Important aspects regarding the newly emerging needs of children in Romania

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Abstract
The newly emerging needs is a concept used to describe the needs of children and young adults not using a classic label, which includes a loosely connected group of challenges, opportunities, events, problems and threats that are relevant to the overall development of children and young adults. This situational group can cause a succession of effects that might have serious consequences upon their lives. These needs are out of ordinary since they have not been found in any other period and generation, and even if they have been found, there is a dramatic increase in their incidence.

Keywords: newly emerging needs, children, youth, social development, contemporary educational approach

Zusammenfassung

Stichwörter: neu entstandene Bedürfnisse, Kinder, Jugendliche, soziale Entwicklung, zeitgenössischen pädagogischen Ansatz
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The concept of “emerging needs” is continually defining and taking other dimensions, like the reality which they represent. The causes of newly emerging needs are different and they expand from the local level to the international one, and vice versa, turning into a specific and concrete concern for the educational experts, which now possess a specific definition for different kind of situations, events, challenges and opportunities defining the society at a given moment and showing effects upon children and young adults development.

Considering the educational and social trends and putting them into connection with the concept we can extract important emerging needs of the current generation of children and youth in Romania.

Real vs. Virtual

The evolution of technology in the last few years has specific effects with ascending trends:

- an increasing number of internet users,
- a decreasing age of children using the computer and the internet,
- an increasing number of hours spent in the “virtual space”,
- diversifying communication methods and increasing online communication,
- an increasing number of persons who communicate frequently with people who live at great distances or that they do not know personally,
- the apparition of alternative identities used internet communication,
- less time spent socializing in the real world and with outdoor activities etc.

Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Telecoms, stated that “more than 70% of the youth use the modern internet capacities. We called them the digital natives, including here the persons who were born in this era and who started to use the computer immediately as they became active consumers on the European markets.” In the European Commission report on EU competition in the field of digital telecommunication, it is foreseen that this generation will dictate the future rules of the game on the European markets.

The survey „Copiii şi internetul” (Children and the Internet), conducted in February 2009 by children’s radio station Itsy Bitsy FM and Intuitex on 3,559 parents reveals, among other things, the following:
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- 63.5% of the children under 14 years of age sit in front of the computer daily, 59% access the internet daily, and 30.5% spend more than six hours a week on the internet.
- Over 43% access the internet for games, over 19% in order to chat, and only 23% in order to look for information for school.
- 38.7% of children under 3 years old access the internet daily.

UNICEF monitored the TV stations in January 2009 with regard to scenes of violence, registering very big values in the case of cartoons TV stations. The research “Representation of TV Violence and the Child Protection” focused on monitoring 11 TV stations: TVR 1, Pro TV, Acasă, Antena 1, Antena 3, Realitatea TV, Prima TV, OTV, Cartoon Network, Jetix and Minimax: first ranked was Jetix, with 37 scenes of violence per hour, followed by Cartoon Network. “In the society of TV screens and computer monitors, children are mainly formed in a universe of TV reality and virtual communication, which become their actual reality. A consequence of this historic change of paradigm consists in the risk of losing the awareness of the difference between good and evil,” stated PhD. Ioan Dragan, manager of the Research Centre for Media and New Communication Technologies Studies of the University of Bucharest, who is the coordinator of this research.

Nevertheless computer games develop a series of skills in children, like logical thinking, decision making, strategy making, rapid reactions etc. However, some children give up interacting with other children, playing in front of the house or in nature, sports and socializing. Online communication has advantages and disadvantages. It is easy, cheap and handy. But the messages that are transmitted are faulted. Written communication is not necessarily interaction, it is more impersonal. It is more difficult to transmit emotions and feelings. It is based on information. Virtual interaction is thus easier but less personal; it does not help knowing more about oneself and communication with other members of the group. Reactions in real situations, finding real solutions to possible conflicts arising with the person with whom one communicates are not to be found in virtual communication.

