the community.

Dilemmas identified from the perspective of motherhood in prison

1. Childhood with the mother vs childhood in a free environment

Among the aims of the social worker in prison is to facilitate communication between the persons in custody and the family, institutions, other actors with an impact on the person's social reintegration process. But does the accommodation of a newborn child in prison help or not to strengthen the relationship between the mother and her family?

The minor's contact with the family is thus restricted and limited to the hours of the visitation program, sometimes leading to frustration and reproaches towards the mother from the parents, the cohabitant and the other children.

Restriction in such situations is not only limited to this, it also has an impact on child development. The mother-child section is, according to the law, separate from the other detainees and has a special regime designed to ensure the necessary privacy and quiet, but depriving the child of interaction with other people, other children, walks in parks and other places can have an impact on the child. The nature of the impact that all of this has is on the emotional and intellectual development of the newborn, as well as on their socialization and integration into groups.

Thus, the free environment in which a newborn baby is desirable to spend the first years of its life is limited in the case of accommodation with the mother and the fundamental rights of the child may be violated, as provided by law. It is also during these early years of the child's life that the attachment relationship develops, the period of breastfeeding takes place, and the baby gets to know the one carried in the womb for a period of about nine months. These are magical and idyllic moments that only take place when the baby remains close to its mother.

After lengthy analysis of the two alternatives, the question remains valid and valid: which of the two options is the best choice and brings the fewest risks for both mother and baby?

2. The best interests of the child vs the purpose of the prison environment

Actions carried out with the involvement of a minor, according to the legal provisions, must be carried out in the best interests of the child. In all delicate or problematic situations, respect for this principle must take precedence.

As for the penitentiary environment, which has the role of ensuring the security of the population, re-education and reintegration of the offender. The main functions of penitentiary establishments include: the restrictive function, the function of protection of citizens and the function of social reintegration.

Analyzing the two components, can the best interests of the child be pursued in a correctional and punitive environment?

3. Close to mom vs. social stigma

Social stigma is a very common term in both custodial and non-custodial institutions and is an issue of concern, with national efforts being made to combat it.

Social reintegration is strongly influenced by stigmatization by the community. We live in a society that brings unfounded and unwanted comments to people for their time in prison, but how will society react to a mother and child who have been in prison together?

Undesirable effects arise in such situations in the next period of a child's life when he begins to attend state educational institutions.

How could a mother prevent such situations for her child without giving up spending time together?

4. Mother's rights vs. child's rights

Respecting the rights of the child leads to violating the mother's rights, so who takes responsibility for violating these rights?

5. The development of mother-child wards vs alternative solutions

Is the identification of alternative solutions, especially in pre-trial detention where persons cannot benefit from the interruption of the execution of the sentence a more efficient option or is it necessary to invest and strategize in the development of mother-child wards?

5. Reflection and Conclusions

Therefore, in view of what has been highlighted above, I believe that it is opportune to remain open, involved and to further research this current issue in our country. The subject raises serious issues and is becoming increasingly difficult to manage in practice in the Romanian prison environment. The dilemmas mentioned above are the main items that signal a more active involvement on the part of society, researchers and people with influence in the development of social policies. Children are the future of the communities, thus, it is necessary that they live in a conducive environment, are provided with good growth and development, as well as their fundamental rights are respected. It is natural for sentenced women to want to start a family, give birth to children and want to have them close to them. Both mother and child need the first period together in a suitable environment, each of us, researchers, community members, specialists and even convicted offenders, each of us can contribute to ensuring this, to the legislative regulation in this area and why not, to the protection of those around us.

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The Influence of Income and Education on Perceived Stress, Depression, and Access to Social Services: A Correlational Analysis

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Abstract. This study explores the interrelations between income, educational attainment, perceived stress, depressive symptoms, and perceived access to social and psychological support services within a socioeconomically diverse sample (N = 74). Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as the stress process model and the reserve capacity model, the findings reveal pronounced socioeconomic gradients in psychological distress. Individuals with lower income and education levels reported significantly higher levels of stress and depression, as well as reduced perceived access to essential services. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses demonstrated that perceived service accessibility is an independent and robust predictor of psychological well-being, particularly in mitigating depressive symptoms among economically disadvantaged participants. These findings underscore the critical role of service accessibility as a protective factor and highlight the necessity for integrated, equity-oriented policy interventions aimed at addressing both material deprivation and structural barriers to mental health support.

Keywords: *socioeconomic status, perceived stress, depressive symptoms, access to social services, psychosocial inequality*

1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Background

The intersection of economic inequality and psychological well-being represents one of the most consequential yet underaddressed public health challenges in contemporary society. Vulnerabilities in mental health and access to social assistance are multifaceted phenomena shaped by complex interactions between economic, social, and psychological factors within broader sociopolitical contexts (Lund et al., 2011; Ridley et al., 2020). Recent meta-analyses have consistently demonstrated robust associations between socioeconomic status (SES) and psychological outcomes, highlighting the profound implications of economic inequality for public health (Allen et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2018). This relationship operates through multiple

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theoretical frameworks. The stress process model (Pearlin et al., 1981; Demeter et al., 2024) posits that economic hardship functions as a primary stressor, initiating a cascade of secondary stressors that cumulatively undermine psychological resilience. Complementary to this, the reserve capacity model (Gallo & Matthews, 2003) suggests that socioeconomic disadvantage depletes psychosocial resources necessary for effective coping with life challenges, thereby increasing vulnerability to psychological distress. Additionally, the social causation hypothesis proposes that structural socioeconomic factors precede and contribute causally to adverse mental health outcomes while acknowledging bidirectional relationships through social selection processes (Dohrenwend et al., 1992).

1.2. Socioeconomic Status and Psychological Vulnerabilities

Precarious economic conditions are robustly associated with elevated levels of psychological distress, including increased prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression (Lorant et al., 2003; Sareen et al., 2011). A comprehensive meta-analysis by Lorant and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that individuals in the lowest socioeconomic stratum face nearly twice the risk of developing depressive disorders compared to those in the highest stratum, with evidence of a dose-response gradient across the socioeconomic spectrum. Multiple pathways mediate this relationship. Economic insecurity generates chronic financial strain, creating persistent allostatic load that compromises neurobiological systems regulating stress responses (McEwen & Gianaros, 2011). Recent neuroscience research has demonstrated that chronic socioeconomic stress is associated with structural and functional alterations in brain regions critical for emotional regulation and executive function, including the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus (Gianaros et al., 2017; Noble et al., 2015; Dughi et al., 2023). These neurobiological changes may be particularly profound when socioeconomic adversity occurs during sensitive developmental periods (Johnson et al., 2016).

Beyond direct neurobiological effects, socioeconomic disadvantage operates through environmental mechanisms, including increased exposure to violence, inadequate housing, reduced educational opportunities, food insecurity, and limited access to green spaces (Evans & Cassells, 2014; Rad et al., 2024). This constellation of risk factors creates a "toxic stress" environment that systematically undermines psychological well-being (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Chiş & Chiş, 2024). Cognitive consequences of economic scarcity further compound these challenges. Seminal work by Mani and colleagues (2013) demonstrated that financial concerns consume cognitive bandwidth, temporarily reducing functional cognitive capacity equivalent to approximately 13 IQ points or one night's sleep deprivation. This "cognitive tax" on executive function impairs decision-making capacity, self-regulation, and problem-solving abilities precisely when these resources are most needed (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

1.3. Access to Social Services and Psychological Support

Access to social and psychological support services represents a critical moderating factor in the relationship between socioeconomic status and mental health outcomes. Andersen's Behavioral Model of Health Services Use (Andersen, 1995; Andersen et al., 2013) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multi-dimensional barriers to service utilization, distinguishing between predisposing characteristics (e.g., demographic factors, beliefs), enabling resources (e.g., income, insurance, geographical proximity), and perceived need for services. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates pronounced socioeconomic gradients in mental health service utilization, despite greater objective need among disadvantaged populations (Wang et al., 2007). Data from the World Mental Health Survey Initiative indicate that even in high-income countries with universal healthcare systems, significant socioeconomic disparities persist in treatment access and quality (Thornicroft, 2008). These disparities are particularly pronounced for evidence-based psychotherapeutic interventions, which often remain inaccessible to socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (Alegria et al., 2018).

Multiple barriers contribute to these access disparities: structural barriers include prohibitive direct costs of psychological therapies (Mojtabai et al., 2011), indirect costs such as transportation and lost wages (Andrade et al., 2014), geographical maldistribution of mental health professionals (Saxena et al., 2007), and fragmented service delivery systems (Mechanic, 2002); sociocultural barriers encompass mental health stigma, which disproportionately impacts marginalized communities (Corrigan et al., 2014), cultural incongruence between service providers and recipients (Snowden & Yamada, 2005; Chiş et al., 2024), and limited mental health literacy (Jorm, 2012); institutional barriers include complex administrative procedures, lengthy waiting periods, inflexible scheduling, and restrictive eligibility criteria that systematically disadvantage individuals with limited resources (Santiago et al., 2011).

The compounding effect of these barriers creates a paradoxical situation where those with the greatest psychological burden have the least access to effective support services—a phenomenon termed the "inverse care law" (Hart, 1971; Tudor Hart, 2000).

1.4. Research Objectives and Theoretical Contributions

Given the complex interrelationships between socioeconomic factors and psychological vulnerabilities, this study aims to provide empirical evidence addressing significant gaps in the existing literature. Specifically, we examine:

1. The association between economic indicators (income, education) and psychological outcomes (perceived stress, depression symptoms), with attention to potential gradient effects across socioeconomic strata.
2. The relationship between income level and perceived access to social assistance services, testing Andersen's model of enabling resources.

3. The relative contributions of income, education, and perceived service access in predicting psychological distress, with implications for intervention development.
4. The potential moderating role of service access in the relationship between economic disadvantage and psychological outcomes.

By simultaneously examining these relationships within a unified analytical framework, this study contributes to integrative theoretical models linking socio-economic conditions, service accessibility, and psychological well-being. The findings have direct implications for developing more equitable social policies and targeted interventions addressing the psychological consequences of socioeconomic disadvantage.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Epistemological Approach

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design utilizing quantitative methods to investigate the relationships between socioeconomic indicators, psychological vulnerabilities, and service accessibility. While acknowledging the limitations of cross-sectional designs for causal inference, this approach enables examination of complex interrelationships among multiple variables within a naturalistic context (Hulley et al., 2013; Chiş et al., 2024).

2.2. Participants and Sampling Procedure

2.2.1. Sample characteristics

The sample comprised 74 participants (42 women, 32 men) with a mean age of 35.2 years ($SD = 8.5$, range: 19–58), recruited through a multi-stage convenience sampling approach. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with monthly income ranging from 1,200 to 7,800 RON (approximately €240 to €1,560). Educational attainment included secondary education (37.8%), undergraduate degrees (45.9%), and postgraduate qualifications (16.3%).

2.2.2. Selection criteria and recruitment strategy

Participant inclusion criteria were minimum age of 18 years; varied self-reported economic status to ensure sample heterogeneity; and capacity to provide informed consent and complete self-report measures.

Exclusion criteria included: self-reported severe psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., schizophrenia spectrum disorders, bipolar disorder) to minimize confounding effects; inability to complete questionnaires independently due to cognitive or literacy limitations.

Participants were recruited through two complementary channels: (1) digital recruitment via social media platforms and psychology forums, which facilitated

access to geographically diverse participants; and (2) in-person recruitment at community centers and social service organizations, which enabled inclusion of participants with limited digital access. This dual recruitment strategy mitigated potential sampling bias associated with exclusively online or in-person recruitment approaches.

2.3. Measurement instruments

2.3.1. Socioeconomic Indicators

Income Assessment. Monthly income was assessed using a structured self-report measure with eight categorical intervals, subsequently collapsed into three broader categories (below 2000 RON, 2000–5000 RON, above 5000 RON) for analytical purposes. This approach enhances response accuracy while mitigating social desirability bias compared to open-ended income questions (Moore et al., 2000; Chiş, 2022).

Economic Resources Scale (ERS). The ERS, developed specifically for this study following guidelines by Boyce et al. (2018), assessed subjective financial security through six items (e.g., "In the last 6 months, I have been able to meet all essential expenses without difficulty") rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$) and correlated significantly with objective income measures ($r = 0.74$, $p < .001$), supporting its criterion validity.

Educational Attainment. Education level was measured ordinally through a structured item assessing highest completed educational qualification, with responses coded numerically (1 = primary education, 2 = secondary education, 3 = tertiary/undergraduate education, 4 = postgraduate education).

2.3.2. Psychological Outcome Measures

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10). The 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) assessed subjective stress experiences over the previous month using a 5-point Likert scale (0 = Never, 4 = Very often). The PSS-10 has demonstrated robust psychometric properties across diverse populations, with meta-analytic evidence supporting its construct validity and sensitivity to socioeconomic factors (Lee, 2012). In the current sample, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$) and test-retest reliability in a pilot subsample ($r = 0.79$, $p < .001$, two-week interval).

Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). The BDI-II (Beck et al., 1996) measured depressive symptomatology through 21 items assessing cognitive, affective, somatic, and motivational symptoms on a 4-point severity scale (0–3). The BDI-II has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, including high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.91$ in the current sample), good convergent validity with clinician ratings

($r = 0.71$; Wang & Gorenstein, 2013), and established sensitivity to socioeconomic gradients (Lorant et al., 2003).

2.3.3. Service Access Measure

Access to Social Services Questionnaire (ASSQ). The ASSQ, adapted from the Perceived Barriers to Psychological Treatment Scale (Mojtabai et al., 2011) and conceptually aligned with Andersen's Behavioral Model (Andersen et al., 2013), assessed perceived accessibility of social and psychological support services. The instrument comprised 10 items (e.g., "I know where to go if I need professional psychological support," "I could afford mental health services if needed") rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree).

Psychometric evaluation demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$) and a two-factor structure through principal components analysis: knowledge/awareness (4 items, explaining 38.7% of variance) and perceived affordability/accessibility (6 items, explaining 29.4% of variance). The total score, ranging from 10–40, was used in primary analyses, with higher scores indicating greater perceived access.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Participants completed the assessment battery either digitally (using encrypted survey software) or in paper format, based on their preference and access capabilities. Completion time averaged 28.5 minutes ($SD = 6.2$). Research assistants trained in standardized administration procedures were available to address questions and ensure proper completion. Paper-based responses were manually entered into the database by two independent research assistants, with discrepancies resolved through consensus. Digital responses were automatically recorded in the secure database. All data underwent rigorous cleaning procedures, including examination of response patterns, outlier identification, and missing data analysis prior to statistical processing.

2.5. Analytical Strategy

Data analysis proceeded through sequential stages using SPSS version 26.0:

- Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics, distributional assessments, and verification of statistical assumptions for parametric tests. Normality was examined through Shapiro-Wilk tests, skewness/kurtosis values, and visual inspection of Q-Q plots.
- Bivariate analyses examined zero-order Pearson correlations among all primary variables, providing initial assessment of hypothesized relationships.

- Comparative analyses utilized one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey HSD tests to examine differences in psychological outcomes and service access across income categories, with effect sizes calculated using partial eta-squared.
- Multivariate analyses employed hierarchical multiple regression models predicting psychological outcomes (stress, depression) from socioeconomic indicators and service access. Models were constructed in sequential blocks to examine incremental predictive validity and potential mediation effects: block indicators1: demographic control variables (age, gender); block 2: socioeconomic (income, education); block 3: service access.
- Supplementary analyses explored potential interaction effects between income and service access in predicting psychological outcomes, examining whether service accessibility moderates the relationship between economic disadvantage and psychological distress.

Missing data (< 3% overall) were addressed using expectation-maximization algorithms, following Little's MCAR test confirming data were missing completely at random ($\chi^2 = 14.72$, $df = 12$, $p = .24$). Statistical significance was established at $\alpha = .05$, with Bonferroni corrections applied for multiple comparisons when appropriate.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the distribution of monthly income across the sample, demonstrating sufficient variability to enable meaningful comparisons across socio-economic strata. The middle-income category (2000–5000 RON) represented the largest segment (45%), with adequate representation of lower and higher income groups.

Table 1. Distribution of monthly income

Income category (RON/month)	n	Percentage (%)	Cumulative (%)
Below 2000 RON	24	32.4	32.4
2000–5000 RON	33	44.6	77.0
Above 5000 RON	17	23.0	100.0
Total	74	100.0	-

Note. Income levels represent self-reported average monthly income. RON = Romanian Leu (approx. 5 RON = 1 EUR).

The middle-income category (2000–5000 RON) represents the largest group, with sufficient representation across all three income strata to enable meaningful comparisons.

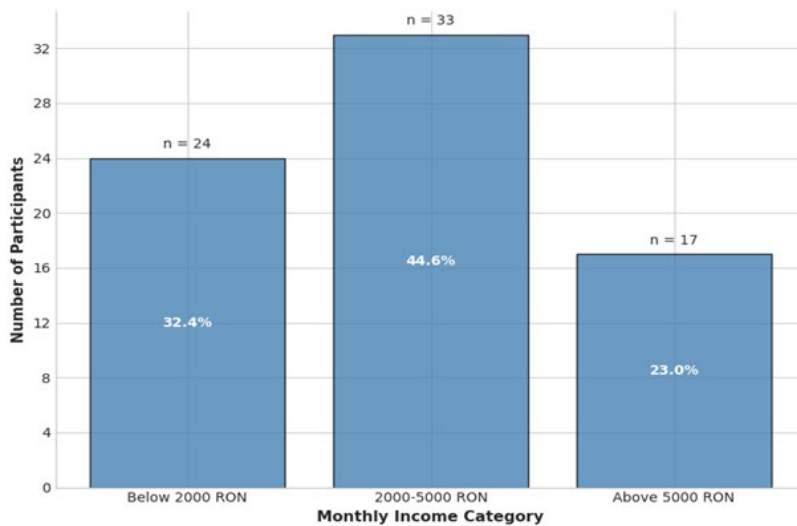


Figure 1. Distribution of monthly income across sample

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the primary study variables. Notably, the mean PSS-10 score ($M = 18.4$) was slightly higher than normative values reported in general population studies typically 13.7–14.2 (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012), potentially reflecting heightened stress levels in the current socioeconomic context. The mean BDI-II score ($M = 14.7$) indicated mild depressive symptomatology, with substantial variability across participants ($SD = 6.1$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for primary variables

Variable	M	SD	Range	Possible Range	Skewness	α
Perceived stress (PSS-10)	18.4	5.2	7–29	0–40	-0.17	0.86
Depression (BDI-II)	14.7	6.1	2–30	0–63	0.36	0.91
Access to social services (ASSQ)	22.3	4.8	10–30	10–40	-0.42	0.84
Monthly income (RON)	3500	1700	1200–7800	-	0.79	-
Education level	2.7	0.8	1–4	1–4	0.23	-

Note. $N = 74$. α = Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient.

3.2. Bivariate Relationships among Primary Variables

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix for the primary variables. The data revealed significant negative associations between socioeconomic indicators and psychological distress measures, with monthly income showing stronger relationships than educational attainment. Both stress and depression demonstrated robust negative correlations with perceived access to social services, suggesting the potential protective role of service accessibility.

Table 3. Pearson correlation matrix for primary variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Monthly income	—				
2. Education level	.35**	—			
3. Perceived stress (PSS-10)	-.42***	-.31**	—		
4. Depression (BDI-II)	-.38**	-.27*	.68***	—	
5. Access to services (ASSQ)	.51***	.45***	-.55***	-.52***	—

Note. N = 74. Education level was coded ordinaly (1 = primary, 2 = secondary, 3 = tertiary/ undergraduate, 4 = postgraduate). *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

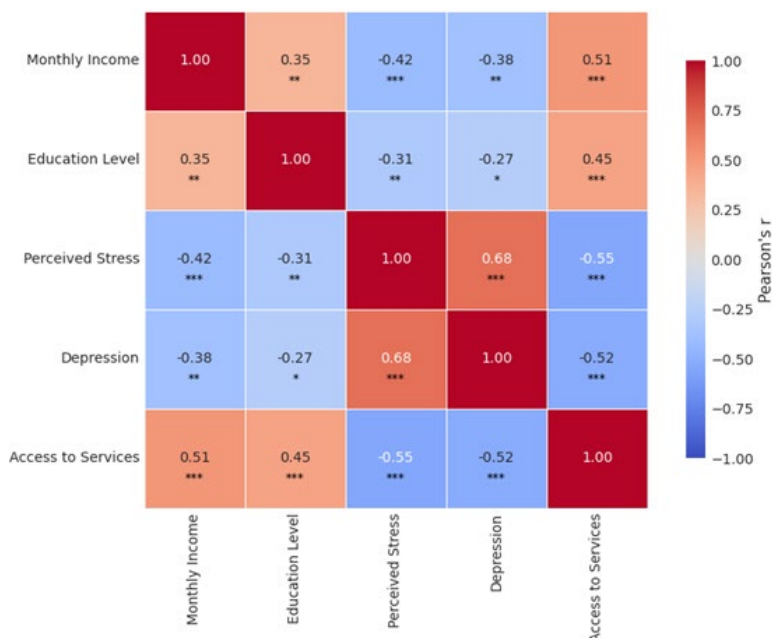


Figure 2. Correlation matrix showing bivariate relationships between key study variables

Blue circles represent positive correlations, red circles represent negative correlations, and the size and intensity of color indicate correlation strength. Monthly income showed significant negative correlations with psychological distress measures (stress, depression) and a strong positive correlation with perceived access to services.

