

THEORETICAL POSITIONS ON AUTONOMY IN PRE-SCHOOL AGE

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Abstract:

The subject of the article has as its center of gravity the phenomenon of *autonomy*, it is not an exhaustive presentation, but those aspects of major interest are analyzed, which obviously refer to the specifics of the process of autonomy formation in preschool children. The essence of the content is given by the notion of *autonomy* (from a philosophical, psychological perspective) as an updated approach, in the context of the changes taking place in society today and the demands that are made on the preparation of the growing generation. Thus, the scientific crossing of the concept of autonomy generates approaches that encompass as many characteristics as possible for the pre-school period. Based on the synthesis of research undertaken, several dimensions of autonomy are examined; some of the stages through which a person passes in order to reach a level of *autonomy*. At the same time, an attempt has been made to combine the critical approach of conceptual clarification specific to the phenomenon of *autonomy* with the postmodernist technique of juxtaposing ideas through a collage of quotations or paraphrases. It emphasizes the idea that the theoretical approach to the concept of autonomy can provide benchmarks for the development and use of an effective intervention approach at pre-school age. Therefore, a major issue is raised in front of the preschool institution, which should not remain only at the level of polemic, but, theoretically and methodologically nourished, should constitute the touchstone in the process of autonomy formation at preschool age.

Key words: autonomy, independence, personal autonomy, self-determination, freedom.

Rezumat: Subiectul articolului are ca centru de greutate fenomenul *autonomiei*, nu este o prezentare exhaustivă, ci sunt analizate acele aspecte de interes major, care trimit în mod evident către specificul procesului de formare a autonomiei la copiii de vârstă preșcolară. Esența

conținutului este dată de noțiunea *autonomie* (din perspectivă filosofică, psihologică) ca o abordare actualizată, în contextul schimbărilor ce se produc în societate la ora actuală, respectiv, și a cerințelor ce se impun față pregătirea generației în creștere. Astfel, traversarea științifică a conceptului de autonomie, generează abordări care să cuprindă cât mai multe caracteristici pentru perioada preșcolară. În baza sintezei cercetărilor întreprinse sunt examinate mai multe dimensiuni ale autonomiei; unele etapele prin care trece o persoană pentru a ajunge la un nivel de *autonomie*. Totodată, s-a încercat îmbinarea demersului critic de clarificare conceptuală specifică fenomenului *autonomie* cu tehnica postmodernistă a juxtapunerii ideilor prin colaj de citări sau parafraze. Se evidențiază ideea că abordarea teoretică a conceptului de autonomie poate oferi repere pentru elaborarea și valorificarea unui demers de intervenție eficientă la vârsta preșcolară.

Prin urmare, în fața instituției preșcolare se ridică o problemă majoră, care nu trebuie să rămână doar la nivel de polemică, ci și, alimentată teoretic și metodologic, să constituie piatra de încercare în procesul de formare a autonomiei la vârsta preșcolară.

Cuvinte-cheie: autonomie, independență, autonomie personală, autodeterminare, libertate.

Introduction

We live in an age of rapid change in all areas. In this sense, one of the main indicators of an individual's well-being in today's society is not only the individual's adaptability and ability to cope with the difficulties of the world around him, but also his capacity to transform it. As a result, modern society needs personalities of integrity and autonomy, capable of coping with a constantly changing environment. In accordance with the educational ideal, the *Education Code of the Republic of Moldova* points to the formation of a personality with a spirit of initiative, capable of self-development, possessing not only a system of competences, but also *independence of opinion and action* [4]. Thus, the issue in question responds to policy *requirements* in early childhood education, all the more so given that the approach to developing autonomy in pre-school children is a forward-looking one, creating a favorable development for them, both immediate and long-term.

In the context of the new guidelines in pre-school education, the formation of autonomy in children complements the dimensions of pre-school education, from the perspective of the requirements of policy documents in early childhood education, where

the role of *autonomy* in activities is particularly emphasized, conceived as a necessity in the process of children's formation of the ability to "know", "know how to say", "know how to do" and "know how to be". The relevance of the problem is also centered on the formation in children of *curiosity* and *interest, persistence, creativity* and *independence* [5].