Also, virtual pace creates its own culture, which can be easily exemplified with specific language elements that have become common knowledge, like “asl pls”, “lol” or shortening Romanian words that become unrecognizable for an “outsider”.

More and more children refuse to go on summer camps they cannot take their Play Station or if there is no internet available. The dependence to technology makes them more vulnerable, less prepared for acing real situations. The alternative reality, the computer games, the role models from cartoons and action films or other models promoted by the media, the front page news that children have access to, create in children certain perceptions and opinions that are far from reality.

City children spend less and less time outdoors or in nature. Some children cannot tell the difference between a duck and a goose because they only see them in zoology manuals. Some children believe that the purple Milka cow is for real and that this is its natural colour. It’s real: today’s children are growing away from nature and from childhood games. And when they have contact with nature or the classical universe of games, they do it in an inadequate manner. The lack of the model of “playing” and “reacting to the environment” generates either violent reactions, or blockage because of lacking a scale of evaluating the environment situations.

Another interesting fact is that the small child perceived the hero to be rather a robotized version than a human or at least a person with humanizing qualities. The tendency is to shift the features of the characters in children’s fiction into a world that is as technical as possible, lacking emotional responses that are adequate to the situation. We can thus notice, in many current fictional productions, serious inadequacies to situations, extremely violent reactions both verbally and behaviourally, and clear and often irrevocable manifestations of hostility. It is extremely rare to find contents dealing with unconditional acceptance, accepting the differences or even forgiveness, but these productions promote individualism, climates of extreme competition, etc.

Another very important aspect in the problematic of the influence of virtual space upon the child’s life and development is represented by the fake identity or a wishful identity, contradicting the individual potential or capacities, which cause serious cognitive dissonance, delaying the formation or altering the capacity for realistic self-perception. By using online communication, children and teenagers create false identities for themselves, starting for pretending to be of another age of another gender and getting in contact with
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adults looking for partners (including sexual partners), so children will reach social maturity much sooner than normal.

**Everything precocious**

The society that we live in is aggressively bombarding us with information, invading almost any life space of the child, from family to play or school, and the messages do not only form the child educationally but rather in the sense of becoming a precocious consumer. Marketing policies are the ones that create or invent needs, generate new trends, which result in behavioural changes at the level of the “targeted” groups.

Another element that determines the precocious apparition of certain needs is caused by the powerful influence of the people of the same or close age to change the behaviour. This is why we should no longer be surprised to notice that, as soon as they learn to read and write, many children become more and more interested in online communication, leading to early subscriptions to social networks and online games or competitions. Many parents declare themselves surprised by messages they “discover” when the “monitor discreetly” the activities of primary school children. They will frequently ask themselves if the sexuality of some messages is adequate for their age and they are even more shocked to find out that some colleagues or friends of their son or daughter are already sexually active.

Although many parents are in denial, precocious sexuality and starting sexual life starts much earlier than in previous generations, because of peer pressure or of the constant bombardment of sexually charged messages delivered by the media. The moment of starting one’s sexual life is often extremely precocious, with negative consequences anatomically, physiologically, but also psychologically, in the absence of a development of decision-making capacities.

Observation studies carried out by doctors and psychologists reveal that the start of puberty now happens at 9-9.5 years of age and not at 11-12 years old, as was the case until the end of last century. Already, we notice more and more cases of premature pregnancies or child fathers.

But the domain of “everything precocious” does not limit itself to sexuality. It also includes the behaviours concerning the consumption of psychoactive substances, in which we include even alcohol and tobacco. For many pubescent children, they feel like they have
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grown up if they are able to smoke, drink beer, to try even more, and the ones who do not follow this trend will be isolated from the groups of girls or boys. The risk of exclusion creates however a very big pressure and determines the child to follow the trend, adopting the “consumer” behaviour in order to be adopted by the group. ANA research entitled “Scientific components of drug consumption in the Romanian society” (2008) mentions the ease with which illegal drugs can be procured by high school students, the excessive consumption of prescription drugs, and other aspects that showcase the early debut of psychoactive substance abuse.

