

Mutual Relations Among Personal, Social, And Organizational Factors in the Process of Education

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Abstract

The education process is most importantly aimed at optimal children's development and their successful learning. School, thus, has a task to provide safety, underlying the clear rules of behaviour and zero tolerance for violence, and to create a positive and stimulating atmosphere. Such school approach is based on dynamic mutual relations among learners, their families, teachers, classes, the entire school, and a wider social context in which the school exists and operates. In a high-quality school, individual differences are accepted, and no one is excluded from the process of making more important decisions. Therefore, it is vital to see how much the school recognizes, encourages, and frees learners' natural curiosity as well as their critical assessment of their own and social values.

In order to contribute to creating a positive school atmosphere and thus encourage the learners' progress and their wish to learn, this paper examines learners' opinions about their own behaviour, satisfaction with school and ways of teaching, and the quality of family environment (a questionnaire has been designed for this purpose). The research was conducted in one primary school in the Zagreb area, including 114 seventh- and eighth-graders. To determine the grade- and gender-related differences, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used for testing significance between two independent samples. With the purpose of creating a positive school atmosphere, mutual relations among learners' personal and social, and the schools' organizational factors have been analysed, and the results show a statistically significant difference in the learners' opinions about the non-acceptable forms of behaviour, as well as the quality of the family environment, effective parenting, and the perception of personal and social development. There is a statistically significant difference between seventh- and eighth-graders in their self-assessments of the development of a positive responsible attitude towards their health and safety, ability to recognize the consequences of their own and others' actions, acceptance of rules of cooperation, and attitudes about family environment. These results in the process of education raise additional questions that can serve to further elaborate the methodology and search for ways to develop self-evaluation and prevention programs in the future, making them a more efficient and effective approach to improving the overall school work.

Keywords: family environment; learners; school satisfaction; stimulating atmosphere

1. Introduction

One of the essential features of school quality assurance approaches is based on the responsibility of the stakeholders for the quality implementation of the school curriculum. Therefore, certain authors (MacBeath et al., 2000; Tot, 2013) propose self-evaluation as the basic mechanism of quality improvement, which can be described as a democratic and transparent process of interpretation that enables reflection and is subject to change. Continuous monitoring and improvement of school quality ensure the improvement of student learning and overall professional and organizational learning. Self-evaluation is based on the understanding that development planning at the level of an individual school is the core of quality assurance, that schools need to be strengthened and effectively supported so that the stakeholders can develop the necessary competencies and make autonomous decisions. Namely, “only teachers, educators or direct participants in the educational process can determine current problems in their practice and what needs to be explored. Unlike in previous approaches, these problems can be explored in a natural situation in the classroom or educational group so that the results can be useful and directly applicable” (Miljak, 2009, p. 162). When schools monitor their development, they develop a positive school culture (Fullan, 2007), which includes components to improve the learning and motivation of all stakeholders. With the increasing complexity and demands of teaching, such as addressing the needs of all learners in inclusive classrooms (De Simone & Parmar, 2006; Kudek Mirošević, 2015), the effective use of learners’ assessments has gained in importance. In such a school, all stakeholders learn to self-critically review and evaluate and thus make progress. Along with creating a positive and stimulating atmosphere, the school’s task is to provide safety with clear rules of conduct and zero tolerance for violence and risky behaviours. *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): Towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* (Education for Sustainable Development - ESD for 2030 Framework) aims to increase the contribution of education to building a more just and sustainable world. Therefore, this decade follows a global vision of “a world in which everyone has the opportunity to take advantage of quality education and learn the values, behaviours, and lifestyles needed for a sustainable future and positive social transformation”. In a quality school, individual differences are accepted, and no one is excluded from the process of making more important decisions. For all school stakeholders, and especially teachers and expert staff, it is important to assess how much the school recognizes, encourages, and frees the natural curiosity of learners and their critical assessment of their own and social values. According to the *National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education, General Compulsory and Secondary Education (NFC)* (2011), schools are expected to encourage the personal development of each learner by improving their emotional, social, and academic competence and thus contributing to human, social, and intellectual capacity in society. Both in the world (UNESCO, 2009) and in the Republic of Croatia, in accordance with the *Primary and Secondary School Education Act* (2008), the emphasis is on education which stresses accepting various specifics of learners’ development

