

Social Intervention Strategies for the Protection of Children from Underprivileged Social Environments

Răzvan POPOVICI-DIACONU, *Ph.D. Associate Lecturer*
Faculty of Philosophy and Social Political Sciences
A.I. Cuza University of Iași,
rzvn_dcn@yahoo.com

Abstract

The need to develop a strategic project of intervention in the area of social protection of children is based on the identification of the specific difficulties of this social category. In this project we develop a series of specific strategies regarding the cases of children coming from underprivileged backgrounds.

The aim of the study is the understanding of specific priorities in terms of social policies applicable to the area of interest. We have considered the following categories of children: children from families with educational or material problems, children discriminated at school or based on race, other categories. Social intervention strategies are a necessity in contemporary Romanian society.

Keywords: *Intervention, Social Intervention, Strategies, Special Children.*

General presentation

The analysis of child rights issues has its conceptual benchmark in the existing state of affairs of contemporary Romania, after December 1989, corresponding to the developments in the social, economic, political, cultural fields. We have witnessed a sinuous, complex and puzzled evolution over time, and the changes of the value systems have created real gaps in the thinking and practice of the social life. Recent years have represented, in terms of the rights and freedoms specific to children, a great leap backward characterized by a series of unfavorable aspects of life, health, education of various categories of children and youth.

In the same vein, we have witnessed the degradation of the traditional value systems, the family values crisis being in fact the best argument in this respect. There are a number of social groups socially vulnerable: children, elderly people, people with disabilities, etc. This shows that the social disadvantage is visible for various social groups.

Children in the contemporary Romanian society are along with the elderly the social category most affected by post-revolutionary transition challenges, and more recently, by the global economic crisis. Any analysis of the situation of today's children should involve the understanding of the protection of their rights in different situations, and also from a more general perspective. Referring to the general perspective in matters of protection of children rights means analyzing the legislation element, the degree of observance of laws and the individual, casual situation of the various categories of children in a state of social vulnerability: children from broken families, children with disabilities, children subject to physical or mental violence, etc.

There is a high level of social risk for certain categories of vulnerable children, meant to disadvantage or affect their specific rights. What are the main categories of social risks for children?

a. *Social risks on growth, education and training of children.*

- Neglect of children by their family, at school or in the society. Socio-educational education of children is a basic necessity in the future life of the adult.

- Lack of normal living conditions, due to unfavorable social status, for example children belonging to families with low living standards. We shall make mention that we refer to both families from disadvantaged backgrounds and families with a low educational standard.

- Negligence in the home environment, by this we mean the lack of concern for children's lives. For example, we refer to children with disabilities who do not receive appropriate care in the area of origin.

- The situation of children discriminated at school, such as the case of the Roma children who are marginalized on racist criteria.

- Children in a state of social exclusion. The lack of means necessary for the daily living is the most striking example in this respect.¹

b. *Social risks regarding the children's family.* In these cases we mention the following possible social situations:

- Numerous families in which children do not receive normal care, education or life conditions.

- Families where children are subject to various forms of physical or emotional violence which damage their personal rights.

¹ In accordance with *Law no.1/2011* it has been agreed that compulsory education should be of 10 grades.

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- Children whose parents are absent or temporarily abroad, children from families who are consuming toxic substances, alcohol, drugs, in this case the children will adopt imitative behavior provided by the family of origin.

c. Social risks for children from vulnerable backgrounds.

- Children from large families whose material condition and education is poor.

- Children from families who do not have normal life conditions: unemployed parents, lack of housing or parents living in unsanitary conditions.

- Children from disadvantaged areas of the country, in this case to ensure their welfare state is the most important element of life.

The analysis, understanding and prevention of social risks for socially vulnerable children are the main goals in the harmonious development of the future adult configuration. Deprivation and abuse suffered by an adult during childhood represents an inconvenience for a normal life, whose boomerang effect is usually unpredictable.

Social risk and vulnerability for children coming from underprivileged backgrounds

Poverty and poverty by vulnerability among children has become a social plague in today's Romania. Young people from different underprivileged social groups, especially from rural areas, have to deal with "the social prejudices of the decadent contemporary culture". From the perspective of family life, it must be noted that an unfavorable social environment creates the premise of a faulty integration of the young people against normal, constructive values.

Vulnerability in underprivileged environments is characterized by cultural events represented by anti-value, subculture, in other words young people from such backgrounds are easy prey for deviant tendencies. Also, we note that the harmful effects of such socio-cultural influences are manifested in the real depreciation of general human values.