The correlation between monthly income and perceived access to services ($r = .51$, $p < .001$) supports Andersen's theoretical model of enabling resources, suggesting that financial resources significantly facilitate perceived access to psychological support. The strong association between perceived stress and depression ($r = .68$, $p < .001$) aligns with theoretical models positing stress as a key pathway to depressive symptomatology.

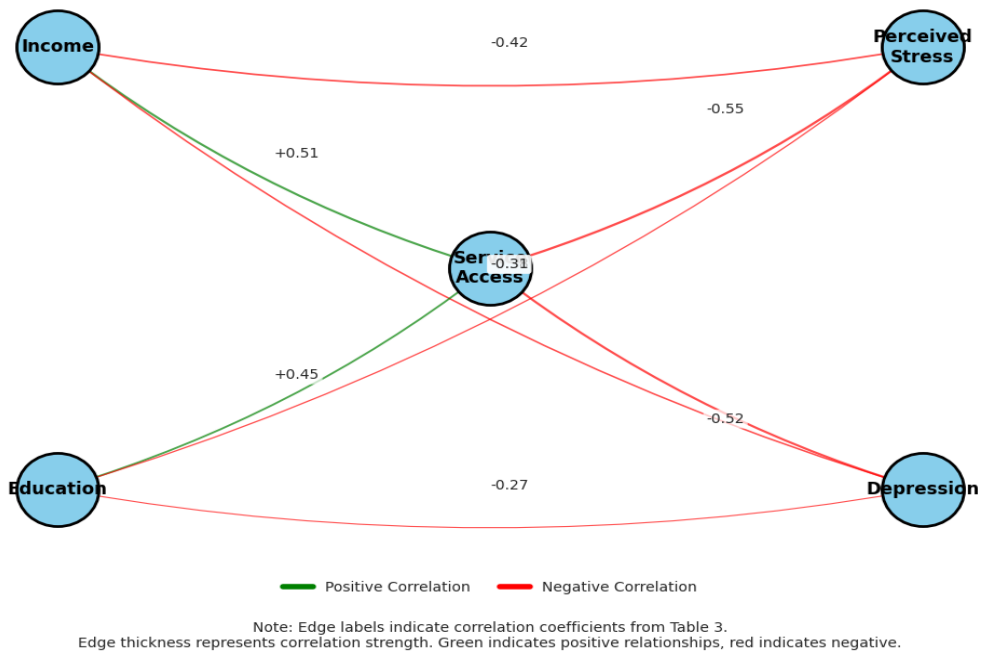


Figure 3. Path diagram illustrating the hypothesized relationships between socioeconomic factors, service access, and psychological outcomes

Values on paths represent significant correlation coefficients from Table 3. The diagram suggests both direct and indirect pathways through which income may influence psychological outcomes.

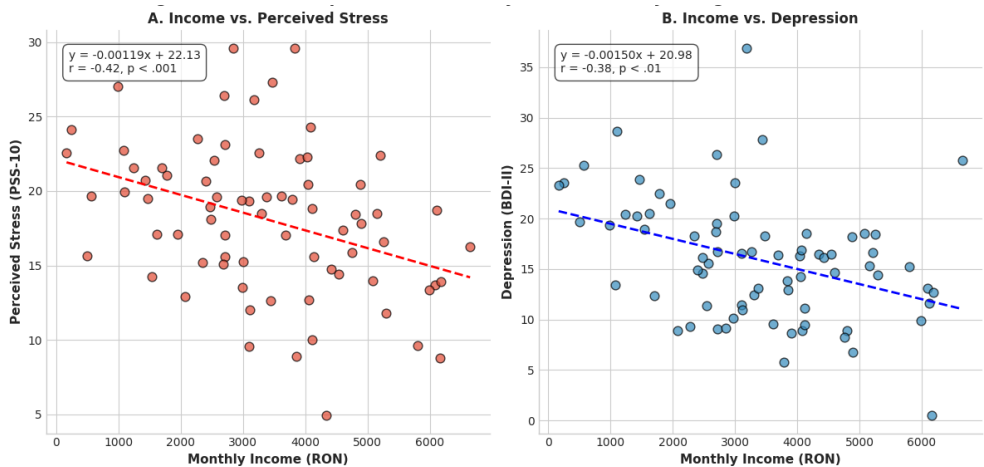


Figure 4. Scatter plots with regression lines depicting relationships between monthly income and psychological outcomes

Both perceived stress (Panel A) and depression (Panel B) demonstrate significant negative linear relationships with income, while perceived access to social services (Panel C) shows a significant positive relationship with income. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

3.3. Socioeconomic Disparities in Psychological Outcomes and Service Access

One-way ANOVA (Table 4) revealed significant differences across income categories for all three outcome measures, with medium to large effect sizes (partial η^2 ranging from .16 to .21). For both psychological distress measures, a clear gradient effect was observed, with each successively higher income category associated with improved psychological outcomes.

Table 4. Comparison of psychological outcomes and service access across income categories

Variable	Income Category	n	M	SD	F	p	partial η^2
Perceived stress (PSS-10)					7.24	.001	.17
	< 2000 RON	24	21.3a	4.7			
	2000–5000 RON	33	17.8b	5.0			
	> 5000 RON	17	14.5c	3.9			
Depression (BDI-II)					6.82	.002	.16
	< 2000 RON	24	17.9a	5.8			
	2000–5000 RON	33	13.6b	6.2			
	> 5000 RON	17	10.3c	4.5			
Access to services (ASSQ)					9.15	<.001	.21
	< 2000 RON	24	18.7a	4.1			
	2000–5000 RON	33	22.1b	4.3			
	> 5000 RON	17	26.4c	3.7			

Note. Different superscripts (a,b,c) within columns indicate significant differences between groups based on Tukey HSD post-hoc tests ($p < .05$).

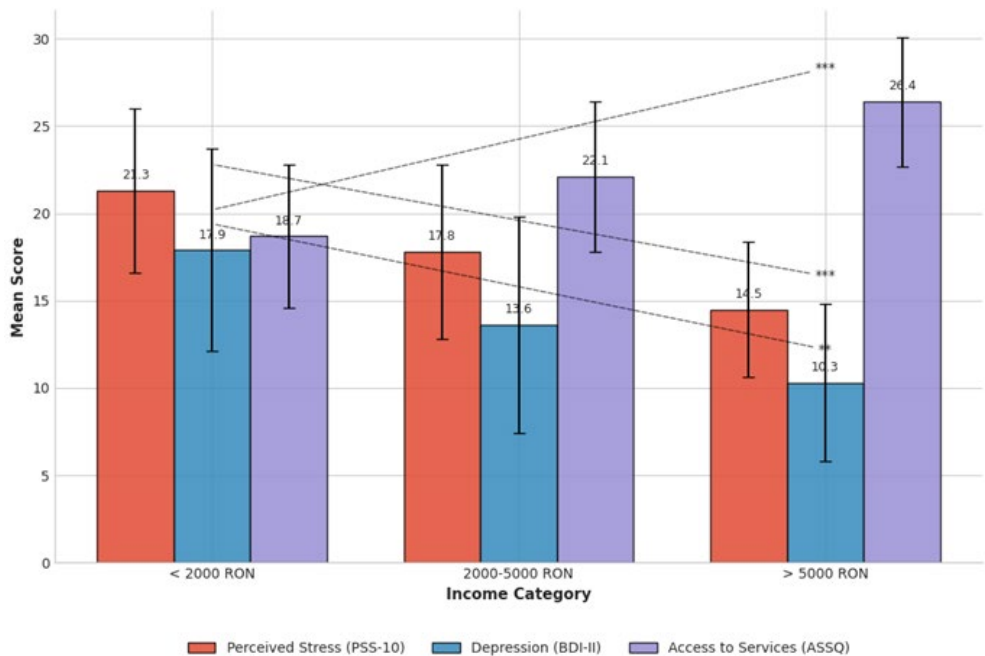
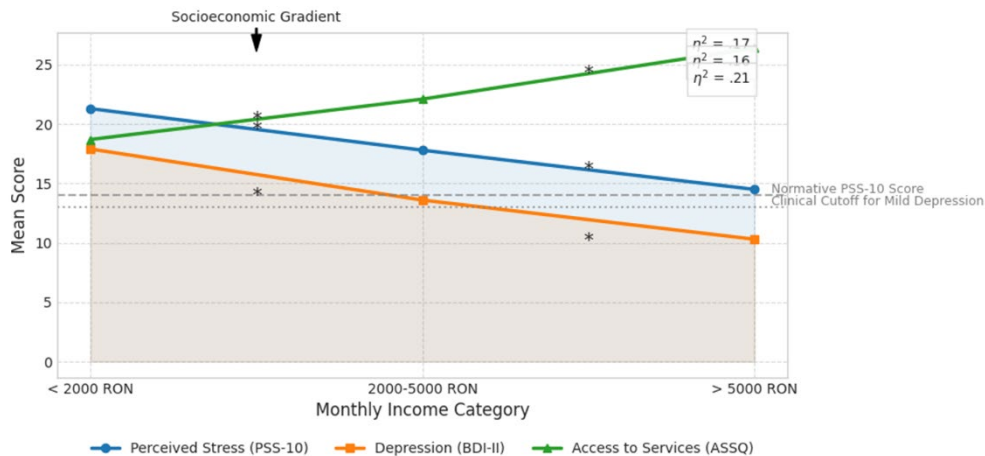


Figure 5. Mean scores of perceived stress, depression, and access to services across income categories

Error bars represent standard errors. All three variables demonstrate significant gradient effects across income categories, with post-hoc Tukey tests confirming significant differences between each pair of income groups.



Note: * indicates statistically significant differences between adjacent income groups ($p < .05$). Effect sizes (partial η^2) represent strength of association between income and each outcome measure.

Figure 6. Line graph illustrating socioeconomic gradients across the three primary outcome measures

Values are standardized (z-scores) to facilitate direct comparison of gradient slopes. The access to services measure demonstrates the steepest gradient across income categories, suggesting particularly pronounced disparities in service accessibility.

Post-hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) confirmed significant differences between all three income categories for both psychological outcome measures. Particularly noteworthy is the substantial difference in depression scores between the lowest and highest income categories (mean difference = 7.6 points, $p < .001$), representing a clinically meaningful disparity.

For perceived access to social services, the gradient was especially pronounced, with each income category demonstrating significantly different levels of perceived access (partial $\eta^2 = .21$). This pattern suggests that financial resources function as a critical enabling factor for service utilization, consistent with Andersen's behavioral model.

3.4. Predictive Models of Psychological Vulnerabilities

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses examined the relative contributions of socioeconomic factors and service access in predicting psychological vulnerabilities. Table 5 presents the regression model predicting perceived stress.

Table 5. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting perceived stress (PSS-10)

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Block 1: Demographics									
Age	-0.05	0.06	-.08	-0.02	0.06	-.04	-0.01	0.05	-.02
Gender (1=M, 2=F)	1.53	0.67	.15*	1.36	0.63	.13*	1.12	0.58	.11
Block 2: Socioeconomic									
Monthly income				-0.001	0.0003	-.39**	-0.001	0.0003	-.32**
Education level				-1.48	0.59	-.28*	-1.35	0.55	-.25*
Block 3: Service access									
Access Services (ASSQ)							-0.41	0.11	-.38***
Model									
R ²	.03			.21			.28		
Adjusted R ²	.01			.17			.23		
ΔR^2	.03			.18			.07		
F for ΔR^2	1.27			7.89**			6.82**		
F for model	1.27			4.73**			9.11***		

Note. N = 74. β = standardized coefficient. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The final model significantly predicted perceived stress, $F(5, 68) = 9.11, p < .001$, explaining 28% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .23$). All three substantive predictors income ($\beta = -.32, p = .003$), education ($\beta = -.25, p = .017$), and perceived access to services ($\beta = -.38, p < .001$) made significant independent contributions to the model. Notably, the addition of service access in Block 3 contributed significant incremental predictive validity ($\Delta R^2 = .07, p = .002$) beyond socioeconomic indicators alone, suggesting that service accessibility represents an important protective factor independent of socioeconomic status.

Table 6 presents the regression model predicting depression symptoms, revealing a similar pattern.

Table 6. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting depression symptoms (BDI-II)

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Block 1: Demographics									
Age	-0.04	0.08	-.06	-0.02	0.08	-.03	-0.00	0.07	-.01
Gender (1=M, 2=F)	1.87	0.84	.18*	1.64	0.79	.16*	1.31	0.72	.13
Block 2: Socioeconomic									
Monthly Income				-0.001	0.0003	-.36**	-0.001	0.0003	-.28**
Education Level				-1.27	0.52	-.27*	-1.02	0.48	-.22*
Block 3: Service Access									
Access Services (ASSQ)							-0.52	0.13	-.41***
Model Statistics									
R^2	.04			.19			.31		
Adjusted R^2	.02			.15			.26		
ΔR^2	.04			.15			.12		
F for ΔR^2	1.57			6.43**			11.37***		
F for model	1.57			4.18**			10.45***		

Note. N = 74. β = standardized coefficient. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

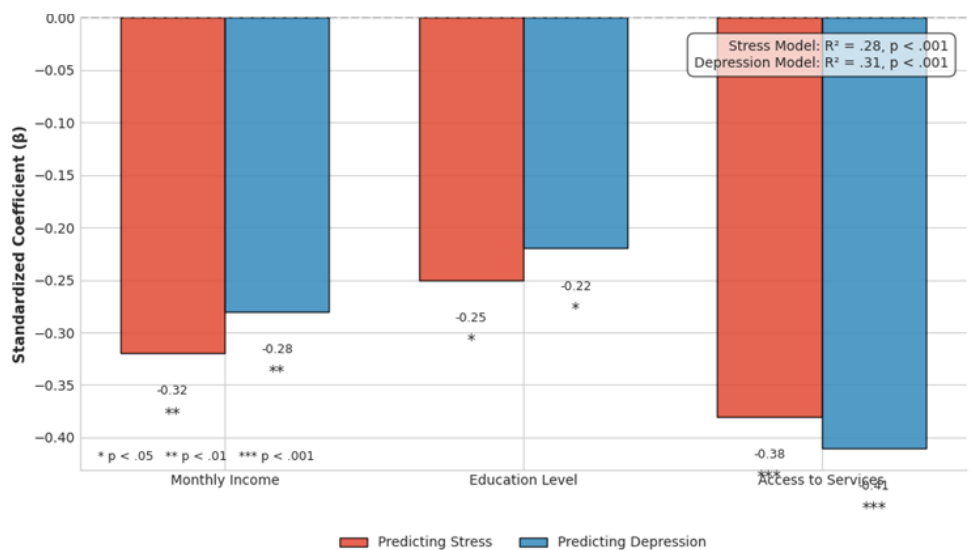


Figure 7. Standardized regression coefficients (β) from final models predicting perceived stress and depression

Error bars represent standard errors. All three primary predictors (income, education, access to services) made significant independent contributions to both outcome variables, with service access emerging as the strongest predictor in both models after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors.

The final model predicting depression explained 31% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .26$), $F(5, 68) = 10.45$, $p < .001$, with all three principal predictors making significant independent contributions. Notably, perceived access to services emerged as the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$), explaining significant unique variance beyond socioeconomic factors ($\Delta R^2 = .12$, $p < .001$). This suggests that service accessibility may be particularly important for understanding and addressing depressive symptomatology.

Supplementary regression analyses exploring interaction effects revealed a significant interaction between income and service access in predicting depression ($\beta = .24$, $p = .017$), but not stress ($\beta = .11$, $p = .148$). This interaction suggests that perceived access to services may be especially protective against depression symptoms for lower-income individuals, potentially compensating for the psychological vulnerabilities associated with economic disadvantage.

The relationship between access to services and depression is stronger (steeper slope) at lower income levels, suggesting that service accessibility may be particularly protective for economically disadvantaged individuals.

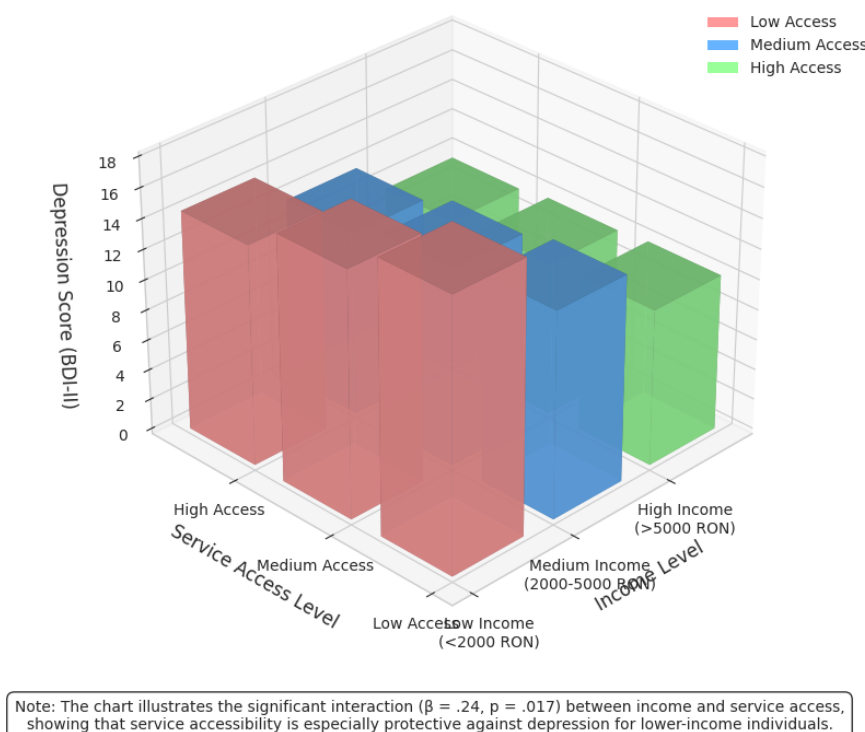


Figure 8. Three-dimensional surface plot illustrating the interaction effect between income and service access in predicting depression symptoms

4. Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence elucidating the complex relationships between socioeconomic factors, perceived access to support services, and psychological vulnerabilities within a specific socioeconomic context. The findings reveal a clear socioeconomic gradient in psychological well-being and service accessibility, with meaningful implications for both theoretical understanding and applied interventions (Chiş, 2020). The observed negative associations between income and psychological distress measures (stress: $r = -.42$; depression: $r = -.38$) align with the economic stress model (Conger et al., 2010; Rad et al., 2022) and the reserve capacity framework (Gallo & Matthews, 2003), suggesting that economic hardship functions as a primary stressor depleting psychological resources. These correlations are comparable in magnitude to those reported in meta-analyses (e.g., Lorant et al., 2003), lending credibility to the findings despite the modest sample size. Particularly noteworthy is the substantial difference in depression scores between income categories (mean BDI-II difference of 7.6 points between lowest and highest categories). This difference exceeds established thresholds for minimal clinically important differences in BDI-II scores (typically 5 points; Hiroe et al., 2005), suggesting that the socioeconomic

disparities observed represent not merely statistical artifacts but clinically meaningful differences in psychological well-being. The significant positive correlation between income and perceived access to social services ($r = .51$) provides empirical support for Andersen's behavioral model (Andersen et al., 2013), confirming that financial resources function as critical enabling factors facilitating service utilization. This relationship remained robust in multivariate models controlling for demographic factors, suggesting that economic resources play a central role in determining service accessibility independent of other sociodemographic characteristics. Perhaps most importantly, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that perceived access to services contributes significantly to psychological well-being beyond socioeconomic factors alone. This independent contribution was particularly pronounced for depression ($\Delta R^2 = .12$), suggesting that service accessibility may function as a protective buffer against depressive symptomatology a finding consistent with stress-buffering models of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 2011). The identified interaction effect between income and service access in predicting depression suggests that accessible support services may be especially protective for economically disadvantaged individuals. This finding resonates with the compensatory model of resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), wherein protective factors become particularly salient under conditions of heightened risk. From a policy perspective, this interaction effect underscores the potential value of improving service accessibility specifically for lower-income populations, who may derive disproportionate benefit from enhanced access to psychological support.