On this basis, we can conclude that the theoretical and applied approach to the formation of autonomy in preschool children can provide benchmarks for the development and capitalization of an effective intervention approach. Therefore, the complexity of this challenge requires a valuable and timely response. In this context, where children's personality development is the exclusive priority of the pre-school institution, the 'discovery' of new ways of 'finding' new ways of working is obviously a topical investigative issue. Thus, the *aim of this investigative approach* is to analyze and open new opportunities to important points of support for the educational system from the perspective of the formation of an *autonomous, free* and *creative* personality.

Concept and methodology

Generalizing researches in philosophy and psychology with reference to the concept of *autonomy* we observe that this phenomenon has a wide semantic expression. On this basis, we consider it indispensable to examine some theoretical landmarks that underlie our approach in the present investigative endeavor, which refers to personal autonomy. Thus, in the researchers' view, *personal autonomy* implies the individual's capacity to choose different actions and lifestyles, without being subject to social-political interference. The concept of *personal autonomy* refers to several aspects of life in which individual freedom is manifested, and is not limited only to the issue of moral obligation [8, pp. 34-47]. At the same time, *personal autonomy* does not always lead to autonomous behavior. Such a person is not only guided by his or her life values, but can also act as an active-creative component, is able to create and transform his or her world and bring new meanings into it. On the other hand, the person also faces some situations of choice. For example: to go with the "flow", without wondering about changes, or to move along the path of self-regulation" [22, p. 98].

We point out that in the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language,

autonomy is interpreted, as "the situation of one who does not depend on anyone, who has complete freedom in his actions; the fact of submitting to laws, one's own rules, of freely disposing one's own will (philosophy) [www.dexonline.ro].

P. Popescu- Neveanu argues that *autonomy* is "the way of being of an organism, person, group (systems in general), which functions *independently*, is determined on the basis of its own structure, its internal laws". *Independence*, however, is "a characteristic of someone who refuses or minimizes dependence on others, preferring *autonomy* on the basis of a system of well-defined and self-accepted personal attitudes" [13].

An etymological and conceptual incursion of the term *autonomy*, which comes from the Greek language; the element "autos" means "oneself" and "nomos" - law, meaning "to give one's own regulations". Thus, *autonomy* is defined as the ability of the individual to "exercise self-control over his own activity".

The philosophical basis of autonomy is mainly constituted by the scientific contributions of scholars who have engaged in the research and identification of some of the defining characteristics of this *autonomy* phenomenon.

The first attempts to tackle the issue of personal autonomy can be traced back to antiquity, in the works of Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, etc. In this regard, Socrates emphasized the need to be guided by the inner voice of conscience, which suggests certain *internal rules of behaviour*, rather than blindly following social requirements. Examining the issue of human virtues, Aristotle actively explored voluntary actions for which a person is responsible. Such actions, the author argues, include actions of conscious choice (a person's ability to make a decision and to accomplish what depends on him), regulation of voluntary actions, the ability to initiate one's own activity [11].

The philosophical traditions of Ancient China bring to the foreground issues of self-regulation and personal development in the context of the culture of society. Thus, the ethics of Confucius postulates the importance of such characteristics as *self-management* and *conscious* organization of all spheres of human life; Taoism values naturalness and harmony as significant for human integration into nature and society; in Buddhist philosophy, aspects of *human self-improvement* are emphasized, such as

spontaneity, openness and concentration on one's inner feelings [3].