and ensuring conditions and support for achieving the maximum development of individual learner's potential. Successful educational systems, as well as successful schools (at the micro-level), pay special attention to providing individual support to learners. Thus, appropriate forms of providing educational support enable learner progress by respecting the specifics of their performance and their educational needs, creating a community based on respect, acceptance, and mutual assistance. In the educational system, there are forms of learner support aimed at improving their educational achievements, developing their personal potential and their overall well-being. In this sense, the goal is to provide a comprehensive learner support system that combines different support mechanisms within and outside schools. Along with the support (learning support, psychological support, counselling etc.), this system includes additional interventions and specific forms of support for all children regardless of their abilities, opportunities, and interests. Learner-centred school interventions present one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of educational systems. In this way, mechanisms at the school level are established to identify learning and behavioural difficulties and, accordingly, mechanisms that provide additional learner support and that improve learner achievements (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). In addition, prevention activities are essential in education. They empower learners in the psycho-social field of development (Aksoy, 2019; Stavrou & Kourkoutas, 2017). Prevention activities encourage learners to develop tolerance and mutual respect and provide peer support. Such activities reduce risky behaviour, develop and strengthen learners' self-confidence, responsibility and ability to make decisions, and promote healthy behaviour. School programs that focus on such activities are desirable in working with learners in the final grades of primary school because the educational system tends to make learners more resilient and ready for further life, and to encourage development of socio-emotional learning. The occurrence, causes, and development of unacceptable behaviours are usually considered in the context of risk and protection factors, and many studies show why some children and young people who are exposed to risk factors during their development do not adopt risky behaviour, unlike others who grow up in the same or similar circumstances (Bašić, 2009; Jurčević Lozančić & Kudek Mirošević, 2021; Willson & Rolleston, 2004; Zweers et al., 2021). Namely, it is considered that the risky lifestyle is difficult to be determined precisely and that possible causes should be viewed in the context of the interaction of various psychological, social, economic, and other relevant factors. In this regard, the literature lists dynamic risk factors, including individual characteristics, family factors, peer influence as well as school and community factors, which suggest that they can be influenced by interventions (DeMatteo & Marczyk, 2005; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). We, thus, considered it important to assess the differences in the opinions of seventh- and eighth-grade primary school learners on the development of their positive and responsible attitude towards their health and safety, ability to recognize the consequences of their own and others' actions, acceptance of the rules of cooperation, and the attitudes about the quality of their family environment.

Consistent with such interpretations, the **aim** of this research is to examine the mutual relations among personal, social, and organizational factors, to create a positive school atmosphere encouraging learners' progress and their desire to learn and improve.

The following **research questions** were formulated:

1. to examine the opinions of and differences between seventh- and eighth-graders related to how they assess their behaviours, their satisfaction with school and ways of teaching, and the quality of their family environment.
2. to examine the opinions of and differences between seventh- and eighth-graders (with regard to grade and gender) related to their self-assessments of having a positive and responsible attitude towards their health and safety, being able to recognize the consequences of their own and others' actions, accepting the rules of cooperative relations, and attitudes about the quality of their family environment.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The research included a stage sample of 114 participants (learners in grade 7 and grade 8 of primary school). A total of 61 (53.5%) seventh-graders and 53 (46.5%) eighth-graders from one primary school in the city of Zagreb, Croatia were surveyed. In terms of gender, the research sample consisted of 47% boys and 53% girls. Both learners with disabilities (13%) and learners without disabilities (87%) were represented. In terms of participants' grade point average at the end of the previous school year, 48% of them had excellent results, 46% very good, and 6% good. This sample was selected because learners in grade 7 and grade 8 attend more prevention programs, which, in accordance with learners' age, relate to developing learners' competencies in decision-making, accepting obligations and responsibilities, and developing life quality.

2.2 Measuring Instrument and Research Method

To create a positive school atmosphere by analysing learners' assessments of their behaviour, satisfaction with school and ways of teaching (school support), a Questionnaire was constructed examining learners' opinions related to how they assess their behaviour, satisfaction with school and ways of teaching (school support), and opinions about the quality of their family environment. For each variable (in total, there were 41 variables), learners assessed school and family environment on the five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 means never, 2 rarely, 3 sometimes, 4 often, 5 always. In accordance with the Code of Ethics for Research Involving Children, the survey was conducted anonymously, in classrooms during regular classes. The learners' task was to read each item in the questionnaire and, next to each of them, put an X in only one of the five columns with the offered answers (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always). The principal components (composites) analysis, i.e. the method for data reduction, reduced a large number of variables to a small number of composite variables. The variables were then transformed into five semantically composite

variables (organization of free time, occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour, education for personal and social development, teacher and learner mutual support, family environment, and effective parenting). Univariate statistical procedures describe the percentages of distribution of responses to individual items, arithmetic means, and standard deviations. The basic descriptive values for all five composite variables are shown in Table 1. In addition to descriptive indicators, as part of inferential statistics for testing grade-related differences in individual composites (attending grade 7 or grade 8), non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used for testing significance between two independent samples.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Descriptive values of composite variables (N=114)