Our results highlight the profound impact of economic factors on psychological well-being, suggesting that policies addressing income inequality represent critical upstream interventions for population mental health. Such structural approaches might include: poverty reduction strategies including progressive taxation, expanded social safety nets, and living wage policies that address fundamental socioeconomic determinants of psychological distress (Patel et al., 2018; Ridley et al., 2020); educational expansion and equalization targeting disparities in educational attainment, which our data suggest remains independently associated with psychological outcomes even controlling for income ($\beta = -.22$ to $-.25$); universal health coverage frameworks encompassing comprehensive mental health services, with particular attention to removing financial barriers for lower-income populations (Patel et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2013).

Given the prominent role of service accessibility in predicting psychological outcomes, interventions targeting specific access barriers warrant particular attention. Integrated care models embedding psychological services within primary healthcare settings to reduce practical barriers and stigma. Meta-analytic evidence suggests such collaborative care approaches yield superior outcomes compared to traditional specialized referral systems, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged

populations (Archer et al., 2012; van der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2010). Community-based interventions leveraging lay health workers and peer support specialists to extend the reach of psychological services in resource-constrained settings. Such task-shifting approaches have demonstrated both clinical effectiveness and cost-efficiency in multiple contexts (Singla et al., 2017; Patel et al., 2018). Digital mental health platforms addressing geographical and temporal access barriers, though careful attention must be given to the "digital divide" to ensure such innovations do not inadvertently exacerbate existing disparities (Lattie et al., 2019; Torous et al., 2019). Financial barrier reduction through targeted subsidies, sliding-scale payment systems, and expanded insurance coverage for psychological services, directly addressing the economic enablers identified in our analyses (Santiago et al., 2011; Mojtabai et al., 2011).

The multifaceted nature of our findings suggests the need for coordinated interventions targeting multiple levels of influence simultaneously. Drawing on socioecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988), comprehensive approaches should address:

- Individual level: evidence-based psychological interventions tailored to address the specific manifestations of economic stress, including financial therapy approaches integrating psychological and financial counseling (Archuleta & Grable, 2011).
- Community level: development of local support networks and resource-sharing initiatives to build collective resilience within disadvantaged communities (Eriksson et al., 2018; Wandersman & Nation, 1998).
- Institutional level: organizational reforms within service delivery systems to enhance cultural responsiveness, reduce administrative barriers, and implement trauma-informed approaches recognizing the psychological impacts of socioeconomic adversity (Santiago et al., 2011; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).
- Policy level: structural interventions addressing fundamental social determinants through economic and educational policies.

The significant interaction effect observed between income and service access suggests that interventions targeting service accessibility may be particularly beneficial for economically disadvantaged populations, potentially yielding disproportionate returns on investment when specifically tailored to low-income communities.

Several methodological **limitations** warrant consideration when interpreting these findings. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference regarding the directional relationships between socioeconomic factors, service access, and psychological outcomes. While theoretical frameworks suggest that socioeconomic disadvantage precedes psychological distress, reverse causation cannot be ruled out particularly given evidence that psychological disorders can impair occupational

functioning and economic productivity (Lund et al., 2011). Longitudinal designs tracking trajectories over time would strengthen causal inference. The relatively modest sample size ($N = 74$) and convenience sampling approach limit statistical power and may compromise external validity. While the sample included sufficient socioeconomic diversity to detect significant associations, replication with larger, probability-based samples would enhance generalizability. The current sample potentially underrepresents the most severely disadvantaged populations, who may face the greatest barriers to research participation. Reliance on self-report measures for all constructs introduces potential for common method variance and social desirability bias, particularly for sensitive topics like income and psychological symptoms. The Economic Resources Scale developed for this study, while demonstrating good psychometric properties, would benefit from further validation against objective economic indicators. Additionally, the Access to Social Services Questionnaire measured perceived rather than actual service utilization, which may not perfectly correspond to objective access patterns.

While the regression models explained substantial variance in psychological outcomes (28–31%), the majority of variance remains unexplained, suggesting important unmeasured factors. The analytical approach treated education as a linear predictor, potentially oversimplifying its relationship with outcomes. More sophisticated modeling approaches, including structural equation modeling with latent variables, could better capture the complex interrelationships among constructs.

Several promising **directions for future research** emerge from this study. Prospective cohort studies tracking trajectories of socioeconomic position, service utilization, and psychological outcomes over time would strengthen causal inference and illuminate temporal dynamics. Such designs could disentangle social causation (socioeconomic factors influencing mental health) from social selection processes (psychological factors influencing socioeconomic attainment). More comprehensive examination of potential mediating mechanisms linking socioeconomic factors to psychological outcomes could enhance theoretical understanding and identify intervention targets. Potential mediators include financial stress processes, allostatic load markers, cognitive bandwidth limitations, and social comparison mechanisms (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Ridley et al., 2020). Future studies should examine multiple dimensions of service accessibility beyond perceived access, including objective availability measures (e.g., provider-to-population ratios), actual utilization patterns, and service quality indicators. Geospatial analyses mapping the distribution of psychological services relative to socioeconomic disadvantage could provide valuable insights into structural barriers.

Experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation of interventions targeting the economic determinants of psychological well-being and service access barriers represents a critical research priority. Such studies should employ mixed-methods

approaches to examine not only clinical outcomes but also implementation processes and contextual factors influencing effectiveness. Investigation of protective factors and resilience mechanisms that enable some individuals to maintain psychological well-being despite economic adversity could inform strength-based interventions. Such factors might include social capital, specific coping strategies, meaning-making processes, and community resources (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Ungar, 2013).

5. Final Conclusions

This study provides robust empirical evidence linking socioeconomic position to psychological vulnerabilities and service accessibility within a specific social context. The findings reveal significant socioeconomic gradients in psychological well-being, with lower-income individuals experiencing substantially higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms. Concurrently, these economically disadvantaged individuals perceive greater barriers to accessing supportive services a troubling paradox wherein those with the greatest psychological needs face the most substantial barriers to obtaining assistance. The finding that service accessibility independently predicts psychological well-being beyond socioeconomic factors alone offers a potential pathway for intervention. While structural approaches addressing fundamental social determinants remain essential, enhancing service accessibility for economically disadvantaged populations may yield meaningful improvements in psychological outcomes even in the context of persistent socioeconomic inequalities.

This research underscores the need for integrated approaches that simultaneously address economic disadvantage and service access barriers. By conceptualizing psychological vulnerabilities within their socioeconomic context, we can develop more effective interventions that recognize the profound interrelationships between material conditions, service systems, and psychological well-being. Such integrated approaches are essential for reducing mental health disparities and promoting psychological flourishing across the socioeconomic spectrum.

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The Impact of Playful Methods on the Development of Motor Skills in Secondary School Students: A Comparative and Interventional Study

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Abstract. The purpose of this research is to understand in detail how certain skills are developed in secondary school students; it is also to discover effective methods of intervention to improve these skills. The objectives of the study are to compare the game methods used to increase the speed and performance of secondary school students as well as to reduce individual differences. The methods used in the study are alternatives, relay type, competition, through play that all compete to obtain a maximum demand for obtaining very good results and to perform the students. The results obtained from the tests and the statistical interpretation of the results indicated a decrease in most of the tests show a reduction in individual differences, indicating an effectiveness of the interventions in the study carried out.

Keywords: *skills, secondary school students, game methods, running, speed.*

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization promotes, through the "Active Life" program, the importance of systematically practicing physical activities for health, with priority given to children and young people. Research has shown that long-term physical exercise improves physical and mental health, making a positive contribution to the process of learning and personality development, reducing the risk of developing physical and mental disorders associated with the modern lifestyle (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Lubans et al., 2016).

The European Commission also emphasizes the role of sport in education, as it can inoculate young people with the values of tolerance and mutual respect, honesty and respect for fairness, as well as its prophylactic role, especially in the fight against obesity (Ekelund et al., 2012).

To this end, great efforts have been made to optimise health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) in all Member States. They will have to develop strategies at

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national level that try, within educational programmes, to develop and strengthen the share of physical activity among children and schoolchildren from an early age. It is worth mentioning the Commission's proposal to promote sports activities and physical exercise as important factors in educational standards, so as to contribute to increasing the attractiveness of schools and improving school results (Cristea & Rusu, 2018).

In addition, it emphasizes how important it is for schools to fund physical activities for the youngest children, as they are essential for the psychological and physical development of the youngest children (Bailey et al., 2009). It also gives young and old a way to improve their health. The Commission encourages Member States to explore ways in which they can promote the concept of active living through their national education and training systems, including teacher training. The Commission is of the opinion that investment in education, training and creativity is essential for the prosperity of future generations. Schools can easily find ways to promote HEPA programs through physical education. The Romanian authorities do not seem to want to change the European policy that focuses on promoting a healthy lifestyle, improving the health of the population and the harmonious physical development of the young generation.

Physical education is a fundamental pillar in the harmonious development of children and adolescents, having a major impact not only on physical health, but also on cognitive, social and emotional development (Bailey et al., 2009). In the current context, characterized by increased sedentary lifestyle and excessive exposure to screens, the role of physical activity becomes even more essential (Tremblay et al., 2011).

The World Health Organization (2020) recommends a minimum of 60 minutes of daily physical activity for children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 years, highlighting the positive impact of exercise on physical and mental health. Regular exercise contributes to the development of executive functions, improves the ability to concentrate and reduces the risk of mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Lubans et al., 2016).

In school, physical education classes are an essential opportunity for intervention to promote a healthy lifestyle, especially among secondary school students. Studies show that the implementation of structured motor programs adapted to the age level contributes to the formation of basic skills and the development of motor skills (Cale & Harris, 2013). In addition, these activities positively influence self-confidence and social relationships (Ekelund et al., 2012).

In Romania, the importance of integrating HEPA (health-enhancing physical activity) programs into formal education is supported by the National Strategy for Sport and European recommendations on promoting an active life (European Commission, 2021). However, the reality in the educational system still indicates

an undervaluation of the potential of physical education in the training of young people (Cristea & Rusu, 2018).

From a methodological point of view, effective interventions for the development of motor skills involve the application of various methods, such as maximum demands, relays, competitions and didactic games (Stan, 2016). They stimulate not only the muscular system, but also neuro-psychiatric reactions, contributing to the improvement of reaction time and exercise capacity (Mujika et al., 2016; Sallis et al., 2000).

Numerous studies highlight the fact that students who constantly participate in motor programs make significant progress in somatic and motor parameters, such as body weight, reaction speed and coordination (Malina et al., 2004; Tomkinson et al., 2018). Also, assessing individual progress based on baseline and final testing is a recommended practice in the literature to establish the effectiveness of interventions (Shephard & Trudeau, 2000).

In conclusion, investigations on the impact of motor activities on the development of secondary school students are essential for substantiating effective educational strategies. The present paper aims to contribute to this approach by comparatively analyzing the progress made by students involved in a structured motor program compared to a control group.

2. Methods

In order to carry out and follow the evolution of the students' results, the research was divided into two stages:

1. The first stage corresponds to module I and included the performance of medical checks and initial testing for somatic measurements and motor tests.
2. The second stage corresponds to module V and included the final performance of the tests following the training program carried out during the physical education lessons.

Subjects: Secondary school students of the Vinga Technological High School:

- Group I, a group of 29 students (13 girls and 16 boys), target group;
- Group II, with a total of 28 students (15 girls and 13 boys), control group.

Venue: National High School of Informatics Arad

Duration: September 2022 – March 2024 which included phase I initial testing, mode 1 I, and phase II final testing, module V, during 2 consecutive school years.

Methods and means used to develop reaction speed:

- the maximum load method, which consists of performing walking and running exercises, alternating with rapid running distances;

- the alternative method, consisting of alternating the intensity, e.g. increasing the speed to the maximum level, maintaining it over previously marked distances, gradually decreasing the intensity;
- the method of relays and competitions that require different forms of speed manifestation;
- the method of play.

3. Results

By comparing the results obtained from the initial test with those from the final test and by calculating the statistical indicators as well as the arithmetic mean, the standard deviation and the coefficient of variability, we can establish the progress or regression in terms of the somatic profile and the general motor profile.

The results that have been obtained in the control samples that are included in the tables indicating both the initial values from the test and the values from the final test.

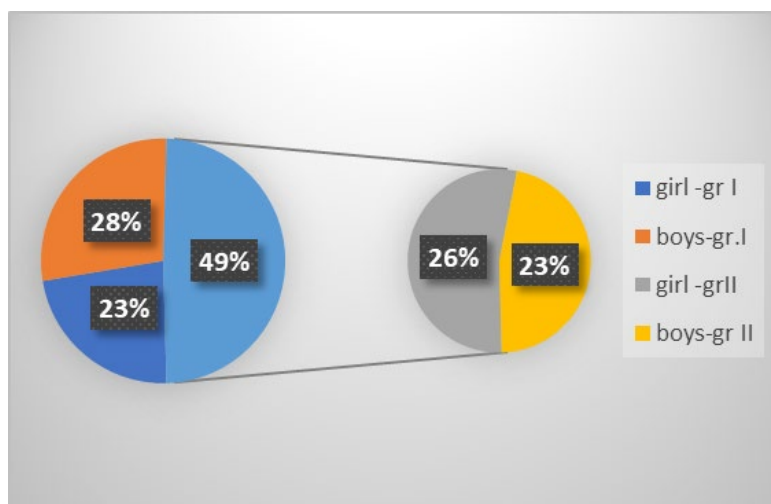


Figure 1. Gender/study group distribution of study participants

The somatic profile provides a detailed picture of the individual's physical characteristics, which is essential for optimizing sports performance and maintaining overall health.

The assessment of this profile helps to personalize training and nutrition interventions, thus contributing to reaching the maximum potential of students and preventing injuries.

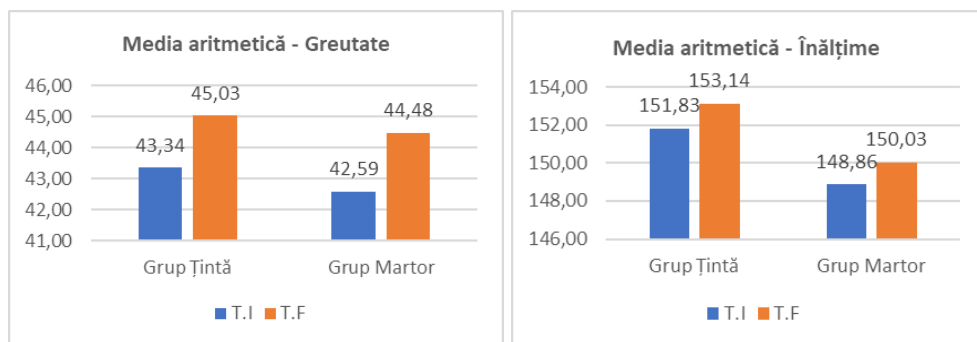


Figure 2. Representation of the somatic profile – arithmetic mean – Weight/Height

Group I showed an average weight gain of 1.68 kg from initial to final testing. This reflects the effects of the activities and interventions applied, indicating a healthy and sustained weight gain among students.

Group II showed an average weight gain of 1.87 kg over the same period. Although the increase is slightly higher than that of Group I, it suggests that students in Group II also had healthy weight gain, possibly due to similar environmental or lifestyle factors.

Although the arithmetic mean of the weight of those in Group I at the final test (44.9 kg) shows more kg than those in Group II (43.8 kg), the reality actually shows us that during the school year and due to exercises, games and the specific attention paid to Group I indicates a decrease (1.68 kg) compared to those in Group II (1.87kg).

If we compare the results obtained so far, we can say that those in Group I have developed more harmoniously than those in Group II.

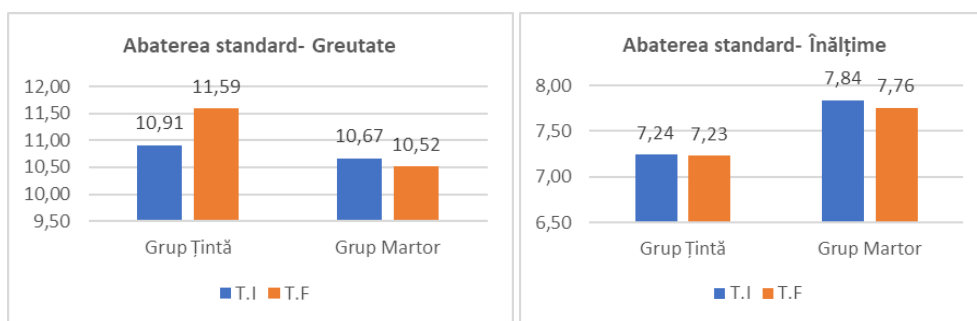


Figure 3. Representation of the somatic profile – standard deviation – height/growth

The standard height deviation for Group I remained virtually constant from initial testing to final testing, indicating a stability of height variability between students. In contrast, the standard deviation for Group II decreased slightly,

suggesting a small reduction in height variability between students during this period.

The standard weight deviation for Group I increased from baseline to final testing, indicating an increase in weight variability between students. In contrast, the standard deviation for Group II decreased slightly, suggesting a reduction in the variability of weights between students during this period.

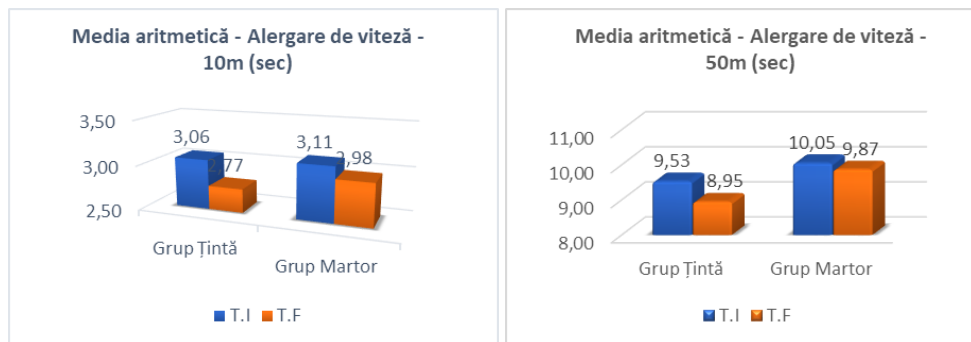


Figure 4. Representation of the motor profile – arithmetic average – speed running at 10m/50m

Group I showed a significant improvement in performance in speed running over the 10m distance, reflecting the positive effects of specific interventions. The decrease in average time suggests an increase in the speed of students in this group. Group II also showed an improvement in performance, but not as pronounced as in Group I.

Group I showed a significant improvement in performance in speed running over the 50m distance, reflecting the positive effects of specific interventions. The decrease in average time suggests a considerable increase in the speed of students in this group.

4. Discussion

The interventions in Group I increased the physical performance of the students, standardized the results and reduced variability. Balanced physical development and improved consistency of performance are demonstrated by increases in arithmetic mean and decreases in amplitude, standard deviation and coefficient of variability.

Group II noticed improvements, but they were not as obvious as in the Target Group. These findings indicate that the interventions that were implemented in the Target Group had a greater positive effect than in the Control Group; However, changes that are made to improve effectiveness could be helpful.

The results obtained from the application of the structured motor program highlight a clear evolution of the physical and functional parameters analysed among secondary school students. The values obtained at the final tests registered significant improvements compared to the initial tests, which confirms the effectiveness of the intervention applied during the physical education classes.

In the experimental group, a more accelerated progression in reaction speed, strength and coordination is observed compared to the control group that followed the standard curriculum. This suggests that the methods and means used in the personalized program contributed to the more effective activation of the motor potential and to the stimulation of the active involvement of the students in the activity.

An element worth noting is the fact that the proposed exercises were adapted according to the age particularities and the level of development of each student, which allowed to obtain balanced results and avoid overwork. Also, the dynamic and interactive nature of the motor activities – such as relays, application routes and games – supported the emotional involvement and motivation of the participants.

In terms of gender differences, natural trends were highlighted: boys performed better in strength and endurance tests, while girls performed better in terms of flexibility and balance. These differences are consistent with the physiological peculiarities of development in the pre-adolescent period.

Comparing the averages recorded in the applied tests, it is found that the intervention had the greatest impact on the speed parameter (50 m running), followed by skill and endurance. This can be explained by the nature of the predominant exercises in the program, which aimed at rapid, sequential activations with short execution times and controlled breaks.

The qualitative analysis of motor behavior also reveals a better discipline among the students who participated in the structured program. They showed a higher degree of cooperation, attention and concentration during the lessons, which could also indicate a positive influence on the psychosocial components of physical education.

It is important to mention that Group II, although it evolved slightly, did not benefit from the same type of methodological diversification and did not register significant jumps in the evaluated parameters. This aspect reinforces the idea that the simple conduct of the physical education class in its classic form is not always enough to achieve notable progress in motor development.

The limitations observed during the research – such as fluctuations in attendance, initial differences between students' levels of preparation or the relatively short intervention time – do not negate the value of the results but underline the need for longer and larger batch studies to consolidate the conclusions.

Overall, the data obtained support the idea that a structured motor program, systematically applied in physical education classes, has a significant impact on the

physical development of students and contributes to the optimization of the motor education process.

