



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

www.techniumscience.com



Vol. 69/2025
A New Decade for Social Changes

PLUS
COMMUNICATION P



International
Communication & PR

Teachers about children left behind raised by grandparents. A qualitative study

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Abstract. With the intensification of migration, the number of left-behind children placed in extended families has also increased, and the phenomenon is considered to have significant consequences on children's well-being (Ratha, Mohapatra, Scheja, 2011; Sănduleasa, Matei, 2015). Grandparents with custody have become an alternative family structure (Edwards, Rothbard, 2000) frequently encountered in Romania, which is why it is essential to understand the implications of this special situation. In this qualitative study, we conducted two focus groups, each with eight participants—teachers of middle school students—with whom we discussed the difficulties faced at school by children raised by their grandparents. The thematic analysis revealed four main themes: (1) behavioral disorders, (2) stress and anxiety, (3) responsibility and maturity, and (4) vulnerability. Participants reported that these children stand out very clearly among their peers and that, depending on the family context, they either develop responsibility and maturity or become antisocial and rebellious. These findings have implications for including them in a risk category and implementing support programs for grandparents who take on the responsibility of raising them.

Keywords. children left behind, children raised by grandparents, teachers

Introduction

The subject of left-behind children raised by grandparents is a relevant topic that concerns both the educational and social domains. This study aims to gain a better understanding of the situation of these children, facilitated by dialogue with teachers. The care of a child by grandparents can be understood differently by left-behind children depending on the definitional nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Nussbaum, Bettini, 1994). There is evidence that grandparent-grandchild relationships are built on the role of supporters, advisors, and friends, and that preferences for either the grandfather or grandmother vary depending on the child's gender (MaloneBeach, Hakoyama, Arnold, 2018). The emotional connection between grandparents and grandchildren is particularly strong, and their influence on grandchildren is undeniable (Knigge, 2016). Therefore, we can assume that being raised by grandparents should be considered a great privilege. However, the situation is different when grandparents become the primary caregivers, and parents are significantly absent from the child's life, at least physically.

In such cases, certain fractures deepen, mainly caused by generational differences, difficulties in establishing authority, the physical and mental availability to support the child in various activities, and vast differences in the meaning of life, relationships, and so on. Labor migration abroad is one of the phenomena that strongly affect our society, bringing significant social, economic, and psychological costs (Yeoh, Lam, 2007; Sitompul, 2023; Botezat, Pfeiffer, 2020). When both parents migrate, the left-behind child frequently lives with their grandparents. Although this phenomenon is widespread in Romania (75,136 children had parents working abroad, of whom 13,253 had both parents gone, and 9,409 had a single supporting parent absent, according to ANPDC, 2020), official data on the exact number of children left behind due to parental migration and placed in extended families are not precise. However, in 2024, out of 8,895 children with both parents working abroad, 8,194 were in the care of relatives up to the fourth degree, without formal protective measures.

Parent-child separation, regardless of the reason, is a considerable adversity for any child (Shi et al., 2021). In the case of left-behind children raised by grandparents, the association between the impact of parent-child separation and socio-emotional development is not well studied and remains unclear due to the child's dual position. Although placing children with relatives or grandparents has significant psycho-emotional implications, this protective measure is considered the most favorable, given that other children may be placed in foster care, family-type homes, or even residential centers.

The impact of parental separation and grandparental care on a child can be observed by teachers who monitor their academic progress, school adaptation, and behavior in various situations. Teachers also have the ability to compare these children with others living in intact families. Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) found that grandparents raising their grandchildren often experience feelings of isolation from their families and friends and feel that social services have left them to manage on their own without clear channels for support. However, their study also revealed the genuine joy that many caregivers experience in raising their grandchildren, suggesting that this is a unique quality of such placements. The article concludes by describing local developments that have resulted from the study.

Literature Review

The grandparent-grandchild relationship places these children in a doubly vulnerable status: (1) being left behind, a phrase that suggests the departure of their parents, and (2) being cared for by their grandparents. In academic literature, these two situations are studied separately, meaning that we have information about left-behind children on one hand and specific studies on children raised by grandparents on the other. In this study, we addressed teachers who have middle school-aged children raised by grandparents due to the migration of both parents in their classrooms. Children raised by grandparents develop maturity and wisdom through intergenerational socialization, acquiring traditional values and life lessons. Grandparents provide them with valuable social capital, stable emotional support, and a secure attachment, which contribute to their emotional balance and the development of empathy. Through early responsibilities and involvement in family life, these children become more independent and capable of making conscious decisions. Additionally, exposure to traditions and cultural norms strengthens their identity and sense of belonging. However, their maturity can also be influenced by the emotional challenges associated with parental absence.

Academic literature describes numerous consequences that this type of arrangement has on both children and grandparents. There are undoubtedly many benefits to children being raised by their grandparents, and studies highlight them: emotional stability, a safe environment,

a strong sense of belonging, and deep emotional bonds (Hayslip, Kaminski, 2005; Hayslip, Goodman, 2008). However, most evidence emphasizes the significant costs of grandparental caregiving. These costs vary depending on the family context, available resources, the frequency of contact with parents, children's psycho-individual traits, the age at which they were left behind, as well as factors related to the grandparents' health, age, education level, and living conditions. These costs include financial difficulties (Padilla-Frausto, Wallace, 2013), psychological development issues, and school adaptation problems (Edwards, 2009).

