

## TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CHANGES AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The rapid social changes of the last decades, generated by digitalization, globalization and changes in family values, have profoundly transformed the behaviors and interpersonal relationships of secondary school students. This study explores teachers' perceptions of these transformations and how they influence school dynamics, motivation and socio-emotional development of students. The research, of mixed type, was carried out on a sample of 85 secondary school teachers, from three counties in Romania. The tools used were a semi-structured questionnaire and a focus-group interview, designed to capture perceptions of students' behaviors, the relationship with the family, the influence of the online environment and changes in the classroom climate. The results highlight an increase in individualism, a decrease in emotional resilience and a growing difficulty in managing collegial relationships. Teachers emphasize the need for educational interventions focused on emotional intelligence, empathy, and cooperation. The study contributes to understanding how social transformations affect the school environment and provides recommendations for strengthening an education centered on positive social values.*

**Keywords:** *social change; secondary education; teachers' perspectives; socio-emotional development; school relations.*

### Theoretical foundation

Today's society is marked by an unprecedented acceleration of social, cultural and technological changes, which profoundly influence the way in which individuals, and especially young people, relate to the world, knowledge and interpersonal relationships. The process of

globalization, massive digitization and transformations of family values have redefined the benchmarks of education and socialization (Castells, 2021). In particular, generations in secondary school experience a double belonging: to the concrete reality of the community and to virtual reality, which offers alternative models, languages and behavioral norms (Livingstone & Helsper, 2020).

This dual belonging causes a tension between the traditional values promoted by the school – cooperation, respect, effort – and the emerging values in the online environment, such as autonomy, instant social validation and perceived performance (Turkle, 2017). UNESCO (2023) underlines that schools are today "in a process of social reconstruction", being called upon to respond to constantly changing educational needs. Teachers thus become agents of change, faced with the challenge of understanding how students' behaviors, motivations, and relationships evolve in this fluid context (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2020).

Recent research shows that contemporary social changes influence not only the school climate, but also the psychological structure of younger generations. The OECD study (2022) on student well-being shows a significant decrease in life satisfaction and an increase in the level of social anxiety among 12–15-year-olds, especially in highly digitized educational environments. These trends confirm the need for a reconceptualization of education, through a more empathetic, participatory and socio-emotional approach.

Preadolescence and early adolescence are essential stages in the formation of identity, social relationships and emotional skills. According to Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model, child development is the result of the dynamic interaction between the microsystem (family, school, group of friends), mesosystem (the relationships between these environments) and the macrosystem (the values and norms of society). When one of these levels undergoes profound changes, the effects are felt on the entire development process.

In recent years, there has been a change in the way students interact with each other and with adults. Twenge's (2023) studies on Generation Z indicate an increase in feelings of isolation and a decrease in empathy, associated with the intensive use of the digital environment. This reality is also supported by the research of Valkenburg and Piotrowski (2022), which shows that online socialization, while expanding communication opportunities, tends to replace authentic interactions, affecting emotional skills and social resilience.

In secondary school, these changes translate into an increase in interpersonal conflicts, difficulties in cooperation and the need for constant validation from the peer group (Roser et al., 2022). Students show an increased sensitivity to social status and an intense concern for personal image, elements that influence both academic performance and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated educational digitization processes and reduced direct social contact, amplifying emotional isolation and diminishing the sense of belonging to school (UNICEF, 2022).

Teachers become privileged observers of these changes. Many of them notice an increase in stress levels and a decrease in students' ability to manage negative emotions. Goleman (2020) emphasizes that the development of emotional intelligence is an essential condition for social adaptation and school success. In this sense, educational approaches centered on socio-emotional competences can represent an effective response to the challenges of social change, by cultivating empathy, self-regulation and cooperation.

In the current context, the role of the teacher can no longer be reduced to the transmission of information. He becomes a mediator of social experience, a facilitator of meaningful learning processes and a support in the socio-emotional development of students. Hargreaves (2021) states that teachers are the "guardians of the school's social capital", helping to reconnect students with the values of solidarity and mutual respect.

According to Bandura's (2018) theory of social learning, students' behaviors and attitudes are shaped by observation and imitation. Thus, teachers influence not only academic knowledge, but also moral and social norms. The research of Day and Gu (2019) has shown that reflective teachers, able to adapt their strategies to the diversity of students, contribute significantly to the development of resilience and a sense of personal competence among them.