5. Conclusions

The study clearly highlights the benefits of implementing a structured motor program in physical education classes at the secondary school level. The results show that the students who participated in the intervention program recorded significant improvements in terms of speed, endurance, strength, coordination and mobility, compared to those in the control group.

The intervention had a positive impact not only on motor performance, but also on students' involvement in the activity, contributing to the development of positive attitudes towards physical education. The varied, adapted and interactive nature of the exercises favoured active participation, motivation and cooperation between colleagues, essential aspects in the personal and social development of the students.

The results obtained confirm that the use of a personalized motor training program, based on exercises with progressive demands and objective assessments, can be an effective strategy for optimizing the performance of the physical education class. It also emphasizes the importance of differentiating activities according to the individual level of development, in order to ensure the progress of each student.

The differences found between the two groups, but also between students of different sexes, reflect the need for a personalized approach in the educational process and the use of teaching methods that meet the real needs of students. In addition, the data obtained support the idea that well-structured physical activities contribute to the overall development of students, not only physically, but also psychologically and socially.

In conclusion, it is recommended to include adapted motor programs in the physical education curriculum, as well as the continuous training of teachers in the use of modern teaching methods, in order to increase the efficiency of the physical education class and to stimulate the harmonious development of students.

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Influencing Factors and Strategies for Improving the Well-Being of Young Athletes

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Abstract. The main purpose of this study is to identify and analyse the factors that influence the well-being of young athletes, in order to develop effective recommendations and strategies for maintaining and improving their physical, mental and social health, in the context of hygiene, sports medicine and occupational health requirements. The main objectives of our study are to assess the current level of well-being in young athletes, physically, mentally and emotionally, to identify risk factors and common problems related to overwork, stress, lack of rest and poor nutrition among young athletes, to analyse personal and collective hygiene practices, as well as training and competition conditions that can influence the health of athletes, as well as studying the role of the multidisciplinary team (coaches, sports doctors, psychologists, nutritionists) in supporting the well-being of athletes. The results suggest that although most young athletes are in good physical condition, there are deficiencies in mental health, nutrition and recovery. An integrated approach is needed, including health education, access to specialists and the constant involvement of all actors around the athlete to ensure harmonious and sustainable development.

Keywords: *young athletes, risk factors, well-being, stress training, athletes' health*

1. Introduction

Maintaining well-being among young athletes is a topic of major interest in the field of hygiene, sports medicine and occupational health. Constant practice of sport during adolescence contributes significantly to the harmonious development of the body but also involves exposure to behavioral and environmental risk factors. The assessment of the health status of junior athletes thus becomes essential for the implementation of effective prophylactic measures (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006).

The well-being of young athletes is a key concern in hygiene, sports medicine, and occupational health. Sports during adolescence foster development but also pose risks. Previous research (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006; Eime et al., 2013) affirms that while sport enhances musculoskeletal and cognitive development and social

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ties, it also brings behavioural challenges such as unbalanced diets, insufficient sleep, and mental stress.

Adolescence represents a sensitive phase of human development in which the physical, emotional, and cognitive systems evolve rapidly. Participation in sports activities during this stage is often associated with identity formation, academic performance, and psychological adjustment (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Inadequate support, however, can amplify the risks of emotional disturbances, low self-esteem, and even athletic dropout, especially when performance pressure overshadows personal growth (Gould & Whitley, 2009).

A multidisciplinary approach, combining medical, nutritional, psychological, and educational interventions, is increasingly recommended (Biddle & Asare, 2011). Hygiene, balanced diet, and sleep are crucial for well-being (Papadopoulou et al., 2017; Gupta et al., 2017). However, modern challenges like technology overuse affect athletes' psychological health and social integration (Twenge et al., 2018). Social media platforms, for example, though offering community, often contribute to distorted self-image and cyberbullying – factors linked to anxiety and performance anxiety among youth athletes (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015).

Parental and coaching behaviours further modulate the psychological climate in sports. Supportive and autonomy-enhancing coaching styles foster resilience and sustained participation, whereas controlling styles may hinder emotional development and intrinsic motivation (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010). Thus, effective strategies for optimizing athlete well-being must consider both structural and relational dynamics within the sport context.

Regularly practiced sport contributes to the healthy development of the musculoskeletal system, to the improvement of cognitive functions and to the strengthening of social relationships (Faigenbaum & Myer, 2010; Bailey & Morley, 2006).

However, getting involved in sports is not without risks. Behavioural factors, such as unbalanced diet, insufficient sleep, or excessive use of electronic devices, can negatively influence the emotional balance and performance of young athletes (Liu et al., 2016; Jago et al., 2006). Also, the constant pressure of competition, physical overexertion, and social expectations increase the risk of burnout and affect the mental health of adolescent athletes (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006).

In recent years, numerous studies have highlighted the importance of a multidisciplinary approach in supporting the well-being of young athletes, including educational, psychological, nutritional, and medical interventions (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Sallis et al., 2000). These interventions not only prevent the appearance of physical and mental imbalances but also optimize sports performance and satisfaction with sports activity (Malina, 2010).

In particular, personal and collective hygiene plays an essential role in maintaining the physical health of athletes. Neglect of hygiene rules can lead to the

appearance of dermatological, respiratory or gastrointestinal conditions, with a direct impact on training frequency and competition capacity (Cvetković et al., 2020). At the same time, observing a balanced diet adapted to the requirements of the sport practiced is essential for post-exercise recovery and for maintaining an optimal mental state (Papadopoulou et al., 2017). Moreover, recent research suggests an association between sleep quality and mental health among adolescent athletes. Insufficient or disturbed sleep affects the ability to concentrate, emotional balance and can amplify the risk of injury (Owens et al., 2014; Gupta et al., 2017).

Modern technology brings benefits but also challenges. The excessive use of electronic devices is associated with a sedentary lifestyle and the dysregulation of biological rhythms, thus affecting sports performance and psychological balance (Twenge et al., 2018). At the same time, screen time can reduce real social interactions and lead to isolation or anxiety, especially in the context of adolescence (Marques et al., 2015). Given these realities, a complex assessment of the well-being of junior athletes is necessary, in relation to behavioural factors (nutrition, hygiene, use of technology) and environmental factors (training conditions, social support, competitive pressure). The present study aims to analyse these factors in the context of sports activity carried out among adolescents practicing team and individual sports. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the research aims to provide concrete data for optimizing prophylactic interventions and supporting a harmonious development of young athletes.

2. Material and Method

Study Participants

The subject of research is the well-being of junior athletes who practice sports games (handball, football, basketball, volleyball and tennis) in relation to environmental and behavioural risk factors.

To carry out this research, an interdisciplinary study was carried out using junior athletes as an example, which will provide research in the field of hygiene, occupational health and sports medicine. The interest of our research is focused on the primary prophylaxis measures of unfavourable changes in the health status of young athletes, which determines the realization of a complex analysis of the influences exerted by occupational, habitual and behavioural factors. As the research subject is a broad one, in order to achieve the concrete goal pursued, complex hygienic, psychophysiological, sociological, statistical investigations were carried out in training conditions with reference to lifestyle, nutrition, functional state of the body and health status of junior athletes.

This research had as its main objective to analyse the well-being of junior athletes practicing sports games (handball, football, basketball, volleyball and tennis),

in relation to their behavioural habits, lifestyle, diet and use of technology. The investigations carried out included tools from interdisciplinary fields: hygienic-sanitary, psychophysiological and sociological assessments, all carried out in real training conditions.

The study was conducted on a sample of 46 junior athletes, aged between 12 and 18 years, selected from different school sports clubs in the urban area. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 21 boys and 25 girls. The participants were active in at least one of the following sports: football (21), basketball (6), volleyball (6), handball (1) and tennis (1).

The data collected from 46 athletes included in the analysis reveal a balanced participation between genders (21 boys and 25 girls), and the most frequently practiced sports were football (21 cases), basketball and volleyball (6 each), followed by tennis and handball (1 participant each). The overall average score obtained for the analysed psychological factor was 4.65, on a scale of 1–5, indicating a good level of emotional balance and positive perception among the participants. For a better understanding of the distribution of this factor by sport and gender, Figure 1 compares the mean scores of psychological factors. Variations between disciplines are observed, suggesting the potential influence of the specific sports environment on the psychological balance of young people.

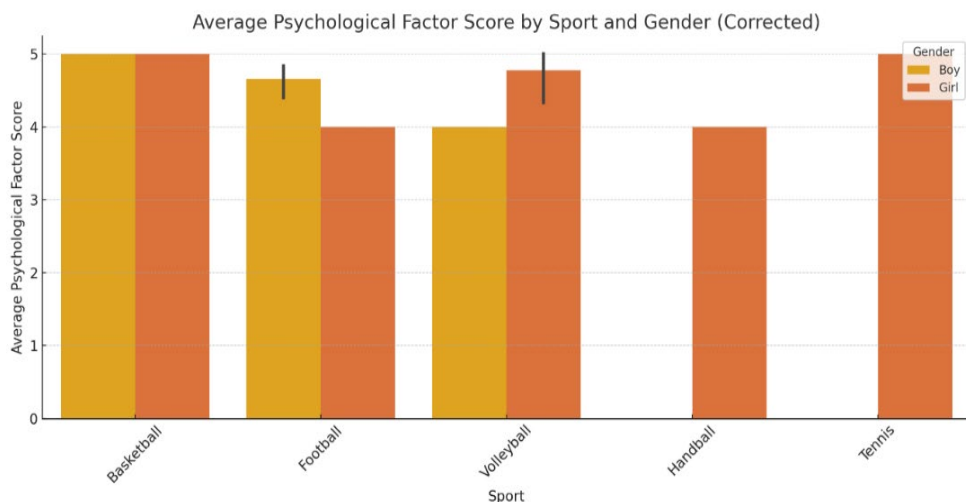


Figure 1. Representation of the psychological factor/sex that affects the athlete

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were informed consent, age 13–18 years, playing sports games: football, volleyball, basketball, handball and tennis. Exclusion criteria – age younger than 13 years and older than 18 years, refusal of athletes to participate in

the study. For each junior athlete in research, the purpose and objectives of the research were explained, obtaining oral informed consent, participation was voluntary and free. The inclusion criteria were practicing sport in an organized way for at least one-year, regular participation in training (minimum 3 weekly sessions) and informed consent of parents or legal guardians. Athletes who had acute or chronic medical conditions, recent trauma or who were undergoing drug treatments that could influence the psychophysiological response were excluded.

Participant Eligibility Screening Process

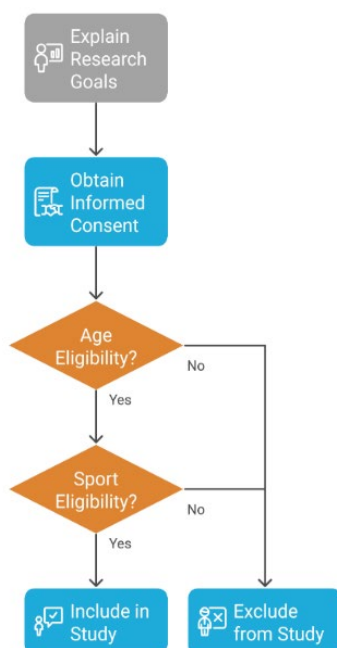


Figure 2. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of participants from the study group

Distribution of Junior Spots

The study was carried out in 3 specialized sports schools in mun. Arad, where children and teenagers train in the following sports events: volleyball, basketball, handball, football, tennis.

The young athletes included in the study meet the following criteria:

- Regularly participate in training (minimum 4 sessions per week);
- Are registered in school or sports clubs;
- Have at least 1 year of experience in the practiced sports branch;
- They have the consent of their parents/guardians to participate in the study.

Study Design

The research was observational, descriptive and analytical. The data were collected in several stages, carried out in real training conditions, within the sports bases of the participating clubs. The investigations aimed to identify the relationship between the well-being of athletes and the behavioural and environmental influences specific to the youth sports environment.

In the first stage, participants completed a standardized questionnaire, including information about lifestyle, eating habits, use of electronic devices (tablet, laptop, computer), perceived stress level and sleep quality. The questionnaire has previously been validated in similar studies on the adolescent population.

In the second stage, functional measurements and direct observations were made during training, targeting aspects related to individual hygiene (frequency of showers, change of equipment, hand washing, etc.), group behaviours, compliance with the rules of collective hygiene, but also signs of physical or mental fatigue.

Assessment Tools and Methods

For the psychological component, a mental factors rating scale was used, scored from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good), completed by coaches and sports advisors familiar with the respective athletes. The score was interpreted as a global indicator of emotional balance and psychological adaptation capacity in the sports environment.

Regarding lifestyle habits, the data were statistically processed, with emphasis on the frequency and duration of use of electronic devices, type of diet (rational/non-rational) and personal hygiene. The correlations between these variables and the psychological factor score were analysed using specific statistical tests using the SPSS v.25 program.

In addition, a graphical representation (see Figure 1) was created that illustrates the average scores of the psychological factor depending on the sport practiced and the gender of the athletes. This representation supports the hypothesis that the specific sports environment can influence the mental state of young practitioners.

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

All participants and their parents were informed about the purpose and conduct of the study, and informed consent was obtained in writing. The research complied with the ethical principles established by the Declaration of Helsinki and national norms on juvenile studies.

Among the limitations of the study are the relatively small sample size and the uneven distribution of the sports represented, which limits the extension of the conclusions to the entire population of junior athletes. Also, the use of subjective evaluations for the psychological component, even if carried out by informed

persons, can introduce a certain degree of subjectivity in the interpretation of the results.

3. Results

The analysis of the collected data revealed several significant trends regarding the influence of behavioral and environmental factors on the psychological state of junior athletes. The mean psychological factor score, calculated over the entire sample, was 4.65 (on a scale of 1 to 5), indicating a satisfactory general well-being among the participants – graph Pearson correlation, t-test, analysis of variance ANOVA.

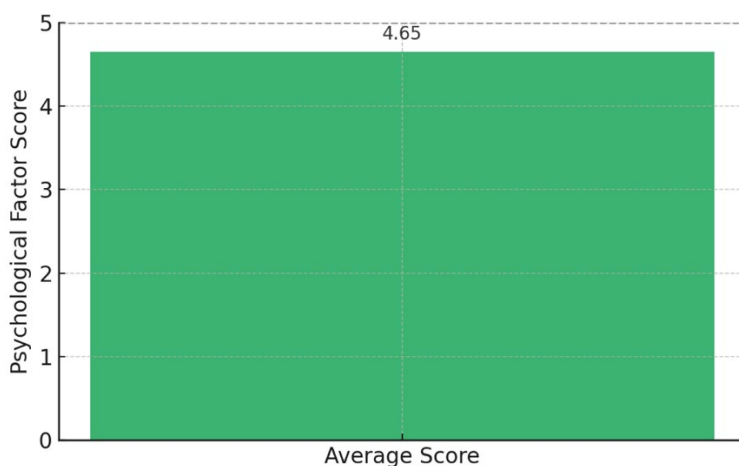


Figure 3. Average psychological factor score

At the gender level, girls had slightly higher scores than boys in terms of psychological balance, but the differences were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). On the other hand, notable variations were observed depending on the sport practiced. Participants in individual sports (tennis) showed tendencies towards a higher level of stress, while athletes in team sports (football, volleyball, basketball) recorded better levels of the psychological factor.

Figure 1 clearly highlights these differences, illustrating the average psychological factor scores by sport and gender. It can be seen that football, although the most practiced sport in the sample, did not offer the highest scores in this regard. On the other hand, the participants in volleyball and basketball had higher values.

In terms of lifestyle habits, it was found that a rational diet positively correlated with higher psychological factor scores ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$), while excessive use of electronic devices (more than 4 hours/day) was associated with lower scores ($r = -0.37$, $p < 0.05$). At the same time, the low frequency of personal hygiene had a moderate negative influence on well-being ($r = -0.29$).

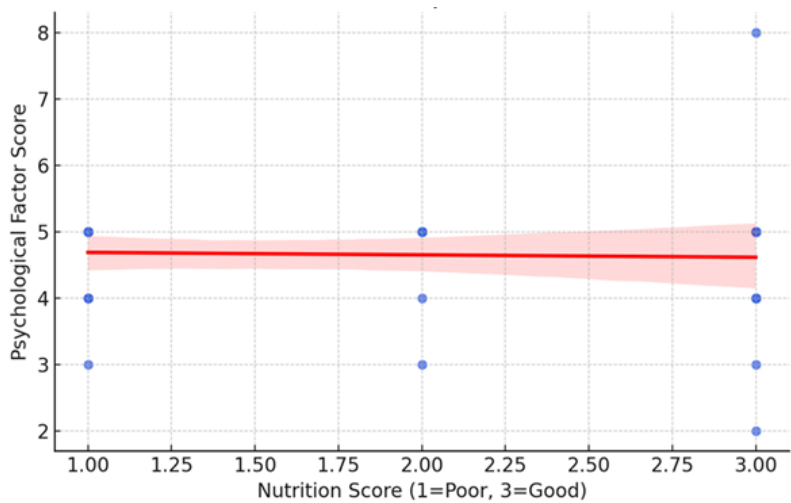


Figure 4. Correlation between nutrition and psychological factor

Based on the data collected, an analysis of the distribution of athletes was also carried out according to the combination of eating style and time spent in front of screens. Participants who reported a balanced diet and screen time under 2 hours a day had the highest psychological scores, with an average of 4.8. In contrast, those who reported frequent consumption of fast food and use of devices for more than 5 hours/day scored below 4.2.

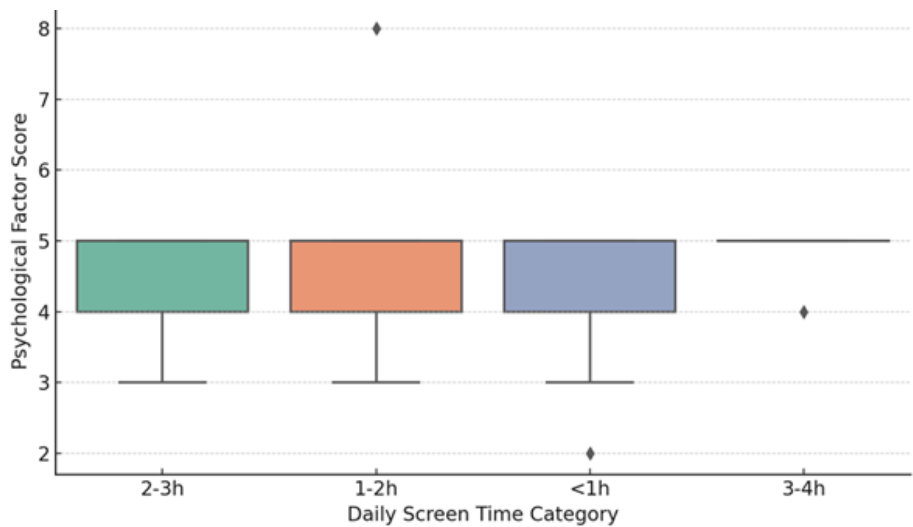


Figure 5. Psychological factor by total time

Interesting differences in scores by age were also observed. Participants aged 12–14 years showed greater variability in scores, compared to those in the 15–17

age group, who had a more stable mean score. This observation could reflect a more mature ability to manage stress and a better adaptation to the demands of organized sport among older adolescents.

Another aspect analyzed was the association between the frequency of showering after training and psychological scores. Athletes who consistently followed this hygiene rule scored better, which may indicate a correlation between personal hygiene, individual discipline, and overall well-being.

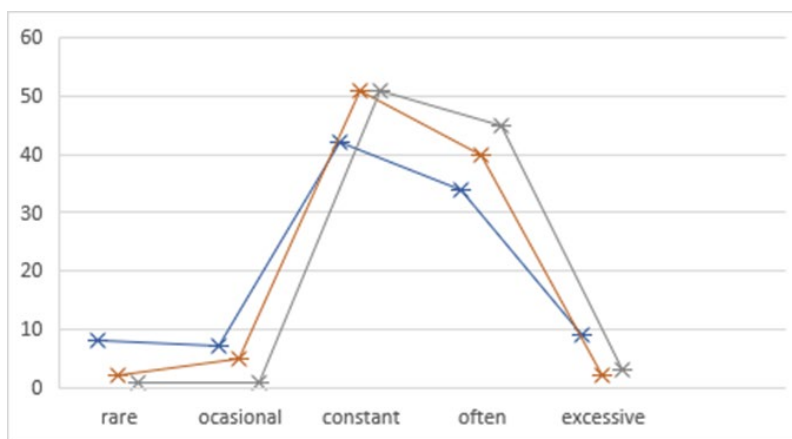


Figure 6. Representation of the correlation between personal hygiene, individual discipline and general well-being

These results suggest the importance of integrating educational and preventive programs into sports training to promote healthy behaviours, both physically and psychologically. It also emphasizes the need for collaboration between coaches, parents and health professionals to support the harmonious development of junior athletes, it may indicate a correlation between personal hygiene, individual discipline and general well-being.