According to an official statistics² we have identified a number of categories of children from underprivileged backgrounds, whose legitimate interests are harmed by the fact they are part of such backgrounds.

- Children who are not integrated into education systems, in this case we mention: children from poor disorganized families belonging to the Roma minority.

² Data presented by the National Institute of Statistics according to [http:// www. Insse.ro](http://www.Insse.ro).

- Children who have left school; the main consequence is the increase of illiteracy.

- Children from remote rural areas who do not have the necessary schooling conditions.

- Children abused in the family environment who are forced to quit school due to ill-treatment; also, children subject to forced labor who will have an unsuitable life direction proven by improper primary socialization.

Due to the obstruction of access to education, we witness the development of various forms of social discrimination, of inequality of life opportunities. For example, one of the consequences is the incapacity of the future adult to have a job in accordance to their skills and personal vocation. Meanwhile, we point out the non-inclusion situation resulting in the development of deviant antisocial behavior. Especially children from broken or dysfunctional families, orphans or abandoned children are affected by these hypothetical situations. The option for deviant, dangerous social behavior is considered against positive and constructive social values.

From a causal point of view, we have identified the following specific items for children coming from underprivileged backgrounds:

- The existence of dysfunctional families unable to work towards normalizing the children's life.

- Domestic violence.

- One-parent families, a single parent playing the role of educator and primary social factor.

- Degradation of the family institution.

- The influence of the negative social environment.

- The attraction produced by entourages whose behavior is antisocial, deviant.

- Abandonment of the family.

- Children's departure from specialized institutions.

The dynamic of the social phenomenon related to children living or coming from vulnerable social backgrounds should be analyzed in terms of the social interactions developed by them, and the fundamental role of the environment of origin and of affirmation, in this case we're talking about school environment which represents the development pillar of the social life of children. Children tend to construct a symbolic world in accordance with the social representations considered; this is actually the specific way of children's understanding.

There is a category of children affected by the more evident state of poverty in the Romanian society, that of street children. Any contingency plan for vulnerable children coming from this category involves the identification of specific variables:

- The family of origin or of provenance, the social life of children; they should be set in practice by social surveys carried out individually.
- Abandoned children who are now part of the category of street children.
- Children who have left home for various personal reasons, such as: their parents are abroad, violent parents abusing their children, parents consuming alcohol or drugs, parents in conflict with the law.

In the same vein, we should mention that there is a series of factors determining the increase children's vulnerability by poverty. The issue of this form of vulnerability is a topic discussed extensively from a theoretical perspective on the European level in recent years. Since 2008 there has been a study³ of the European Union which synthesized a series of data on poverty among children. According to these data, about 19 million children lived below the poverty line. There are several drivers of this situation. According to this study, in terms of specific variables, namely: age, educational level, household characteristics, they found a number of indicators showing the risk of poverty among this social group.

First of all, the family, its composition, is a contributing factor for the development of dangerous situations.

- 13% of children living with one parent are in this situation.
- 20% of families with three or more children have an average risk of poverty of 25%.

In the same vein, the age and education of parents is an aggravating factor for children vulnerability.

- 27% of children have higher risk of vulnerability through poverty, if the mother is under 30 years.
- 19% in case of mothers aged 30-39.
- 16% when it comes to mothers aged 40-49 years.

In terms of the educational level, we note that in case of 30% of poor children with no parent has reached secondary school level. There are exceptional situations regarding the employment of parents with children with high risk of vulnerability by poverty.

- 10% of cases, no parent has a stable job.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/psi/child_poverty_en.htm=childpoverty.

- 13% of cases, parents work, but do not have adequate income to support the family.

Intervention strategies for children from underprivileged backgrounds

Social integration of children from underprivileged backgrounds is a priority of social protection policies in contemporary Romania. The interest for developing some forms of social inclusion suitable to the needs of children from underprivileged backgrounds has become a vector in the society, given the increasing number of cases in recent years. Any intervention strategy, whether we talk about projects developed by public or private organizations, starts from pragmatic reasons, useful for those interested.

The educational component is defining for children or young persons; social vulnerability, characteristic to the social environment of origin or inclusion, can generate a low level of life integration. From the perspective of social integration through education we have identified some categories of vulnerable children:

- Children suffering from chronic diseases, with poor educational integration capability.
- Children without a fixed address or street children.
- Children belonging to populations or social groups without a fixed address.
- Children who have passed school age, not participating in the educational environments insertion.

