

A RESEARCH PROJECT ON ABSENTEEISM AND DROPOUT: THE CASE OF CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The results of this research project have led to a great number of statements in relevant terms of acceptance and commitment. In this specific case, the individuals involved in the survey were mostly Roma people from ten villages of Central and Southeastern Romania (Zizin, Târlungeni, Râşnov in Braşov County; Porumbacu de Jos, Avrig in Sibiu, Hăghig in Covasna County; Adjud, Bilieşti, Sihlea, and Tâmbouieşti in Vrancea County). I assume that well-established approaches to gather information about absenteeism and dropout have substantial predictive validity. Beside this aspect, the project was supported by UNICEF Romania and the University of Bucharest.*

Key words: *qualitative study, marginalized groups, dropout.*

1. Theoretical Background

In Romania, the Roma people subject (with all the related social issues/implications) has been constantly on the headlines of the newspapers for a long time.

At the national level, a number of policies and specific programmes (aimed at improving Roma people's living conditions) have been introduced by the Government. Likewise, academic and scientific institutions and also non-governmental organizations developed projects (both in partnerships and on their own) focussed on Roma communities living in Romania. The key-issues for those programmes/projects and the main aspects to investigate were [1]:

- *Employment* (research coordinated by the professors Elena and Cătălin Zamfir in 1992);
- *Education* (research coordinated by the professors Elena and Cătălin Zamfir in 1992);
- *Social services*;
- *Health*;
- *Fight against discrimination*;
- *Roma people's adjustment to society*;
- *Absenteeism*.

The Ministry of Education, Research and Youth and its partners set up six types of specific programmes aimed at implementing Education for Roma people in the period 1990-2008 [2]:

1. Programmes built and sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth on its own. They mainly involved:

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- a) Reserving a certain number of places for Roma students in universities and in colleges;
 - b) Teaching the Gypsy (Romani) language in universities;
 - c) Arranging summer schools to teach Gypsy (Romani) language and history (1999-2008);
 - d) Earmarking funds to hire Gypsy language and Roma people's history teachers (1990; 1992-2008) etc.
2. Programmes built and sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth. Among others:
- a) Romani CRISS (1994-2008);
 - b) UNICEF (2001-2008);
 - c) "Ruhama" Foundation – Oradea (2007-2008) etc.
3. Programmes built by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth and sponsored by UNICEF in Romania. They mainly involved:
- a) Editing educational materials and auxiliary textbooks on Gypsy and Roma people's history and traditions (2001-2008);
 - b) Earmarking funds to establish summer schools to teach the Gypsy language and the Roma people's history (2001-2008);
 - a) Applying EPA test (education priority areas) etc.
4. Programmes built and developed by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth [and financed] through EU funds within the PHARE Programme (designed to help disadvantaged children and pupils). They mainly consisted of:
- a) Development of the PHARE Programme (designed to help disadvantaged children and pupils - especially, coming from Roma families);
 - b) Awarding scholarships to young Roma students;
 - c) Establishing a network of cultural/linguistic mediators (over 600) to help Roma students integrate at school.
5. Programmes developed by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth within the Government programmes. In this case:
- a) All activities were coordinated on the basis of the overall Government Strategy aimed at improving Roma people's living conditions and school attendance;
 - b) Some European strategic projects were developed by the Government (*e.g.*, „Everybody to be enrolled in the first class”, etc.).
6. Programmes built by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth from a legislative perspective [maybe it's better to say “actions/ measures taken by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth from a legislative perspective]. They mainly consisted of:
- a) Order on hiring of school mediators, No. 25 436/28 January 2008;
 - b) Order regarding the progress of a few activities specific to the Roma people's school house, No. 42 622/25 October 2006;
 - c) Other decrees, resolutions, and executive orders.
- On this line, the European Commission's main objective is to improve this ethnic group's living conditions.
- In the European context, the educational situation of the Roma communities has been analyzed for years: “out of an estimated 10-12 million Roma people living in whole Europe, some 6 million live in the EU, half of whom are of school age” [3]. Usually, the number of those who attend school does not represent their

totality, as the absenteeism rate is very high.

In recent years this situation has been slowly evaluated by the researchers, recording spectacular results in most cases [4].

Advertising campaigns promoting projects aimed at helping Roma people are being conducted on the media to awaken citizens' consciences regarding Roma people's issues. This has resulted into a higher level of awareness and a greater commitment to support actions/initiatives aimed at helping Roma people in poor areas. A remarkable example is the *School Attendance Initiative – SAI Project*, introduced from 2010 to 2013 and launched by an advertising campaign whose main slogan was “Come to school!” (thousands of posters with this caption were distributed and displayed in all the schools involved in the project) (see Fig. 1):



Fig. 1. Advertising campaign “Come to school!”