These results suggest the importance of integrating educational and preventive programs into sports training to promote healthy behaviours, both physically and psychologically. It also emphasizes the need for collaboration between coaches, parents and health professionals to support the harmonious development of junior athletes.

4. Discussions

The results obtained highlight a complex picture of how lifestyle, type of sport practiced, and personal hygiene influence the psychological balance of junior athletes. The high values of the average psychological score (4.65) confirm a general state of well-being among the studied sample, which can be correlated with active involvement in regular sports activities and support from coaches and teammates.

The differences in scores between team and individual sports can be explained by the social nature of team activities. The support offered by the group, the spirit of collaboration and frequent communication contribute to reducing stress and a more effective psychological adaptation. In contrast, individual sports involve a greater degree of personal responsibility and pressure on performance, which can lead to increased levels of stress.

The correlations identified between diet, use of electronic devices and psychological scores are consistent with the literature, which claims that a balanced diet and limited time spent in front of screens are protective factors for adolescents' mental health. The importance of personal hygiene is also directly reflected in psychological scores, suggesting a link between self-discipline and emotional well-being.

Observations on the differences between age groups underline a tendency to stabilize the psychological balance with maturation. Older adolescents seem to manage the challenges associated with sports activities better, which indicates a positive process of adaptation and personal development.

These findings support the idea that the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, a balanced diet and appropriate hygiene behaviours should be a priority in sports training programmes. Integrating health education and psychological counselling sessions into the athletes' routine could help optimize performance and maintain emotional balance.

In conclusion, the present research provides valuable insight into the factors influencing the well-being of junior athletes and highlights the essential role of a multidisciplinary approach in supporting their development.

5. Conclusions

The study highlighted the importance of behavioural and environmental factors on the psychological state of junior athletes. Regular participation in sports activities, a balanced diet, limiting the use of electronic devices and maintaining proper personal hygiene are essential elements that contribute to maintaining a healthy emotional balance among young athletes.

Team sports have been shown to have a more pronounced positive impact on psychological well-being, thanks to social interaction and collective support, while individual sports can generate a greater degree of stress and personal responsibility. It has also been observed that older adolescents show a better ability to adapt and manage stress, compared to younger ones.

The results suggest the need to integrate educational and counselling components into sports training, as well as the importance of collaboration between coaches, parents and mental health specialists. Through a multidisciplinary approach, optimal conditions can be created for the harmonious development of junior athletes, not only physically, but also psychologically.

Overall, the research highlights that promoting mental health must be a priority in adolescents' sports training, and the implementation of preventive and educational strategies can have a significant impact on their performance and well-being.

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The Role of the Teacher and the Psychopedagogical Counselor in Improving Academic Performance and Enhancing the Educational Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs

Mariana ANGHEL¹, Robert PRODANCIUC², Gabriela MOTOI³

Abstract. This article explores the perceptions and professional practices of support teachers and school counsellors regarding the educational integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. Using a qualitative methodology based on structured interviews with eight education professionals (six support teachers and two school counsellors), the study aims to analyze the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship, the role of stigma and labelling in shaping educational trajectories, and the institutional support mechanisms available for inclusive education. The theoretical framework combines sociological and psychological approaches, focusing on symbolic interactionism, theories of educational resilience, and the concept of social inclusion as a multidimensional process. The results indicate that the quality of the relational climate between the teacher and the student significantly influences the integration process, while labelling and insufficient institutional involvement are major barriers to inclusion. The findings confirm the initial hypotheses, emphasizing that inclusive education is not merely a matter of curricular adaptation but a systemic social process involving cultural change, emotional commitment, and interprofessional collaboration. The study concludes with a call for coherent public policies, improved professional training, and sustained institutional support for the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: *inclusive education; special educational needs; support teacher; school counsellor; educational integration; stigma; labelling; teacher-student relationship; social inclusion; qualitative research.*

1. Context

Special education is one of the more recently developed fields within education and psychology. The scientific study of this aspect of education can be traced back to the beginning of the last century. While children with exceptional needs have always existed, special education programs are a relatively recent development. In the 18th century, French and American scholars conducted investigations into the educational needs of individuals with certain types of disabilities, such as deafness.

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The modern concept of special education began in the 19th century with the emergence of associations specialized in legislation concerning special education and in the development of programs tailored to each category of special educational needs (Winzer, 1993; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Heward, 2013). Subsequently, specific legislation was developed and implemented in many countries to ensure that children receive a minimum level of appropriate education. In recent years, developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States have taken the initiative to adopt various laws to support the education of individuals with special educational needs (Alkahtani, 2016, p. 71).

The integration of children with special educational needs (SEN) into the Romanian education system can take the following forms: compact classes and groups of 3–4 SEN students integrated into mainstream schools. The most common form is individual integration into regular classes within mainstream schools (OECD, 2007).

It is also considered appropriate for the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) to begin as early as kindergarten, as this stage represents the first step toward their later inclusion in both the school environment and the wider community. For this reason, the inclusion process must be analyzed at the level of preschool institutions, in order to identify, on the one hand, the challenges faced by teachers and to address them, and on the other hand, to recognize and enhance existing good practices.

Unlike children in mainstream education, children with special educational needs (SEN) require an individualized approach in terms of the educational strategies implemented by teachers. For the successful integration of SEN children into mainstream education, it is essential that teachers receive appropriate training so they can provide support and education for all, as well as care and attention for each individual. Moreover, in the literature, inclusive education is portrayed as a necessity of our times – one that relies on the responsibility and involvement of each preschool institution, every educator, and each of us in order to become a reality (Malcoci, 2019, 139).

In recent decades, more and more countries have promoted the idea of an inclusive society – one that is open and flexible regarding the phenomenon of human diversity. Within this context, the implementation of inclusive policies for the integration of children with special educational needs (SEN) in schools has required the attention and involvement of multiple fields: legal, organizational, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, social work, and healthcare. All these domains have aimed to give rise to a new society capable of providing everything necessary for the integration of individuals with SEN into community structures. Romanian schools are still in the process of adapting to new educational practices as a result of the inclusive education programs being implemented (Ghergut, 2010: 712–713).

The first steps toward developing policies and practices related to inclusion began in 1990. At that time, for children with special educational needs (SEN), this

meant creating an appropriate and adapted environment for their needs – even within general schools – alongside peers of the same age. This laid the foundation for the inclusive school model, which is currently defined as a friendly, open, and accessible school that aims to respond to the abilities, needs, and developmental potential of all children – and of each child individually – by focusing on identifying barriers to learning and development and providing the necessary support resources to eliminate them (Neamtu, Ghergut & Rudica, 2000).

From the perspective of the sociology of education and social protection, the process of educational inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) cannot be analyzed separately from the broader logic of intervention in cases of social vulnerability. As D. Buzducea (2011) emphasizes, vulnerability results from the interaction between individual, contextual, and structural factors, and the school, as a fundamental institution of socialization, becomes the space where structural inequalities and social risks are not only manifested but can also be mitigated (Buzducea, 2011, p. 132).

Therefore, the evolution of special education from its early, fragmented, and exclusionary forms in the 18th and 19th centuries to today's inclusive models reflects a profound transition not only at the legislative and institutional levels but especially at the cultural and social levels. The modern concepts of inclusion, diversity, and educational equity cannot be separated from the broader processes of democratizing access to education and recognizing special educational needs as fundamental rights of the child. As demonstrated in the literature and emphasized by authors such as Winzer (1993) and Heward (2013), the school today becomes a key actor in addressing vulnerability and social inequality – provided it embraces an inclusive vision and develops pedagogical practices centered on the real needs of every child. The integration of children with SEN should not be viewed merely as curricular adaptation or a compensatory measure, but rather as an expression of social solidarity and collective responsibility.

2. Theoretical Framework

In psychopedagogical literature, a number of terms are frequently encountered which, depending on the approach taken to the issue of individuals with special educational needs (SEN), can help clarify important semantic distinctions that are useful for a correct and nuanced understanding of the phenomena in question:

- *From a medical perspective: Deficiency* refers to a deficit identified through clinical and paraclinical methods, including functional assessments or other types of evaluations used in the medical field. The deficit may be sensory, intellectual, physical, motor, neuropsychological, or related to speech. A deficiency represents the loss, anomaly, or disturbance – either permanent or temporary – of a

physiological, anatomical, or psychological structure, and denotes a state of abnormality;

- *From a functional perspective:* Disability refers to a total or partial loss or reduction in physical, motor, mental, or sensory abilities as a consequence of a deficiency, which hinders the normal performance of certain activities. Disability leads to adaptive changes, specific adaptive behaviors, and performance limitations that affect – more or less – the level of personal, professional, and social autonomy;
- *From a social perspective:* The effects of deficiency and disability become visibly manifested in the social sphere, depending on the severity of the deficiency and the demands of the environment (Ghergut, 2011, 595–599).

According to authors in the specialized literature, “the notion of SEN refers to educational needs that are complementary to the general objectives of school education – needs that require schooling adapted to individual particularities and/or those characteristic of a disability. The school integration of children with intellectual disabilities can be achieved either through individual integration into regular classes or by integrating a group of 2–3 children with disabilities into mainstream classes” (Vrasmaş, 2012, pp. 19–26).

In analyzing the process of integrating children with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream education, it is essential to articulate a multidimensional theoretical framework that brings together psychological perspectives on individual development and adaptation, as well as sociological theories that explain the mechanisms of inclusion and social exclusion within the educational context. Thus, school integration and inclusion cannot be understood outside the societal, institutional, and normative context in which the child and the teacher interact, nor in the absence of a rigorous assessment of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral particularities of the child with SEN.

From a sociological perspective, classical functionalist theory provides a relevant starting point, insofar as education is perceived as an essential mechanism of social integration, the transmission of shared values, and the preparation of individuals for predefined social roles (Durkheim, 1895/1993). Within this framework, the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in the mainstream education system entails adapting institutional norms and functions to reflect social diversity while preserving social cohesion. At the same time, education acts as a vector of social equity, and the failure to integrate students with special needs signals dysfunctions within the educational system as a whole.

Complementing this approach, symbolic interactionist theory highlights the importance of micro-interactions between teachers and students with special educational needs (SEN), emphasizing how social labelling contributes to the formation of a child’s educational identity. According to Goffman (1963), stigmatization is a social process through which labels assigned to individuals perceived as different

lead to their marginalization and profoundly influence the expectations of those around them. Thus, if a student is perceived as “problematic” or “cognitively inferior,” such labelling can negatively affect interactions with teachers and peers, perpetuating a vicious cycle of exclusion (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). In this sense, “labelling is not only the result of a real deficit, but also a social construction that determines educational trajectories” (Becker, 1963, p. 22).

On the other hand, psychological theories of learning and child development outline a perspective centered on the need to individualize the educational process. Vygotsky (1978) introduces the concept of the “zone of proximal development,” emphasizing that effective learning occurs within the context of sustained interaction between the child and an adult (teacher, counsellor, parent), which highlights the importance of personalized pedagogical support in the case of students with special educational needs (SEN). In the same vein, constructivist approaches suggest that the educational process should be based on each student’s needs, interests, and individual pace, stressing the role of the educational environment as a facilitator of development (Piaget, 1972).

The self-determination theory formulated by Deci and Ryan (1985) also introduces the idea that intrinsic motivation is essential for active engagement in the educational process. This type of motivation can be fostered through learning environments that support autonomy, competence, and positive relatedness. For children with special educational needs (SEN), creating such an educational climate – one that reduces anxiety and enhances the sense of personal efficacy – is even more crucial, as these students often face multiple challenges in learning and school adjustment.

The specialized literature increasingly emphasizes the multidimensional nature of the vulnerability of children with special educational needs (SEN), where cognitive, emotional, and social factors intersect, requiring a holistic approach from both teachers and school counselors. Thus, the integration of these students involves not only curricular adaptation, but also the construction of a supportive learning environment centered on empathy, recognition, and the valuing of difference (Malcoci, 2019, p. 141). According to Vrasmaş (2012), “the notion of SEN refers to educational needs that are complementary to the general objectives of school education – needs that require schooling adapted to individual particularities” (p. 20).

In the complex analysis of the educational integration process of children with special educational needs (SEN), an essential role is played not only by pedagogical and psychological dimensions, but also by the sociological framework of institutional culture and the values that govern school interactions. In this regard, Motoi emphasizes that “in any inclusive educational intervention, social values and collective attitudes can function either as support or as a structural obstacle” (Motoi, 2018, p. 91), which underscores the need for an integrative approach – one in which educational

inclusion is reflected both in concrete practices and in the symbolic representations held by educational actors.

The school inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) must be understood, according to Buzducea (2010), within the broader context of European social policies and international standards regarding child protection and the right to equal education. The author emphasizes that social exclusion is manifested not only through the lack of material resources, but also through the inaccessibility of essential services such as education (Buzducea, 2009), which transforms educational integration into a strategic obligation of the state and its institutions.

Finally, a major theoretical contribution comes from resilience theories, which highlight the ability of some children to adapt and succeed in unfavorable educational environments, provided that significant protective factors are present – such as supportive relationships with adults, a positive school climate, and the appreciation of effort (Rutter, 1987; Masten, 2001). In this sense, teachers and psychopedagogical counselors can become key actors in activating these resources, playing a decisive role in transforming vulnerability into developmental potential.

3. Methods

In this study, we propose a series of hypothetical ideas that guide our investigative approach. These are as follows:

- H1.** *The more the social interactions between teachers and students with special educational needs are characterized by a positive and non-conflictual relational climate, the greater the chances for their functional integration and socio-educational adaptation within the mainstream school environment.*
- H2.** *If students with special educational needs are subjected to negative labeling processes and do not benefit from the active involvement of the teacher in their educational trajectory, then it is more likely that they will develop an alienated perception of the school institution and experience difficulties in social integration and school participation.*

In this study, the group of participants (8) consisted of six support teachers and two psychopedagogical counselors who were interviewed and who worked in two inclusive and special education institutions in the Municipality of Craiova. The interview-based survey method was applied to a sample of teachers from these two schools. The structured interview included a set of 10 predefined open-ended items used in dialogue with the participants in order to collect empirical data. The questions were formulated as concisely as possible and were limited in number to avoid tiring the respondents, yet they were structured in such a way that the answers could provide clear insights capable of confirming or refuting the study's hypotheses.

To investigate the perceptions, experiences, and strategies applied by teachers in the educational integration of students with special educational needs (SEN), a semi-structured interview guide was developed and applied. This tool was designed to ensure a balance between thematic rigor and the flexibility required for qualitative exploration. The instrument was constructed based on a prior thematic analysis of the relevant literature, as well as in alignment with the research objectives. The structure of the guide was intended to allow for the identification of both facilitating factors and obstacles encountered in the school integration of SEN students, with a particular focus on the role of the support teacher and the psychopedagogical counsellor.

The interview guide was composed of 10 central themes, each reflecting an essential dimension of the inclusive educational process. Each theme was supported by open-ended questions formulated in a clear, non-directive, and exploratory manner, in order to encourage participants to express themselves freely, authentically, and in detail. The questions were adapted according to the professional category of the respondent (support teacher or psychopedagogical counsellor), while maintaining overall thematic coherence. The interviews were conducted individually, in a familiar setting, with an average duration of approximately 40 minutes. With the respondents' consent, the interviews were audio recorded and then fully transcribed, thereby ensuring the accuracy of the thematic analysis process.

4. Results

The majority of respondents identify a wide range of needs, from constant emotional support to specific instructional adaptations, emphasizing the importance of a differentiated approach. A support teacher notes: *"Many of the children already come with heavy emotional baggage, and if you're not there to see it, to understand it, you lose them from the very first week"* (C.I., support teacher). Another respondent observes: *"The greatest difficulties are not cognitive, but social integration ones. Children with SEN are easily rejected by peers and become withdrawn"* (D.V., psychopedagogical counselor). The responses highlight a deep and realistic understanding of the multiple dimensions of vulnerability faced by students with SEN, suggesting that their difficulties are not limited to cognitive challenges but essentially include emotional, relational, and social integration problems. This finding underscores the fact that support strategies must go beyond the logic of differentiated instruction and become integrated interventions that also include socio-emotional components. The need for empathy, emotional support, and personalized understanding emerges as a defining element in the perceptions of the interviewed teaching staff.

Repeatedly, the interviewees emphasized the quality of the interpersonal relationship as a prerequisite for educational progress. A support teacher stated,

“Before we learn letters or numbers, we have to learn to look at each other with trust and patience. That’s what I do with my students every day” (M.R., support teacher). In a similar vein, a counselor highlighted the role of emotional routine: *“Emotional stability is the foundation. Once the student feels seen and heard, small progress starts to appear”* (S.B., psychopedagogical counsellor). The participants’ statements suggest that the educational relationship with students with SEN is not merely functional or instructional, but profoundly relational – based on trust, emotional availability, and attachment. These aspects emphasize that the affective dimension of interaction is not just a complement, but a necessary condition for the success of educational interventions. Teachers perceive a positive relationship as a “gateway” to learning, which reaffirms relationship-centered education theories (Noddings, 2005) and the idea that attachment to the teacher acts as a protective factor for vulnerable students.

Collaboration with the family of the student with special educational needs (SEN) is considered essential for successful integration, yet it is often perceived as lacking. One respondent stated: *“There are parents who support us, but also many who look at us with suspicion, believing that we are labelling their child. Parents need education just as much as the students do”* (A.T., support teacher). In the same vein, a reflective attitude is noted: *“The family is the key partner. When the parent is absent or negative, all our efforts are cut in half”* (L.P., psychopedagogical counsellor). This theme highlights the crucial role of the family context in the school integration process while also revealing a frequent tension between school and home. The responses indicate a lack of continuity between school intervention and family support, which undermines the effectiveness of educational measures. The situation described reflects a deficiency in interinstitutional communication and a cultural gap between the perspectives of specialists and those of parents – suggesting the need for structured mechanisms for parental education and socio-educational mediation.

On the topic of institutional support and perceptions of inclusive educational policies, the responses reveal a strong sense of ambivalence. Although interviewees acknowledge the existence of a favorable legal framework, they point out the inconsistency in its implementation. *“On paper, we have everything we need; in reality, we manage as best we can – resources are lacking, training is rare, and the textbooks are of no help at all”* (I.S., support teacher). Another teacher notes: *“Policies are too general; they don’t take into account the realities of the classroom, where each child comes with a unique story”* (R.M., support teacher). The teachers’ responses indicate a significant discrepancy between the theoretical legislative framework that promotes inclusion and the practical reality in schools, where material, human, and methodological resources are often insufficient. This theme highlights a systemic tension in which inclusive educational policies are applied in a fragmented and uneven manner, with adaptations left largely to the discretion of individual teachers.

It underscores the need for greater coherence between normative discourse and the actual institutional support infrastructure, as well as the importance of continuous professional development and the cultivation of an organizational culture of inclusion.

Most support teachers express both their creativity and their ongoing efforts to adapt, but also the exhaustion that comes with it. *"Every day I have to reinvent the activities – I can't work with the same materials my colleagues use in class. I use stories, I draw, I improvise worksheets"* (M.R., support teacher). A sustained effort toward interdisciplinary collaboration is also noted: *"I often consult with primary teachers and the speech therapist – otherwise, I can't build a coherent intervention"* (C.I., support teacher). The teaching interventions described by the respondents highlight the high levels of innovation, flexibility, and additional work required to adapt educational content to the needs of students with SEN. This theme reveals that support teachers become active pedagogical agents who create materials, personalize approaches, and engage in co-teaching processes. At the same time, the responses suggest a lack of standardized and effective adaptation tools, leading to a kind of "pedagogy of resistance" based on personal resources and improvisation.

The issue of stigmatization and labelling in the school environment generates intense emotional reactions among respondents, who acknowledge the persistence of stigma even within institutions that declare themselves inclusive. *"Unfortunately, we still hear labels like 'the weird one' or 'the one who can't read'"* (I.S., support teacher). A counsellor adds: *"Labels harm them in the long run. When a child is labelled as 'weak' from the beginning, they end up believing that about themselves"* (S.B., psychopedagogical counsellor). The testimonies reflect the persistence of both subtle and overt forms of discrimination and marginalization within school communities, including from the peers of students with SEN. This highlights the fact that formal integration into a classroom does not equate to genuine inclusion, and that changing collective mindsets remains a major challenge. The phenomenon of social labelling, which contributes to the formation of a negative school identity, reconfirms the validity of stigmatization theories (Goffman, 1963) and underscores the urgent need for awareness-raising and moral education interventions among all educational stakeholders.

According to a study conducted by Popescu and Motoi (2022), teachers' perceptions of children with special educational needs (SEN) are often filtered through the lens of rigid social expectations and stereotypes, which leads to a subtle yet persistent form of symbolic marginalization. The authors state that "stigmatization, even when not explicitly expressed, is reflected in modes of interaction, in the level of engagement, and in the type of support provided" (Popescu & Motoi, 2022, p. 269). This observation fully aligns with our findings, which confirm that the negative labelling of students with SEN significantly reduces their chances of developing a positive relationship with the school.

