

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE OF PUPILS FROM SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES. A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY ON 8th GRADE PUPILS, BIHOR COUNTY

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Abstract.

Objectives. Studies have shown that single-parent families face various types of psycho-emotional problems but also the precariousness of economic resources, being among the vulnerable groups with a high risk of social exclusion. The paper presents a series of concrete aspects from a research conducted in Bihor County and it aims to analyze the differences between children from single-parent families and those coming from two-parent families, and those between single-mother families and single-father families, respectively, in terms of school life.

Material and methods. The method used consists in a sociological survey based on a questionnaire, applied to a representative sample of 4708 8th grade students from Bihor County, in the 2019-2020 school year. Data processing was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [SPSS] program, with the aim of calculating the frequencies and correlations between the variables.

Results. In terms of school performance, education environment quality within the family, and school-family collaboration, the research found statistically significant differences between single-parent and two-parent students, respectively between families with single mothers and single fathers.

Conclusions. The data showed that school performance is strongly influenced by family structure, climate, and functionality. From this perspective, the single-parent family represents a structure with low educational potential; in terms of school performance, the single-mother family describes a structure that favors school performance to a greater extent compared to the single-father family.

Keywords: single-parent families, school performance, vulnerable groups, family climate, family structure.

Introduction

Those who argue that, in the face of globalization and the challenge of the knowledge society, the educational approach must benefit from the responsible and shared involvement of educational actors in the community coexist with those who assert that educational influences should be concentrated only at the school or family level. The family, as a social institution, is confronted with societal phenomena that have a substantial impact on the child's education in the setting of the home environment: the rise and diversification of single-parent families, rising divorce rates, the proliferation of families at risk from a socioeconomic standpoint, the exacerbation of domestic violence, or the rise in the number of children left home alone so that

their parents can work abroad are all key factors. These influences must be considered in the context of the synergy between home education and school-based formal education, enforcing the knowledge of changes that occur at an unknown rate inside each of the two subsystems, as well as in the global social system.

The single-parent family, as an asymmetric social structure, has characteristics that limit, in terms of functional structure, the fulfillment of its functions as a fundamental social group.

While the school benefits from the concrete support and intervention of state institutions, families must adhere to this without official assistance for the acquisition of the essential abilities in order to become anchored in the reality of a dynamic society, which needs an adequate profile of the student in response. Promoting a new culture of family education is a desideratum in relation to everyday reality.

Schools and families are therefore established as significant educational actors, exerting their influence on the child through a network of institutions with field attributions and, last but not least, in a community environment with well-defined components of distinctiveness.

Literature survey, research objectives, discoveries

Children from single-parent households are regarded as a *vulnerable group* who experience a variety of socio-emotional, economic, or cultural issues. These aspects have been emphasized by numerous specialized studies: the instability of the single-parent family is considered to affect the well-being of children (Lee & McLanahan, 2015, p. 738-763), the precariousness of resources can maintain a low level of involvement of the single parent in the child's education so that in the medium and long-term they can obtain poor results at school and an inadequate professional performance, correlated with the low level of education and training (Woessmann, 2015).

The educational and behavioral outcomes of children from single-parent families are affected by family structure (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Research data show that when the sole supportive parent is the mother, the risk situation of the children is considered higher, due to low income, poor parental socialization, and the fragile balance of the family environment.

Health, another criterion of the child's well-being, is analyzed in relation to the family structure, in situations where the father is the sole provider of the child, the probability that the latter will develop health problems is lower than in situations where the single parent is the mother (Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

The register of behavioral, emotional, school problems of children from single-parent families is completed by problems related to delinquency. Studies such as Anderson's (2002, p. 575-587) show that delinquency rates are higher for single-parent children compared to those growing up in two-parent families.

Another concern being researched is drug usage, although studies suggest that the analysis must be done in light of the unique circumstances of the single-parent family; therefore, divorce, one of the most important elements in the single-parent family, can have both positive and negative consequences. Divorce can contribute to the restoration of a stable family and educational environment (Hemovich & Crano, 2009), without conflicts, with high potential in the education and training of the child, just as divorce can generate long-term effects on the child (Hemovich & Crano, 2009), depression, revolt, low socialization, adopting attitudes that violate rules and laws, etc.

