WELL-BEING AND VULNERABILITY. ENHANCING SOCIAL INCLUSION AMONG VULNERABLE CHILDREN

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Abstract

The present paper brings into discussion the importance of working together for the well-being of the children. The current and hardest realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, extremely difficult conflicts from certain countries, emphasize and demonstrate that children's rights are violated even in these times of postmodernity. In this line, the paper has an awareness purpose and underlines how can we as individuals and professionals act in promoting and respecting each child's rights. The topics as well-being, vulnerability, empowerment, and resilience are discussed, presenting an overview for understanding the factors that influence and determine the realities that lead towards a social exclusion, rather than a social inclusion. Finally, the paper emphasises the importance of developing socially integrated services for ensuring the well-being of children and enhancing thus the social inclusion of vulnerable children.

Keywords: child protection, vulnerability, social inclusion, well-being.

Résumé

Le présent article met en discussion l'importance de travailler ensemble pour le bien-être des enfants. Les réalités actuelles et les plus dures comme la pandémie de Covid-19, les conflits extrêmement difficiles de certains pays, souligner et démontrer que les droits des enfants sont violés même en ces temps de postmodernité. Dans cette optique, l'article a un objectif de sensibilisation et souligne comment nous pouvons, en tant qu'individus et professionnels, agir pour promouvoir et respecter les droits de chaque enfant. Les sujets comme le bien-être, la vulnérabilité, l'autonomisation et la résilience sont abordés, présentant une vue d'ensemble pour comprendre les facteurs qui influencent et déterminent les réalités qui conduisent à une exclusion sociale plutôt qu'à une inclusion sociale. Enfin, le document souligne l'importance de développer des services sociaux intégrés pour assurer le bien-être des enfants, favorisant donc l'inclusion sociale des enfants vulnérables.

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Mots-clés : protection de l'enfance, vulnérabilité, inclusion sociale, bien-être.

Rezumat

Prezenta lucrare aduce în discuție importanța eforturilor colective pentru a promova bunăstarea copiilor. Realitățile actuale și dure ale societății în care trăim, de exemplu pandemia Covid-19 și conflictele armate din anumite țări, subliniază și demonstrează încă o dată faptul că drepturile copiilor sunt încălcate chiar și în aceste timpuri ale postmodernității. În acest context, lucrarea are mai mult un scop de conștientizare și subliniază modul cum noi ca indivizi, dar și ca profesioniști putem să acționăm pentru a promova și respecta drepturile fiecărui copil în parte. Subiectele precum bunăstare, vulnerabilitate, autodeterminare și reziliență sunt aduse în prim plan prezentând o imagine de ansamblu pentru a înțelege mai bine factorii care influențează și determină realitățile sociale care conduc și încurajează mai degrabă excluziunea socială, în detrimentul incluziunii sociale. În cele din urmă, lucrarea scoate în evidență importanța serviciilor sociale integrate pentru asigurarea bunăstării copiilor, conducând astfel la o incluziune socială în rândul copiilor vulnerabili.

Cuvinte cheie: protecția copilului, vulnerabilitate, incluziune socială, bunăstare.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected millions of people including children. Considering the international and national context following the economic changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which are being amplified by the armed conflicts from Ukraine and the Near East and with all the efforts made by international organizations, it is obvious that our society needs to work a lot more for a true application of the legislative provisions regarding the protection and promotion of children's rights. To understand children's rights we need to bring into discussion the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and to analyse the obligations and responsibilities that are assigned to the governments. In a society that is centred on adults, children are strongly dependent on adults, and that makes them vulnerable. Children in the most difficult situations are often being marginalized, are those children whose lives are affected by the „violation of their rights, caused by one or more of the following forms of marginalisation: extreme poverty, violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, discrimination and social exclusion, catastrophic events, such as conflict or disaster" (Ray, 2010, p. 64). They experiment with unequal power relations and a large part of children's life is influenced and limited by adults. Thus, the main issues aren't generated by the inabilities of children or the wrong perceptions, but from wrong positions attributed to children (Alderson & Goodey, 1996). Taking into consideration these facts, the paper highlights the challenges faced by vulnerable children with accent on the risk and protective factors that influence their lives. Concepts such as vulnerability, well-being, resilience, and empowerment are discussed, underlying the implications for enhancing the social inclusion of vulnerable children. Promoting child protection and their participation in all aspects of life emphasises the need to develop integrated social services through individual and collective responsibility for children's wellbeing.
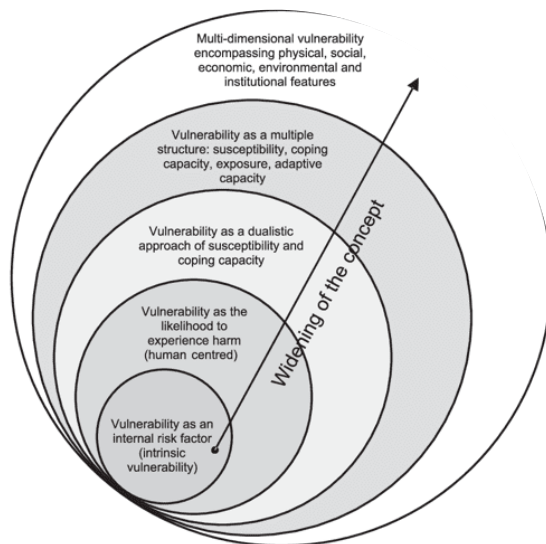
2. Well-being and vulnerability of children