From the perspective of integration, teamwork is vital, yet it faces limitations. *"Some colleagues understand our role, others don't. The idea still exists that we, support teachers, are here to 'get in the way' or 'waste time with hopeless cases'"* (A.T., support teacher). Nevertheless, there are also examples of good practice: *"We work as a team, and when all teachers are involved, the student feels like part of the group"* (L.P., psychopedagogical counsellor). This theme reveals a significant structural issue: the integration of SEN students is often seen as the sole responsibility of support teachers, while interprofessional collaboration remains limited or uneven. The responses highlight an urgent need to develop a collegial culture based on shared responsibility, professional dialogue, and mutual support. This situation points to a gap in both initial and ongoing teacher training in the field of inclusive education and indicates the necessity of institutional reforms to promote collaborative practices.

Respondents acknowledge that working in inclusive education is often emotionally demanding and requires psychological balance. *"There are days when I feel like I'm carrying the weight of the world. But when I see a child's progress, even a small success, I know it was worth it"* (D.V., psychopedagogical counsellor). A support teacher states: *"You end up dreaming about the children you work with. It's not just a job – it's a deeply personal commitment"* (M.R., support teacher). The interviews reveal a high level of emotional involvement and, consequently, a significant risk of emotional burnout among staff working with students with SEN. This finding highlights the lack of psychological support mechanisms for teaching staff, and the fact that professional resilience is built more on personal vocation and intrinsic rewards than on systemic support.

All interviewees emphasize the urgent need for ongoing, specific training adapted to new challenges. *"What I learned in university is not enough for the reality in the field. We need practical courses, supervision, professional networking"* (C.I., support teacher). Along the same lines, a counsellor states: *"Training must also include the psycho-emotional dimension, because we work with suffering, not just with school subjects"* (S.B., psychopedagogical counsellor). The respondents' statements highlight the insufficiency of initial teacher preparation for the real challenges of working with SEN students and underscore the urgent need for practical, continuous training based on case studies, concrete examples, and the development of emotional competencies. There is also a strong need to create spaces for collective reflection on educational practice, where teachers' accumulated experience can be valued.

Finally, respondents offer personal visions of inclusion, seeing it not merely as an educational goal, but as a complex social process. *"Inclusion is not just about the child with SEN – it's about the kind of people we want to shape: empathetic, tolerant, open"* (I.S., support teacher). In resonance, a counsellor concludes: *"If we teach children to accept differences from an early age, we have a real chance at a more supportive society. School is the place where change can happen"* (L.P., psychopedagogical

counsellor). Thus, teachers and counsellors do not see inclusion as merely a technical-didactic endeavour, but as a societal project with long-term implications for the formation of a more open, tolerant, and democratic society.

5. Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted with eight teaching staff members – six support teachers and two psychopedagogical counsellors – allowed for the construction of a complex and nuanced picture of the current educational realities concerning the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream education. The participants' responses consistently reveal that the process of educational inclusion is not merely a matter of curricular adaptation or the mechanical application of normative regulations, but rather a profound social process involving transformations in interpersonal relationships, collective perceptions, and the organizational culture of the school.

From a sociological perspective, it can be argued that the school functions in this context as a social microcosm in which the tensions between normality and difference, integration and exclusion, and the ideal of equal opportunity versus the reality of structural inequalities are reflected and reproduced in a condensed form. Therefore, the inclusion of children with SEN cannot be understood without reference to concepts such as stigmatization, labelling, solidarity, institutional adaptability, or the symbolic capital of educational actors.

The analysis of the responses confirms the first hypothesis: the interviewed teachers consistently emphasized that a positive, empathetic, and stable relationship between the teacher and the student with SEN fosters not only school integration, but also personal development, self-confidence, and motivation for learning. The educational relationship thus becomes an essential relational resource that mediates between the student's vulnerability and the demands of the school system. Likewise, the second hypothesis is confirmed, as the analyzed data indicate that the process of negative labeling, the absence of emotional involvement, and the neglect of the relational dimension by teachers can have significant negative effects on how students with SEN perceive school and its role. Furthermore, labeling was identified not only as an individual reaction but also as a collective mechanism of symbolic exclusion, sometimes manifested even in relationships among teachers or between classmates.

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The Influence of the Predominant Type of Effort, Aerobic or Anaerobic, on Thoracic Elasticity among Athletes

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Abstract. This study investigates the influence of the predominant type of effort – aerobic versus anaerobic – on thoracic elasticity in high-performance athletes. Thoracic elasticity, a critical indicator of respiratory efficiency and athletic performance, is often overlooked in functional assessments of athletes. The research analyzes and compares two distinct groups of athletes: those practicing predominantly aerobic disciplines (e.g., long-distance running, cycling) and those engaged in anaerobic efforts (e.g., bodybuilding, sprinting, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu). By evaluating thoracic circumference at rest, maximum inspiration, and maximum expiration, significant differences between the two effort types were identified. The study provides practical implications for coaches, physiotherapists, and sports physicians in optimizing training protocols and respiratory rehabilitation.

Keywords: *thoracic elasticity, aerobic effort, anaerobic effort, respiratory capacity, functional assessment*

1. Introduction

In the current context of sports performance, where every physiological parameter is meticulously monitored and optimized, the adaptability of the respiratory system emerges as a crucial factor for achieving and maintaining a high level of performance. Thoracic elasticity – defined as the difference between thoracic circumference during forced inspiration and forced expiration – serves as a relevant indicator of chest mobility and, by extension, the efficiency of the ventilatory mechanism (Åstrand, Rodahl, Dahl, & Strømme, 2003). Enhanced chest mobility can facilitate lung expansion, thereby contributing to more efficient ventilation and improved tissue oxygenation, which are fundamental aspects of high-intensity physical activity.

The literature highlights that the predominant type of effort practiced by an athlete significantly influences the physiological adaptations of the respiratory, cardiovascular, and muscular systems (Wilmore, Costill, & Kenney, 2008). In endurance sports, sustained aerobic effort places continuous demand on the respiratory system, leading over time to improvements in lung capacity and respiratory mechanics. These adaptations are associated with increased thoracic elasticity, driven by the

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development of respiratory muscles and greater rib mobility (McArdle, Katch, & Katch, 2015). In contrast, anaerobic sports, which involve short-duration, maximum-intensity efforts (e.g., sprinting, weightlifting), place less direct demand on the respiratory system, with the focus shifting to anaerobic energy reserves and rapid neuromuscular activation (Powers & Howley, 2017).

Thoracic elasticity reflects not only the anatomical mobility of the chest but also the adaptive capacity of respiratory muscles and the osteo-articular structure under specific training conditions. It can be influenced by the frequency and intensity of breathing during effort, the posture adopted during training, as well as the predominant type of breathing (abdominal vs. thoracic) (Zavorsky, 2000). In this regard, differences between athletes practicing aerobic versus anaerobic disciplines can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms by which thoracic elasticity develops in response to the demands imposed by the sport.

Thus, the central question of this study is whether the type of effort – aerobic or anaerobic – differentially influences thoracic elasticity in athletes, and if so, to what extent. Investigating these differences can contribute to a better understanding of the role of respiratory adaptations in optimizing athletic performance, while also providing a foundation for developing personalized training programs and respiratory interventions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Thoracic Elasticity and Respiratory Adaptations Based on Type of Sporting Effort

Thoracic elasticity is a function derived from the ability of the thoracic musculo-skeletal system – comprising ribs, intercostal muscles, diaphragm, and ligamentous structures – to enable efficient expansion and contraction of the chest during the respiratory act. This biomechanical parameter is essential for achieving efficient ventilation, being influenced by both anatomical factors (such as chest conformation or integrity of costovertebral joints) and functional factors, including muscle tone, ligament flexibility, and chronic adaptations induced by systematic physical training (McArdle, Katch, & Katch, 2015).

2.1.1. Respiratory Physiology in Athletes

According to the literature, athletes trained in aerobic activities exhibit a series of functional adaptations that provide a significant advantage in respiratory efficiency. These include an increased vital lung capacity, a lower respiratory rate during submaximal effort, a larger tidal volume, and optimized oxygen utilization at the tissue level (Wilmore & Costill, 2004; Powers & Howley, 2018). These adaptations contribute to more efficient ventilation, thereby reducing the respiratory effort required during prolonged exercise.

In contrast, athletes engaged in predominantly anaerobic activities, such as weightlifting, sprinting, or combat sports, develop significant muscle hypertrophy, particularly in the upper trunk. This structural change can, in some cases, limit thoracic mobility due to the stiffening of paravertebral and intercostal muscles. Additionally, these athletes frequently employ specific respiratory control techniques, such as the Valsalva maneuver, which involves temporary breath-holding and increased intra-abdominal pressure to stabilize the trunk during maximal efforts. While effective for supporting strength, this technique may adversely affect chest mobility and respiratory coordination over time (Zatsiorsky & Kraemer, 2006).

2.1.2. Adaptations to Aerobic Effort

Aerobic effort, typical of endurance activities such as long-distance running, cycling, swimming, or cross-country skiing, involves constant and prolonged demand on the respiratory system. These activities require a continuous oxygen supply to sustain muscle energy metabolism, placing significant pressure on the respiratory apparatus. Over time, this repeated demand leads to remarkable chronic adaptations in the respiratory system, optimizing the body's ability to respond to intense and prolonged physical demands.

One of the most important adaptations is increased thoracic elasticity, which allows for more efficient expansion of the thoracic cavity during inspiration and a more controlled contraction during expiration. This enhanced elasticity is accompanied by an increase in lung volume, particularly vital capacity, which reflects the maximum amount of air that can be inspired or expired in a respiratory cycle. According to McKenzie (2012), endurance athletes develop stronger respiratory muscles, especially the diaphragm and intercostal muscles, facilitating more efficient ventilation and reducing the effort required for breathing. Additionally, an improvement in neuromuscular coordination among respiratory muscles enables optimal synchronization between inspiration and expiration, even under intense effort conditions.

A study by Naranjo et al. (2005) highlights significant differences between endurance athletes and sedentary individuals in terms of respiratory function. Athletes exhibit superior thoracic mobility, translating into a greater capacity for lung expansion and contraction. Furthermore, the residual volume – the amount of air remaining in the lungs after maximum expiration – is lower in these athletes, indicating more efficient use of total lung capacity. This adaptation allows for better alveolar ventilation, meaning a higher proportion of inspired air is effectively used for gas exchange, improving blood oxygenation and carbon dioxide removal.

Beyond structural and functional changes, endurance athletes develop an extremely fine and efficient respiratory control. This control enables them to adjust the rhythm and depth of breathing according to the varying demands of physical effort, conserving energy and preventing premature fatigue. For example, during a

long-distance race, a marathon runner may alternate between deeper, slower breathing during steady phases and faster breathing during acceleration moments, without compromising ventilatory efficiency. This adaptation is also supported by improved muscle oxygenation, contributing to sustained performance over long durations.

Another important aspect of adaptations to aerobic effort is its impact on energy metabolism. Due to improved respiratory function, endurance athletes can sustain a higher level of aerobic effort without rapidly accumulating lactic acid, delaying the onset of fatigue. According to Åstrand et al. (2003), chronic aerobic training increases oxygen transport capacity in the blood, due to a higher capillary density in muscles and greater cardiovascular efficiency, working in tandem with the respiratory system. These adaptations are essential for athletes participating in long-duration competitions, where maintaining a steady pace and efficiently managing energy resources are critical.

Moreover, regular aerobic training influences lung structure at a microscopic level. Studies show that endurance athletes may develop a larger alveolar surface area, facilitating oxygen diffusion into the blood (Powers & Howley, 2017). This adaptation, combined with improved pulmonary perfusion, ensures a constant oxygen supply to active muscles, even during prolonged effort. Additionally, aerobic training contributes to reduced airway resistance, allowing for a smoother and less fatiguing airflow.

Over the long term, these adaptations not only enhance athletic performance but also offer health benefits. Enhanced respiratory capacity and efficient breathing control can reduce the risk of respiratory conditions and improve quality of life. In a sports context, they enable athletes to achieve a superior level of endurance, resist fatigue better, and recover more quickly after intense efforts. Thus, adaptations to aerobic effort clearly illustrate how the human body can adjust to meet extreme physical demands, optimizing vital functions for performance and survival.

2.1.3. Adaptations to Anaerobic Effort

Unlike aerobic effort, which involves endurance activities with sustained oxygen use, anaerobic effort is characterized by maximum-intensity, short-duration activities where oxygen supply is insufficient to sustain energy metabolism during the active phase. Typical examples include sprints, weightlifting, throws in athletics, or plyometric exercises. In these conditions, the body relies primarily on anaerobic metabolism, generating energy through the rapid breakdown of glucose without direct oxygen involvement, leading to lactic acid accumulation. Breathing during anaerobic effort is profoundly influenced by the nature of the activity, often synchronized with specific movement phases and, at times, partially blocked.

This partial breath-holding, also known as the Valsalva maneuver, is frequently used in strength or speed sports, such as weightlifting or throws. According to a study by Hackett and Chow (2013), the Valsalva maneuver involves voluntary apnea accompanied by contraction of the abdominal muscles and diaphragm, increasing intra-abdominal pressure. This pressure stabilizes the trunk and spine, enabling maximum force generation during explosive movements. However, frequent use of this technique can have adverse long-term effects, such as reduced thoracic elasticity due to pressure on the thoracic walls and limited spontaneous ventilation. Additionally, the hypertrophy of thoracic and abdominal muscles, typical of strength athletes, may contribute to increased chest rigidity, reducing respiratory mobility.

Beyond these effects, anaerobic effort induces changes in breathing dynamics. During maximum-intensity phases, respiratory rate may increase rapidly immediately after effort to compensate for the oxygen debt and eliminate carbon dioxide and lactic acid. However, during the actual execution, breathing is often shallow and irregular, which can limit efficient gas exchange. Over the long term, this adaptation may lead to a decrease in dynamic lung capacity and greater reliance on post-effort ventilation, potentially affecting rapid recovery between intense exercise sets.

Notable exceptions occur in sports that combine anaerobic effort with physical contact or intermittent demands, such as jiu-jitsu, judo, wrestling, or boxing. In these disciplines, respiratory control becomes an essential tactical component, intensely trained to cope with physical and mechanical stress. Athletes are subjected to mechanical pressure on the thorax, either from an opponent or specific body positions, necessitating special adaptations of respiratory mechanisms. A study by Kim et al. (2011) highlights that specific training in these sports fosters the development of an increased capacity to manage breathing under stress. For example, judokas are trained to inhale quickly and exhale controlled during throws or immobilizations, maintaining adequate oxygenation even under intense intermittent effort conditions.

These atypical respiratory adaptations include better-preserved thoracic elasticity compared to pure strength sports, due to the alternation between maximum effort phases and recovery periods. Athletes develop neuromuscular endurance that allows them to regulate breathing according to tactical context, such as avoiding complete airway blockage under pressure or efficiently managing breathing during prolonged fights. Additionally, specific training strengthens respiratory muscles, such as the diaphragm and intercostal muscles, enabling them to maintain a stable airflow even in physically constrained situations.

Over the long term, adaptations to anaerobic effort can vary depending on the sport. In strength sports, where the Valsalva maneuver predominates, a trend toward thoracic rigidity is observed, with potential implications for vital capacity and maximum ventilation. Conversely, in combat sports, where breathing is a strategic element, respiratory flexibility develops to support performance in intermittent

effort regimes. According to Powers and Howley (2017), these differences reflect the body's ability to adapt to the specific demands of each activity type, optimizing respiratory functions to cope with the stress imposed by anaerobic effort. Thus, respiratory adaptations to anaerobic effort are complex and context-dependent, highlighting the diversity of physiological responses to extreme human body demands.

2.1.4. Previous Studies

Although the literature includes numerous studies analyzing the influence of physical training on general lung function – such as forced vital capacity (FVC), maximum expiratory volume per second (FEV1), or tidal volume (VT) – few investigations have specifically focused on thoracic elasticity as a differentiating indicator between effort types. The study by Khosravi et al. (2017) demonstrated that endurance athletes exhibit a significantly larger thoracic circumference during maximum inspiration compared to strength athletes, suggesting increased chest wall elasticity. Similar findings were reported by Belczak et al. (2012), who analyzed differences in thoracic mobility among athletes from various disciplines and concluded that aerobic training leads to more pronounced chest expansion and increased flexibility.

These findings support the hypothesis that the type of effort practiced induces distinct respiratory adaptations, with implications for thoracic mobility and respiratory system functionality. From this perspective, assessing thoracic elasticity can serve as a useful tool in both sports performance research and the practice of coaches and physiotherapists, aiming to personalize training programs and prevent respiratory dysfunctions.

3. Research Objectives

3.1. General Objective

The general objective of this research is to analyze the influence of the predominant type of effort (aerobic or anaerobic) on thoracic elasticity in high-performance athletes.

3.2. Specific Objectives

- Determine the average values of thoracic circumference at rest, maximum inspiration, and maximum expiration for each effort type.
- Compare thoracic elasticity between the aerobic and anaerobic groups.
- Correlate thoracic elasticity with years of sporting practice and discipline type.
- Evaluate statistically significant differences between groups using the t-Student test.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: *Athletes trained in an aerobic regimen exhibit significantly greater thoracic elasticity than those trained in an anaerobic regimen.*
- Hypothesis 2: *The number of years of practice positively influences thoracic elasticity regardless of effort type.*

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Study Design

The study is quantitative, comparative, and cross-sectional. It was conducted over a 4-month period (January–April 2025) at a sports center.

4.2. Participants

Forty male athletes (ages: 20–30 years) were included, divided into two groups:

- **Group A (Aerobic):** 20 athletes practicing long-distance running, cycling, or distance swimming.
- **Group B (Anaerobic):** 20 athletes practicing bodybuilding, sprinting, or contact martial arts (Jiu-Jitsu, wrestling). Inclusion criteria:
 - Minimum of 3 years of competitive experience;
 - Good health status;
 - Non-smokers.

4.3. Instruments and Procedures

Evaluations:

Thoracic circumference was measured at 3 points:

- Respiratory rest;
- Maximum inspiration;
- Maximum expiration.

Instrument: Ergonomic tape measure, with its metric band positioned at the level of the fourth anterior intercostal space.

Calculation of thoracic elasticity:

Elasticity = Maximum inspiratory circumference – Maximum expiratory circumference
Each measurement was taken three times by the same examiner, and the average was recorded.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Data

Analysis of mean values shows that anaerobic athletes have larger thoracic circumferences both at rest and during maximum breathing compared to aerobic athletes. However, thoracic elasticity – the difference between maximum inspiration and expiration – is significantly greater in the aerobic group. This finding suggests a superior thoracic expansion capacity among aerobic athletes, reflecting a functional adaptation to the specific demands of endurance effort.

5.2. Inferential Statistical Analyses

To test the statistical significance of differences between athlete groups, an independent t-Student test was applied. The analysis yielded the following results:

- Difference between mean thoracic circumferences at rest: $p < 0.01$ – statistically significant.
 - Difference between mean thoracic circumferences during maximum inspiration: $p = 0.03$ – statistically significant.
 - Difference between mean thoracic circumferences during maximum expiration: $p < 0.01$ – significant.
 - Difference between mean thoracic elasticities: $p < 0.001$ – highly significant.
- These results confirm the research hypothesis that the predominant effort type significantly influences thoracic elasticity, with clear advantages for athletes engaged in aerobic activities.

Table 1. Mean Values of Thoracic Circumferences (in cm)

Group	Rest (cm)	Max Inspiration (cm)	Max Expiration (cm)	Elasticity (cm)
Aerobic (n=20)	87.6 ± 3.2	98.4 ± 3.6	84.1 ± 3.1	14.3 ± 1.2
Anaerobic (n=20)	95.3 ± 4.1	102.7 ± 4.5	91.2 ± 3.8	11.5 ± 1.4

Preliminary Observations:

- Anaerobic athletes have a more developed chest at rest (possibly due to muscle mass).
- Thoracic elasticity is greater in the aerobic group (14.3 cm vs. 11.5 cm).