Composites	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Stat	Std. Error	Stat	Stat	Stat	Std. Error	Stat	Std. Error
Organizing free time	3.50	.095	1.012	1.025	-.244	.228	-1.108	.453
Occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour	1.95	.063	.680	.463	1.017	.226	1.586	.449
Education for personal and social development	3.46	.071	.750	.564	-.398	.229	.267	.455
Teacher and learner mutual support	3.14	.081	.831	.692	-.280	.236	-.165	.467
Family environment and effective parenting	3.35	.057	.587	.345	-1.253	.237	2.681	.469

The variables from the Questionnaire were formed according to *National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education, General Compulsory and Secondary Education* (2011), which is based on providing equal educational opportunities for all learners and emphasizes the promotion of basic values through education, such as human dignity, justice and solidarity, dialogue and tolerance, work, honesty, etc. Consequently, **the first composite variable *Organizing free time*** consists of the following items: I think that I care about the quality of my life (enough sleep, diet, physical activity, risk-free behaviour, etc.); In my free time, I exercise regularly, i.e. I do some sports activities recreationally; I am actively involved in sports, i.e. I play for a sports club; In my free time, I do a creative activity (playing, singing, painting, dancing, etc.). **Second composite variable *Occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour*** consists of the following items: I have experienced other learners at school insulting me, saying I am stupid, etc.; I have experienced that some learners persuaded others not to hang out with me; I have experienced that some learners deliberately destroyed things at school (mine, other people's, school property); I have experienced other learners deliberately physically assaulting me at school; I have experienced other learners insulting, ridiculing, threatening me,... via cell phone or the Internet; It

occurred that I solve problems at school using harsh words, insults, swear words, etc.; It occurred that I solve problems at school by slapping/hitting/pushing etc.; I skipped classes when I didn't feel like going to school and/or I wanted to avoid school duties. **The third composite variable *Education for personal and social development*** consists of the following items: In school, we learned about violence, how to recognize it and resist it; I feel safe at school; I study and write homework regularly; I am motivated to achieve the best possible school results; I plan my duties and activities well; I fulfil my school duties immediately, without delay; In school, I learned how to study well; I successfully use acquired learning techniques. **The fourth composite variable *Teacher and learner mutual support*** consists of the following items: Teachers respect me and are attentive to me; Teachers teach in an interesting, clear, and understandable way; Teachers give me regular and understandable feedback on my learning and achievement; Teachers adapt the ways of working to the learners who need it; Learners offer help in learning to their peers who need it; Teachers emphasize what we have done successfully; Teachers approach learners during classes and help them with assignments when they need help; Teachers make arrangements with learners who need to be examined; I feel afraid of oral or written tests; I am satisfied with my teachers and school. **The fifth composite variable *Family environment and effective parenting*** consists of the following items: My parents smoke; My parents drink alcohol; My parents play games of chance; My parents notice when I'm upset about something; I discuss different topics with my parents; My parents support me in making my own decisions; My parents help me learn, write homework, and fulfil my school duties; I talk to my parents about school and class problems; I find that my parents work well with teachers and the school; I spend a lot of time with my parents; I am happy with the relationship with my parents.

The results shown in Table 2 show that $p < 0.05$, which means that the grade-related difference, i.e. difference between seventh- and eighth-graders, is statistically significant at the level of 0.05.

Table 2: Age-related differences in composite variables between seventh- and eighth-graders (N=114)

	Organizing free time	Occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour	Education for personal and social development	Teacher and learner mutual support	Family environment and effective parenting
Mann-Whitney U	1465.500	1181.000	1389.000	1161.500	950.500
Wilcoxon W	2843.500	3072.000	3159.000	2436.500	2661.500
Z	-.553	-2.479	-.858	-1.371	-2.515
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.580	.013	.391	.170	.012