Also, contemporary pedagogies, such as transformational pedagogy (Mezirow, 2018) and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020), support the idea that education must stimulate critical thinking, moral autonomy and social awareness of students. In the same vein, the European Commission's report (2022) on key competences for lifelong learning underlines the importance of the social and civic dimensions of education, considering them indispensable for the formation of active citizens in a democratic society.

Thus, teachers are called to combine pedagogical skills with social sensitivity, to become leaders of change in the school community and to provide students with stable benchmarks in a context of uncertainty. In many cases, however, the lack of continuous training in socio-

emotional competences and the absence of adequate institutional support limit teachers' ability to respond effectively to these challenges (OECD, 2023). Therefore, exploring teachers' perspectives on social change becomes an essential condition for building educational policies adapted to current realities.

### **Research methodology**

The present study was conceived based on a mixed design, which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, in order to obtain a complex perspective on how secondary school teachers perceive the social changes manifested in students' behaviors, values and relationships.

The objectives of the research are:

O1: Identify the main social changes observed by teachers in the behaviors of secondary school students;

O2: Analysis of teachers' perceptions regarding the influence of the digital environment and the family context on the socio-emotional development of students;

O3: Highlighting the educational strategies that teachers consider effective to support students' adaptation to new social realities.

The general hypothesis of the research was that teachers perceive an intensification of the effects of social changes on students' relationships, school climate and learning motivation, while being aware of the need to adapt pedagogical practices to these transformations.

The research sample consisted of 85 secondary school teachers from three counties in Romania: Arad, Cluj and Braşov. Participants were selected through a stratified sampling method, to ensure the representativeness of the diversity of educational contexts (urban and rural, large and small schools, different levels of experience).

Of the respondents, 78% were women and 22% men, the average age being 41.6 years. The teaching experience varied between 2 and 34 years, which allowed the perspectives of different generations of teachers to be captured. All participants completed the questionnaires voluntarily, being informed about the purpose of the research, the anonymity of the answers and the observance of ethical principles in educational research.

For the quantitative component, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed, built on the basis of the specialized literature on social changes and socio-emotional development of students (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Goleman, 2020). The questionnaire contained 24 items grouped into three dimensions:

1. Perception of social changes observed in students (e.g.: increased individualism, dependence on technology, decreased empathy);
2. Assessing the impact of these changes on school climate and interpersonal relationships;
3. Educational adaptation strategies adopted by teachers.

The items were formulated on a 5-step Likert scale, from 1 ("very small") to 5 ("very large"). The reliability of the questionnaire was verified by the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient, which recorded a value of 0.88, indicating a very good internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2020).

For the qualitative component, three focus groups were organized, each with 8–10 teachers, in which the direct experiences regarding the social transformations observed among the students were explored. The discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol, with questions on:

1. relationships between students in the school environment and online;
2. attitudes towards authority, colleagues and family;
3. adaptation of teachers to new forms of social behavior.

The transcripts were analyzed using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2021), aiming to identify recurring themes related to teachers' perceptions and experiences.

The analysis of the quantitative data was performed using the SPSS software, through descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, distribution of responses) and inferential statistics. To examine the relationships between the perception of social change and teaching experience, Pearson correlation tests and the t-test for independent samples were applied.

The qualitative results were coded thematically, according to the methodology of Braun and Clarke (2021), and then integrated with the quantitative data through methodological triangulation. This approach made it possible to identify convergences between teachers' general perceptions and their concrete experiences in the classroom.

## Results

### Descriptive analysis of quantitative data

The analysis of the questionnaires completed by the 85 teachers highlighted clear trends regarding the perception of the social changes observed in secondary school students. The overall mean score for the size of the perception of social changes was 4.21 (SD = 0.54) on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, indicating that most teachers consider these transformations significant and visible in their daily work.

- The highest average values were recorded for items related to:
1. dependence on technology and social networks ( $M = 4.68$ ;  $SD = 0.47$ ),
  2. decreased emotional resilience and frustration tolerance ( $M = 4.45$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ),
  3. increased individualism and decreased cooperation between peers ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 0.60$ ).

On the other hand, the items associated with the diversity and inclusion adaptation dimension recorded slightly lower values ( $M = 3.78$ ;  $SD = 0.62$ ), signaling an inhomogeneous perception of students' ability to integrate the values of tolerance and mutual respect.

Regarding the impact of these changes on the school climate, 72% of respondents considered that relationships between students are more volatile and conflictive than five years ago, and 68% indicated an increase in the need for educational interventions aimed at emotional regulation and social cooperation.