Over the last two decades, children's well-being has become a central topic conducted from an international and interdisciplinarity perspective (Stoeklin, 2021; Minkkinen, 2013; Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). The concept of well-being is complex and multi-faced, is a growing field of research, and the question of how it should be defined is still being explored (Dodge et al., 2012). Some authors (Dodge et al., 2012) propose a new definition of well-being, a balance point between the individual resources and the challenges met. The authors (Dodge et al. 2012) sustain that „stable well-being is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need when they meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge" (p. 230). The see-saw dips when individuals have more challenges than resources, affecting their well-being, the process is also vice-versa.

Figure 1. Definition of well-being (Dodge et al., 2012)

To understand the well-being of children, first of all, we need to understand how childhood is constructed. Childhood can be seen as a period of dependency; children are dependent on family income and resources. Closely related to dependency is parental control and ownership. Parents may explain to children the decisions taken, but this doesn't mean that the children's opinions are taken into consideration. Childhood can also be seen as a period of obedience and respect, children must be obedient, do what they are told, and listen to others (Twum-Danso, 2010). Hence, children are dependent on the adults, and on the decisions taken for them, this being the most salient source of vulnerability.

Well-being is considered also to be linked to vulnerability since vulnerability influences the well-being of children. Vulnerability is determined by specific contextual characteristics (Goodin, 1986), it is about ontological and situational aspects (Mackenzie et al. 2014), it depends on the context in which it manifests itself, social, cultural, economic, and political (Gergen, 2015). Vulnerability is also seen as an internal characteristic of a system, the conditions of the community are seen as the main characteristics of vulnerability (Birkmann & Wisner, 2006). A representative view of vulnerability is represented below, vulnerability has to do with internal risk factors up to vulnerability that is related to institutional features.

Figure 2. Key spheres of the concept of vulnerability (Birkmann & Wisner, 2006)

Vulnerability impacts the well-being of the children (Bagattini, 2019). Many studies regarding the well-being of children demonstrated the fact that a secure environment is extremely important for the well-being of the children (Rees & Lee, 2005; Rees et al., 2010). Children who are living in poor environments and complicated situations experience hard difficulties in accessing opportunities, or in having access to social, medical, and educational services. Apart from the challenges met in their families, some factors have more to do with infrastructure, poor investment in the marginal areas or a lack of specialists. These children are often left behind, and they are exposed to neglect, emotional abuse, and risk of family abandonment or at risk of dropping out the school. Most vulnerable children are children from rural areas, children who are subject to discrimination and social exclusion (World Vision Romania, 2022a). Children who are in risk situations are more likely to develop deviant behaviours. For example, at the national level, the child welfare report from 2022 developed by World Vision Romania shows that 9% of children from rural areas don't currently attend any educational institution, 2 from 10 children affirm that violence is present in their school a lot, a quarter from children denote the fact that children from poor families are subjects to discriminations (World Vision Romania, 2022a). According to the National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption from Romania, we observe that the most cases encountered in 2022 are neglected children, children who are victims of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and cases that occurred in children's families, but also in foster care families, residential services, schools, and other locations of institutions.