The idea of distinguishing between freedom "*for*" and freedom "*from*" is supported by F. Nietzsche. The author also drew attention to *the connection* between *freedom* and *responsibility*. Freedom, in the author's opinion, means nothing other than the ability to follow the voice of *reason, health, well-being* and *conscience* against the voice of *irrational passions*" [12, p. 107]. Therefore, F. Nietzsche, associates *freedom* with *awareness* and *understanding of the situation*, with the possibility to choose and responsibility for the choice made. So, freedom is defined by the author not as "the action of awareness of necessity", but as an action based on "awareness of alternatives and their consequences". However, the decision remains with the individual; it depends on his ability to take his life seriously; it depends on his willingness to solve both his own moral problems and the moral problems of the whole of society; it depends ultimately on his courage to be himself and for himself [ibid].

Particular merit in formulating the problem of *autonomy* belongs to Im. Kant. In this context, Im. Kant for the first time attempts to "assemble" *autonomy* and *personhood* into a whole, consigning autonomy as a personal quality, which begins with the Age of Enlightenment (Aufklärung), and the most representative expression of this idea is provided by the author's *moral philosophy*. Within this idea, the author wanted to find a philosophical basis for *human autonomy*. Im. Kant treats *autonomy* as the foundation of *human freedom* and its morality, linking autonomy with spirituality as the highest quality of personality [2, p. 24].

Also in this vein, we note that for Im. Kant, the lesson of "Enlightenment" is, in essence, the lesson of autonomy, i.e., the emergence from the "state of *minority*". Minority implies the incapacity of which man himself is guilty. From this perspective, only *children* (found minors) need *assistance and guidance*. Therefore, the Kantian image of childhood represents the age of minority, "man's inability to use his own intellect without being guided by someone else" [ibid]. Thus, from the standpoint of *autonomy*, the child is symbolically defined by the inability to *think* on his own and to *control* his drives. In short, childhood means exemplary transparency, i.e. honesty towards the desires that lie deep inside, but also towards the people around him.

These analytical reflections show that children, unlike adults, need the help of adults because they are not yet able to use their own intellect. At the same time, the subject quality of autonomy is always present in the child, and its manifestation depends on both internal factors (motives, desires, needs) and external, environmental factors - in the diversity of their manifestation (from material objects to actions and emotional reactions of other people). Therefore, the child's autonomy is manifested in correlation with *interests, selectivity, orientation, ability, creativity*, and the dominance of certain qualities will determine the characteristics of each child's autonomy [20, pp. 43-44].

We also find Im. Kant, who argues that autonomy does not mean, "do whatever you wish", but rather, "be the authority of your own actions". Because of his idea that "our thinking influences the way we perceive the world", the author develops the method of "critical philosophy" to advocate *freedom*. In this sense, in order to be free, we need to understand both *our rationality* and *our thinking* so that we can *adapt* accordingly. Im. Kant approaches autonomy from the perspective of *the freedom of man*, who, through the effort of his own reflection, gives himself principles of action. At the same time, the author draws attention to the fact that 'to be free' does not mean to dispense oneself from rules, but, on the contrary, to give oneself one's own rules, i.e. one's own moral legislation. From this perspective, as we have seen, the positive meaning of freedom lies neither in defying the social order nor in asserting a rebellious individuality. On the contrary, it is about *aligning the self* with the indisputable canons of *reason*. This is because *autonomy* has its origin in *thought*, that is to say in the capacity to discover true principles for oneself [2].

In the same vein, Im. Kant argues that "a person in the choice of moral orientations should be *independent of* the external influences of society (religion, ideology, politics, etc.), because morality and virtue are valuable and self-sufficient. The author associates *the autonomy of* the individual not with his *freedom* from external influences, but with his voluntary stance towards universal principles, which are unconditional imperatives. Thus, *awareness of* one's own autonomy allows the individual to be free from arbitrary transitory social institutions, the dictates of power, and not to lose *self-control* in conditions of "social destabilization and totalitarian repression" [ibid]. Therefore, the

author attributes to *reason* the right to create its own laws, and the autonomy of the will of practical reason he considers as the only foundation of moral laws, is the pride of man. Moreover, we should note that *rational* beings have the capacity to voluntarily initiate *causal chains*, and this is one of the defining components of the idea of autonomy. Therefore, we see a double resistance that delimits the framework of autonomy: resistance to *the power of nature* and resistance to *human power*. So, we are dealing with two complementary theories: (1) the person is autonomous when he rises above *natural tendencies*, when the voice of reason drowns out the "hum" of *instinct*; (2) the person is autonomous when *the voice of reason* drowns out the *social* "murmur". At the same time, these theses do not assume that *impulses* and *prejudices* are bad in themselves, but only that they must be brought under the *control of reason*. [Apud 14, p. 157].