The t-test applied to compare the perceptions of teachers with less than 10 years of experience and those with more than 20 years of seniority indicated statistically significant differences in the perception of excessive use of technology,  $t(83) = 2.74$ ,  $p < .01$ , younger teachers being more tolerant and less critical of the influence of the digital environment.

Also, the Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant association between the level of teaching experience and the perception of decreased student empathy ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that teachers with longer experience observe more pronounced the negative effects of social changes on students' interpersonal relationships.

### **Qualitative results – thematic analysis**

The analysis of the focus groups led to the identification of four main themes, which reflect teachers' perceptions and experiences in relation to students' social transformations:

#### ***Theme 1: "The digital learner" – between connection and isolation***

Most teachers described current students as "permanently connected, but increasingly lonely." The intense use of social networks has been perceived both as a source of information and self-expression, and as a factor of isolation and social comparison. One participant summarized: "Students communicate a lot, but they don't listen to each other. Everything is instantaneous and superficial."

#### ***Theme 2: Restructuring social and moral values***

Teachers noticed a visible change in the hierarchy of values promoted by students, the emphasis shifting from effort, discipline and solidarity to social validation and personal success. This transformation is

correlated with media influence and the diminishing role of the family as the main agent of socialization. According to a teacher: "Children want to be appreciated, not necessarily good. Everything is measured in likes."

***Theme 3: Weakening interpersonal relationships and the classroom climate***

Participants reported an increase in tensions between students, a decrease in cooperation and a general difficulty in managing conflicts. Many teachers have described an "amplified emotionality," in which students react impulsively and quickly withdraw from difficult interactions. A teacher with 25 years of experience mentioned: "They are very sensitive. A minor observation can trigger a strong reaction. Everything is personal."

***Theme 4: The need for a socio-emotional pedagogy***

A recurring theme in all focus groups was the need to train teachers in the field of socio-emotional competences and group relationship management. The participants stressed that traditional discipline strategies are becoming less and less effective, and the school must become a space of understanding and cooperation. One teacher said: "Students no longer respond to authority, but to empathy. We also have to learn to communicate differently."

**Integration of quantitative and qualitative results**

The triangulation of the data revealed a significant convergence between statistical results and qualitative themes. Teachers consistently perceive social changes as determinants of changing students' behaviors, noting in particular the impact of the digital environment, value changes and social pressure for validation.

A trend of professional self-reflexivity has also been observed: teachers recognize the need to adapt their pedagogical practices to current socio-cultural realities, showing interest in training focused on empathy, communication and emotion management.

The results confirm the general hypothesis of the research and outline the image of a generation of students at the intersection between connectivity and emotional fragility, which calls for a new type of educational leadership and approach to learning.

**Discussions**

The results of the study offer a nuanced perspective on how teachers perceive and interpret the social transformations that mark current generations of secondary school students. These perceptions confirm the trends identified in the literature and reflect a complex educational

reality, in which digitization, changes in values and the weakening of interpersonal relationships are redefining the way the school operates.

First, the high level of scores obtained for the items on technology addiction and diminishing empathy supports the claims of Turkle (2017) and Livingstone & Helsper (2020), according to which excessive digital connectivity led to a paradoxical form of emotional isolation. Students are more informationally exposed but less available for authentic interactions. From the teachers' perspective, this "hyperconnectivity" transforms the social dynamics of the classroom, weakening cohesion and the sense of belonging. Similarly, Twenge's (2023) recent studies on Gen Z show an increase in emotional distance and a decrease in engagement in collective activities, which is perfectly consistent with the observations of the participants in the present research.

On the other hand, the theme of restructuring social and moral values highlighted in the focus groups reflects a profound mutation in the students' reference system. Teachers perceive a shift from collectivist to individualistic values, which confirms the theories of Castells (2021) on networked identity formation and Bauman (2017) on "liquid modernity", in which norms become flexible and moral landmarks more unstable. In this context, the role of the teacher extends beyond that of facilitator of knowledge, becoming a social model and a benchmark of stability in a constantly changing world.

A significant result is the generalized perception of the fragility of interpersonal relationships and the increase of conflicts between students. This tendency can be interpreted through the prism of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory of bioecological development, which shows that imbalances at the level of the microsystem (family, school) can generate behavioral and emotional tensions. In a society characterized by increased social mobility, the restructuring of family relationships and constant exposure to virtual social models alters the way students build their attachments and interpersonal trust (OECD, 2022). Teachers, who are at the center of these processes, become direct witnesses of how macro-social changes influence the micro-field of education.