Obviously, access to education for this category of children is limited⁴. In recent decades, an important role is played by the allocation, in terms of educational policies, of inclusive education systems, whose purpose is to eliminate any barriers of vulnerability among young people and consequently of social exclusion.

In the category of children with high vulnerability degree fall the children with physical or mental disabilities; they face socio-professional integration difficulties, therefore this social category must fundamentally benefit from the necessary requirements of a special education, the only one likely to provide a suitable alternative of socio-professional insertion. By avoiding labeling and marginalization, the inclusion of children in a normal course of life involves removing specific social marginalization and exclusion situations. The concept of

⁴ The study is carried by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Europe Policies in education for students at risk and for those with disabilities in South-East Europe, according to <http://www.oecd.org/>

special educational support reflects, and at the same time, supports the orientation of the categories of children with disabilities towards special education formulas, especially for children with mental, physical, sensory, language, socio-affective disabilities, etc.

The specific growing, education or socio-professional training needs should be adapted to the potential of these children marked or characterized by a high degree of social vulnerability. The need for affirmation and development of an individual adapted to the normal social values determines the prioritization of the appropriate action strategies for this social category.

First, we must consider the priority of inclusive education by ensuring access for all students to the educational process in any community, which means social integration capacity and adequate training of the students with special needs. In this case, we shall consider the following aspects:

- Acceptance and valuing of social diversity, the fundamental condition for each student with special needs or requirements.
- Compliance with specific rights.
- Provide equal opportunity to this social category.
- Appropriate professional development and support.
- Compliance with environmental social culture of origin of the young.

We note that intervention and social action strategies are made permanent by the conditional character of the social integration of children in the appropriate social environment; the main obligation of organizations and individuals who have expertise in the field is to eliminate any tendency aimed to socially marginalize or exclude that person, characterized by social vulnerability.

The inclusive education should be based on a social basis of premises anchored in the social reality; the valuing of children based on their skills and options is a priority in this direction. In this context, in terms of education systems, the creation and adaptation of a system of education adapted to the needs of children with special needs and the orientation by forming groups of students, based on proven skills, is an element in the configuration of a specialized intervention strategy. In parallel, there is a need to enhance awareness and participation of students with special needs in appropriate curricular and extracurricular activities.

Education through social inclusion requires special educational policies whose purpose is the social integration of the young people in the active life. First of all, we have to consider, through institutions, specialized structures belonging to

the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity or the Ministry of Education, a series of social policies in line with the needs, interests and dates of origin of children from underprivileged backgrounds.

The importance of proper training of specialized teachers is the main condition for social, professional and educational training for life of the students from vulnerable social groups or of those with special needs. Teachers working in special schools should be involved in a training specific to the mass education, while beyond this level it is necessary to achieve a specialized training in order to deal with children with special needs. At school, it is necessary to set the following action program:

- Create classes or specialized centers for students with problems of social integration, using for this purpose EU funds.
- Evaluation of students from a mental-intellectual, motivational, emotional and vocational point of view to assess their needs and interests. A preliminary assessment is mandatory and must be followed by successive, gradual evaluations.
- Establishment of the inventory of physical and mental disabilities and organization of the special groups of students. This priority would target problem-children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Ensure educational curricula in accordance to the vocational needs of students.
- Motivational development of students by identifying interests and skills and preferences expressed by young people in such specialized centers.
- Gradual assessments of students from these specialized centers in order to have a continuous assessment of the young people of this kind, and with the purpose of monitoring their educational journey.

A legitimate question that interferes in the analysis of the systems of social integration of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have difficulties of social integration is: What is the best alternative for the social integration of a child who belongs to this category? The answer is relative and differs from the social context in which that child is found. First of all, we can talk about social integration by means of compulsory education, by special classes for students with physical or mental deficiencies or by mainstream education for the category of students coming from underprivileged backgrounds. At the same time, we mention that the differences between mainstream education and special education are clear.

Secondly, there is a possibility of a normal trajectory by usual education of the young, regardless of the origin or specific needs of children. In this case, there

is risk of social vulnerability for children belonging to these categories; from this perspective, future effects can be harmful.

Conclusions

We emphasized the analysis based on considerations aimed to ensure intervention in underprivileged social environments. There are many differences between the rural environment and the urban one, and the perspective of integration and support of children with problems from the rural areas, is especially an overriding need in terms of the socio-economic crisis in contemporary Romanian society. Interventionist strategies in underprivileged environments are an accumulation of needs meant to improve the situation of children from these backgrounds at present, but especially in the future.

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