The representatives of *existentialist philosophy* (C. Wilson, I. Murdoch, W. Golding, E. Husserl, A. Andersch, S. Lenz, E. Nossack, F. Kafka, etc.) maintain that each person is condemned to be free. He himself chooses what he should become and be, relying only on his own strengths and capacities. Nothing and nobody (except himself) can limit the activity. At the same time, having such freedom, the individual bears full responsibility for his actions, thanks to which he becomes what he is (*responsible* and *active* life position, adaptation and commitment, evaluation of values and priorities for creating an *active life* position).

Therefore, according to the ideas of philosophers, the manifestation of the best qualities of a person is due to the presence of *autonomy* as an essential embodiment of the subjective *freedom of* the personality. Moreover, the concepts of "freedom", "autonomy", "responsibility", on the one hand, correlate with each other, manifesting independence from the outside world and its influence, on the other hand, the relationship of man with the surrounding world is not excluded. As a result, man is not subject to the conditions with which he relates, rather, these conditions are subject to the decision of the individual. In other words, the person chooses his or her own position in relation to what is happening around him or her, to the conditions in which he or she finds himself or herself. Therefore, the study of the phenomenon of personal autonomy has its origins in philosophical teachings, which, with the gradual development of both

society as a whole and of science itself, have created the premises for examining this phenomenon in other scientific fields, in particular, in the field of psychology.

The psychological approach. Reflecting on the specifics of the phenomenon of autonomy, from the point of view of the practical relevance of research in the field of personal autonomy, we can start from the following contradictions: on the one hand, the "old" that is found in the educational process of older generations, on the other hand, the new, largely unclear elements that have led to the emergence of premises for the formulation of value and motivational characteristics of modern man, as well as the education of an *autonomous personality*.

The interest of psychologists in *autonomy* in general, and in *personal autonomy* in particular, has existed at all times and in all countries, a fact recorded in numerous publications. Most authors recognize the relevance of this psychological phenomenon, its structural heterogeneity and the lack of generally accepted operational definitions. The problem of *personal autonomy* came into psychology from philosophy, where researchers examined it from the perspective of *free will*, but the concept of autonomy itself only began to acquire its status in the sphere of professional psychology.

R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci made the first attempts to formalize an approach based on the idea of *personal autonomy* in an evolutionary review of the main *psychological* paradigms that have entered the sphere of reference of personality psychology. In this respect, the authors put forward *the self-determination theory*, which makes important contributions to the understanding of the process of formation of personal autonomy. In the experiments carried out, the authors examine the conditions (biological, social, cultural) that enhance or, on the contrary, reduce (or even undermine) the individual's capacity for psychological growth and development, involvement and well-being, both in specific and general areas. Thus, the research carried out from the perspective of *the self-determination theory* refers to both *internal* (individual development) and *intrasocietal* hypotheses. The authors, try to understand what, in fact, a person needs (both from the psychological and from the social environment) in which he lives in order to develop himself fully [15, p. 34].

According to the theory of *self-determination* human nature itself is active and

social and, given a "good enough" environment, that is, one that supports the basic needs of the individual, will follow the path of his prosperity, well-being and integrity. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, social contexts can prevent basic needs from being met (this refers to both protective and compensatory strategies). Again, it should be noted that *self-determination* theory also assumes that active development processes require some support from the social environment. From this perspective, the connecting link is a set of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Therefore, the social environment that supports needs contributes to the development of self-regulation (in particular, "the ability to manage some intentions, impulses, emotions, motives that arise in each person"). Moreover, the social environment provides support for autonomy, competence and relatedness, which not only "theoretically contribute more to self-determination and qualitative functioning in a given situation, but also imply more effective promotion of self-development, development of resilience and sustainable psychological health" [ibid].

