

IDENTIFICATION OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ABSENTEEISM IN ROMANIAN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The present article highlights the factors that favor the high absenteeism of high school students in rural areas. The first part of the article includes an analysis of the literature, and the second part presents and analyses the research carried out in April-May 2020 with the aim of identifying the causes of school absenteeism of high school students in rural areas. As far as the design of the research is concerned, this is a quantitative one that used the questionnaire as a research tool. The participants in this study were 82 students from two rural high schools in Hunedoara County. The research tool used tracked family-type factors, namely the relationship between family members, the encouragement and interest of parents towards school and alcohol consumption; on the other hand, economic factors (income and difficulties caused by lack of income) and social factors (entourage, how students tend to spend their time when not attending school) were targeted. The questionnaire was completed online through a Google Forms app, and their results highlight problems related to school absenteeism in students from violent families whose members are drinkers; the same is true among those whose parents are of little or perhaps non-existent interest in the child's school results. Family low-income makes attending school difficult and favours the entry into the labour market for young people who want to support their family financially.*

Keywords: *school absenteeism; rural environment; high school students; Romania.*

1. Introduction

School absenteeism is a phenomenon that can no longer be overlooked and that is not just a school problem: it has become a problem of the whole community. (Blank, Melville & Shah, 2003).

School absenteeism is characterized by a low school attendance leading to insufficient vocational training or even to failure to complete the studies started. High absenteeism is common among children from rural areas, children from families with financial difficulties, children of other ethnicities than Romanian, or from single-parent families (Ivan & Rostaș, 2015). In Kearney's interdisciplinary model (2008) of school absenteeism, it is argued that school non-attendance progresses over time, i.e., from occasional and harmless absenteeism to a regular one and even to school dropout.

The result of studies carried out at national and European level by UNICEF highlights the close relationship between learning and well-being. The low and, sometimes, non-existent incomes of rural families favor students' non-attendance and non-learning, which, in turn, contributes to a reduction in economic development and even to poverty for future generations (UNICEF, 2017; Save the Children, 2014). Today's students can represent a better future for the society and, therefore, the causes that contribute to school non-attendance by students from rural areas need and the effects of school absenteeism on the person's professional and social future should be investigated. The high dropout rate is just one of the

many problems facing the current Romanian education system: “the decreasing of the school population, the disorganisation of the educational system, of all the levels, which becomes incapable to provide all the specialisations and working resources, necessary for the national economy” (Otovescu &Otovescu, 2019, p.375)

Rural areas have the highest dropout rate. Difference in school dropout rates in rural (26.6 %) and urban (6.2% in municipalities, 17.4% in cities and suburbs) areas is high (European Commission, 2017). That is why, in addressing and preventing this problem, Romania has come up with a strategy aiming at “ensuring access to education and quality education for all children; ensuring the completion of compulsory education by all children; reintegrating into the education system of early school dropouts; developing appropriate institutional support.” (Guvernul României, 2015); however, students from villages face daily problems related to the shuttle whose costs are settled only partially or not at all by the educational institution in which they study (Bejan, 2012). In support of these students, the Government decided, following the executive meeting on 28.05.2020, that students should benefit from free transport both by rail and by road between their home address and the locality in which they are studying (Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, 2020). This decision encourages students to attend school offering the opportunity for cost-free transport, which, for many rural students, is essential.

One of the fundamental rights of each child is to education but, according to an analysis by the European Commission, in rural areas this right is often violated because the time given to learning is replaced by household chores. These children have difficulty solving mandatory educational requirements because of physical and mental exhaustion. The subsequent consequences are negative, with students prone to high absenteeism and even dropping out of school (Comisia Europeană, 2017). World Vision conducted a study in 2018 showing almost a doubling compared to the results of the 2016 study of children who are absent from school to help their parents with household work or because they go to work to support the family financially.

School dropout is the result of the involvement of several factors, both internal and external, with different consequences for each student depending on their personal interaction with other social, pedagogical or psychological factors (Trancă, 2019). School is the main institution for carrying out the educational act, but school years lost through absenteeism are impossible to recover, and their recovery requires the allocation of a precious time of each person’s life, so attending school at the right time is essential for a person’s personal, professional, and social training.