5.3. Graphical Representation

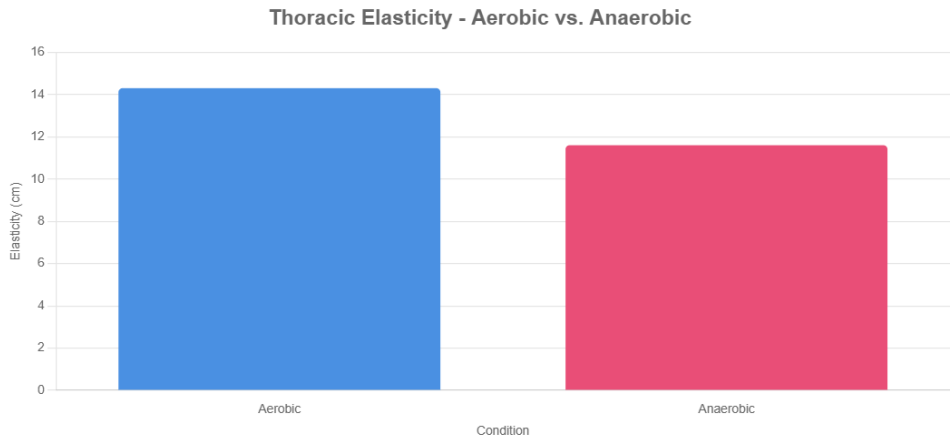


Figure 1. Thoracic Elasticity – Comparison Between Groups

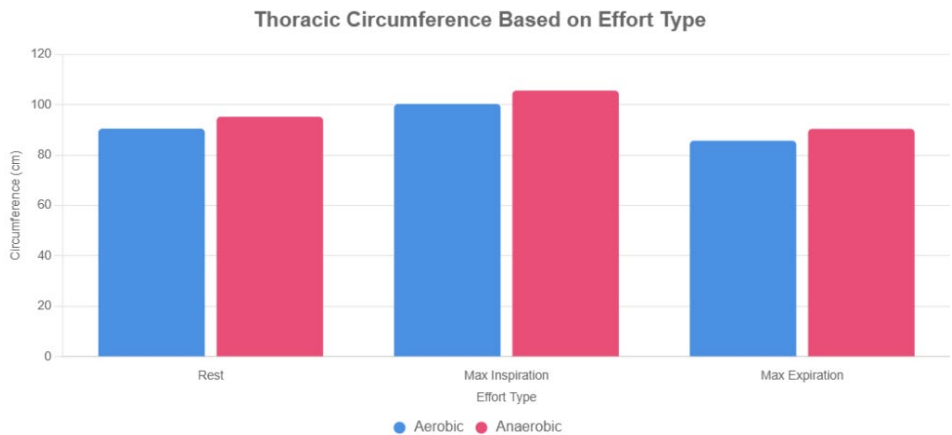


Figure 2. Comparison of Circumferences Across All Three States

5.4. Statistical Test: t-Student for Elasticity

Hypothesis: H0 – There is no significant difference between groups.

Result:

$$t(38) = 5.12$$

$$p < 0.001$$

Interpretation:

There is a statistically significant difference in thoracic elasticity between athletes practicing aerobic sports and those involved in predominantly anaerobic sports, favoring the former.

6. Additional Statistical Analysis

6.1. Pearson Correlations

The relationship between thoracic elasticity and years of sporting experience was investigated for each group.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations Between Elasticity and Sporting Experience

Group	r (Elasticity – Years of Practice)	p
Aerobic	0.58	0.007
Anaerobic	0.42	0.06
Total (n=40)	0.49	0.001

Interpretation:

In the aerobic group, thoracic elasticity increases significantly with experience ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$). In the anaerobic group, the trend is positive but not statistically significant. In this context, sporting experience can be considered a moderate predictor of thoracic elasticity.

7. Discussion

7.1. Interpretation of Differences Between Groups

The obtained data confirm hypothesis H1: athletes trained in an aerobic regimen develop significantly greater thoracic elasticity than those specialized in anaerobic effort. This result aligns with the literature, which suggests that sustained moderate-intensity effort directly trains the respiratory system by increasing tidal volume, diaphragm mobility, and rib movement (Powers & Howley, 2018).

Conversely, athletes involved in anaerobic sports, although possessing a larger chest mass (higher circumferences), exhibit limited respiratory mobility, likely due to parietal muscle hypertrophy, fascial stiffening, or respiratory habits (including inspiratory apnea during effort).

7.2. Implications for Training

These findings underscore the importance of incorporating respiratory flexibility exercises even in anaerobic disciplines. Techniques such as yoga breathing, thoracic stretching, and controlled breathing exercises can prevent functional limitations in strength athletes. For athletes working in an aerobic regimen, maintaining optimal thoracic elasticity can provide a competitive advantage in endurance sports. Regular monitoring of this indicator can also serve as a screening tool for overtraining or postural imbalances.

7.3. Study limitations

- Relatively small sample size ($n = 40$).
- Exclusivity to males; female athletes were not analyzed.
- Thoracic elasticity measurement was conducted only with a tape measure, without spirometry.
- Additional variables such as body mass index, $VO_{2\max}$, or lifestyle outside training were not analyzed.

8. Conclusions

1. The predominant type of effort influences thoracic elasticity. Athletes trained in an aerobic regimen exhibit greater thoracic expansion, reflecting superior respiratory mobility.
2. Sporting experience positively influences thoracic elasticity, particularly in endurance sports.
3. Thoracic elasticity should be monitored as a functional indicator in sports medical evaluations, playing a role in injury prevention and performance optimization.
4. Coaches in anaerobic sports are encouraged to include methods to develop thoracic flexibility to prevent long-term functional stiffening.

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Appendix

Individual values of thoracic circumferences and elasticity for each participant

ID	Group	Rest (cm)	Max Inspiration (cm)	Max Expiration (cm)	Elasticity (cm)
A1	Aerobic	87.1	93.4	86.8	6.5
A2	Aerobic	88.9	97.9	86.9	11.0
A3	Aerobic	89.1	92.4	83.9	8.5
A4	Aerobic	88.2	90.4	86.8	3.6
A5	Aerobic	84.6	101.4	88.9	12.4
A6	Aerobic	81.6	98.6	80.6	18.0
A7	Aerobic	92.2	93.4	86.7	6.7
A8	Aerobic	84.2	99.4	87.5	12.0
A9	Aerobic	87.4	98.5	83.9	14.6
A10	Aerobic	80.3	97.3	78.7	18.6
A11	Aerobic	93.0	93.5	86.9	6.6
A12	Aerobic	84.2	99.5	90.6	9.0
A13	Aerobic	82.7	98.3	85.4	12.8

ID	Group	Rest (cm)	Max Inspiration (cm)	Max Expiration (cm)	Elasticity (cm)
A14	Aerobic	89.1	103.7	78.5	25.1
A15	Aerobic	86.0	95.5	85.5	10.0
A16	Aerobic	80.7	105.6	80.9	24.7
A17	Aerobic	85.6	98.8	86.9	11.9
A18	Aerobic	87.9	107.9	83.7	24.2
A19	Aerobic	90.0	96.4	85.0	11.4
A20	Aerobic	86.8	98.9	89.0	9.9
N1	Anaerobic	89.2	104.8	93.7	11.1
N2	Anaerobic	98.7	106.8	87.3	19.4
N3	Anaerobic	93.1	104.5	94.1	10.4
N4	Anaerobic	92.7	108.0	90.1	17.8
N5	Anaerobic	102.7	105.9	90.4	15.6
N6	Anaerobic	97.8	100.1	103.4	-3.3
N7	Anaerobic	104.9	99.2	94.4	4.8
N8	Anaerobic	94.2	99.7	89.7	10.0
N9	Anaerobic	87.5	99.3	86.9	12.3
N10	Anaerobic	87.5	111.7	93.6	18.1
N11	Anaerobic	99.7	110.0	94.7	15.3
N12	Anaerobic	94.0	96.5	89.0	7.5
N13	Anaerobic	88.5	99.5	87.0	12.5
N14	Anaerobic	97.9	104.2	93.8	10.4
N15	Anaerobic	97.4	104.5	91.8	12.7
N16	Anaerobic	91.7	107.1	95.6	11.5
N17	Anaerobic	88.8	102.1	91.2	10.8
N18	Anaerobic	86.1	104.7	90.2	14.5
N19	Anaerobic	87.3	106.8	91.8	14.9
N20	Anaerobic	102.3	104.6	92.1	12.5

Where: A = aerobic

N = non-aerobic

Cohesion of the Team – A Determining Factor in Football

Claudiu Octavian BULZAN¹, Julien Narcis HERLO²

Abstract. This scientific article explores the role of group cohesion in football, particularly among youth teams aged 10–12. It discusses socialization processes, interpersonal relationships, leadership, and group structure within teams. The research emphasizes the psychological and sociological foundations of team dynamics, using sociometric methods to evaluate cohesion and interpersonal preferences. Through comparative analysis between a control and an experimental group, the study identifies key factors influencing team performance, such as mutual choices, social status, and rejection dynamics. The findings highlight that stronger team cohesion correlates with better on-field results and team synergy.

Keywords: *team cohesion, football, sociometry, leadership, group dynamics*

1. Introduction

In sports psychology and sociology, team cohesion is considered a vital factor influencing group efficiency and performance. The socialization process, defined as the integration of the individual into social structures through the internalization of norms, roles, and behaviors, is fundamental for building effective teams. Football, as a collective sport, depends significantly on the harmonious interaction between players, which must be actively developed and monitored by coaches. This study aims to demonstrate the importance of cohesion in football teams, particularly among young athletes, where interpersonal dynamics greatly impact group performance. In team sports such as football, success relies not only on individual skill but also on collective functioning. Team cohesion – the psychological bond among members – plays a decisive role in coordinating strategies, building trust, and achieving performance. This paper investigates how cohesion develops, how it can be measured, and its impact on match outcomes. We begin by defining core concepts such as socialization, group status, and interpersonal relations.

2. Theoretical Background

A social group is defined as a structured human unit whose elements influence each other reciprocally. In the context of a sports team, the understanding of

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interpersonal relationships is essential. Researchers such as Moreno, Ralea, and Epuran emphasized that cohesion stems from the network of mutual choices and preferences within the team. Sociometric methods allow us to quantify social dynamics through matrices and sociograms that identify group leaders, isolated members, and the degree of group integration. The higher the number of reciprocal preferences and the fewer mutual rejections, the stronger the cohesion. Leadership, both formal and informal, significantly affects team climate. Ideally, the team captain should also be the informal leader recognized by teammates, which fosters cooperation and respect. A social group is understood as a structured human ensemble whose elements exert mutual influence. There are many types of groups: student classes, families, work teams, sports teams, residents of an apartment block, faculty members, company staff, gangs, etc. (Ștefănescu et al., 2005). Understanding personal inter-relationships within a sports team is absolutely essential at the high-performance level, as elite performance requires a clear understanding – by all coaches and professionals involved in competitive sports – of the connection between team cohesion and competitive efficiency. Team cohesion, as a result of personal interactions, plays a decisive role in achieving athletic performance within the group. Knowing the group dynamics within a team is extremely important, given that football is a team sport. Team cohesion is one of the most determining factors of a team's competitive output. The greater the cohesion among team members, the higher the team's performance. If the formal leader overlaps with the informal leader, the team climate will be conducive to achieving superior performance. Interpersonal group relationships have been studied by many psychologists and sociologists. Among the first to address this issue in Romania were M. Ralea and T. Herseni, who in their work *Introduction to Social Psychology*, dedicated a chapter to "The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships," where they defined these relationships as "inseparably psychosocial, being psychological modes of social life." In the same volume, in the chapter titled "The Psychology of Collectivities," the authors identify numerous social and psychological relationships formed among individuals who are part of the same group. This topic is also studied by Associate Professor Dr. C.V. Ciocârlan in his book *Interpersonal Relationships*, in which he emphasizes that "interpersonal relationships represent the most elementary form of social interaction. Due to their affective nature, such relationships strongly influence the emotional life of microgroups – they can generate psychological states such as enthusiasm or apathy, optimism or pessimism, calm or anxiety, confidence or distrust, drive or passivity," etc. Preferences are an important aspect of interpersonal relationships. Using the sociometric test, J.L. Moreno and his followers established that in any group or microgroup, there are interpersonal relationships of sympathy, antipathy, and indifference. Some members are preferred and enjoy popularity, while others are isolated or rejected. The author underlines the importance of cohesion in achieving efficient group activity.

The greater the number of inward-oriented preferential relationships and the greater the number of mutual choices, the higher the group's cohesion. In recent years, the sociometric method has developed as a result of the need to study the structure and dynamics of small groups, as well as psycho-social aspects such as the degree of cohesion, mutual influences among members of the group under investigation, their hierarchy, etc. (Maroti, 2002) Introduced into scientific research by J.L. Moreno, the founder of sociometry, the sociometric test quickly proved to be a valuable tool in studying the relationships among members of a group. It provides valuable data about affective – i.e., preferential – relations between members of the group, as well as the actual stage of structuring at a given moment. The technique is relatively simple: it involves formulating questions through which individuals are asked to indicate one or more people they prefer, do not prefer, or feel indifferent towards in a shared activity. In this way, data is gathered about the affective relations between group members, the nature of these relationships, and how they are structured and organized. However, before applying the sociometric test, certain methodological guidelines must be followed.

A key aspect is the researcher's familiarity with the group being studied, to allow for the formulation of questions that truly reflect the interests and experiences of the respondents. To achieve this, it is important for the researcher to immerse themselves, as much as possible, in the group's daily life. Special care must be taken in choosing the criteria upon which the participants will base their choices. Ideally, the criteria should be relevant to the subjects' own interests, should reflect real-life problems, and should be feasible in context. Another issue concerns the number of questions posed to the participants. Opinions vary: some researchers believe the number of questions should be limited, while others advocate for using as many as possible. There is no universal solution. In any case, the number of questions should correspond to the specific goals of the investigation.

A final issue for consideration is whether or not it is necessary to make participants aware of negative relationships, such as rejection, within the group. After the sociometric test is applied, the data collected must be analyzed, processed, and interpreted. The first operation in the primary processing of the sociometric test is to construct the sociometric matrix, a two-entry table where all the subjects who completed the test are listed both vertically and horizontally (usually identified by initials). Each cell notes, using a conventional symbol, the expressed and received choices for each subject. The construction of the sociometric matrix allows the researcher to highlight several key characteristics of the group. These include: the number of choices each individual receives; identification of isolated individuals and those receiving the most choices; mutual choices; opposing sentiments; etc. A particularly important element is the so-called sociometric status, which indicates the degree to which a person is accepted by the group.

Sociometric status is determined by summing all the choices a person receives across the various criteria used. A more complex method of determining sociometric status includes the calculation of the social status index, the Rioux-Chappuis popularity index, the individual and group expansiveness index, and the group cohesion index.

By analyzing participants through the lens of sociometric status, we observe that some individuals receive a large number of choices, others fewer, and some none at all. Thus, some are classified as having high status, others medium, and others low. Those with high status are called popular or leaders, and those with no choices are considered isolated. Common characteristics of highly chosen individuals include:

- Greater opportunity to interact with others;
- Possession of traits that are desirable according to group norms and values;
- Similarity in attitudes, values, and social background with the chooser;
- Being perceived as someone who would return the favor or possesses positive traits;
- The ability to help fulfill the chooser's socio-emotional needs.

To better interpret the data from the sociometric matrix, results are transferred into sociograms, which are graphic representations of the relationships between individuals. Sociograms can be individual (showing all of one subject's relationships) or collective (showing the entire group's network of relationships). These are built using conventional symbols, which may vary from author to author.

In a sociogram, several insights from the matrix become clearer: sociometric status, expansiveness, and also new data that become visually obvious. These include the nature of relationships between individuals (unilateral or reciprocal preferences, unilateral or mutual rejections, preferences met with rejection, etc.), main group structures (circles, chains, triangles, etc.), subgroups within the larger group, and choices directed outside the group – all of which are made evident through the sociogram.

3. Methodology

The research employed a sociometric test as the primary method for assessing group cohesion. The test consisted of a 12-question questionnaire, including 11 open-ended questions and one closed-ended item. Each question required five ranked responses, with point values assigned from 5 to 1 depending on the order of preference. The responses were recorded and processed in a sociometric matrix, from which various indices were calculated: number of preferences (Pb), value of preferences (Pv), rejections (Nb), value of rejections (Nv), reciprocal preferences (PP), reciprocal rejections (NN), social status index, positive expansiveness, and cohesion index. Sociograms and statistical matrices were then interpreted for both control and experimental groups.

4. Results and Analysis

The sociometric analysis of the control group, composed of 15 subjects, revealed a total of 73 expressed preferences ($P_v = 221$) and 43 rejections ($N_v = 87$). Of these, 46 preferences were mutual (64.7%), and 6 rejections were reciprocal (13.3%). Two players, identified as 'VR' and 'CO', received the highest number of preferences (10 each), highlighting their roles as informal leaders within the group. Notably, player 'CO' did not receive any rejections, whereas 'VR' was the subject of four. The group cohesion index (I_c) was calculated at 0.438 – slightly below the ideal threshold, yet still indicative of a moderately unified team. In comparison, the experimental group recorded 64 preferences ($P_v = 196$) and 36 rejections ($N_v = 129$), with 38 mutual preferences (59.4%) and 10 reciprocal rejections (28%). Players 'IN' and 'HM' emerged as central figures; however, two individuals received no preferences and were identified as socially isolated.

These same players also recorded the highest number of rejections. The resulting cohesion index for the experimental group was $I_c = 0.362$, indicating a lower level of social integration and team unity relative to the control group.

These findings support the hypothesis that stronger cohesion within a team correlates with improved synergy and enhanced athletic performance.

Sociometric Data Tables and Figures

Table 1. Control Group Sociometric Data

-	BR	DA	OV	TA	VR	SM	OR	MB	PM	CD	CO	LR	ZD	MA	PG	P	N	PP
BR	-		2		4	1		2			5		3		1	4	3	3
DA		-			5	3		2	1	1	2	3			4	4	3	4
OV	3		-	1	2			4	1		3	2	5			5	3	3
TA			1	-	2	3			5		3		4	1	2	5	3	4
VR		3	5	1	-		2	3			4	2	1			4	3	3
SM	4	2	1	2	1	-	2		5			3		3		6	3	4
OR	2				5	4	-			2		1	3		1	5	3	4
MB	4	2	2	1	3	5	3	-			5	1				6	3	3
PM		4			1	2	3		-	2		3	1			4	3	2
CD					2		5	1	4	-	3	2	3		1	4	3	1
CO	5	4		1	3		2				-	1	2		3	5	3	5
LR					1		4	2	5	3		-	2	3	1	5	3	1
ZD			5	2	3		2		1	3	1		-	4		5	3	4
MA			2	3	5	3	1				1		4	-	2	4	3	2
PG		2	3	2	5			4			3		1	1	-	5	3	3
P _v	13	13	13	10	35	15	15	12	20	5	30	1	18	9	11	-	-	-
N _v	5	4	8	2	7	6	8	7	2	6	-	17	10	3	2	-	-	-
P _b	3	4	4	7	10	5	5	4	5	2	10	1	5	4	5	-	-	-
N _b	2	1	4	1	4	2	4	3	2	3	-	8	6	1	2	-	-	-

Table 2. Experimental Group Sociometric Data

	HM	KE		GF	TG	GA	SF	CI	IN	MD	MI	NA	LB	HF	TG	PI	P	N
HM	-	3			3		2	1	2		4	1				3	5	3
KE	5	-			4				5								1	2
GF		4		-	5			3	3	2				5	2		3	4
TG	3				-	2		5	5	4		1					5	1
GA		4			4	-	2	5	2	3		1	1			3	4	5
SF	1						-		4	2				5	3		5	-
CI	4				5			-	2			5	5	3	1	1	4	4
IN		5			3				-	4				2	5		4	1
MD					2			5	5	-	1	3	4			4	4	3
MI	5	3			1			4			-	2	5	4		3	5	3
NA	5	4			3			5		2	3	-	1			4	5	3
LB	4						1	5				3	-			5	4	1
HF		3		4	5		3	4	2	1	5	1		-			5	4
TG		5				1	3		5	4	2				-		5	1
PI	5				2			5	1			4	3			-	5	1
Pv	32	-		4	15	3	7	-	31	20	14	14	5	19	11	21	-	-
Nv	-	31		-	22	-	4	42	5	2	1	5	13	-	-	4	-	-
Pb	8	-		1	6	2	3	-	10	7	4	6	3	5	4	5	-	-
Nb	-	8		-	5	-	2	10	1	1	1	3	3	-	-	2	-	-

Legend:

Purple color: preferences expressed by the subject

Red color: mutual preferences expressed by the subjects

Green color: rejections expressed by the subject

Blue color: mutual rejections expressed by the subjects

1,2,3,4,5: the value of the preference or rejection expressed by the subjects; value 5 corresponds to rank 1 of preference or rejection, value 4 corresponds to rank 2, and so on

Pv: value of the number of preferences received

Nv: value of the number of rejections received

Pb: raw number of preferences received

Nb: raw number of rejections received

P: number of preferences expressed

N: number of rejections expressed

PP: number of mutual preferences expressed

NN: number of mutual rejections expressed

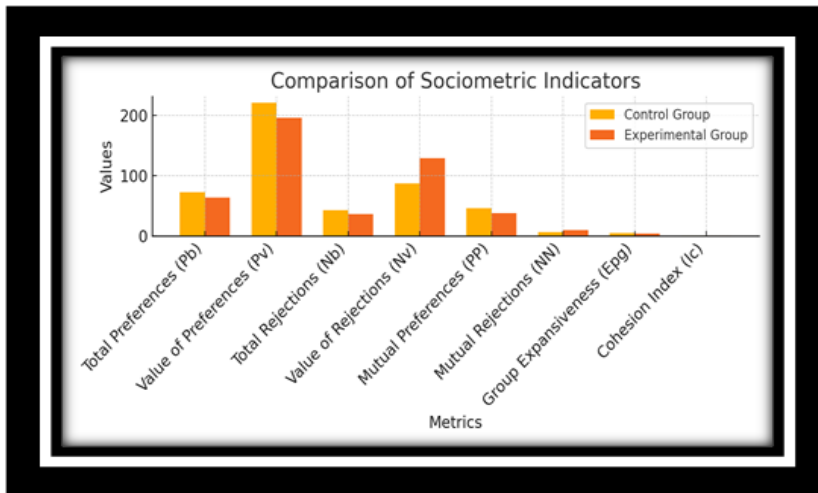


Figure 1. Comparison of Sociometric Indicators

5. Conclusions

Team cohesion is a measurable and critical factor in achieving success in youth football. The results demonstrate that interpersonal dynamics, mutual respect, and psychological safety contribute directly to team performance. Leaders who are also socially integrated enhance group morale and coordination. Sociometric tools provide valuable insights for coaches and sports psychologists in identifying group structure and potential conflicts. Developing a cohesive environment must be a strategic goal in any performance-oriented football team, especially at formative levels. In order to substantially improve team performance in competition, coaches must prioritize the continuous improvement of group interrelations and significantly increase the cohesion level of the team.