Infantile aggressiveness and criminality are becoming a growing problem. Desensitized by examples from movies, cartoons, video games, as well as a low capacity for discernment, corroborated with missing or faint ethical criteria, the incapacity to choose between good and evil, makes children want to experiment with behaviours characteristic to their “super-heroes”.

The article “Jetix, ProTV and OTV – Champions of violence on the small screen” by Moga C., reads, “Cartoon networks maintain their position of leader regarding the proportion of violent scenes, compared with the rest of the television stations” – these TV stations broadcast violent scenes in proportion of over 50%. Even if the parents are selective with regard to choosing the cartoons or TV shows, games etc., children have the same “heroes” as their kindergarten or school colleagues. They tell their parents about the adventures of the violent characters even though they did not get to watch them themselves in their family. Which would be the source of this? Their colleagues and friends, the toys that show these characters, the trend of comics and marketing products that promote these cartoon or computer game characters.

Universal access to information and news bulletins that children can watch anytime, offer them access to global events. There are the fairy tales with Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty, but also news about wars, murders, rapes, more or less unfortunate events. They can watch any TV channel, anytime. They know about the parents’ financial problems, they are left unsupervised for a large portion of the day. From the point of view of information, children mature themselves faster and they get a bigger amount of knowledge earlier and earlier in life.
Contemporary role models and values

Theoretically the concept of value means “a way of being and of acting that a person or a community recognizes as being ideal and that makes the people, the groups or behaviours to which it is attributed, be considered good or respectable.” - Emile Durkheim on collective conscience. Values are the expression of general principles, fundamental orientations, and, first and foremost, of certain collective preferences. Values differ from a society to another, from a group to another; they integrate specific elements from different cultural zones. R. Parsons underlines the fact that the American society, for instance, favours less the values associated to maintaining cultural models than the ones related to accomplishment.

On the other hand, the concept of role model refers to the attempt to understand a social phenomenon realized by means of a schematic representation, which nonetheless respects the complexity of the respective phenomenon. This representation, based on observation, is a construction that aims to explain the object, in its synchrony and diachrony. Role models are instances of imitation or comparison. They appear frequently, spontaneously, and are short-lived. Today, a model represents a style of appearance and behaviour, induced to people by means of persuasion through advertising and perceived through the (seemingly endless) willingness for imitation.

Role models are in tight relation with people’s lifestyle, meaning the manner in which an individual or a group (models of social relations, product consumption, and culture assimilation) expresses itself. It can be a visible indicator of class, of detachment of elites from the masses, of big age groups, etc. Following this scientific theory, it is not surprising that we are shocked to witness the loyal imitation of certain behaviours, be they anti-social, just because “the role model” does it.

Starting from rhetorical questions or psychological or sociological theories, one can notice that the mere exposure to changes in society, family, media, and education, will increase the attraction and interest towards a certain thing, person, role model, or value. The explanation is that, in a first stage, the confrontation with a new object or situation will lead to negative feelings (fear, mistrust). After further exposure and in the absence of a threat
from the respective object, people will find it attractive. The attraction increases as the object becomes familiar and proves to be successful in a short time, with minimum effort. The forming of a moral personality is a process that is both necessary and difficult. Necessary because the life ideal, the social commitment of the individual to attain it, the relation with others - both as an object and as a subject - are put under the sign of morality. Generally speaking, moral is the moral system of the society regarded as a whole (norms, principles, values, moral ideal). “The sphere of the concept of moral is composed ... by the moral conscience and the moral relations, which consist of socially efficient facts and actions ... it also implies their valorisation, which opens the issue of lived action and experience” (Hună, I., 1981).

Morality is what makes adjustment possible, based on values and moral principles. There is a “law of adjustment” that implies several steps:

- identity (who am I?)
- values (what for?)
- capacities (how?)
- behaviours (what?)
- environment (where? when?)