2. The School Attendance Initiative (SAI): project introduction

The School Attendance Initiative – (SAI) was carried out from 2010 to 2013 in schools located within the Priority Education Areas (PEA). I assessed the impact and sustainability of this Project.

3. Project Primary Objectives

This research was aimed at substantiating the SAI through a sociological understanding of the social processes that are put in motion in communities, schools and families involved in the programme, contributing thereby to the impact of the initiative in the near future. On the basis of empirical evidence, a list of priorities ahead of the formulation of effective and sustainable policies regarding equal opportunities in education was proposed. The assessment proposal followed up the development of the SAI project, after an implementation period, diagnosing a few issues and recommending optimizing actions such as:

- A sociological description of the existing situation in the communities involved in the project, focussing on the study of the forms of inequality in school participation. The research included an analysis of the learning process organization both within the school and the family, as well as strategies and community practices of encouragement for school attendance and dropout limitation.

- A systematic analysis of the impact of the third stage of carrying SAI in relation with both: the overall objective of the project and the main objectives in the current phase of the implementation. The analysis focussed on the impact associated with the successful practices and the project sustainability conditions.

- A differentiated analysis of the impact and sustainability of communities living and directional learning to allow the setting of future priorities for implementation. For this purpose we chose a comparative approach, focused on:

- a) The perception of the interventions by the five partners involved (1) Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, (2) Institute of Educational Sciences, (3) Resource and

Information Center for Social Professions, (4) “Holt” Foundation, (5) “Together” Agency, including studying how interactions among these partners are mutually reinforcing;

- b) Multiple causes of the absenteeism and dropout.

Conclusions: recommendations and identification of best practices in order to replicate and disseminate them in the next stages of the program; highlighting of the lessons learned through implementation as a resource for program adjustment and national policies.

4. SAI Design

The project required the use of a complex methodology. In order to improve the value of the study and the accuracy of the results I have applied a set of methods, analysis techniques and social interpretation paradigm employing multiple research tools.

The project evaluation methodology was developed on three levels: document research, secondary analysis and field research. We took into account the generation of quantitative data, accompanied by qualitative frameworks. The samples were stratified with a multistage probabilistic analysis.

4.1. Research tools

Providing a comparison on these issues among villages lying in the Central Romania area and in the Southeastern Romania area represented a first step into this research. On the other hand, depending on our needs for the evaluation, everything was caught, including the physical environment, social organization, project activities as well as behaviours and people’s interactions. Hence, the complete package of tools followed up the compared

data maximizing and current empirical evidence validity.

4.2. Field research (city halls, schools and households)

From September to November 2013, I conducted sociological fieldwork in Central and Southeastern Romania with the support of the UNICEF Romania and the University of Bucharest. I worked on rural livelihood, absenteeism and dropout issues throughout the country.

My fieldwork took place in six villages lying in the Central Romania area (Zizin, Târlungeni and Raşnov in Braşov County; Porumbacu de Jos and Avrigh in Sibiu County; Hăghig in Covasna County) and in four villages lying in the Southeastern Romania area (Adjud, Biliieşti, Sihlea and Tâmboieşti in Vrancea County). It specifically explored the relationship between school and livelihood as an ethical struggle over subsistence rights, political authority and meaning of the community. The reference population from which the sample was taken consisted of the school population from the 178 communities included in the SAI in 2012-2013. Regarding the schools selection, the stratification was given by the variables crossing development regions and villages development index. The pupils’ selection was made on the basis of the two lists provided by contacted institutions from each area (schools). The first list contained information about all the pupils who were enrolled at school in the 2012-2013 school year. The second list contained information about those who were at risk of dropping out for the same school year.

The sampling consisted of a selection algorithm for pupils and respondents from schools who had been picked through a random selection process. A reserve list was compiled and included in the research protocol. The fieldwork involved

individual and group interviews, as well as questionnaires application and completion of data sheets about communities where the interventions took place.

The methods applied to the community level were differentiated depending on the category of the community (extended, mean or reduced). The research included both quantitative and qualitative data based on: structured interviews (with parents, children, school managers, teachers, school mediators and social references), focus groups, questionnaires with open-ended questions applied at the family level, participant observation and case studies as to children at risk of dropping out, including multiple sources of information (photographic evidence, data from interviews with key informants etc.).

Prior to interviewing the selected families, at the town hall we applied the “Community Sheet” and “Social Reference Sheet” tools, in order to gather essential statistical data for 2013 at several levels: ethnicity, education, occupation, migration, employment and transport facilities. Similar tools were applied at their schools (“School Sheet”, “Manager Sheet”, “Teacher Sheet”, “Mediator Sheet”, “School Situation Sheet”, “Pupil Questionnaire” etc.), and, finally, at their homes.

During this research visited 134 families (69 in the Counties of Braşov, Sibiu and Covasna County; 65 in Vrancea County), exploring particular aspects of this community’s social world in relation to the way individuals define and deal with their often stigmatized identities through their experiences of social exclusion and prejudice.