It is worthwhile to acknowledge that the child's whole existence is impacted by the family's core social group, its traits, which are shaped in turn by aspects of qualitative and

quantitative change in the internal and external environment. School and family education both contribute to children's social and personal success. This accomplishment necessitates the use of educational actors' resources, skills, and strategies. The theory of the social network elaborated by Kohn (as cited in Stănciulescu, 1997, p. 24) considers the child as an actor located in the center of the networks formed by entities (institutions and people) and they are focused on social interaction and on certain purposes.

Thus, the levels of analysis of these networks are, in Kohn's perspective, different and include: *the personal constellation, the personal network and the supra-individual social reality*. The personal constellation refers to those social actors who, by virtue of a common interest, interact. As for the personal network, it concerns both the relationships between the child and the social entities in the network, as well as the interactions between the two parts. Thus, the third level, the supra-individual social reality is configured without having in the center one of the entities, but the relations between the network actors. This theory is relevant to the topic addressed, as family education takes place in the context of the relationships between school, cultural institutions, kinship networks and the social networks of the child and parents. Each of these poles brings a series of external constraints but at the same time transfers its own resources, so that it alters to a greater or lesser extent the family education.

The importance of examining both home and school education in this study is crucial because they work in conjunction to promote a child's growth, as well as school and social integration, which are obvious determinants of a child's personal success.

Environmental factors (physical, social, and cultural) affect the order of the environment in relation to complex development, according to Neacșu (2010), and each has a different impact on growth, with variable degrees of interaction. The determinants of the environment are therefore physical (air, water, soil, diet, behaviors that are significant), social (fosters the convergence of social and cultural forces, with ramifications for family and community social conduct), and cultural (rituals, prejudices, myths, etc.).

Taking everything into consideration, the need to assess the magnitude of several key educational actors on children's conduct is entirely reasonable, and this is a concern that I addressed in this research paper.

Material and methods

The research was conducted as a sociological survey within the MERPAS project (the Educational Monitor of Outcomes, Practices, and Attitudes in Bihor County's Schools), under the guidance of Adrian Hatos, Ph.D., by the Doctoral School of Sociology at the University of Oradea in collaboration with the Superintendency of Schools and Centre for Educational Assistance Resource in Bihor County, on a simple random sample of 8th graders (a total of 5360 pupils from 278 classes).

Data processing was performed using the SPSS program, aimed at calculating frequencies and correlations between variables.

The questionnaire, as the main investigative tool, comprises a total number of 119 questions, grouped into topics such as school and student performance, school orientation, degree of personal satisfaction with school results, satisfaction with personal life, social networks, free-time activities, internet access, non-formal education, school guidance options, and family.

Field operators oversaw the deployment of the investigation tool by coordinating and advising subjects on any ambiguities revealed during the administration of the extemporaneous standard questionnaire to each class included in the sample.

Results

Accurate verifiable data, techniques and instruments, evaluation criteria

The current paper examines a particular aspect of the aforementioned study, namely the association between family structure (single-parent or two-parent) and school performance of children from the two types of families. Following a review of the specialized literature, the suggested hypothesis was that children from single-parent families (regardless of the indicator utilized) had an inferior learning performance compared to children from two-parent families. It is worth mentioning that the research team correlated the variable family structure with school success metrics, such as overall average and awards from the previous school year, participation in school Olympiads, and the perceived value of school performance in relation to future growth.

The average obtained by children in the previous school year, the awards received, and their assessment of school results were all significantly different, according to attendance analysis and statistical correlation tests. Children from single-parent families scored a general average of 8.08 out of 10, with a standard deviation of 1.233, compared to children from two-parent families, who had an average of 8.48, with a standard deviation of 1.278, a difference of 0.40 percentage points in favor of the latter. The correlation test T yielded $T = -7.326$, with a significance threshold of $p < .05$, indicating that the two types of variables do have positive relationship.

The findings are consistent with the awards obtained by students in previous years of study: most students who have never received an award or a consolation prize are among children from single-parent families (29.9%), as opposed to those from two-parent families (26.5%). Furthermore, the frequencies indicate that children from two-parent families account for the majority of those who earned at least three awards or consolation prizes (40.60% vs. 33.30% for children from single-parent families). Those coming from single-parent families are placed in the category of those who received prizes only once (19.0% of single-parent families and 17.30% of two-parent families) and twice (17.70% - from single-parent families and 15, 60% of two-parent families). The calculation of the Pearson significance test whose value is 8.824 at a significance threshold $p < .05$ allows the conclusion according to which *there is an association/ correlation between the tested variables: family structure and learning awards*. After the correlation test between the variables family structure of origin and participation in Olympiads or trade competitions with a Hi-Square of (.276) showing that *there is no significant correlation between them*, the calculated frequencies still suggest a certain trend, in the sense that the highest proportion of children who took part in a school Olympiads or a trade competition came from the category of two-parent families (49.9%), ahead of the percentage of children coming from single-parent families by 2.7 percentage points. From this point of view, the research data allow a statement according to which single-parent families create an educational climate that does not favor the children's school performance, even if there are certain exceptions, enrolling in family structures "poorly educogenic" (Mitrofan & Ciupercă, 2002).