Every student who does not attend school has a personal and social history that determines this. Not attending school is more of a process than of an isolated event, which can start as early as primary school and is indicated by distancing from the school. In Romanian education, a representative share of the high school students who come from rural areas are from families in difficulty, who fail to provide children with support in doing homework and assimilating the subjects, families with material difficulties that impact the students on a daily basis because they cannot afford to pay their transport costs and, thus, reduce school attendance (Bejan, 2012).

Although education is free for each citizen, according to the *National Education Act No. 1/2011* (regardless of one’s status, health, or political and sexual orientation), the main factor contributing to school absenteeism is poverty (Gavrilă-Ardelean, Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2017). This is also why students aged 15-18 often think about dropping out of school in favour of finding a job (Eurostat, 2017).Muntean, Iovu & Roth (2016) show that children with high level of subjective poverty are less school engaged.

The results of a research on the well-being of rural children (Gazibar, 2018) show that, in Romania, there are still children who go to bed without having supper. The family

cannot support them financially so that they can attend school, i.e., “parents cannot afford to provide children with school supplies and clothing. In other words, the inability of the parents to provide children with the necessary resources for education leads, implicitly, to the non-attendance of school and, at the same time, to the exploitation of children through work, thus favouring absenteeism” (Bejan, 2012). These children resign themselves to the situation and give up school or become indifferent to everything related to the school because they cannot overcome school failures.

As regards the socio-economic causes in rural areas, there is a significant share of children who do not attend school because they are used as a labour force (Țiulescu, 2013). Their desire to support their family and the satisfaction of producing an income makes young people attend school less and less, have a short school route and a poor background training. The lack of compatibility between school and the student’s background may give rise to a refusal to attend school, which is, then, followed by school failure or even school dropout (Surdu, 2011).

Parents’ departure to work abroad is often driven by their desire to support their children financially to accomplish their studies, but few are aware that this departure is, actually, an important factor making children drop out of school. However, taking into account that various communication channels, and the messages sent through them, have the capacity to influence and reach different types of public (Coman et al., 2018, p.41), having the desire to help their children, parents might also be influenced in their decision to leave by mass media and the information it sends about the way people live in other countries and their incomes. In fact, it is well known that the dropout rate and the absenteeism rate are far higher for children whose parents are working abroad. School failure becomes almost invariable in the absence of parental authority: “The absence of mothers from families with children, who were left in the care of grandparents or close relatives, to be able to work abroad, meant not only depriving them of the emotional support necessary for personal development, but also losing control over their schooling and the education they needed.” (Otovescu, 2017, p.68).

According to data provided by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption (2018), 94,991 children have their parents abroad. Children returning to school after having gone abroad with their parents are prone to high school absenteeism because it is difficult for them to find their identity and motivation to learn (Voicu, 2010).

Parents’ disinterest in the school at which their child learns, their disregard for their children’s school results, for whether or not their children use to learn, favours young people’s decision not to give importance to their studies and to be absent more and more. Also, with regard to the family environment, there are other factors that contribute to increasing absenteeism, such as the level of education of the parents, which, in rural areas, is predominantly secondary and, therefore, they do not consider high school studies important, the family climate in which adults usually consume alcoholic beverages and become violent, thus negatively affecting the child’s ability to learn and his psyche, which will subsequently exhibit inappropriate behaviour, both at school and in society (Dancă, Croitoru & Grădinaru, 2014). Nowadays, a cause of absenteeism which is very difficult to fight with is the lack of true models and the fact that negative examples predominate. What high school students are likely to follow are false and negative values that give the misleading feeling of being effective and easy to succeed in life. Bărbat *et al.* (2010) suggest focusing the school assistant process on promoting positive values, examples and behaviours, and reducing behaviours that are unfavourable to children’s intellectual development.

There are causes of school absenteeism that are strictly related to the student: some of them are psychological and they refer to the personality, motivation, health status, and lack of