During my fieldwork I lived with one of the families in Vrancea County (see Fig. 2), which, therefore, allowed me to have access to sensitive information about life in their villages. At the beginning, people were suspicious about the reasons for my

stay in their village. However, once they got to know me better and got used to the fact that I was going to stay there for several days, they became more curious and often invited me to their houses.



Fig. 2. *In Sihlea (Vrancea County)*

After arriving at their households, I applied the “Parent/Tutor Questionnaire” and the “Household Sheet” tools (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *In Tâmboişti (Vrancea County)*

In some households, where one of the parents was missing (emigrant, dead, hospitalized or unavailable for good reasons), I discussed with the other parent. If they both were missing, I applied the questionnaires to their grandfather/grandmother or other relative who identified themselves as tutors.

I also conducted a focus group at “Școala Gimnazială Târlungeni” in Braşov, having a strong impact on the fieldwork. It is known that focus group data collection is a survey mode that is almost universally applicable in every country and it has become more common.

All the discussion was focused on two interesting topics:

- I. Interactions, perceptions on school, ethnic distances;
- II. Intervention assessment.

The participants were chosen from among teachers, social workers, parents and people without close relationships/pre-friendships.

A number of questions covered those topics and the respondents' answers made a lot of things clear. Here we talked about other communities (Romanian and Hungarian), certain projects in which the school had been involved over the years (related to the school equipment and incentives for children), specific events (festivals, divers competitions), children's development, transfer of a child to another location for some reasons, successful people from the community to be taken as positive role models, family traditions and methods to prevent dropout.

4.3. Results

It was very interesting to find out that the information provided by schools through the “Pupils Results from Sample” tool (absence rate, behaviour grade) was not all real in certain cases. There were a few inaccuracies between what I had learnt from school (i.e. large absence rate) and what the pupils or parent had declared.

Apart from informal conversations with most of the subjects, the participant observations played a major role in the evaluation, because I was too close to their situations. I followed up the source of these distortions and wrote down what I

actually saw in those unusual cases. The primary means of recording observational information - field notes - could be strengthened with photographs, having achieved every family's consent. Good field notes required a selectivity that focused me on important details of everyday's family life.

Although, there is a huge amount of photographic evidence on rural livelihood, the emphasis was not on it as such, but on the causes of absenteeism and dropout. For most people, education at the level of elementary school or perhaps high school was not held in high regard. The anticipated marriage age in those villages was between eleven and thirteen. It was in the parents' interest to have their children married as soon as possible due to economic considerations.

5. Conclusions

The study has contributed to dialogue and help inform public officials in the key of developing policies aimed at preventing absenteeism and dropout.

I wish to thank the University of Bucharest for this potential opportunity. This project allowed me to strengthen my own original ideas and to advance research with flexibility in the above field. Furthermore, this research experience brought me new insights into the intersection of social exclusion, education and politics.

The results of this study will be also useful in my future research activity in order to make choices on the nature and extent of any follow-up qualitative studies in this specific research area.

Although this project was beneficial and generated important results, many families in these marginalized groups are struggling for basic survival at this time. More specifically, some of them have serious problems on this line, as the area is mostly

rural. As long as these children do not have decent living conditions equivalent to the current society requirements/standards, their education is compromised most of the times.

6. My reflexions

The results of this study would be shared with other organizations in order to help and sustain those people.

The responses to all the questions have given precious indications for a significant support in solving of their stressful issues.

Spending a lot of time with these people, I realized it isn't so easy for each of them to go on. Eventually I identified the places and the poor conditions in which they live (see Fig. 4 and 6), how many children and animals they have (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. *Family under poor conditions (Târlungeni, Braşov County)*



Fig. 5. *Sihlea (Vrancea County)*



Fig. 6. *A large family with four children (Târlungeni, Braşov County)*

Perceived by the others as invisible people, they hope one day it will be better.

Teachers along with their headmasters have tried to take them to school, but they haven't been totally successful in this attempt.

In the light of this analysis framework, their visibility in all places has remarkably increased over the past decade. The first discussions have had potential implications on Roma people, describing the data used in this study and performing simple analysis.

Much of the survey was devoted to questions asking the respondents about their attitudes towards their children's school situation, including other items such as moral judgment, lifestyle (i. g. income, social work, driving) and work abroad.

Dropout is still a great problem, but in the Romanian society it is even more threatening. That is an enormous obstacle for everyone involved in prevention and dropout research.

From a critical theoretical perspective, the economic and educational dimensions lead to the people's social differentiation in the context of a changing rusticity in contemporary Romania.

In summary, as an aspiring sociologist researcher, this fieldwork put me in many

delicate hypotheses and gave me opportunities to interact with Roma people in various locations in Romania. Nevertheless, I was more than happy to share experience, cultural background knowledge and methods with my colleagues and with other specialists in the field.

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