$p < 0.05$

The results in Table 2 show the difference in learners' assessments of the occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour, and differences in their opinions on the family environment

and effective parenting. The direction of these grade-related differences, i.e. differences between seventh- and eighth-graders, is shown in Table 3. With regard to composite variables, these differences show that eighth-graders' self-assessments are higher when assessing whether they have experienced inappropriate attitudes and behaviours such as insults in school as well as via the Internet and mobile phones; they experienced more social exclusion, destruction of personal and school belongings, physical attacks, solved more problems at school with harsh verbal messages and physical assaults, and avoided school obligations more. The results indicate that despite the fact that eighth-graders were more educated through prevention programs in terms of developing social skills and habits, they had "worse" results. In fact, it is possible to conclude that eighth-graders are more sensitized precisely because of their participation in many educational programs in which they were involved during the implementation of the prevention programs. These results suggest that eighth-graders were able to recognize more forms and elements of various unacceptable behaviours, both in peer relationships and personally, especially when it comes to non-physical forms of violence, lying and gossiping in particular. Similar results are indicated in the research by Livazović and Vranješ (2012), who state that older learners are more often victims of spreading lies and gossip compared to their younger peers and explain that non-physical forms of violence are more present in older learners and that the tendency to quarrel increases with learners' age.

Table 3: Grade-related direction of differences, i.e. differences between seventh- and eighth-graders

Composites	Grade	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Organizing free time	seven	58.08	3484.50
	eight	54.68	2843.50
Occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour	seven	50.36	3072.00
	eight	65.72	3483.00
Education for personal and social development	seven	53.54	3159.00
	eight	58.79	3057.00
Teacher and learner mutual support	seven	56.88	3128.50
	eight	48.73	2436.50
Family environment and effective parenting	seven	45.89	2661.50
	eight	60.84	2798.50

Table 3 also shows that eighth-graders' assessments are higher than seventh-graders' in composite variables related to assessments of parental behaviours with regard to consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, and playing games of chance. Furthermore, eighth-graders' assessments are higher when assessing whether their parents notice when they are upset about something, eighth-graders perceive the quality of mutual conversations more, their self-assessments are higher also when assessing the quality of parental support they received when making their own decisions, learning, and fulfilling school duties, and when assessing the amount of quality free time spent with their parents. Furthermore, eighth-graders' self-assessments are higher when assessing how much they talk to their parents about school and

classroom problems, as well as the extent to which their parents successfully collaborate with teachers and the school. The results show that eighth-graders are more satisfied with the relationships with their parents. According to the results, additional work on the development of social skills and habits in the previous year (grade 7) and in this school year, i.e. in grade 8, yielded greater awareness of analysing the occurrence of inappropriate behaviours, directions, and goals of education for personal and social development, and better recognition of a quality family environment and effective parenting, i.e. awareness of parental behaviour and the quality and frequency of parental support and time spent together in joint activities. The obtained results are in accordance with Croatian and world research (for example Durlak et al., 2011; Livazović & Vranješ, 2012; Weissberg, 2019) according to which young people need adequate and timely prevention and support for spending quality free time because creatively designed free time provides many opportunities to develop their potential, strengthens self-confidence, and creates a positive self-image. Furthermore, these results indicate that parents and teachers are those who, through cooperation and partnership, should guide the prevention efforts of the school community and encourage learners to permanently adopt healthy lifestyles, engage in appropriate activities, and organize their free time properly through quality cooperation and equal models. Thus, the school enriches family education, and the family, along with teachers, above all represents a strong social role model for children. By setting good examples, parents can encourage models of behaviour that will develop their children's awareness of avoiding violent and unacceptable forms of behaviour and create a positive and responsible attitude towards their health, safety, and the safety of others (Kudek Mirošević et al., 2020). Therefore, these results point to the need to strengthen and continuously improve school prevention programs aimed to create partnerships and a positive school and family atmosphere encouraging learners' progress and desire to learn and improve.

To analyse the results related to the second research question, i.e. learners' self-assessments of developing a positive and responsible attitude towards their health and safety, the ability to recognize the consequences of their own and others' actions, accepting the rules of cooperation and attitudes about the quality of family environment, and to examine the needs for creating and improving future education, it was important to find out whether there are gender-related differences in the opinions of seventh- and eighth-graders. The results obtained by the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test, presented in Table 4, show that the significance level is $p < 0.05$. The results thus show that there are gender-related differences in learners' opinions.

Table 4: Gender-related differences in composite variables

	Organizing free time	Occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour	Education for personal and social development	Teacher and learner mutual support	Family environment and effective parenting
Mann-Whitney U	1436.500	1552.000	1428.500	1354.000	1035.500
Wilcoxon W	2867.500	3037.000	2754.500	2950.000	2361.500

Z	-.743	-.387	-.602	-.116	-2.059
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.458	.699	.547	.908	.039

$p < 0.05$

The results in Table 4 show that girls and boys in grade 7 and grade 8 have different perceptions of the family environment and effective parenting, i.e. they have different opinions about the quality of life of their parents, parental support, parents' involvement in their children's lives, and education and cooperation with the school. Table 5 shows the direction of gender-related differences. The differences were identified on the composite variable *Family environment and effective parenting*.