The data show that school performance, materialized in grades and awards and even successful participation in competitions and Olympiads target the children from two-parent families to a greater extent because they are trained in a highly motivating and stimulating environment, and parents induce concrete aspirations in this regard. The constant parental control influences the quality of students' training and their support in school activities.

Students' family background was analyzed using dimensions and indicators (parents' educational capital, parents' profession, family welfare, and family educational style) in order to identify certain characteristics of single-parent families that may be responsible for children's poor

school performance. The analysis started from the idea that the set of abilities that an individual acquires and applies in any context of life, namely human capital "consists of *educational capital* (skills acquired by individuals in the school training process, but also outside of it) and *biological capital* (physical abilities of individuals, synthesized, most often, through health)" (Di Bartolo, 1999, as cited in Voicu, 2004, p. 138).

Parents' level of education is considered by researchers (Stevenson & Baker, 1992) a factor that determines parental involvement in children's education, including financial support. At the same time, parents who "Have acquired a high level of education have high educational aspirations for their children, which determines a greater acceptance and assumption of responsibilities towards their education" (Steelman & Powel, 1991, as cited in Hatos, 2006, p.184).

The *educational level* (as defined by graduate studies) of the student's mother and father were examined, with each comparison made between these variables and the type of family from which the individual originates (single parent and complete). It was found that mothers from two-parent families had graduated a higher education institution in 5.5 percentage points compared to mothers from single-parent families. The value of the Pearson correlation test applied to the two variables was 16.277, at a significance threshold $p < .05$, which confirms the association/correlation between the tested variables: *family structure and mother's level of education*; the educational level of mothers from single-parent families is inferior to that of mothers from two-parent families. The same trend has been observed in fathers' educational levels, implying that parents in two-parent families have higher educational capital than those in single-parent families and that educational capital can be considered a factor responsible for their children's school performance. Most studies capture the family's socioeconomic condition through the parents' occupation, which has been extensively shown as accounting for a major portion of the difference in children's school performance, regardless of how they are quantified (Scheerrens, 1999, as cited in Hatos, 2006, p. 179).

Once the relationship between the parents' occupation and the two types of family structures was investigated, it was discovered that there were no statistically significant differences in mother's occupation, though there were some differences at the level of recorded frequencies, primarily a higher proportion of workers on the one hand and the unemployed on the other, and fewer housewives among single-parent families compared to a large number of them in the two-parent families. Instead, the application of statistical correlation tests highlighted the existence of significant associations between *the variable occupation of the father and the type of family to which he belongs* (the value of the Pearson statistical test is 30.593 with a significance threshold $p < .05$), in the sense that the students' fathers from single-parent families are mostly found among people with higher education, technicians, foremen and civil servants, workers in services and tourism and entrepreneurs but also from the unemployed. On the other hand, fathers present in two-parent families are more frequently represented in the category of workers, pensioners and work-at-home men.

This interesting situation triggered a check that refers to the specifics of labor migration of family members. Thus, it was found that both frequency data and statistical tests indicated that one of the members of the single-parent family migrates more frequently to work abroad, compared to those from two-parent families. On the other hand, the recorded frequencies show that in both types of family, the person who most often goes to work abroad is the father, stating that the highest share is represented by *fathers from two-parent families*, in 69.6% of cases, compared to fathers from single-parent families, in which the father is gone only in 60.0% of cases. As for the *mothers who work abroad, they have the highest share in single-parent families*, in

32.9% of cases, compared to only 24.0% of cases in the two-parent family structure. The value of the Pearson statistical test is 8.926, at a significance threshold $p < .05$, which certifies *the existence of an association/ correlation between the tested variables: family structure and the person in the family who went abroad.*