At the same time, the results indicate a growing awareness of the role of socio-emotional pedagogy in response to these challenges. The participants in the study emphasized the importance of empathy, communication and emotional understanding, which corresponds to the direction promoted by Goleman (2020) and Ryan & Deci (2020), who argue that the development of socio-emotional skills is a key element of educational success. In particular, teachers with long experience reported greater difficulties in managing unstable emotional behaviors,



suggesting a need for continuous professional training to adapt teaching strategies to the profile of the contemporary student.

At the same time, the differences in perception between younger and more experienced teachers highlight a generational divergence in the interpretation of the phenomenon of digitalization. While young teachers seem more tolerant of the use of technology, experienced teachers find that it negatively affects concentration and social cohesion. This intergenerational tension can be analyzed through the prism of the theory of professional capital proposed by Fullan & Hargreaves (2020), according to which schools must capitalize on the complementarity between experience and innovation, creating contexts of reflective collaboration between generations of teachers.

Also, the emerging theme of the need to rebuild the school climate aligns with international research on the role of emotions and relationships in the educational process (Jennings et al., 2021; Day & Gu, 2019). A positive climate, based on trust and mutual respect, is a predictor of academic performance and student well-being. In this regard, the study confirms the conclusions of the UNESCO report (2023), which advocates for a "new ethics of education" centered on solidarity, compassion and cooperation.

From a broader perspective, the results of the research have significant implications for educational policies. In a context marked by accelerated changes, teachers are a strategic resource for maintaining social balance in school. Understanding their perceptions of social transformations provides a valuable framework for designing continuing education focused on socio-emotional skills, empathetic leadership and diversity management. These directions are in line with the vision of the OECD (2023) and the European Commission (2022), which propose a reorientation of the teaching profession towards the humanistic dimension of education.

Finally, integrated data analysis supports the idea that the contemporary school cannot be separated from the social context in which it operates. Students bring into the educational space the values, tensions and uncertainties of today's society, and teachers, as cultural mediators, have the responsibility to transform these realities into learning and development opportunities. As Giroux (2020) states, education must be "a space of hope and critical resistance", capable of rebuilding the link between knowledge, ethics and community.

Thus, the results of this research confirm that social changes cannot be approached only as phenomena external to the school, but as an integral part of the educational ecosystem. Teachers become the mirror of society, but also agents of its transformation, which requires an

educational vision based on empathy, reflexivity and authentic partnership between school, family and community.

## Conclusions

Contemporary social changes, driven by digitalization, globalization and the transformation of cultural values, have significantly reconfigured the universe of secondary school students and, implicitly, the role of the teacher. The present research highlighted the fact that teachers perceive these transformations as profound and with a direct impact on students' behaviors, motivation and interpersonal relationships.

The quantitative results showed a widespread awareness of the problems associated with excessive use of technology, decreased empathy, and increased individualism. The qualitative analysis completed this picture by highlighting the more subtle dimensions of the phenomenon: the weakening of interpersonal relationships, the decrease in the capacity for cooperation and the growing need for emotional support in the school environment. Teachers described students as increasingly connected to the virtual world, but increasingly disconnected from the human dimension of interactions.

Theoretically, the study confirms the relevance of ecological and socio-emotional models of human development, demonstrating that learning and socialization processes cannot be separated from the social context in which they take place. The school becomes a space of intersection between different worlds — the real and the digital one — and the teacher is called upon to ensure the balance between them, through a reflective and empathetic pedagogy.

On a practical level, the results support the need for continuous training focused on teachers' socio-emotional skills, on managing group relationships and on building a classroom climate based on respect and trust. Adapting education to current social realities involves the development of a flexible school culture, capable of capitalizing on technological potential without sacrificing the human dimension of learning.

As for future research directions, it is necessary to comparatively explore the perceptions of teachers from different educational levels, as well as to analyze the impact of emotional training programs on the teacher-student relationship. At the same time, it would be useful to expand the sample at national level and include a longitudinal perspective, in order to follow the evolution of these perceptions over time.

In conclusion, the voice of teachers provides a faithful mirror of contemporary social changes. They not only observe the

transformations of society, but live them daily in the classroom, being called to shape generations capable of living in a balanced way between technology and humanity. In this sense, education becomes not only a training process, but a profoundly social act, meant to rebuild the link between knowledge, emotion and responsibility.

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