Table 5: Direction of gender-related differences

Composites	Gender	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Organizing free time	m	54.10	2867.50
	f	58.65	3460.50
Occurrence of unacceptable forms of behaviour	m	56.24	3037.00
	f	58.63	3518.00
Education for personal and social development	m	54.01	2754.50
	f	57.69	3461.50
Teacher and learner mutual support	m	53.37	2615.00
	f	52.68	2950.00
Family environment and effective parenting	m	46.30	2361.50
	f	58.46	3098.50

According to the results from Table 5, girls' assessments are higher when assessing the opinions about their parents' behaviour (alcohol and cigarettes consumption, games of chance), family relationships and mutual communication, spending free time with parents, parental support in making their own decisions, as well as the extent to which parents cooperate with the school. Maleš (1988) states that social context has a key role in considering gender-typical behaviour, i.e. behaviour is under the influence of direct messages from the environment. Namely, the behaviour and opinions that are formed in early childhood are manifested in the observation of the parent model, in the identification with the parent of the same gender, while the influence of peers and other adults prevails later. Vulić-Prtorić and Macuka (2003) state that some studies emphasize the influence of cultural factors and education on building different attitudes of boys and girls. However, research has also shown that age, with respect to gender differences in diagnostic classifications, is taken as an extremely broad category and that it is an indicator of multiple meanings. Namely, processes that affect biological, hormonal, and cognitive maturity do not develop at the same time (Vulić-Prtorić & Sorić, 2001). Accordingly, the results obtained support the results of some studies according to which differences in opinions between girls and boys are most likely the

result of parenting style and the culture in which they grow up, or the result of different expectations parents and families have from girls and boys (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999; Lauri Korajlija, 2010). This is supported by the opinions of theorists and researchers that family economic problems affect various parental behaviours, such as discipline, consistency, punishment, and expression of parental warmth (Dearing, 2008). Therefore, the results indicate a constant need to improve the cooperation between school and parents, to raise awareness of how important it is to spend quality time with children because of their psychophysical development, and awareness of the model of behaviour in relation to addiction. It is necessary to educate parents more about spending quality free time, communication, parenting styles, socializing, the quality of family life, and effective parenting, and to stress the need for parental support in learning and quality cooperation with the school.

4. Conclusion

With the purpose of creating a positive school atmosphere, mutual relations among learners' personal and social, and the schools' organizational factors have been analysed, and the results show a statistically significant difference in learners' opinions on unacceptable behaviours, quality of family environment, effective parenting, and perception of personal and social development. There is a statistically significant difference between seventh- and eighth-graders in their self-assessments of the development of a positive responsible attitude towards their health and safety, ability to recognize the consequences of their own and others' actions, acceptance of rules of cooperation, and attitudes about family environment. Therefore, these experiences through school self-evaluation in the process of education raise additional questions that can serve to further develop the methodology and search for ways to develop self-evaluation and prevention programs in the future making them a more efficient and effective approach to improving the overall school work. Furthermore, the results of this research could also help to focus on some priorities in educational and wider social support for the primary prevention of risky behaviours. Here, teacher competencies in classroom management should be considered (Lewis, 2006). Namely, effective classroom management increases learners' engagement and reduces unacceptable behaviours, while increasing teaching time. The results may indicate the need for prevention and educational-formative (corrective) actions in terms of preventing unacceptable forms of behaviour and developing communication in older primary school learners. These include the ability to apply social skills and attitudes in different situations, training to take responsibility for one's own learning, and making decisions about one's own educational path (National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education, General Compulsory and Secondary Education, 2011). Moreover, further development of professional teacher competencies is required to understand the different individual needs of learners' and their families. In the analysis of and reflection on the process of school self-evaluation, the aim of this research is not causal inference and generalization. In that sense, these results can be used as one of the many

starting points for improving the quality of schools and developing school curricula and educational standards. Therefore, this research can help in further reflection on the self-evaluation of each school, learning and teaching, the roles of learners and teachers in these processes, and exploring in-depth and key issues that have a great impact on the quality of performance and teaching/learning success of learners' and teachers. However, neither the determination of quality nor its measurement necessarily leads to improving the quality of schools and the quality of creating a school atmosphere. Therefore, initiatives for their systematic monitoring and improvement are still necessary, which is the intention of this paper. The paper can thus serve as an orientation for generating future research questions aimed at developing the competencies of learners, teachers, and the school as a whole.

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