interest of the student towards high school graduation. If children are neglected, ex. parents leaving to work abroad, or those who themselves do not rate school graduation at a high level, may indirectly encourage their children to be less preoccupied by school. As distractions are numerous, gadgets like mobile phones, internet connections are easily available and children can become more interested in them, than in school, even getting addicted to them (Vintila, M., Tudorel, O., Goian, C., Barbat, C., 2018; Tudorel, O., Vintila, M., Vlaicu, L., Balauta, D., Goian, C., Rusu, A., 2018). Psychological causes, inherited or acquired, as anxiety, depression, personality disorders, like schizotypal personality, are linked to quality of life, self-esteem conducting to a higher risk of school dropout if these problems are not discovered and approached in an early stage. It is known already that the incidence of these psychological problems is abruptly raising in teenage years (Barron, D., Vintila, M., Swami, V., 2020; Gavrilă-Ardelean, Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2017). It is well known that children mostly learn at their early ages through imitation, and later on through identification. When these processes are not cultivated by the parents children will fail to be appropriate and to be able to integrate in a collectivity, like school, this will lead to isolation and can lead to dropout (Goian, C., 2019). Another attribute frequently found in rural communities that leads to low school attendance or even to dropout is early marriage or giving birth to a child. (Țircă, 2012). Among psychological factors, Țiulescu (2013) recalls school immaturity, i.e., the inability of students to cope with school tasks because of the mismatch between school tasks and the level of development of the child. Yet another problem can be related to the problematic divorce of the parents, who attract their children in the fight between them alienating the child exposing the child to the denigration of a parent, making him take parts will highly affect the psychological wellbeing of the child, affect his behavior and school results (Sirbu, A., Vintila, M., Tisu, L., Stefanut, A., Tudorel, O., Maguran, B., Toma, R., 2020).

The causes of school absenteeism can also be favoured by teachers who are critical and have high expectations from students. In this regard, the interaction between students and teachers is very important, and during courses it is essential for teachers to create a friendly climate that can have the potential to become a climate which favors collaboration (Coman, 2007, p.177). Teachers can improve their skills in this area through adult education specially conceived for educators who are challenged in their professional life and which allow them to handle stress and overwhelming in their professional activity (Goian, C., 2014). A positive attitude and behaviour of the teacher favours the dedication of the students to the school, but an authoritarian, critical, and non-communication attitude can influence the students' decision not to attend school (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011, *apud* Ocak, Ocak & Baysal, 2017).

2. Research Methodology

The goal of the study was to identify the factors contributing to the absenteeism of high school students from rural areas, and the objectives were to highlight family-type reasons why rural students do not attend school; identifying socio-economic reasons that contribute to students' non-attendance of classes, and revealing how rural students who do not attend school use to spend their time. Research hypotheses are: if there are relationship difficulties within the family, then absenteeism is higher; if socio-economic reasons are a difficulty, then students face obstacles in attending school; the more students spend their time in a way that is not conducive to educational development, the lower their interest in classes and the completion of high school.

The design of the research is a descriptive one, using a quantitative research method, and the research tool used was the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 28 questions,

both closed and open, addressing family-type factors, i.e., the relationship between family members, the encouragement and interest of parents towards school and alcohol consumption; on the other hand, economic factors (income and difficulties caused by their absence) and social factors (entourage, the way students tend to spend their time when they skip classes) were aimed at. The participants in the study were 82 students from grades IX-XII from rural Țara Hațegului (Hunedoara County, Romania), selected according to the snowball sampling method. They study at two high schools in Hunedoara County; gender distribution shows that 59% of participants were female and 41% were male. Of these, 90% live with their parents and 10% with other relatives.

The questionnaires were applied online via the Google Forms app and, subsequently, shared via link on the social network Facebook between April and May 2020. Data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical programme, version 20, a package that is comprised of many elements such as: the tools that manage the package itself- tools that allow the users to visualize data, to perform statistical analyses and generate files with the results of the analyses, the data gathered by the researcher- which must be inserted into a specific file of the program, commands- according to which several analyses can be conducted by the researcher, as well as the results of the analyses (Coman & Netedu, 2011, p.123).

3. Research Results

To verify the first hypothesis (according to which if there are difficulties of relationship within the family, then absenteeism is higher), a cross-processing (cross-tabulations) between school absenteeism and family quarrels was carried out. Of the total participants who responded that there were rare arguments between family members, only 12% had a low score because of high absenteeism in the previous semester, 31% were warned about the high number of absences, and 57% had no problems with absences. Of all those who said that there were frequent and very frequent arguments between family members, 23% had a low score in the previous semester because of absences, 69% had a high number of absences and were warned about it, and only 9% of them did not experience problems related to school non-attendance. Therefore, it can be concluded that students' problems with absenteeism are more common among those from families whose members use to argue.