Table 1. Cases of abuse, neglect, and exploitation
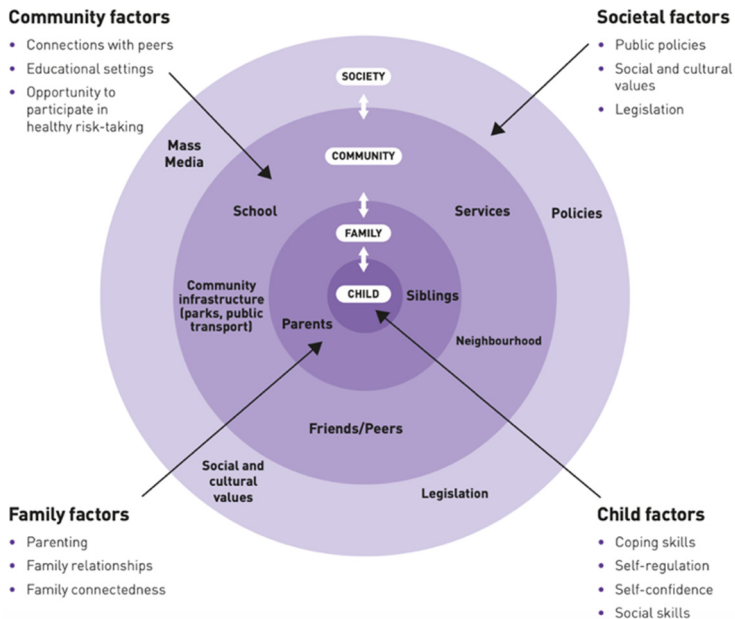(January – December 2022), which occurred in:

Cases of:	Families	Foster care families	Residential services	Schools	Other institutions	Other locations
Physical abuse	1355	30	85	185	9	248
Emotional abuse	1878	5	19	50	7	130
Sexual abuse	656	11	12	28	3	775
Neglect	10774	23	21	66	18	346
Labour exploitation	228	0	0	0	1	39
Sexual exploitation	27	1	0	0	0	19
Exploitation for committing crimes	75	0	0	10	0	41
Total	14993	70	137	339	38	1598

Source: National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption from Romania, Statistical Data Children and Adoption, www.copii.gov.ro

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced a lot the well-being of the vulnerable children. On the psychological side, teachers affirm that 65% of children concentrated harder in class, 33% of the children became more aggressive, and 32% of children are becoming more withdrawn (World Vision, 2022b). Among other effects of the pandemic are the physical disputes families between and adults. Compared to 2020, there is an increase of 10% in quarrels resulting in physical violence, and many parents have issues finding a place to work, either they lost their job, or they didn't have a job before (World Vision Romania, 2022b). These aspects influence and have consequences on children's educational results. For example, PISA results from 2022 show that despite the significant progress registered in Romania during the last years, the coverage rate, of children eligible for PISA testing, remains the lowest from the European level, and school dropouts still demand the attention of political decision-makers, according to PISA data (CNPEE, 2023). Absenteeism tends to be more present in disadvantaged schools as well as in rural schools. PISA results from 2022 took also into consideration the well-being of children from a psychological and social point of view. PISA highlights the aspects that are more related to adolescents' school experience and how they perceive the school environment as being safe and supportive. What happens in school relates to children's satisfaction, including their aspirations. The well-being of children of 15 years is correlated with their previous experiences in health environments, families, schools and community resources. Life satisfaction index is around 2%, exposure to bullying between 3% and 4%, safety in school between 2% and 3%, feeling of belonging towards their school between 3% and 4%, and between 0,5 and 3% is the quality of relationships between teachers and pupils. The index for future expectations is higher, between 25% and 30% (CNPEE, 2023).

The results are correlated with the socioeconomic level, thus the socioeconomically disadvantaged schools are more likely to confront problems such as school dropout, truancy, use of alcohol or illegal drugs, bullying, etc.

Among risk factors, poverty is the most frequently encountered criterion (Barnett, 2002), being one of the most severe problems in the world (Schweiger & Graf, 2015). Besides poverty, other factors lead to social exclusion of children as parental education, poor health or nutrition, lack of social services at the local level, poor infrastructure, and poor educational services (Holmes & Lowe, 2023). In the face of adversity, children react differently. Their reactions can be influenced by factors related to the individual child (coping skills, social skills), the child' environment (parental skills, family relationships, family safety), the community (connection with peers, education, participation), and factors related to society (public policies, legislation, social and cultural values). The next figure shows the complexity of factors that influence children's reactions to adversity (Beyond Blue, 2017).

Community factors
- Connections with peers
- Educational settings
- Opportunity to participate in healthy risk-taking

Societal factors
- Public policies
- Social and cultural values
- Legislation

SOCIETY

COMMUNITY

Mass Media

School

Services

Policies

FAMILY

Community infrastructure (parks, public transport)

CHILD

Siblings

Parents

Neighbourhood

Friends/Peers

Social and cultural values

Legislation

Family factors
- Parenting
- Family relationships
- Family connectedness

Child factors
- Coping skills
- Self-regulation
- Self-confidence
- Social skills

Figure 3. Factors that influence a child's experiences of and reactions to adversity (Beyond Blue, 2017).