Along the same line of analysis, it should be noted that the main difference between *self-determination theory* and other theories is that R. M. Ryan and E. A. So approach personal autonomy in relation to the *motivational sphere* of the individual. The view offered by the authors refers to the way in which people claim and take responsibility for their behavior, and the degree of autonomy of individuals depends on their perception of contexts and events, their motives for action. Contexts support autonomy when they encourage the process of choice or control, when they push (or nudge, on a case-by-case basis) behavior toward specific outcomes [ibid].

At the same time, action motivation can be *externally* and *internally* driven. Thus, extrinsic motivation refers to goals that extend beyond the activity itself and are separable from it, such as the pursuit of rewards or the avoidance of punishment. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to performing an activity for its inherent value, because the individual feels that he or she can expand or exercise his or her capabilities, explore or learn. However, not all external actions are intrinsically controlled. People may internalize external motives for action, seeing their own behaviors as important and determined by them (e.g., the internal causality orientation in the manifestation of

autonomy). This internalization is fed by a process of social integration. However, "autonomy must emanate by itself and therefore can only be facilitated by contextual events" [16, pp.141-166].

In this area of concern we also note that the authors examine *self-determination* in the context of *the developmental process*. They believe that a person's level of self-determination depends on the variety of environment in which the child was raised. Thus, optimal development is only possible when the child is given maximum *freedom* to explore the world. The development of behavioral regulation moves in the direction from complete determination by certain external forces to internal autonomous self-regulation. The different stages of this process and the degree of autonomy can be represented as a continuum. According to the characteristics of motivational development, a person can develop *three different types of locus of causation* [ibid]:

- *Internal locus* - a person can rely on his or her own choice;
- *External locus* - based on external demands or expected reward;
- *Impersonal locus* - impossibility to achieve the desired outcome either way.

Depending on the predominant type of the locus of causality, the authors distinguish three types of *motivational subsystems* of the same name, which predominate in a person. In this sense, personality typology is structured on the basis of the criterion of a *motivational subsystem*. At the same time, the type of motivational subsystem in combination with cognitive, affective and other corresponding psychological characteristics is defined as a causal orientation, which can be internal (interval), external (external) or impersonal. Also, it should be noted that in practice these three types of motivational subsystems are present in a person, and individual differences are appreciated in the corresponding proportional orientation relations, which can be measured using the psycho-diagnostic tool developed by the authors [ibid].

Supporting the above ideas, we consider it important to specify, without absolutizing, that *self-determination* is not only a capacity, but also a necessity, it is a qualitative characteristic of a person and contributes to the formation of intrinsic motivation. In this sense, the person who manifests some autonomous actions perceives his own behavior as self-determination. In other words, the choice of behavioral

procedures is made independently by the individual on the basis of personal intrinsic decision and in accordance with personal values and interests. In this case, autonomy can be contrasted with experience, as a result of the control of external factors, perceived as foreign to the individual.

Moreover, to be autonomous, means to be *self-initiated* and *self-regulated*, as well as to live in accord with one's own Self. Thus, at the basis of the formation of a healthy autonomous personality is the tendency towards self-determination. However, self-determination is not just a skill but also a personal need of the individual. An autonomous person shows *flexibility* in regulating his or her relationships with the environment, feels free and shows *spontaneity* and *creativity*. The manifestation of autonomy in the individual can also be confirmed by certain psycholinguistic indicators, such as the predominance in speech of the verb "want" over the verb "should", the presence of internal motivation, i.e. *free participation* in *activities*, without the submission of some external requirements [19, pp. 397-413].