It is of a legitimate interest to identify children whose only legal guardian has gone to work abroad; in terms of parental control, it becomes a problem in the single-parent family type (as it will be seen below), and along with other elements it leads to *an associated risk*. Going to work abroad can also be symptomatic for the family's financial situation. The fact that in the single-parent family, the mother is the one who goes to work abroad more frequently, it may suggest more financial difficulties. In a two-parent family, the father is the one who bears responsibility for resolving the family's financial issues, as well as the one who pursues greater wages by working abroad. Of course, in both circumstances, there is another issue to be resolved: who will look after the child at home? In terms of the family's socioeconomic status, the present research aims to define differences between the two family structures in terms of their material well-being, as measured by the subjects' perceptions of family income capacity to meet the needs of family members, supplying the home with goods for a decent living, while taking into consideration the area they live in: rural or urban. The findings demonstrate that the associations were statistically significant for all of the measures examined, showing a lower degree of well-being in single-parent families compared to two-parent families, reinstating the condition of single-parent families at greater risk of social exclusion.

The educational style of the family consists in its ability to find methods and strategies that judiciously combine the two structures of the human personality: individuality and sociability, "which, although they belong to opposite domains, they coexist, looking for balanced solutions of the "and-and" type (both individual and social), not excluding each other. When these elements guide or support the educational action in the family, they are constituted in educational styles or parenting styles" (Bonchiş, 2011, p. 68). On the one hand, there are methods and strategies that contribute to shaping the individual perspective, by developing a sense of personal fulfillment, trust and a spirit of independence, while the social perspective aims to promote respect and responsibility for achieving what is mean by obligation at the level of the individual.

The research team used the following indicators to analyze the parents' educational styles, depending on the family they came from: knowledge of the child's timetable, rules for being familiar with the child's entourage, participation in parent-teacher meetings, discussing the school situation with teachers, and addressing school problems to the students' parents. Analyzing the research data, it was found that the only indicator that positively correlates with the type of family is the one regarding the participation at parent-teacher meetings. Single-parents are less likely to attend parent-teacher meetings than those from two-parent families (single-parents never or seldom attend meetings, with a 12.40% share compared to 19.90% in the case of two-parent families). In contrast, those who always participate in the meetings are selected in a higher share (63.40%) among two-parent families, compared to only 52.10% among those from single-parent families. The value of the Pearson statistical test is 29.411 with a significance threshold $p < .05$, which highlights the aforementioned trend of stronger involvement of parents from whole families in maintaining relationships with the school their own children attend, compared to parents from single parent families. Out of the 5 variables taken into account and correlated with the type of the subject's family of origin, only parent-teacher meetings attendance proved to be in a statistically significant relationship with the type of family the student comes from. In the case of the other 4 variables there were clear tendencies to establish the educational style which was less favorable to

the knowledge and assistance of children's school behaviors (in the case of single-parent families). As a result, the school-family partnership, less present in the case of single-parent families could be one of the contributing factors to the poorer learning outcomes of children in this group.

Single-father families and single-mother families

The relationships between the aforementioned factors were analyzed and backed by the literature, from the perspective of single-parent families, based on the criterion of the parent remaining the sole food provider.

Consistent with the situation of other countries in Europe and in the world, in Romania the highest share is held by single-mother families (in the sample the share is 81.6%). Statistical tests revealed differences in school performance and behavior not only between children from single-parent and two-parent families, but also between children from single-mother families and single-father families. Thus, 26.9% of students with no *educational prizes* come from single-mother families, while 43.4% are from single-father families. The value of 8.996 was obtained at the Pearson Test, supporting the concept of a link between single-parent family structure factors (only mother, respectively only father) and children receiving awards or consolation prizes in school activities. Considering that *private tutoring is* an investment of the parent to ensure the conditions for school success, this indicator was analyzed and the Fischer test revealed through the significance threshold $p < .05$, the existence of a correlation between the variables single-parent and private meditations. According to the findings, children from single-mother families benefit from paid private lessons with teachers at a rate of 42.5%, which is greater than the rate of 31.2% for children whose sole backer is the father.

In fact, single-mother families exhibit a greater involvement in children's schooling and participate more often in *meetings with parents*. 81.4% of single-mother families and 71.1% of single-father families always/often participate at parent-teacher meetings. There is a correlation between these variables, the value of the Pearson test being 12.189 with a significance threshold $p < .05$. Another aspect of the research acknowledges mothers' interest and involvement in their children's formal education: the educational stock of the mother in the single-parent families included in the study is higher than that of the father, implying higher aspirations for their children's education and outcomes.