Moral education implies starting to circulate moral values taken from the society’s table of values (which are the basis of moral norms), and by their assimilation - if they are associated with positive aims and feelings - the moral behaviours are determined.

On the other hand it is known that, when individuals shift to another environment (other than the family) for a long time, their system of value, gained in the family, will change, more or less. D.J. Boorstein claims that the media could harm moral formation, because it leads to imitating pseudo-personalities who became role models.

Psychologist Otilia Spataru Ostrotky said, in the article “Media and Education System - Interaction and Mutual Causality”: “The more shocking, even tragic, information is, the more important it is considered and the bigger an impact it has. Such images make children overexcited, inciting them to violence and brutality. Violence in fiction will easily lead to real acts of violence. J. Cazeneuve says that the biggest evil is not the fact that scenes of violence are shown, but that a mix between fiction and real is created, making children
mentally confused and unable to separate what is fiction from what is real. The true significance of indifference to violence, both as a fact and in fiction, is the devaluing of the concept of humanity.”

All this leads to what is called the principle of social proof. This principle starts from a simple idea: if people hear or see that certain people have certain behaviours, this is likely to make them adopt similar behaviours. Bandura (apud Cialdini, 2004) noticed that the social proof is a powerful predictor of social (and educational) influence. E.g., every day a child was playing happily with a dog for 20 minutes. This made 67% of a group of preschoolers, who were previously afraid of dogs, wish to play with a dog as well. Sometimes it is only sufficient to use certain key words in order to start a contagious behaviour of the social proof type. Social proof can be a strong motivating factor for children and youngsters.

Another aspect worth special attention refers to the mental and emotional fragility. The individual can be happy or unhappy with himself. When he is not happy, one hope that he will attempt to change this, making efforts in this respect. If the individual is a teenager or even an adult, the aspiration is natural. We should mention that the nature of the aspirational self is an indication of whether the individual knows his reality or not and, either yes or no, to what extent. William Thomas, in his book, The Unadjusted Girl, presented four aspirations that he considered to be common in all human beings; therefore they are the premise from where we can start:

- the aspiration to get or gain a new experience;
- the aspiration to be acknowledged by others;
- the aspiration to respond to others;
- the aspiration towards security.

Although we have a certain attitude towards an aspect of life, we will not always behave accordingly. This is where the parent, the educator, the counsellor, the members of the community has a primordial role, intervening systematically to form the child, that his attitudes and behaviours should be in accordance with one another, so that the character should be as homogenous and harmonious as possible, and to give him access to the most adequate ways of evolution.
Acquiring a positive attitude towards oneself will thoroughly reflect in the relation with society, work, family, and even oneself. Because children learn especially by imitation, they will do what adults do, not what adults say, as we very well know. Sykes C. underlines this idea by means of the following rule: “Winners have a life philosophy,” and children need it to be strengthened, even in ordinary situations, in order for them not to experience the fact that “losers have their own life philosophy.”

Children and youth need to be permanently connected to life. The adult who is already emotionally and functionally stable can constantly offer this, stressing on awareness and accountability, confirming through the way in which he solves day-to-day problems that “life is not divided into semesters and that summer is not a holiday,” and that “television is not real life” (Sykes, C.J., 2007)

**Conclusion**

After conducting of the study it came out the book “Newly Emerging Needs of Children – an Exploration”, where it is offered a theoretical definition of newly emerging needs, explaining how they can be indentified and what’s new about them as well as a concrete methodology on how one can address changing concept of childhood, implementing Children’s Rights Convention, the uneven rise of girl power, bypassing of traditional mediators, fusion of reality, virtuality and the impossible, accessing new terrains, exposure to global lifestyles. The author considers that these themes are the main domains of how newly global needs appear, and they might appear in a certain extent in the research done in different societies, countries, children groups.
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