It is reasonable to assume that the sense of *competence* and *self-determination* of the personality is formed from birth to the age of 12. The outcome of this period forms the basis for the further development of self-determination. In the mentioned perspective, we distinguish the following stages [7, p. 97]:

- *The first year of life.* Among the important factors: *the reaction of the environment* to the child's manifestations and his interaction with the environment. Within this period the foundations of *will* are laid.
- *Second and third year of life.* *The separation* of the child's "I" from other people takes place; the child *emerges* as an effective agent of *autonomy*; the child's need to "get away from the environment and go his own way" is manifested. The combination of the first two stages, according to E. L. Deci, represents a *critical period* for the development of *self-determination*, in which both *will* and *autonomy* are important.
- Stage 4-6 years. It is important for the child in this period of varying to increase the *activism of activity* and *coordination of initiations*; the child acts in the environment in search of opportunities to demonstrate his competence in his interactions with it;

learning occurs through "trial" and "error", in which children test their efficiency and competence; characteristic for this period is the manifestation of *rivalry* and *identification*, as well as *verbal mediation* of behavior.

- Stage 7-12 years. Competition for accommodation in the social environment emerges; from parents and home, the child turns to the world of peers and to "surrogate-parents"; at this stage some problems, which were not solved at an earlier age, can be solved, which is possible through *identification*, *imitation*, *interaction* with peers, as well as the development of *cognitive understanding*.

From the above, we deduce that, the most important years for the development of *autonomous orientations* are the first 12 years, because at this age the basic directions are formed, which later is subject only to modifications. As a consequence, in the following age periods, it only influences how a person will manifest himself, in the form of general guidance, and not in the form of concrete behavior, i.e. it provides, with the help of will, the ability to choose behavior and to drive motives, freedom.

In this context of retrospective analysis, we must also include the position of Д. ЛЕОНТЬЕВ who develops *the theory of self-determination*, identifying two key dimensions of measurement: freedom and responsibility. *Freedom* is defined by the author as the highest form of *activism*, expressed by the ability to initiate, stop or change the direction of activity at any of its points. But not every action that occurs 'from within', without any external pressure, is autonomous. Autonomous actions must also be free from unconscious impulses. Moreover, one of the typical characteristics of autonomous action is *the ability of the individual to reconsider the decision* when he or she recognizes the incorrectness of that action. *Awareness* is the main tool for achieving *freedom*, thanks to which the individual breaks the chain of stimuli and reactions in order to make a considered choice [23]. Therefore, *awareness* is the main tool for achieving *freedom*.

Based on the synthesis of the research carried out so far, we note that *autonomy* is the highest level of *personal self-development*, which occurs by changing the mechanisms of determination from the *social*, towards *oneself*, as well as the transition from the *object of activity* to the *subject of creative activity*, based on one's own interests, values, needs, becoming aware and accepting responsibility for the actions performed.

Here we also note that in the course of self-development, a person passes through a series of stages to eventually reach a level of *autonomy*. The most important stages can be structured as follows [24, pp. 80-85]:

(1) ***The amorphous*** (emergence) stage - in this period the first premises are manifested, the foundations are laid for the formation and further development of personal autonomy, which occurs at the preschool age. According to E. Erikson, in this period balanced parental permission of the child's actions contributes to the formation of autonomy. At the same time, an important role in the development of autonomy at this stage is played by the adult and his/her interaction with the child. Children who in the process of development have felt the support of actions of autonomy and initiative are more internally motivated or more focused to master various situations. However, at the initial stage, the entire activity and behavior of the personality is structured on the basis of the *external control of the society* (adult) as a whole and on the basis of cultural values. Thus, the *amorphous* (initial) stage can be characterized by the presence in the child of a set of common values (which will later become the basis for the formation of his value sphere), as well as the sphere of motivational needs, which satisfy the needs of the individual, in particular, external influences and internal vital impulses. In this respect, it is important to create an optimal environment that offers the child freedom of activity. This situation is a guarantee for the child's development of autonomy and success;

(2) The "***freedom from...***" stage - occurs during adolescence, which on the one hand is the age of socialization, and on the other hand is the age of individualization - the discovery and knowledge of the self, through the development of self-awareness and ego identity. It is during this period that liberation from 'childhood dependence' takes place, and the adolescent's tendency to become free and independent of adults is clearly manifested. But it is noteworthy that this freedom is less associated with taking responsibility for one's actions. Adolescents perceive freedom as liberation from adult tutelage, but at the same time they take less account of their real desires, of what they really need for self-fulfillment in life. At the same time, we note that the new central formation of the adolescent period is the emergence and development of *self-awareness*, which is one of the components of personal autonomy.