The second cross-processing, carried out in order to strengthen the first hypothesis, concerned school absenteeism and aggression between family members. Of all those who responded that there are very often forms of aggression between family members, 60% had a low score of behaviour because of absences, and 40% had problems with absenteeism and were warned by the school. Of the total number of respondents who said that there was rare and very rare aggression within the family, 21% had a low grade in behaviour in the previous semester because of non-attendance of classes, 67% were warned because of the high number of absences and 12% did not experience absence problems in the previous semester. Of the total study participants who said that there were never any forms of aggression among family members, only 7% had absence problems in the previous semester and their score was lowered, 32% were warned because of high absenteeism, and 61% had no absence problems in the previous semester. Thus, that students from families where there were forms of aggression had more often problems at school related to the increased number of absences than those who come from families where there are no forms of aggression between members.

Following the third cross-processing to validate the first hypothesis, absenteeism and alcohol consumption among family members showed that among students skipping classes, an increased percentage come from families with alcohol issues. Thus, of the total number of

students who do not skip classes, 25% had alcohol-consuming persons in their family and 75% did not have alcohol-consuming persons in the family, and of the total respondents who said they skipped classes often and very often, 88% had family members who consumed alcoholic beverages and 12% did not have alcohol consumers in their family.

The cross-processing between absenteeism and family members' concern for students' school results shows that, of the total number of students who responded that they never skipped classes because they were not in the mood for classes, 92% said that the family was concerned about their school results and 8% said that parents were only sporadically concerned about their school results. Of all young people who were skipping classes very rarely and rarely because they were not in the mood for classes, 57% had parents concerned about their school results, 41% of families were concerned only sporadically, and 2% were not at all concerned about their results. Of the total participants who skipped classes often and very often because they were not in the mood for classes, only 24% had families concerned about their school results, 46% had families occasionally concerned, and 30% of students did not come from families concerned for their school results at all. So, the percentage of students who were skipping classes because they were not in the mood for classes was higher among those whose families were not concerned about their school results.

The second hypothesis (if socio-economic reasons are a difficulty, then the students encounter obstacles attending school) was verified by means of cross-processing between different socio-economic characteristics and participation or intention to participate in school activities.

Of all students who have both parents employed, 7% believed that they would have difficulty commuting until they completed high school, 73% believed that they would not find it difficult to commute until the completion of high school studies, and 21% did not know the response or did not answer this question. Of the participants who responded that only one parent was employed, 38% were students who appreciated that commuting would be a hindrance to graduate from high school, 32% believed that they would not face difficulties because of the commute, and 30% did not know or did not want to answer this question. Of the total responses showing that none of the parents were working, most (73%) considered it difficult for them to commute until the end of their high school studies, and only 27% believed that commuting was not a barrier to completing high school. Therefore, the opinion of students whose parents did not work saw future difficulties related to commuting until the end of high school.

Of those who said they came from families whose income was less than 500 RON / month / member (100 Euros), 94% had plans to work during high school, 3% did not think about looking for a job during high school, and 3% did not know or did not answer this question. Of the students surveyed whose families had an income of less than 1,000 RON / month / member (200 Euros), the percentages of those who wanted to work during high school and of those who did not plan to do so were equal, i.e., 37%, and 26% were those who did not know or did not answer the question. Of all those who responded that the family income was not more than 2,000 RON / month / member (400 Euros), 38% had plans to work during school, 62% did not plan to get employed until the end of high school. Among students from families whose income was more than 2,000 RON / month / member, 38% had plans to find a job during high school, and 62% did not plan to work during high school. Thus, it appears that low income of the family encourages students to opt to find a job during high school, which could, then, contribute to lower attendance of school activities.

Of all students who responded that both parents are employed, 28% had plans to work during high school, 63% of students did not think about working during high school, and 10% did not know or did not answer if they planned to work during high school. Of all respondents who had only one parent employed, 78% planned to find a job while in high

school, 18% of these students had no plans to work while they were in high school, and 4% did not know or did not respond. Of all students whose parents were not employed, 91% planned to work during high school and 9% did not know or preferred not to answer this question. Thus, the percentage of students who had plans to find a job during high school was higher among those who had only one parent or none of the parents employed.

Verification of the third hypothesis (the more students spend their time in a way that is not conducive to educational development, the lower their interest in courses and the completion of high school) was verified by cross-processing of alcohol consumption and the influence of the entourage, on the one hand, and absenteeism, on the other.