From the perspective of being left-behind children, there are numerous risks, and the costs include social and gang violence (Carranza, 2022), feelings of abandonment, poor psychosocial outcomes (Parreñas, 2005), and mental health problems (Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015). Another study categorizes them as disadvantaged and vulnerable (Corrás et al., 2017). Tomşa and Jenaro (2015), as well as Cheng and Sun (2015), found anxiety and depression among left-behind children, while Fan et al. (2010) argue that these children develop emotional and behavioral problems, with a potential risk of developing psychopathologies.

Results

There was a high level of homogeneity in participants' representations of these children, and several categories of reactions to this situation emerged. Depending on their personality structure and available resources, left-behind children raised by grandparents tend to: (1) rebel, (2) become extremely hardworking and determined, or (3) withdraw into isolation. In any case, this status difference—being raised by grandparents and not having their parents present constitutes a reason for stigmatization. The thematic analysis revealed four main themes: (1) behavioral disorders, (2) stress and anxiety, (3) responsibility and maturity, and (4) vulnerability.

Some potential variables identified by participants include the quality of the relationship with grandparents before the parents' departure, cohabitation with another grandchild or cousin, the level of involvement of the grandparents, their age, and the quality of the grandparent-parent relationship.

Behavioral disorders

Currently, we know that the family factor, specifically the lack of authentic parent-child contact, is a determining factor in the development of behavioral disorders (Berg-Nielsen, Vikan, Dahl, 2003). A child separated from a parent is a child who experiences this lack of contact. Physical closeness, warmth, tenderness, and actual presence cannot be replaced by sporadic online conversations, no matter how much effort the parent puts in. To what extent can a grandparent be considered an authority figure and competent to care for a child reaching an age such as preadolescence? As mentioned, participants' perceptions of children left in the care of grandparents were quite uniform. In the two focus groups conducted, several situations observed in the classroom were highlighted, including frequent anger, outbursts of aggression (even among girls), and among boys, frequent defiance of rules, frequent lying, and theft. Verbal aggression was also mentioned, but it alternates with isolation, excessive shyness, low self-confidence, and heightened anxiety. Participants recounted discussions among children when classmates raised by grandparents were picked up from school, as well as specific situations related to being cared for by grandparents, such as a more traditional setting for birthday parties, living conditions below the standard of other children, and less fashionable clothing. Some children financially supported by their parents compensate through expensive items such as mobile phones, clothing, or pocket money.

Grandparents often fail to understand or anticipate certain situations and position themselves either as permissive guardians or as imposing rigid limits that provoke rebellion from the child. Participants mainly described grandparents who were aware of the children's suffering and loss, seeking to compensate by offering understanding, granting freedoms, and showing trust.

High stress and anxiety

In general, contact with grandparents or spending time with them generates balance, warmth, and trust. However, when grandparents become the primary caregivers of a child or preadolescent, things change. The anxiety reported by study participants is likely caused by the absence of parents and the new living environment in which these children find themselves.

They more frequently come to school with unfinished homework because they lack support at home, are less popular and visible, and participate less in school-organized events and trips. As a result, they tend to avoid social situations, withdraw more frequently from new interactions, and exhibit anxiety in unfamiliar situations. Sometimes, they complain of stomach or headaches, become restless, and feel fatigued.

High levels of maturity

A particular trait of these children has been highlighted—namely, wisdom, expressed through a higher level of understanding of things and a maturity that significantly distinguishes them from others. Participants believe that the age at which the parents left and the quality of the relationship with them are crucial factors in how the child reacts to the new family arrangement.

This maturity, expressed both emotionally and in attitude, is sometimes perceived as oppressive and restrictive, leading to occasional outbursts of frustration due to the discrepancy between their age, needs, and context. More frequent exposure to their grandparents' limitations, needs, and age-related difficulties increases their empathy and sense of responsibility. Additionally, they tend to be more respectful and polite toward adults and various situations compared to other children, as they are raised in a more traditional setting. They do not react impulsively or in a "childish" manner like their peers.

Vulnerability

Participants listed several vulnerabilities, such as deep feelings of abandonment, refusal to accept the situation, limited access to educational services, inadequate support with homework, lower participation in cultural events or social programs, differences in how they experience life compared to other children, a different daily routine, and more. One consequence of the significant age gap between grandparents and grandchildren is the grandparents' difficulty in protecting the child from risks they do not recognize or understand. Study participants reported situations in which grandparents treated certain topics naively, such as media consumption, the use of mobile phones for educational purposes, or extended visits to a classmate's house for studying.

The significantly different social context, along with the limited exposure grandparents have to everyday professional or school-related realities, positions them as vulnerable guardians.

Limitations

The methodology is limited by the lack of generalizability; however, we believe that we have gained new insights into the situation of left-behind children raised by grandparents.

Conclusions

The results suggest the need for a closer focus on children raised by grandparents and the development of parenting programs tailored to their needs. Raising awareness and familiarization of teachers regarding the issues of these children would also be welcome.

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