(3) The stage of "*freedom for...*" - is a stage of transition from *freedom* to *autonomy*, when a person learns to control and direct his life, to make *conscious* choices, shaping his own life. At this stage, a further development of the components of autonomy takes place: self-awareness, self-motivation, self-determination (both personal and professional), self-control (including moral, associated with the individual's value domain), self-analysis, self-actualization and self-actualization. It should be noted that this stage falls within the period of early adolescence, when the gradual transition from childhood to adulthood, to independent living, occurs;

(4) The stage of *autonomy* - is the stage when a person not only shapes his or her life, but creates it, according to his or her beliefs, values and needs. At this level of self-development, a person can fully reveal his or her potential and *self-actualize*; he or she creates his or her own life, taking full responsibility for every decision made, every action taken, developing and demonstrating his or her competence, interacting with society. Reaching the level of autonomy, a person becomes the subject of *creative activity*.

Talking about the nature of *self-determination*, some psychologists appreciate it as an *innate predisposition* of the organism to engage in a behavior of interest, only that this fact does not imply *genetic* predetermination of the child's psychological characteristics [15, pp. 68-78]. This approach allows us to deduce that by "*innate orientation*", the authors rather have in mind a *starting point* in the developmental process, the direction of which depends on the specifics of the child's interaction with the outside world. Although the child is naturally directed towards autonomy, however, the formation of appropriate behaviors requires an *educational approach* that supports initiatives and creates situations in which the individual can assert his or her own assertiveness. E. Erikson attributes particular importance *to the educability of autonomous behaviors* throughout the child's psychosocial development. He identified eight stages of psychosocial development of the individual from birth to old age. In the 3-6 years stage (middle childhood) the child begins to do certain things, at the risk of making mistakes; at the same time, he or she develops *self-confidence, initiative and identity*. [9, p. 109]. From this we deduce that the *development of autonomy in pre-school*

children can be realized naturally, obviously, if appropriate socio-affective contexts are created through effective educational interventions. In this respect, *the task of the teacher* is to discover and *support the child's autonomy* in the various types of activity in which he/she is involved. In the same context, we also note that the child's actions of autonomy are manifested in correlation with *interest, selectivity, orientation, ability, creativity.* In such circumstances, the dominance of certain qualities will determine the characteristics of each child's manifestations of autonomy.

Related to the phenomenon of autonomy is the notion of *independence.* Some authors start from the distinction between autonomy and independence, stating that "autonomy implies an ability to think and act by oneself (for oneself), whereas independence implies a need (for oneself) to be separate from others" [6]. Other scholars *superimpose* independence on autonomy, starting from the argument that not every kind of independence can be a certain amount of autonomy. Only *instrumental independence* can lead to autonomous behavior, as it is expressed by certain concrete behaviors: *taking the initiative, overcoming obstacles, perseverance, willingness to do things on one's own,* etc. [17, pp. 143-157]. At the same time, independence is not a sum of knowledge, skills and abilities of the personality that allows the child to carry out his or her everyday activities on his or her own, but an ordinary manifestation of the personality that characterizes the type of attitude towards work, people and society [22, p. 123]. Thus, *independence* is one of the main characteristics of personality, which is related to activism and responsibility, in other words, autonomy.