Single-parent families inquire about their children's school activities to a lesser extent, whether in a formal framework (via meetings with parents) or through individual chats with the teachers, so that proper parental support and intervention measures may be adopted if necessary. As a result, 69.1% of single-mother families and 62.5% of single-father families often and always address their child's activities and behavior in the school environment with the school management and teachers. Another factor looked at was the single-parent's demand for information about their child's interactions at school and the results obtained by classmates.

The appropriate partnership between school and family facilitates the global optimization of school services, as well as meeting the needs of the contemporary society, in which the family is the primary actor supporting and preparing the child, even though the school plays a critical role in early socialization. Social relationships, the interactions between the two entities, the family and the school, become important when "multiple contexts of childhood development are interdependent, integrated or overlapping" (Epstein & Sanders, 2002, as cited in Harwood, Miller, & Vasta, 2010, p. 751).

The social context and the family background have the role of significant factors in obtaining adequate school results (Coleman, 1987) and parental involvement is their basis as it

mediates almost all the influences of mother's education on school performance of the child (Stevenson & Baker, 1987, as cited in Darter-Lagos, 2003, p. 13).

The basic conclusion that needs to be emphasized, starting from the approached subject, refers to the existence of significant differences between the school performances of the children coming from the two types of family structures. Although the correlation tests showed such differences only in terms of average scores obtained in the previous year and the prizes received in secondary school, the recorded frequencies reported trends in poorer school performance of children from single-parent families compared to those from two-parent families, as well as in the case of the other indicators taken into account, namely the participation in Olympiads and competitions on trades or children's perception of the importance of school results for their further development.

The research highlighted the existence of some characteristics of single-parent families that are factors generating low school performance: the educational capital of parents from single-parent families is lower compared to two-parent families; the occupational status of parents from single-parent families is lower than that of parents from two-parent families; this is associated with the tendency of parents from single-parent families to work abroad in a higher share; parents from single-parent families are more likely to establish and practice an educational style less favorable to a competitive education of their own children, thus becoming less educated families; the well-being of single-parent families is undersized in relation to two-parent families, which places them in the category of groups at high risk for social exclusion.

It can be concluded that there are statistically significant differences between single-mother families, respectively single-father families, on several levels: the degree of emotional and social support provided by the parent, the educational climate of the family, or the material or financial support of the family. The research revealed that there are correlations between the structure of the single-parent family and the school results obtained by children, the involvement in formal education activities and school-family partnership, the support, including private lessons, children's preparation to obtain results and prizes. Single-mother families exercise their emotional support to a greater extent than single-father families. The students' behavior is influenced by the level of education of the single parent, the mothers more likely to have a high stock of education, as well as a propensity to communicate.

Discussions

Children from the single-parent families are a vulnerable group, the studies supported this approach through concrete arguments. Thus, Bramlett and Blumberg (2007, p. 549-558) support the relationship between the mental and physical health of children coming from single-parent families, considering that they have a weaker physical and mental state than children from two-parent families. The instability of the family structure is negatively associated with the child's welfare, and studies on child delinquency in single-parent families show that they are at high risk compared to those from two-parent families (Anderson, 2002, p. 575-587). In the same way, Hemovich and Crano (2009, p. 2099-2113) claim that the degree of illicit drug use among adolescents from single-parent families is higher.

The research data support the need for a complex comparative analysis of the children's situation from single-parent families, in relation to that of children from two-parent families. Thus, beyond knowing the vulnerability of children from single-parent families, it is possible to ensure a correct substantiation to support them.

Conclusions

One can consider that the research brought to attention sufficient data to support the placement of the single-parent family in the category of vulnerable groups, at high risk of social exclusion, by depriving children of equal opportunities to access education with other children from two-parent families. In this sense, the research team believes that educational policies are needed to support this category of children, with real possibilities for development but lacking the attention and full support of the family. Thus, one must ensure an adequate educational infrastructure and an adequate psycho-educational support from specialized educational actors, as well as from the community.

The need to build a viable partnership between school and family is essential beyond the differentiated involvement of the single supportive parent and the shared responsibility of the actors involved. The network the child belongs to and the place where their education takes place must be active and dynamic in order to ensure their academic and social success, respectively to transcend the elements of vulnerability due to them belonging to the single-parent family.

Limitations of research

The main limitation of the research data presented refers to the fact that it was based exclusively on quantitative data collected on the basis of a questionnaire applied to students.

Data processing was limited to frequency calculations and statistical correlation tests between variables without resorting to deeper and more sophisticated analyzes.

The data will be supplemented later with information derived from qualitative research, based on interviews applied to specialists or focus groups with teachers and parents of children.

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