Of the total study participants who responded that they did not consume alcoholic beverages at all, 38% sometimes think they would like to do anything other than come to school, and 62% of them did not think about it. The percentage is reversed among students who consumed alcohol often and very often, 62% thought they could do anything but attend school, and 38% did not think about skipping classes to do anything else.

Eighty-three percent of students who had people around them thinking school is a waste of time thought they wanted to do anything other than attend school, and 17% did not think they could do anything other than work in school. Of those who said they had partially around them people who appreciated that school was just a waste of time, 57% thought to stop attending school, being concerned about doing something else, and 43% wanted to continue attending school without doing other types of activities. Of all those who said that there were no people in their entourage who thought school was a waste of time, 25% often thought that they would like to deal with anything other than to continue school, and 75% did not think that they would like to drop out of school to do other activities. Response analysis showed that students who had people around them who associated school with a waste of time sometimes thought they wanted to do something other than continue school.

4. Discussions

Research results show that the number of students experiencing absence problems at school is higher among those from disorganized families where aggression is manifested or where alcohol consumption is increased. The same is true for students whose parents have little interest in their school results, instilling in children that school is not important. This conclusion also matches the data from the study conducted by Scutaru & Botnari (2019), who showed that a high percentage of students are absent because of their parents' indifference to their school results. Because of lack of encouragement and motivation, many teenagers quit school early in high school (Scutaru & Botnari, 2019).

The economic situation of the family is an important factor that causes high school students to attend school less and less because they find it difficult to commute or because they need a job. This leads to dropout and to a lack of trained people to contribute to the smooth running of society.

In order to identify the people influencing the students' decision to skip classes, Băiașu (2014) mentions that most of the students who use to skip classes are encouraged by colleagues and friends, i.e., by people in their entourage. Research results also show that students whose entourage think that school is a waste of time and that it does not help anything are also those who think they could do anything other than attend school. Integrating students into an inappropriate entourage can give rise to school deviations, violence, addiction, etc. As responses show, those who more often consume alcoholic beverages are also those who would like to spend their time with something else than attending school activities.

Braghiș (2010), after analyzing the studies carried out on school absenteeism, mentions that the most common causes of this phenomenon that are also identified in this

study are the influence of the entourage and the family environment (domestic problems, family attitude).

The limits of the research consist in the current social context because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed this research to be carried out only online, and the poor connection of the Internet or even its lack in the countryside have made it difficult to collect answers. Other limitations are the fact that students come from two different high schools, the snowball sampling method used, and the application of the research tool in the online environment, which made it impossible to delineate the percentages of those from one high school and those from the other high school. Thus, a comparative analysis of the two educational institutions could not be carried out.

5. Conclusions

Following the analysis of the results of the study, some conclusions can be drawn. Regarding the factors contributing to the increase of absenteeism among rural high school students, results show the lack of parental interest in the student's school results, aggressive relationships and alcohol consumption among family members and, in terms of the negative outside influence factor on the students, the entourage in which they integrate and which considers the school a waste of time and of no use for professional success.

The consequences of absenteeism increased now can then be felt in the long term in an unfavourable way in the development of society and in economic growth. Not attending school has negative consequences both in the lives of those who are absent and in terms of the well-being and evolution of society.

In view of the research results, implementing measures to prevent school absenteeism should be considered, such as teachers taking into account the number of absences of students, early identification of students who are prone to school failure because of absenteeism, involvement or employment of a social worker in order to intervene in the prevention of absenteeism and better relationship with the families from which the students come from who are experiencing problems because of absences. Social workers in schools have a very important role both in preventing absenteeism and school dropout, and in subsequent intervention, (Bălăuță, Borcovici, Vlaicu, 2017; Trancă, 2018; Trancă, 2020), involvement of social workers for the prevention of bullying in schools (Gavrila-Ardelean, 2019; Meszaros, Goian, Vlaicu, Bălăuță, 2020). To improve the relationship between parent and student it would be ideal to implement an educational program for parents that consists in increasing adults' awareness of the benefits that completing high school can have in the professional life of their children.

In order to continue this research, a potential study would target parents of rural students with a view to identifying the reasons of their little interest in their children's school results and also the factors influencing their decision not to provide support to their own children in order to complete their high school education.

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