In the face of these challenges, the purpose is to teach children to become more resilient and how to empower them to be more confident in their strengths. Alongside vulnerability and well-being, resilience and empowerment are key concepts that can direct the actions of practitioners and institutions to seek solutions for developing integrated services adapted to children's and families' needs. Empowerment is a process by which people gain mastery and control over the events that influence their lives (Woodall, 2010). The objective is how to involve

children in activities that can empower them, other than passive practices. These may include activities that encourage confidence, and self-esteem, developing thus coping mechanisms or enhancing personal skills which will contribute to their development as capable adults of managing their own lives. In the face of some adversities, how children react is important, it depends on how resilient children are. Resilience can be defined as the capacity of a system to be able to adapt successfully to challenges that can threaten its normal function (Masten, 2014). Resilience includes communities, organizations, ecosystems, families, and individuals. The main idea of resilience is the fact that for individuals resilience means the adaptative capacity in a specific time and context in the face of risks and adversities (Masten, 2014). The question is what makes a difference, and how individuals can face the challenges and adapt. Here the protective factors may play an important role and could explain how some individuals can thrive following adversity. For child development, we can list here „some of the factors related also with family factors: caring family, sensitive caregiving; close relationships, emotional security, belonging (family cohesion); parental skill, family management; agency, motivation to adapt, active coping; problem-solving skills; self-efficacy, positive view of the self or identity; hope, faith, optimism; meaning-making, believe life has a meaning, purpose" (Masten & Barnes, 2018, p. 6). In the paper conducted by Mullin (2019), hope appears to be an important resource for children's autonomy and resilience. Hope strengthens the emotional abilities of children and has a significant impact on their self-sufficiency (Mullin, 2019).

3. Strategies for enhancing social inclusion

There is strong evidence from all around the world that social protection intentionally developed reduces poverty, increases access to social services, and increases the resilience of children and families, reducing social exclusion and vulnerability (Holmes & Lowe, 2023). Families, schools, communities, and institutions should share responsibilities in protecting and respecting children's rights. There is a need for an early intervention and to development of specific actions to prevent some behaviours. For example, a practical model that guides early years professionals to create safe and supportive environments is the „MANDELA model for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), a reflective framework of questions that promote reflexivity in work" (Lumsden, 2018, p. 191). The model proposed by the author is based on the MANDELA model of practice learning developed by the author Tedam (2012). The model represents hope, an essential resource that gives courage to people in a world that is put to a hard test. The questions of the MANDELA model explore how we can develop inclusive working environments, engaging in anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices. The following table details the specific acronyms of the model and the questions addressed by each one:

Table 2. *Child Protection in the Early Years: A Practical Guide* (Lumsden, 2018)

Make Time	-	*Understand the community that uses the settings, children, and families; use the information to shape different conservations, develop relationships, co-constructing action plans*
Acknowledge	-	*striving for inclusion in all we do through respecting and appreciating others' needs, differences, education, life experiences*
Needs	-	*how can you ensure the setting is inclusive of all needs?*
Differences	-	*recognize all the differences*
Educational Experiences	-	*support parents and carers to develop their knowledge about child development*
	-	*how does the organization support families to understand the importance of child development?*
Life Experiences	-	*how do we value the journey and create safe environments for people to use?*
Age	-	*how does the setting value people of different ages?*

The model proposed by the author (Lumsden, 2018) could be used as a way of connecting children, families, communities, and practitioners for developing and implementing preventive programs starting from the needs of children and their families. Innovative and sustainable strategies are required, to strengthen institutions to protect children from maltreatment or any form of abuse, ensuring that children are raised in healthy circumstances and enable all children to have chances and opportunities for a better life. Percy-Smith & Malone (2001) believe that authentic participation involves inclusion rather than integration. The attention must be on a system that also includes the values of children and appreciates the role of children as being participants, new ways of interaction with children being necessary.

4. Conclusions and further directions

Resilience studies show that there are opportunities to facilitate the resilience of children through preventive interventions (Masten & Barnes, 2018). How leaders lead during hard times has an outside effect on children's protection, collective resilience, and empowerment. It is important to invest in children's future and implicit in their education, but it is equally important to pay attention to children's well-being and to promote the healthy development of children. Child protection is a complex phenomenon and moving forward, a transdisciplinary and interprofessional framework is needed to reduce the risks to which children are exposed and to promote social inclusion. Integrated social services and involving the participation of children in all aspects of life contribute to the well-being of children. Children's rights cannot be implemented and respected without appropriate legislation, policies, and good practices capable of sustaining an

inclusive protection of children, regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, gender, or disability.

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