“Below, we aim to make a series of recommendations meant to assist coaches and make their work more efficient. We therefore suggest the following:

1. Conduct an initial questionnaire with children during the selection process, gathering personal information such as:

- Why did they choose to play football?
- What other sport would they have chosen if not football?
- Who brought them to the stadium for the first time?
- What is their family background?
- How many family members are there?
- Urban or rural environment?
- What is their home situation?
- Who plays the most important role in the child’s life (mother, father, siblings, grandparents, uncle, etc.)?

2. Develop a sociogram of the team to clearly determine the relationships between group members and the appropriate approach to each individual.

It is also essential to carry out a detailed psychological evaluation of each player to understand their strengths and weaknesses. We must know how to communicate with each member as part of the group, based on their psychological profile. Additionally, knowing the individual and collective qualities of the group enables appropriate responses in critical situations, such as: How do we motivate players before each match? How do we approach the players after a loss? Do we scold them? Motivate them? Overlook some aspects hoping they will self-correct? When should we analyze the game – immediately after the final whistle or the next day? When are players more receptive? How do we maintain an optimal atmosphere in the locker room regardless of the result? How do we keep players' attitudes consistent regardless of the opponent's strength or ranking?

3. Establish and maintain constant contact with the child's family: Be aware of any problems the child may be facing outside the stadium. Know which family member to speak to when issues arise within the team (mother, father, grandparents, etc.).

4. Build an authentic relationship with the child's relatives to support their professional development: One of the common challenges for youth coaches is parental interference in technical-tactical matters. Often, parents attending training sessions or games feel compelled to offer tactical advice, encouragement, or, conversely, criticism. How should we respond in such situations? What do we tell the parents? What do we tell the children? Another issue is the constant pressure placed on youth coaches by parents seeking the immediate promotion of their children. Sometimes, parents even resort to external influence to persuade coaches. They want guarantees of their child's success. In such cases, coaches must show tact and objectivity in setting promotion criteria. Parents and children both want certainty, but they must understand that football is a specialized field, where success or failure is directly proportional to the individual's abilities and engagement. Yielding to parental pressure risks promoting players by criteria other than competence, resulting in a harmful selection process for the club, coach, and even the player, who may later fail when faced with higher performance standards.

5. Systematically evaluate the motivational factors influencing player performance: The coach must know exactly which motivational factors work most effectively for each player. They must determine whether extrinsic or intrinsic, positive or negative motivation yields better results. Identifying these factors is crucial to preventing dropout from football. Why do children quit? What triggers this? How should we intervene? Initially, football should not be presented merely as a sport or a game, but rather as a beneficial activity with complementary effects: harmonious physical development, health, education, discipline, etc. Later, as the

child matures, football must be framed as a structured activity – with rules, principles, tools, and goals.” (Hniatiuc, 2008)

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Inclusive Education Policies

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Abstract. Inclusive education policies and their impact on promoting equal opportunities in the education system can be analysed from three perspectives: strategic, cultural and practical. In the context of diversity and social challenges, the focus should be on strategies to combat discrimination and school segregation, promoting inclusive and equitable schooling for all children. New legislation and education policies support the development of accessible and inclusive educational environments, helping to build a more equitable and tolerant society. These public policies address the challenges and emphasise the opportunities of inclusive education/inclusive schooling to achieve a universal and just education system.

Keywords: *inclusive education, inclusive school, discrimination, desegregation, equal opportunities; public policies on inclusive education*

Inclusive Education and Inclusive School

According to UNESCO, inclusive education refers to access to and participation in quality education and is thus understood as a key approach that involves transforming schools and other centres of learning to meet the needs of all – boys and girls, pupils/students from ethnic minorities, those affected by various diseases, as well as those with disabilities and learning difficulties. Furthermore, UNESCO recognises that inclusive education means ensuring equitable and quality learning conditions for all by identifying and removing all barriers that lead to exclusion from education. This covers everything from curriculum and pedagogy to lifelong learning.

The European Union promotes inclusive education as a fundamental principle of the right to education under the European Pillar of Social Rights. It underlines that "everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education and training to maintain and acquire the skills that enable them to participate fully in society and to manage successfully transitions in the labour market", with a view to "children whose learning difficulties hinder their ability to benefit from mainstream education without support or accommodation (adaptation) to their needs" (European Commission, 2018).

The Salamanca Statement (1994) indicates children included in inclusive education processes: "children with disabilities, gifted children, homeless children, children from remote areas or belonging to nomadic groups, children belonging to

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linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, children with HIV or belonging to any other vulnerable groups". It should be noted that the phrase 'belonging to any other vulnerable groups' should also include (as more than 30 years have passed since this statement) children at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or low educational achievement, belonging to economically disadvantaged groups, discriminated against because of their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, physical appearance, school performance, place of residence, victims of domestic violence, bullying, trafficking, addiction to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, mobile phones, computers, gambling and video games.

Inclusive education refers to an education system that is open to all children and individuals and involves access, participation and support through educational processes that respond to the diverse needs of all children with unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs, through substantial changes in educational content, didactic and pedagogical approach, structure of the education system and educational strategies. Inclusive schools are not selective but value all children and young people, are tolerant, friendly, democratic and aim to combat exclusion, discrimination and segregation. Inclusive education also means identifying, reducing and removing barriers to learning in and out of school, as well as developing pedagogy that enables all children to learn together, including when they have significant differences in learning or behaviour.

The inclusive school concept can be approached from three perspectives: strategic, cultural and practical. The strategic perspective entails not just one-off interventions or simple pedagogical adaptations, but coherent, integrated, long-term orientated public policies that involve transformations at all levels of the education system and in society, promote equity and combat discrimination, supported by legislation, adequate funding and effective regulation. These public policies should focus on anticipating barriers to participation and learning (e.g. poverty, disability, language, ethnicity, social status) and on creating inclusive school environments. A strategic inclusive education system uses disaggregated data (by gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.) to identify inequities and inform decision-making. Inclusive education involves cooperation between ministries (education, health, labour, social protection) to support children in the complexity of their needs and relies on the participation of marginalised communities and groups.

Cultural perspective refers to the values, attitudes, beliefs and practices that define how an educational community perceives and responds to diversity. It is central to the success of inclusive education, as even the best policies or resources can fail if there is not a culture of acceptance and respect in schools and society. It encourages a school culture that does not tolerate discrimination or marginalisation and that promotes empathy and solidarity among pupils. "Inclusive education is not only a change in the content, methods and structures of education, but also a change

in the cultures and values of educational institutions so that they respect and support the diversity of learners." (UNESCO, 2021)

Without an inclusive culture, reforms become superficial or can meet resistance. For example, you can install a ramp for disabled pupils, but if they are seen as 'a problem' or 'a burden', the school is not truly inclusive.

The practical perspective refers to internalising the cultural perspective and applying the school's inclusive policies in the classroom. A key practical component is training teachers to adopt an inclusive mindset, not just technical knowledge (e.g. "All children can learn, but in different ways"). An inclusive school cultivates real partnerships with parents, local communities and minority groups, respecting each child's cultural and linguistic identity. Inclusive education involves continuous self-analysis of practice: What kind of norms are we promoting? Who is really included? Who, perhaps inadvertently, are we leaving out? Teaching-learning-assessment methods should encourage the participation of every pupil/student.

School discrimination and segregation

The exclusion of children, young people and adults from education is recognised internationally and nationally as discrimination amounting to a violation of their fundamental rights. Human rights and child rights legislation contains both specific prohibitions and implicit prohibitions against discrimination and segregation. Equity of education and in education is the major direction of action promoted by all European and national programme documents, including the National Strategic Framework for Education and Training at all levels 2021–2030, assumed by the Romanian Government and validated by the European Commission

Discrimination is a behaviour or practice in which some pupils are treated unfairly, unequally or inferiorly within the school because of personal or group characteristics.

"Discrimination in education occurs when a person or group is deprived of equal access to quality education, or does not benefit equitably from all educational opportunities because of personal or social characteristics" (UNESCO 2020)

Discrimination at school affects a child's self-esteem and educational outcomes, perpetuates social inequalities, violates children's fundamental rights, blocks the process of inclusive education and the development of an equitable society.

Discrimination can be:

- Direct: when a pupil is clearly treated differently (e.g. 'Roma children sit in their own separate class').
- Indirect: when a seemingly neutral rule adversely affects a particular group (e.g. ban on the use of mother tongue in playgrounds).

Segregation is a serious, systematic form of discrimination and results in unequal access of children to quality education, violation of equal enjoyment of the right to education and of human dignity.

Segregation is a structural and visible form of discrimination in education. In other words, segregation is the institutionalised manifestation of discrimination. The two concepts are interlinked and the approaches are cross-cutting. Segregation often occurs as a result of systemic discrimination – i.e. when decisions in the education system (without explicit intention) lead to the separation of groups of pupils. Once institutionalised, segregation fuels discrimination, through stigmatisation ('the Roma class is weak'), lowering teachers' expectations, exclusion from common activities or weakening social interaction between children from different groups.

School discrimination	School segregation
It can be individual or systemic (e.g. a teacher treats pupils from a minority group differently)	It is structural, often generated by institutional policies or practices (e.g. separate classes for Roma or disabled pupils)
Can be subtle or hard to notice (attitudes, low expectations, labelling)	It is usually clear and obvious: physically separating pupils on unfair grounds
Produces inequalities in treatment and opportunities	Produces inequities in access to resources, good teachers, learning conditions

School desegregation is a necessary condition for realising real equality of educational opportunities. Without desegregation, equality of opportunity remains a theoretical principle, because pupils are educated in completely unequal environments. Desegregation is not just about "mixing pupils", it is about creating a level playing field for participation and achievement for all – which is exactly what equality of opportunity is all about.

School desegregation	Equal opportunities
Create physical and organisational conditions for shared learning	Allows equal access to resources, teachers, curriculum and opportunities
Removes 'Roma classroom' or 'school for the poor' barriers	Ensure that pupils are not marginalised because of their background
Encourages diversity in the classroom	Help pupils learn from each other on equal terms

In the light of the above, *inclusive school* education policies can only have inter-connected conceptual approaches (discrimination–desegregation–equal opportunities) on cross-cutting sub-domains (ethnic segregation, violence, bullying, different school performance, etc.).

The negative educational and social consequences of school discrimination/segregation:

- Difficulties in attracting pupils into the education system – high non-schooling rates;
- Inability to retain pupils in the education system – high drop-out rates;
- Inability to attract and retain qualified teachers in their schools;
- Inability to prepare pupils to the standards required for progression to higher forms of schooling;
- Maintaining prejudices and stereotypes, both in the majority population and in groups vulnerable about school segregation;
- Contributions to negative representations of the school's capacity to generate social progress and equity.

Specific legislation

In December 2024, MEC issued the Methodology for monitoring, evaluating, identifying, preventing and combating school segregation in pre-university education. The new methodology sets the general framework for actions to prevent and monitor school segregation, as well as the obligations of the different institutions in the pre-university education system in this area. The main aim of the methodology is to prevent and eliminate all forms of school segregation, ensuring equal access to quality education for all pupils, regardless of ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status or other criteria. Specific objectives include:

- Establishing clear criteria for identifying and assessing situations of school segregation;
- Implementing proactive measures to prevent the emergence of segregation in pre-university education;
- Developing an effective system for monitoring and reporting cases of segregation;
- Promoting an organisational culture that supports diversity and inclusion in the school environment.

According to the Methodology, school segregation refers to the separation of pupils within the same educational institution or between different institutions, based on criteria such as:

- Ethnicity (e.g. separating Roma pupils from other pupils).
- Disability (e.g. placing disabled pupils in separate classes without pedagogical justification).
- Socio-economic status (e.g. separate classes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds).
- School performance (e.g. creating 'elite' and 'underperforming' classes based on academic performance).

The methodology foresees the following steps to identify and assess segregation situations:

- Data collection – schools should regularly collect and analyse data on the distribution of pupils according to the above criteria.
- Analysing indicators – specific indicators are used to assess the degree of segregation, such as the proportion of pupils from a particular category in different classes or school activities.
- Reporting – the results of the analysis must be reported to the county school inspectorates and to the Ministry of Education, according to a set timetable.

To prevent and combat segregation, the methodology proposes the following measures:

- Development of Action Plans – each school must develop and implement an action plan for desegregation, including clear objectives, specific activities and deadlines.
- Staff training – teachers and support staff should participate in continuous training programmes on diversity, inclusion and anti-discrimination.
- Community involvement – schools are encouraged to work with parents, non-governmental organisations and other local institutions to promote inclusion and prevent segregation.
- Review internal policies – the internal regulations and procedures of schools should be reviewed to remove any provisions that could lead to segregation.

A School Commission for the prevention and elimination of violence, corruption and discrimination in the school environment and the promotion of interculturality is set up at the level of each pre-university education institution. County school inspectorates are responsible for monitoring the implementation of the methodology at local level, by:

- Conducting regular evaluation visits to schools to assess compliance with the methodology.
- Analysing reports – examining reports submitted by schools on segregation situations and measures taken.
- Providing counselling and support – providing assistance and advice to schools in the development and implementation of desegregation plans.

At national level, the Ministry of Education, through its specialised structures, coordinates the monitoring process and ensures the coherence of desegregation policies. In case of non-compliance with the provisions of the methodology, the following sanctions may be applied:

- For schools: warnings, reduction or withdrawal of additional funding, restriction of access to educational programmes and projects.
- For teaching and management staff: warnings, salary reduction, suspension.

In order to clarify the classification, role and attributions of specialised and support human resources for inclusive education, the Framework Regulation on the organisation and functioning of the county centres/ Bucharest Municipality Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance and the Procedure for the transfer of itinerant and support teachers and teaching staff employed as itinerant and support teachers from state education institutions/ inclusive education school centres to the county centres for educational resources and assistance/ Bucharest Municipality Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance were approved. The Classification of Occupations in Romania – level of occupation was also completed, by introducing the occupation of itinerant and support teacher.

Challenges of inclusive schools:

- Lack of inclusive teaching and assessment tools. Lack of detailed methodological and practical guidelines on inclusive education,
- Limited progress in adapting teaching to individual pupils' needs,
- Emotional well-being for discriminated/segregated children and their poor school results
- Limited accessibility of school facilities for children and pupils with SEN,
- Limited access to resources for special education, with segregation of special education expertise in special schools,
- Limited institutional capacity and lack of a continuum of inclusive education services,
- Social stigmatisation and insufficient public awareness of school inclusion,
- Insufficient teacher training in inclusive education.

General objectives of a public policy on inclusive education:

- Creation of a map of educational segregation, based on research involving data collection from all pre-university education institutions in Romania;
- Completion/amendment of the legislative framework on discrimination/desegregation of schools in Romania;
- Developing specific complementary measures to prevent and combat discrimination or segregation in schools;
- Identifying and implementing a package of measures to encourage and attract quality human resources to segregated pre-university education institutions by offering incentives and other bonuses;
- Analysing and modifying the curriculum accordingly by introducing historical, linguistic and cultural-identity elements of minorities;
- Revision and implementation of measures to develop the issue of diversity in the national curriculum and to introduce historical, linguistic and cultural-identity elements of the local community into the school's teaching;

- Promoting activities and campaigns to positivise the ethnic self-image of Roma children;
- Development of initial intercultural training programmes at university level and continuous intercultural training programmes for teaching staff in order to understand the historical, linguistic and cultural-identity elements of minorities and to prevent discrimination;
- Development of school-parent partnership in pre-university schools identified as segregated;
- Training for teachers and school principals.

What can be done?

- Carrying out research in this field, clear, European and international definitions of terms in the field of inclusion in education and special education, of indicators for operationalising definitions (the unity of vision, terminological coherence in the field, with regard to modern psycho-pedagogical theory, is obvious);
- Introduction of the multi-level support system in all pre-university (mainstream/general) schools;
- Creation of a resource room for educational and psycho-pedagogical support in schools;
- Individualised curriculum approach as a necessity, through a working tool such as an individual educational plan – "personalised educational plan" that is detailed and explained in depth, for the implementation and monitoring of which adequate structures, informative and illustrative materials and training are needed;
- Ensuring the collaboration and calibration – according to the needs assessed at individual and social level – of educational support structures and services, as measures to equalise opportunities, for the real, equitable exercise of the right to education;
- Creation of the National Centre for Inclusive Education (CNEI)
- Strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Education and Research, CNEI, school inspectorates, educational resource and support centres and schools to provide quality inclusive education, including for children with SEN and/or disabilities;
- Working in multidisciplinary teams, – teachers, specialists and parents (at the level of each school to activate professionals who provide learning support services to pupils with learning difficulties – support teachers, speech therapists, school counsellors, school facilitators, mediators, medical staff, etc.)
- Support teacher training sessions on inclusive pedagogy and the provision of adapted support.

EU-funded programmes supporting inclusive schools:

- The project *Strengthening the management of the Romanian education system, through the development and implementation of an efficient system of local and central governance, and increasing the equity of the Romanian education system*, implemented in the period 2023–2025 by the Ministry of Education and Research, in partnership with UNICEF and the European Commission, continues, aiming to increase the capacity of the MEC to promote equity in the education process at national level through monitoring, preventing and combating school segregation.
- *The Safe and Supportive Schools Policies and Resources* project runs from July 2024 to June 2026 and has the overall aim of promoting a healthy and safe school environment where social and emotional learning, psychosocial support and mental health are part of the culture and current practice of every school as a whole-school approach.
- The implementation of the NRRP programme "*Equipping pre-university education institutions and affiliated units with furniture, teaching materials and digital equipment*" aims to improve the quality of the education process, equity and increase access to education.
- The implementation of the NRRP call for projects "*Equipping pre-university education institutions, children's palaces and clubs with intelligent laboratories*" aims to create complex STIAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths) classrooms in secondary schools as well as in children's palaces and clubs, in order to provide opportunities for inquiry-based learning.
- Under the *Building and developing a pilot network of green schools* programme, new/modernised schools are being built with the aim of developing a network of sustainable, environmentally friendly schools with a curriculum that includes education for sustainable development.
- *Electric minibuses* is a programme that provides school transport with environmentally friendly and energy efficient minibuses for pupils in low population areas to sustainable and quality education. It creates the preconditions for ensuring equal opportunities for all pupils and children nationwide by providing the means of travel.
- The *Safer, Inclusive and Sustainable Schools* project aims to modernise the school infrastructure by rehabilitating, consolidating/building schools in the most earthquake-prone areas of Romania, in order to provide safer and improved learning environments for pupils and teachers and to increase institutional capacity to invest in sustainable educational infrastructure.
- Through the *mate.edu.ro platform*, the teaching staff, users of the Integrated Information System for Education in Romania, was trained to use the Early

Warning Mechanism in Education application, developed specifically for recording, processing and extracting data and information on school dropout.

- The *Educational platform saptamanaverde.edu.ro* project was developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests. The platform is dedicated to environmental and climate change education.
- *1,400 SmartLabs* in schools contribute to experiential learning for high school students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) smart *labs*.
- Through the *EDULIB project*, 3,600 virtual lessons (multimedia kits and STEM kits) have been created for school subjects such as: maths, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, Romanian language and literature, computer science and ICT, robotics/STEM, English and French and a teaching management platform has been developed.

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