It is also worth noting another important finding, namely that the foundation of independence of preschool children is laid in *the crisis* period of *the 3rd year of life* and is clearly manifested *in activities with objects.* The process of independence formation includes a series of stages: (1) *goal-setting*, in which only the intention to set a goal is *independent*, and the realization itself depends on the adult; (2) *determination* (deciding), which is manifested by the child discovering the tendency to achieve a socially accepted outcome; (3) *intrinsic evaluation*, a stage, which conditions the emergence of new reasons to act in order to achieve other outcomes. Moreover, the emotions and the experience lived by the child impel the appearance of reflective elements in the child,

which denotes *emergent autonomy* [21, pp. 286-296]. Therefore, *independence* is an integrative peculiarity of the child's personality, one of its characteristics as a subject of activity and behavior. Therefore, we will say that independence exerts influence on the development of the child's personality. In addition, the child can act independently if he or she shows interest, a desire to do something on his or her own, as well as the adult's interest in supporting the child's independence.

Autonomy should also be seen in the context of *the active role of the child's personality* in one or another activity. From this perspective, the child's relationship with the social environment determines the child's self-awareness, which is formed through independent activity. Thus, the main *condition* for the formation of autonomy in the child is *the activity* he/she carries out and his/her involvement as an *active subject* [22, p. 143]. In other words, autonomy is for the child a special *way of organizing* his activity.

Tracing the dynamics of research in psychology, we mention the merit of A. Bandura, who developed the *social-cognitive* theory, also outlining some mechanisms for the development of *children's autonomy*, such as: *imitation of adults' behaviors*, *identification* with them, but especially the role of *the model* in the construction of behaviors. In this respect, the author recognizes the importance of *observing* and modelling the behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others. Observing or picking up patterns of behavior provides information about other types of reactions, their impact and consequences. Here it is worth noting that *referring to models and imitating behavior is a form of learning present from the earliest ages, and is subsequently encountered in various contexts of children's everyday life* [1, pp. 122-147]. Therefore, one of the powerful ideas found in the *social-cognitive* theory of A. Bandura is represented by *the understanding of behavior* as an element that is symbolically assimilated before it is operative. By simply *observing* a model, the child forms an idea of how he should or would like to be. The next logical step is that children can *guide* their *learning* before they are asked what to do; once they see the model they can describe the behavior and imitate it.

Appreciating the significant contribution of the research carried out, through retrospective analysis we find that the definition of *personal autonomy* implies that it is

approached as *a personality trait* [16, pp. 68-78]; the *capacity for deliberation* [18]; the *capacity for psychological, moral and social self-governance*, the *capacity for decision-making* in the light of personal values regarding appropriate choices and consequences assumed, the *freedom to conduct* one's own existence appropriate to one's own desires and values [10, pp. 31-39]; the *capacity to exercise self-control over one's own activities* [22].

Conclusions

To summarize, we can identify a number of perspectives around which the main ideas presented during the course of this paper revolve with reference to the specific nature of autonomy at pre-school age:

1. The manifestation of a person's best qualities is due to the presence of *autonomy* as an essential embodiment of personal *freedom*;
2. Autonomy is produced by changing the mechanisms of determination from the *social* to the *self*, as well as the shift from the *object of activity* to the *subject of creative activity*, based on their own interests, values, needs;
3. The quality of the subject of autonomy is always present in the child, and its manifestation depends on both internal factors (motives, desires, needs) and external factors, environmental factors - in the diversity of their expression (from material objects to actions and emotional reactions);
4. The social environment provides support for manifestations of autonomy in children, which not only contributes to self-determination and qualitative functioning in a given situation, but also implies more effective promotion of its freedom of action. So it is important to create an optimal environment that provides the child with freedom of activity;
5. The most important years for the development of *autonomous orientations* are the first 12 years, because it is during this period that basic directions are formed. As a result, in the following age periods, it only influences how a person will manifest himself, in the form of general guidance, and not in the form of concrete behavior, i.e. it provides, with the help of will, the ability to choose behavior and to direct the motives, freedom.

6. The main prerequisite for the formation of autonomy in children is their *activity* and their involvement as *active subjects*. Thus, autonomy is for the child a special way of *organizing* his activity.

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